

CROSSROADS IN THE LABYRINTH
Volume 5
DONE AND TO BE DONE

by Cornelius Castoriadis*



translated from the French
and edited anonymously
as a public service

"Cornelius Castoriadis" is here a pseudonym for Paul Cardan.

**A Paul Cardan (active 1959-1965) was a pseudonym for Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997).

NOTICE

The present volume is offered to readers as a public service in the hopes of encouraging reflection and action aimed at deepening, and realizing, the project of individual and collective autonomy on a worldwide basis in all its manifestations.

Neither any website that would make the electronic version available nor any other distributor who may come forward in any medium is currently authorized to accept any financial remuneration for this service. “The anonymous Translator/Editor” (T/E) will thus not receive, nor will T/E accept, any monetary payment or other compensation for his labor as a result of this free circulation of ideas.

Anyone who downloads or otherwise makes use of this tome is suggested to make a free-will donation to those who have presented themselves as the legal heirs of Cornelius Castoriadis: Cybèle Castoriadis, Sparta Castoriadis, and Zoé Castoriadis. Either cash or checks in any currency made payable simply to “Castoriadis” may be sent to the following address:

Castoriadis, 1 rue de l’Alboni 75016 Paris FRANCE

A suggested contribution is five (5) dollars (US) or five (5) euros.

The aforesaid legal heirs are totally unaware of this undertaking, and so it will be completely for each individual user to decide, on his or her own responsibility (a word not to be taken lightly), whether or not to make such a contribution—which does not constitute any sort of legal acknowledgment. It is entirely unknown how these heirs will react, nor can it be guessed whether receipt of funds will affect their subsequent legal or moral decisions regarding similar undertakings in the future.* Nevertheless, it is recommended that each user contact, by electronic mail or by other means, at least ten (10) persons or organizations, urging them to obtain a copy of the book in this way or offering these persons or organizations gift copies. It is further recommended that each of these persons or organizations in turn make ten (10) additional contacts under the same terms and circumstances, and so on and so forth, for the purpose of furthering this nonhierarchical and disinterested “pyramid scheme” designed to spread Castoriadis’s thought without further hindrance.

* Much Castoriadis material has gone out of print and much more remains to be translated into English, publication projects in which T/E is currently engaged. So far, in addition to the present volume, five other Castoriadis/Cardan volumes (listed below with the electronic publication dates) have been translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service:

■ *The Rising Tide of Insignificance (The Big Sleep)*. <http://www.notbored.org/RTI.pdf>. December 4, 2003.

■ *Figures of the Thinkable, Including Passion and Knowledge*. <http://www.notbored.org/FTPK.pdf>. February 2005.

■ *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificance, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today*. <http://www.notbored.org/ASA.pdf>. October 2010.

■ *Postscript on Insignificance, including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificance, followed by Five Dialogues, Four Portraits and Two Book Reviews*. 1st ed. March 2011. *Postscript on Insignificance, including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificance, followed by Six Dialogues, Four Portraits and Two Book Reviews*. 2nd ed. August 2017. <http://www.notbored.org/PSRTI.pdf>.

■ *Democracy and Relativism: Discussion with the “MAUSS” Group*. <http://www.notbored.org/DR.pdf>. January 2013.

■ *Window on the Chaos, Including “How I Didn’t Become a Musician” (Beta Version)*. <http://www.notbored.org/WoC.pdf>. July 21, 2015.

■ *A Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthology: Autonomy, Critique, and Revolution in the Age of Bureaucratic Capitalism*. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. With a Translator/Editor’s Introduction by David Ames Curtis (March–April 2016). London, Eris, 2018. 488pp. <http://notbored.org/SouBA.pdf> London, Eris, 2018.

Plus two online videos with English-language subtitles:

■ Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis (outtakes from Chris Marker’s 1989 film *L’Héritage de la chouette* [The Owl’s Legacy]). <http://vimeo.com/66587994> May 2013.

■ Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis for the Greek television network ET1, for the show *Paraskiniom*, 1984 (with English-language subtitles). Video in Greek from publicly available online source. English translation: Ioanna. <http://vimeo.com/kaloskaisophos/castoriadis-paraskiniom-english-subtitles> (EL/EN-subtitles).

The body of the present six translated and edited volumes and the apparatus for each volume are ©copyrighted by David Ames Curtis

CONTENTS

<i>Table of Contents</i>	iv
<i>Books by Cornelius Castoriadis Published in English, with Standard Abbreviations</i>	vi
<i>Books by Cornelius Castoriadis Published in French, with Standard Abbreviations</i>	ix
<i>Notice</i>	xiii
<i>On the Texts</i>	xiv
<i>Translator/Editor's Foreword</i>	xv
<i>On the Translation</i>	xvi

Done and To Be Done	1
Ontology	2
Relation to Inherited Philosophy	17
Psyche and Society	26
Learning and Progress	36
Meaning and Validity	41
Autonomy: Ethics	64
Autonomy: Politics	75
Today	90

PSYCHE

From the Monad to Autonomy	100
The Construction of the World in Psychosis	134
Passion and Knowledge	157
The Paradoxical Relation Between Passion and Knowledge	158
Philosophical Aspects	162
Belief, Knowledge, Truth	166
Psychoanalytical Aspects	169
Knowledge and Passion for the Truth	177
Psychoanalysis and Philosophy	184
Ontology	188
Philosophical Anthropology	197
Practical Philosophy	202

LOGOS

Merleau-Ponty and the Weight of the Ontological Tradition	206
<i>Phusis</i> , Creation, Autonomy	263
<i>Phusis</i>	263
Creation and Autonomy	271
Conclusion	276
Complexity, Magmas, History	279
Perplexities of Complexity	279
Heterogeneity and Creation	286
Heritage, Heterogeneity, and Creation in European History	288
<i>La Ville médiévale</i>	296
Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection	303
The Imagination of the Subject—Philosophy	306
Aristotle	307
Motives for Occultation	307
Kant	310
Digression on Phenomenology	313
Return to Kant	318
The Imagination of the Subject—Freud	327
Reascent Toward the Living Being	349
The Human Imagination	352
The Instituting Social Imaginary	355
Sublimation, Thought, Reflection	367
<i>Appendix: Potential Errata</i>	381

BOOKS BY CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS PUBLISHED IN ENGLISH, WITH STANDARD ABBREVIATIONS:

[ASA\(RPT\)](#) *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificancy, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today* <http://www.notbored.org/ASA.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: October 2010.

CL *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Tr. Martin H. Ryle and Kate Soper. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Brighton, England: Harvester Press, 1984. 345pp.

[CL1](#) *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Vol. 1. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-1.pdf>

[CL2](#) *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Vol. 2. *Human Domains*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-2-human-domains.pdf>

[CL3](#) *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Vol. 3. *World in Fragments*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-3-world-in-fragments.pdf>

[CL4](#) *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Vol. 4. *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-4-rising-tide-of-insignificancy.pdf>

[CL5](#) *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Vol. 5. *Done and To Be Done*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-5-done-and-to-be-done.pdf>

[CL6](#) *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. Vol. 6. *Figures of the Thinkable*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-6-figures-of-the-thinkable.pdf>

- [CR](#) *The Castoriadis Reader*. Ed. David Ames Curtis. Malden, MA and Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1997. 470pp.
- [DR](#) *Democracy and Relativism: Discussion with the "MAUSS" Group*. <http://www.notbored.org/DR.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: January 2013. 63pp.
- [FTPK](#) *Figures of the Thinkable including Passion and Knowledge*. <http://www.notbored.org/FTPK.pdf> and [http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-Figures of the Thinkable.pdf](http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-Figures_of_the_Thinkable.pdf). Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: February 2005. 428pp.
- [IIS](#) *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Tr. Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1987. 418pp. Paperback edition. Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1997. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998. N.B.: Unless otherwise indicated, pagination always refers to the 1987 English-language edition of *IIS*.
- [OPS](#) *On Plato's Statesman*. Tr. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002. 227pp.
- [PPA](#) *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*. (N.B.: The subtitle is an unauthorized addition made by the publisher.) Ed. David Ames Curtis. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. 304pp.
- [PSRTI](#) *Postscript on Insignificancy, Including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificancy. Followed by Six Dialogues, Four Portraits, and Two Book Reviews*. <http://www.notbored.org/PSRTI.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: March 2011. 2nd ed. August 2017.
- [PSW1](#) *Political and Social Writings*. Volume 1: 1946-1955. *From the Critique of Bureaucracy to the Positive Content of Socialism*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. 348pp.
- [PSW2](#) *Political and Social Writings*. Volume 2: 1955-1960. *From the Workers' Struggle Against Bureaucracy to Revolution in the Age of Modern Capitalism*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. 363pp.
- [PSW3](#) *Political and Social Writings*. Volume 3: 1961-1979. *Recommencing the Revolution: From Socialism to the Autonomous Society*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 405pp.

[RTI\(TBS\)](#) *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (The Big Sleep)*.
<http://www.notbored.org/RTI.pdf> and
http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-rising_tide.pdf.

Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: December 4, 2003.

[SouBA](#) *A Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthology: Autonomy, Critique, and Revolution in the Age of Bureaucratic Capitalism*. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service, with a Translator/Editor's Introduction by David Ames Curtis. London: Eris, 2018. 488pp.

[WIF](#) *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*. Ed. and tr. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997. 507pp.

[WoC](#) *Window on the Chaos, Including "How I Didn't Become a Musician."* <http://www.notbored.org/WoC.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: July 21, 2015.

A complete bibliography of writings by and about Cornelius Castoriadis can be found at: <https://www.agorainternational.org>

BOOKS BY CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS PUBLISHED IN FRENCH, WITH STANDARD ABBREVIATIONS:

- CE* *La culture de l'égoïsme*. Avec Christopher Lasch. Traduit de l'anglais par Myrto Gondicas. Postface de Jean-Claude Michéa. Flammarion, Paris, 2012. 105pp.
- CFG1* *Ce qui fait la Grèce*. Tome 1. *D'Homère à Héraclite*. Séminaires 1982-1983. *La Création humaine II*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004. 355pp.
- CFG2* *Ce qui fait la Grèce*. Tome 2. *La Cité et les lois*. Séminaires 1983-1984. *La Création humaine III*. Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Précédé de "Castoriadis et l'héritage grec" par Philippe Raynaud. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008. 313pp.
- CFG3* *Ce qui fait la Grèce*. Tome 3. *Thucydide, la force et le droit*. Séminaires 1984-1985. *La Création humaine IV*. Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Précédé de "Le germe et le *kratos*: réflexions sur la création politique à Athènes" par Claude Moatti. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011. 374pp.
- [CL](#) *Les Carrefours du labyrinthe*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978. 318pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2017. 432pp.
- CMR1* *Capitalisme moderne et révolution*. Tome 1. *L'impérialisme et la guerre*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 443pp.
- CMR2* *Capitalisme moderne et révolution*. Tome 2. *Le mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 318pp.
- CS* *Le Contenu du socialisme*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 441pp.
- D* *Dialogue*. La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 1998. 112pp.
- DEA* *De l'écologie à l'autonomie*. Avec Daniel Cohn-Bendit et le public de Louvain-la-Neuve. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981. 126pp. *De l'écologie à l'autonomie*. Paris: Éditions Le Bord de l'Eau, 2014. 107pp.
- DG* *Devant la guerre*. Tome 1: *Les Réalités*. 1^{er} éd. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1981. 285pp. 2^e éd. revue et corrigée, 1982. 317pp.
- [DH](#) *Domaines de l'homme. Les carrefours du labyrinthe II*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986. 460pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 1999. 576pp.
- DHIS* Cornelius Castoriadis, Paul Ricœur. *Dialogue sur l'histoire et*

- l'imaginaire social*. Édité par Johann Michel. Paris: Éditions de L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2016. 80pp.
- DR *Démocratie et relativisme: Débats avec le MAUSS*. Édition établie par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2010. 142pp.
- EMO1 *L'Expérience du mouvement ouvrier*. Tome 1. *Comment lutter*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1974. 445pp.
- EMO2 *L'Expérience du mouvement ouvrier*. Tome 2. *Prolétariat et organisation*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1974. 445pp.
- EP1 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 1. *La Question du mouvement ouvrier*. Tome 1. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2012. 422pp.
- EP2 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 2. *La Question du mouvement ouvrier*. Tome 2. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2012. 578pp.
- EP3 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 3. *Quelle démocratie?* Tome 1. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2013. 694pp.
- EP4 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 4. *Quelle démocratie?* Tome 2. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2013. 660pp.
- EP5 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 5. *La Société bureaucratique*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2015. 638pp.
- EP6 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 6. *Guerre et théories de la guerre*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2016. 723pp.
- EP7 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 7. *Écologie et politique*, suivi de *Correspondances et compléments*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2020. 448pp.
- EP8 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997*. Tome 8. *Sur la dynamique du capitalisme et autres textes*, suivi de *L'Impérialisme et la guerre*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2020. 709pp.
- FAF *Fait et à faire. Les carrefours du labyrinthe V*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997. 284pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2008. 352pp.
- FC *Fenêtre sur le chaos*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007. 179pp.

- FP* *Figures du pensable. Les carrefours du labyrinthe VI.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999. 308pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2009. 364pp.
- HC* *Histoire et création. Textes philosophiques inédits (1945-1967).* Réunis, présentés et annotés par Nicolas Poirier. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2009. 307pp.
- IIS* *L'Institution imaginaire de la société.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975. 503pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 1999. 544pp. N.B.: Unless otherwise indicated, pagination always refers to the 1987 English-language edition of *IIS*.
- M68* Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort et Jean-Marc Coudray. *Mai 68: la brèche. Premières réflexions sur les événements.* Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1968. 142pp.
- M68/VAA* Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort et Cornelius Castoriadis. *Mai 68: la brèche* suivi de *Vingt Ans après.* Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1988. 212pp. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2008. 296pp.
- MI* *La Montée de l'insignifiance. Les carrefours du labyrinthe IV.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996. 245pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2007. 304pp.
- MM* *Le Monde morcelé. Les carrefours du labyrinthe III.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990. 281pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2000. 349pp.
- P-SI* *Post-Scriptum sur l'insignifiance.* Entretiens avec Daniel Mermet (novembre 1996). La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 1998. 37pp.
- P-SID* *Post-Scriptum sur l'insignifiance.* Entretiens avec Daniel Mermet suivi de *Dialogue.* La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2007. 51pp.
- SB1* *La Société bureaucratique.* Tome 1. *Les rapports de production en Russie.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973. 317pp.
- SB2* *La Société bureaucratique.* Tome 2. *La révolution contre la bureaucratie.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973. 441pp.
- SB(n.é.)* *La Société bureaucratique* (nouvelle édition). Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1990. 492pp.
- SD* *Une société à la dérive. Entretiens et débats 1974-1997.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005. 307pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2011. 40pp.
- SF* *La Société française.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 315pp.
- S. ou B.* *Socialisme ou Barbarie. Organe de Critique et d'orientation révolutionnaire.* Paris. 1949-1965. See <https://soubscan.org>.
- SouBA* *Socialisme ou Barbarie. Anthologie.* La Bussière: Acratie, 2007.

344pp.

SPP *Sur Le Politique de Platon*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999. 199pp.

SV *Sujet et vérité dans le monde social-historique*. Séminaires 1986-1987. *La Création humaine, 1*. Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Enrique Escobar et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002. 496pp.

A complete bibliography of writings by and about Cornelius Castoriadis can be found at: <https://www.agorainternational.org>

Notice*

One will find gathered together here my writings from the last few years relating to psychoanalysis and philosophy. I have prefaced them with “Done and To Be Done.” I should point out how this programmatic summary text originated.

In 1987-1988, at the invitation of my friend Giovanni Busino, a number of writers agreed to contribute to a collective volume devoted to my work. The whole was published in issue 86 (December 1989) of the *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales* and in a separate volume, *Autonomie et autotransformation de la société. La philosophie militante de Cornelius Castoriadis* (Geneva: Droz, 1989). Since it was not possible to envisage a reissuance of this volume in the near future, I republish here my own contribution, where I profited from the discussion of some of the critiques that had been addressed to me in order to shed light on my way of thinking and its main results while at the same time sketching out some new interrogations. I hope that my friends who contributed to the collective work will pardon me for supplying here some responses to critiques one will have to seek elsewhere. I hope, too, that the reader will be able to deem that the text can be read on its own terms.

“Neither done, nor to be done” was the traditional exclamation of bourgeois ladies of the house faced with the unsatisfactory work of their maid. “Done and To Be Done” could be the subtitle of every philosophical text worthy of the name.

June 1996

* *Avertissement*, first published in [CL5](#), 7 (7 of the 2008 reprint).

On the Texts

All the texts appearing in this volume are reprinted here in the form in which they were published, aside from the correction of misprints and of a few *lapsus calami*. [Translator/Editor (hereafter: T/E): Relevant publication information for each text now appears in the corresponding publication note, while footnotes have been numbered consecutively, sometimes preceded by “French Editors,” “Author’s addition,” or “T/E”.]

[French Editors: In this reprint edition, we have introduced a few minor formal corrections, sometimes requested by the author himself in his working copy. Also added, in footnotes, is some supplemental bibliographical information T/E: preceded by the indication “French Editors.”]

Translator/Editor's Foreword

As was noted in “The Theme of ‘The Rising Tide of Insignificance’ in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis” (which forms the bulk of the Translator/Editor’s Foreword for the previous volume, [CL4](#), in the present six-volume series), a publishing decision was made by Castoriadis, after *Le Monde morcelé* (the third volume in the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series, now translated as [CL3](#)) came out in 1990, “to separate topical subjects in a clear-cut manner from philosophical ones” that were scheduled to appear shortly thereafter in subsequent volume. *Le Monde morcelé* had endeavored to proclaim, as I explained, “essential, but ontologically difficult to discern, connections among what [Castoriadis] was admitting were these somewhat tangentially related texts.” The result was a “strict, yet problematic, division...between “Kairos”-, “Koinōnia”-, and “Polis”-themed texts in *Le Montée de l’insignifiance*” (1996; now translated as [CL4](#)) “and “Psyche”- and “Logos”-themed ones in *Fait et à faire*” (1997; now translated as the present volume, [CL5](#)). The less topical “psychoanalytical/philosophical essays in this fifth *Carrefours* volume”—the last one to appear during Castoriadis’s lifetime—were “nonetheless preceded by the eponymous ‘Done and To Be Done,’ a wide-ranging reply to contributors to the 1989 Castoriadis *Festschrift* that treated a broad range of ontological, philosophical, psychoanalytical, ethical, political, economic, and social issues from *all* phases and features of his oeuvre.” Thus, across and through this somewhat artificial division between topical and philosophical texts in [CL4](#) and [CL5](#), which was forced upon Castoriadis by the vagaries and exigencies of the publishing world, we can continue to detect and appreciate what I called the “magmatic unity-in-the-making that is Castoriadis’s overall oeuvre.”

On the Translation

We refer the reader to “On the Translation” in [CLI](#) for an overview of translation issues that have arisen and have been addressed in the six volumes of the present series.

We note here simply a list of the various English-language words and phrases Castoriadis employed in the original French-language texts for this fifth volume: by and large, problem-solving (thrice), Big Brother is ungood (twice), narrative, Bill of Rights, Political Action Committees, due process of law, whatever that may mean, oral sex, steady and sustainable state, estrangement, come to terms, misleading, the one precise essential, sense data, self-awareness, awareness, aware, reckoning, “So, what else is new?”, falsifiable.

Done and To Be Done*

I can thank the friends who have so kindly contributed to this volume [*Autonomie et autotransformation de la société*] only by sharing with them the emotion I feel at seeing the number and quality of their testimonials. It is with the same emotion that I thank Giovanni Busino, who initiated this volume and brought it to term amid numerous obstacles and personally painful circumstances.

I would have liked to flesh out further these expressions of thanks by responding here to each person in detail, but that would have required a second volume of comparable dimensions and several months of work. This is why—and it will also facilitate the reader's task—I have preferred, rather than to make of this text a series of remarks on the remarks addressed to me, to organize it around a few of the themes that correspond to the main axes of my work and to cover, I hope, a good portion of the criticisms one can read in this volume. Undoubtedly, numerous questions—some that are raised by my friends present here, others that on their own awaken me at night—have not been broached. They remain no less present in my mind and I hope to be able to speak about them elsewhere. In any case, I have endeavored to underscore, in the most important cases, the tasks that remain and the orientations for the work to come.¹

*T/E: “Fait et a faire,” *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, 86 (December 1989): 457-514. This issue was reprinted in book form as *Autonomie et autotransformation de la société. La Philosophie militante de Cornelius Castoriadis*, ed. Giovanni Busino (Geneva: Droz, 1989). It includes thirty discussions of Castoriadis and his work in English, French, German, and Italian. Reprinted in *FAF*, 9-81 (9-98 of the 2008 reprint). Translated in [CR](#), 361-417.

¹T/E: The key to the abbreviations used to reference specific texts previously published by Castoriadis may be found at the end of the present

Ontology

We do not philosophize—we do not concern ourselves with ontology—in order to save the revolution (Axel Honneth) but in order to save our thought, and our coherency. The idea that an ontology, or a cosmology, might be able to save the revolution belongs to Hegelo-Marxism—that is, to a conception as far removed as possible from my own. An ontological investigation oriented toward the idea of creation leaves room, in the most abstract way, for the possibility of the instauration of an autonomous society as well as for the reality of Stalinism and Nazism. At this level, and almost all others, creation has no value content, and politics does not allow itself to be “deduced” from ontology.

Ontology signifies what is traditionally called metaphysics. I have never thought (Agnes Heller) that I have “transcended” metaphysics (*MSPI* [1973], in [CLI](#), 199-201). As we know, the word is a historical accident. That does not prevent Aristotle, in the book later named by others *Meta ta phusika*, from audaciously affirming: There is a certain kind of science (*epistēmē*) that considers Being/being [*être/étant*] (*on*) *qua* Being/being and appertains to it toward itself (*kath' auto*, in itself). We say: There is a reflection/elucidation, which is concerned with Being/being and which asks itself what appertains to it toward itself and what appertains to it inasmuch as it is for us—that is, from the fact that we are reflecting upon it. This formulation affirms that it is impossible to separate reflection upon Being from reflection

article. In the body of the text, the *date of first publication* appears in parentheses after the abbreviation. Abbreviations for published *volumes* may be found in the front matter of this volume and of the other ones in the present series.

upon beings, as it is impossible and *sinnwidrig* (nonsense) to separate reflection upon being from “theory of knowledge” (Kant, and his offspring down through our time).

Since total Being/being manifests itself, as well, as concrete and effective organization (order, *kosmos*)—for the moment, we are not deciding whether this organization is total or partial and fragmentary—ontology is also, necessarily, cosmology. It is curious to see the term cosmology used as if it were close to astrology, alchemy, or necromancy. As Molière’s character Monsieur Jourdain spoke prose without knowing it, Honneth puts the weightiest cosmological postulates into action when he sits down in front of his typewriter or when he goes out into the street: he acts as if he were certain that the former was not going to explode in his hands or that his fellow citizens had not been transformed, overnight, into headhunters. In brief, he is postulating at least a regularity and stability to phenomena, sufficient as to need/usage,² which no transcendental consciousness, no *Wesensschau*, no intersubjective communication could produce or draw out of themselves. Perhaps the coherency of experience is only probable (Husserl), but the coherency of certain philosophers appears highly uncertain when they place in doubt or consider in their books as merely probable such facts as their activity shows are taken by them to be categorically assured.

The path of philosophy (ontology, metaphysics) necessarily opens up when one reflects upon mathematics, physics, or biology (*MSPI*). It opens up just as necessarily when one reflects upon the fact, unintelligible from the standpoint of critical philosophy, that there is, in the

²T/E: Castoriadis takes this phrase from Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.5.1133b20.

weightiest sense of the term, a *history* of these sciences (*MSPI*, *OIHS* [1986]). I was going to write that no one is obliged to take an interest in science, in its results, and in its history, but this would be false. To do philosophy is to take responsibility for the totality of the thinkable, since philosophy is required to reflect upon all our activities. The concrete difficulties this taking of responsibility encounters today pertain to another level of considerations; it does not change anything on the level of principle.

The path of philosophy opens just as necessarily when one reflects upon society, history, or the human psyche. And twice rather than once, for this reflection does not only lead to the question, "What is the mode of being of these beings (society, history, the psyche), 'alongside' the mode of being of these other beings that are physical nature and the living being?" It also confronts us with the question of the being and mode of being of this being *for which* there is a world, nature, or life. The ontology of society, of history, of the psyche is part of philosophy's self-reflection in the strongest sense possible, since it is not only "under condition" of society, of history, of the psyche that philosophy exists (nature or life is also among its conditions), but also since it appears as a specific creation in and through the domain of being that the social-historical and the psychical make be.

But reflection upon the social-historical and the psychical is philosophically privileged to a third degree, for the fact of being (the effective existence) of the social-historical and its mode of being lead almost directly to weighty conclusions concerning total Being/being as such (toward itself, *kath' auto*). And this, again, twice rather than once: that is, inasmuch as the social-historical (and the psyche, but I shall concentrate here on the former) manifests a mode of being that, from this very fact, proves to appertain to total

Being/being (be it only as one of the latter's strata), since the social-historical could not be excluded from what *is*; and, inasmuch as the fact of being and the mode of being of the social-historical are not neutral with respect to the mode of being of total Being/being. In other terms: The fact that *there is* the social-historical, and that the latter *is* on the mode of being that is its own, *says something* about the world (I shall, for brevity's sake, use this term in the pages that follow).

I have never ceased writing about this mode of being proper to the social-historical since 1964, and I shall not repeat myself here. It suffices to recall that each society creates a magma of social imaginary significations (henceforth: S.I.S.), irreducible to functionality or "rationality," embodied in and through its institutions, and constitutive, each time, of its own, or "proper," world (both "natural" and "social").

We remark straight off the immense variety of these proper worlds—of the S.I.S. of different societies and of the institutions that bear and convey them. We then ask ourselves: How is the world *tout court*, since there effectively is this indefinite variety of worlds proper to each society?

The response is: The world lends itself to (is compatible with) all these S.I.S. and privileges none. That means: The world *tout court* is senseless/meaningless [*a-sensée*], devoid of signification (save that of lending itself to..., but this is not what we call a signification). The result is that, *at this level*, all "hermeneutical" discussion, every attempt to see in the creation of S.I.S. "interpretations" of the world, has no ground to stand on.

We thus remark that all effective institutions of society, and all those we might imagine as effective and viable, necessarily include an ensidic³ dimension and that the

³Author's addition: Abbreviation for *ensemblistic-identitary*.

latter has a certain grasp upon the world, sufficient as to need/usage, otherwise these societies could not exist. How is the world *tout court*, then, since the ensidic dimension has, roughly speaking and to a large degree, a grasp upon it?

The response is: The world *tout court* includes *within itself* a dimension that not only *lends itself* to an ensidic organization but *corresponds* to such an organization. The Understanding is socially instituted (*SII* [1975], in [IIS](#), 320-39), but the Understanding would be objectless if the world were pure multiplicity of the manifold, of the absolutely diverse ([IIS](#), 340-44). In an abuse of language, I shall call this the ensidic dimension *of the world*.

The world includes an ensidic dimension; otherwise, for example, the “unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics”⁴ becomes unintelligible. But the world *is not* an ensidic system. First, it is not so since it includes the human imaginary, and the imaginary is not ensidic. Next, the application of the ensidic to the world has a history, which would become unintelligible if the world were wholly ensidic (*MSPI*, *OIHS*). Finally, even supposing that the world were reducible in an exhaustive way to an ensidic system, this system would be suspended in air since it would still be impossible to account *ensidically* for its ultimate axioms and its universal constants (*MSPI*, in [CLI](#), 206-208).

The world indefinitely lends itself to ensidic organizations. The world cannot be exhausted via them. These two statements define a mode of being, which I have called the mode of being of the magma (*MSPI*, [IIS](#), *LMQA* [1983]) and which we rediscover everywhere (save in

⁴T/E: Eugene Wigner, “The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences,” *Communications in Pure and Applied Mathematics*, 13:1 (February 1960).

mathematical constructions *separated* from their foundations).

We also remark that the diverse creations of S.I.S. are both unmotivated and effectively actual.

S.I.S. are unmotivated for reasons I presented at length in *MRT* (1964-1965, in [IIS](#), 115-64). For these reasons, it makes no sense to say, for example, that the world of the ancient Egyptians was “false” (which one would be obliged to say, or at least to discuss, if this world were an “interpretation” of something with full meaning that would be external to it). We are not saying, moreover, that the world of the Koran, or of the Gospels, is “false”: we are saying (a) that we do not want this world beyond the private sphere and (b) that even within this sphere it renders impossible, or meaningless, some objects or activities that we value—for example, genuine philosophy, or theater (see Borges’s “Averroes’ Search”).⁵

S.I.S. are effective not only for the human beings they socialize but also, in principle, for everyone else, and this not only pragmatically but theoretically: they set *constraints* upon their interpretation. For example, to say that pharaonic Egypt was capitalist (or feudal) would be false; to say that the signification of Athenian democracy is exhausted in its instauration of the freedom of the community of brothers [T/E: Heller] would be inadequate and mutilating.

Let us now examine the question from the other end. Society *is* on the mode of being of the for-itself—and each society is a for-itself. It creates a world of its own, and for it nothing can make sense or simply exist that fails to enter into

⁵Jorge Luis Borges, “Averroes’ Search,” in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962).

its proper world in the way this proper world organizes and endows with meaning that which enters therein. The world of the singular psyche also is, to begin with, a world of its own and, in its most deep-seated strata, it remains so until the very end, even if the socialization of the psyche opens it to a larger proper world, the public world of the society that socializes it. This proper world *is* on the mode of *closure*—and its organization is the *a priori* of everything that can present itself—appear, be a phenomenon—to the for-itself under consideration. And this *a priori* is both “material” (for example, sensoriality) and “formal” (for example, categoriality).

The existence of proper worlds, the mode of being of the for-itself, its “*a priori*” organization are facts. Curiously, denial of these facts is absurd—by which I mean: if there is a proper world, its organization can only be *a priori*. The idea that electromagnetic waves are colored in themselves, or that one might be able to discover by induction the categories of the one and the several on the basis of “observation” (which therefore could not know at the outset whether that which was observed was “one” or “several” or both at once)—these ideas are absurd.

But we are obliged to remark that the mode of being of the for-itself, as such, is not specific to the human (whether social or psychical). The living being exists for itself (*MSPI*, *SST* [1986]). It creates its own world and nothing exists for it (except as catastrophe) that does not enter into this world *according to* the organization of this world.

Let us note in passing that Kant is not interested in this enlargement and that such an enlargement is disturbing for his theoretical philosophy. The admirable paragraphs of the third *Critique*, which *in fact* and despite Kant’s precautionary statements establish the ontological autonomy

of the level of the living being, do not consider the latter from the *erkenntnistheoretische* point of view, as organizing a proper world.

For us to halt here would be to accept one of the unacceptable bounds of Kantianism. How does it happen that some for-itself in general, and some living being in particular, exists (and can exist only) by creating a world of its own—and that it is able simply to exist, to subsist in the world *tout court*? It must be remarked that, logically speaking, the problem is the same for the living being *and* for the “transcendental subject”: the effectively actual world can effectively be organized only if it is *organizable*, and this is an *attribute of the world*, not of the subject (*SII*, *LMQA*, *OIHS*). It is this question that Kant both recognizes and covers over with the famous phrase “happy accident [*heureux hasard*].”⁶ Contrary to what Joel Whitebook believes, this nonanswer creates a problem for Kant, not for me. It is Kant who committed himself to sifting out the *a priori* (therefore *necessary*) conditions of experience, who believes he has found them *solely* on the side of the subject, who “forgets” that there equally are conditions of experience on the side of the “object,” and who places everything under the sign of “necessity” (after which the “accident,” fortunate [*heureux*] or unlucky [*malheureux*], obviously creates a disagreeable surprise), whereas he is constantly basing himself on raw facts (that *there is* experience, that *there is* “an art hidden in the depth of the human soul,”⁷ etc., etc.). As for myself, I

⁶T/E: See the fifth section of the Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, where the expression “happy accident” (*glücklicher Zufall*) occurs.

⁷T/E: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (first division, book 2, chapter 1: “Of the Schematism of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding”), tr. F. Max Müller (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1966), p. 123.

certainly shall never claim to be able to bring the ultimate facts (that there is a world, that there is for-itself) under the yoke of any sort of “necessity” whatsoever nor think that one might be able to call “accident” or “chance” (*hasard, Zufall*) that which is on the near side or on the far side of the contingent and the necessary, and within which alone contingent and necessary are effectively actual and thinkable.

That does not dispense us from trying to elucidate the various articulations at issue here. That the for-itself as such, and the living being in particular, creates each time a world of its own is only one part of the question. The living being effectively exists. That implies a certain relation between its own world and the world *tout court*. Let us call this relation *correspondence* in the vaguest sense of this term. It is a fact, a pure fact, a raw fact (and one conditioning an infinity of other facts, for example, the existence of philosophers) that this correspondence exists. This fact is neither an accident nor a nonaccident. In a certain regard, it is a tautology (the Darwinian tautology: the living being is alive, therefore it is fit for life). In another, much more profound regard, it in no way at all is a matter of a tautology, but of a being-thus of the world—of a given strata of the world we know. Nothing tells us that some for-itself ought to be able to exist in every possible world.

Freud’s “answer” in *Future of an Illusion* (*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* [hereafter: *SE*] 21: 55), invoked by Whitebook, does not surpass the considerations presented above. It is Darwino-Kantian. Kant says, All knowledge (and, more generally, every relation with the world) implies *a priori* structures of the for-itself. He does not say how and why these structures happen to “correspond” to (have a grasp upon) the world. (One can certainly imagine worlds upon which some

of these structures *would not have* a grasp. Moreover, we already positively know some of them: the stratum of microphysics and the psychical stratum, for example. Whence my ever-reiterated restriction to the *first natural stratum*.) He says, It's a happy accident. Freud responds to him by invoking a Darwinian genesis of these structures: if the *a priori* structures did not "correspond" to the world, selection/adaptation would not have allowed the bearers of these structures to exist and to reproduce themselves. The response is, on its own level, correct—but inadequate for the purposes of our discussion. First, it does not draw the ontological implications from the fact that the world in itself is also organizable, that it includes the ensidic. This was not Freud's problem, and it was not a problem for Freud (he never doubted the "rational" makeup of the physical world). But next and above all, the response on the genetic level—his level—is valid for every effective for-itself, for living being as a whole, and is valid only for the limited quasi-"knowledge" that corresponds, each time, to the category of the living being under consideration. It is valid for bacteria, for sea tortoises, for chimpanzees. If these beings exist as living beings—that is to say, as instances of beings-for-themselves—that implies that they have become capable, in one way or another, of creating for themselves proper worlds that happen to have points of contact, sufficient as to need/usage, with the world *tout court*. It is strictly impossible to "explain" in this way the birth of the theory of *n*-dimensional Hilbert spaces and the grasp this theory has upon the physical world (or the birth of psychoanalytic theory itself), unless one postulates an essential homogeneity, without break, stretching from the logic of infraviruses to the logic of Einstein, and also a wholly ensidic organization of everything that is. (It is in this sense that I wrote, irreverently,

that “the *Transcendental Aesthetic* holds good for dogs—and of course for us, too, to the (great) extent that we are related to dogs” [*OIHS*].)

One might think that adaptation/selection could “explain” development of a strictly ensidic and narrowly instrumental kind of human knowledge. In fact, it does not explain even that. It has nothing to say as to what is proper to the human proper worlds (those of various instituted societies)—namely, that the S.I.S. that make them be are not “adaptive” or “antiadaptive”: they are *elsewhere*. The psyche itself is a massive and monstrous case of *inadaptation*. This *inadaptation* is, somehow or other, tamed by the social institution and the socialization of the psyche—which certainly has, in this regard, a value—not “adaptive,” but one of survival: if humanity had not created the institution, it would have disappeared as a living species. But this tautology becomes aphonic when faced with the infinite variety of S.I.S.: are the Babylonian gods more, or less, “adaptive” than the Mayan gods? It also has to occult the decisive dependence of the ensidic dimension of each institution of society—of its *legein* and *teukhein*⁸—with regard to the properly imaginary dimension of its S.I.S. (without Babylonian theology, no Babylonian astronomy). Last and most important, it collapses in the face of the creation of unlimited interrogation, philosophy and science in the true sense of the term. What relation is there between “adaptation” and the fact that, after hundreds of millennia of instituted (and also more or less “adapted”) existence, certain societies begin to call explicitly into question their institution and their established S.I.S.? What is accomplished thereby is a *shattering of the closure* in and through which the simple living being *is*, an (always

⁸ Author’s addition: On these two terms, see ch. 5 of [IIS](#).

imperfect and unfinished) unsettling of one's own world as exclusive, something that *negates head on* biological "logic," the creation of a being and of a mode of being that is unprecedented in the history of the world: a being that explicitly calls into question the laws of its own existence and that henceforth *is* in and through this calling into question.

Let me backtrack a moment to explicate the answer to the question I posed in [IIS](#) by generalizing it: If the for-itself brings everything out of itself, how and why would it ever encounter anything other than its own products? And if it does not do so, this would mean that it "borrows" or "copies" its own world from "without," which is absurd. The *general* answer is: The for-itself can *be* only by creating (only *if* it creates) a world of its own that is sufficiently "analogous" to traits of the "external" world; and such a creation is rendered possible by this, that both the proper world of the for-itself and the world *tout court* include an ensidic dimension. The for-itself has to create the ensidic—and there is something ensidic in the world. The for-itself, for example, separates and combines—and there is, in the world, something *separable* and *combinable*. When it comes to the particular for-itself that is the psyche, this is but a completely inadequate, partial answer (it concerns the debris of animal regulation that subsists within the human being). The essential point here is that, for the psyche, the "outside world" is the *social* world, that the psyche *is* in and through meaning, and that the social world permits it to create a meaning for it on the basis of social signification. I shall return to this point further on ("Psyche and Society"). As for the proper world of each society, it poses still other problems (see "Meaning and Validity").



The social-historical is creation: creation once and for all (institution and signification are irreducible to the biological), creation each time of its institution by each society (history is not rational unfolding). The social-historical *is*. *Therefore*, creation *appertains* to Being/being, it has to be counted among the *toutō huparkhonta kath' auto*—to that which appertains to it as such.⁹ But this also holds beyond the social-historical: there is living being. The mode of being of a star is not the mode of being of an elephant. (And this is *independent* of the fact that one might eventually show, a possibility Jean-Pierre Dupuy evokes, that under certain conditions the “inorganic” might be able to “produce” the “organic”: the living being brings about the appearance of laws and qualities that, as such, have *no meaning* in the physical realm.) It is immediately evident that the emergence of being-for-itself (the living being, psyche, the social-historical) entails an *essential fragmentation* of total Being/being. The extent to which, the manner in which despite and through this fragmentation a *kosmos*, a partially organized and “coherent” totality, continues to exist is obviously an immense question that remains to be worked out.¹⁰

The fact of creation also has weighty ontological implications, but I can do no more than allude to them here. It entails the abandonment of the hypercategory of *determinacy* as absolute (and of its avatar, the idea of a complete determinism). But it is a logical error to think—as

⁹T/E: Aristotle *Metaphysics* 4.1.1003a21-22.

¹⁰T/E: See the “Notice” for [CL3](#), dated the same month as the appearance of the present text.

Honneth and others seem to do—that due to this fact one must replace this hypercategory with the idea of absolute and complete indetermination. My philosophy is not a “philosophy of indetermination.” Creation means, precisely, the *positing* of *new determinations*—the emergence of new forms, *eidē*, therefore *ipso facto* the emergence of new *laws*—the laws appertaining to these modes of being. At the most general level, the idea of creation *implies* indetermination *uniquely* only in the following sense: the totality of what is is never so totally and exhaustively “determined” that it might exclude (render impossible) the surging forth of new *determinations*.

The idea of creation is equally foreign to the idea of a full and absolute indetermination from another, equally important point of view. Whatever its specific makeup and whatever the degree of internal indetermination it includes, every form (therefore also every new form) is a *being-this* and a *being-thus*. It would be nothing if it were not an *ecceitas* distinct from the others, a *Dies-heit* and a *Was-heit*, a *tode ti*.

Beyond this point, the discourse has to become specific at each level. The created form can almost exhaust itself in its ensidic determinations (for example, a new mathematical theory) or else reduce these determinations to relatively little (the initial psyche). The mode of being of the indeterminate itself is not purely and simply indeterminate: despite the fact that the indetermination of the Unconscious is, perhaps, the strongest kind we might be given the opportunity to approach, the Unconscious is nevertheless a *this* that is sufficiently distinct for one to be able to state that its indetermination has *no relation* (other than logical and empty)¹¹ with the eventual indetermination of quantum

¹¹T/E: This is Castoriadis’s translation of Aristotle’s phrase *logikōs kai*

entities. Society has its own sort of [*propre*] indetermination—and so does *each* particular society.

What is the relation between new and old forms? More generally, what are the *forms of relation* in general among forms, and among instances (particular exemplars) of each form? What are the relations among strata of Being/being, and among the beings [*étants*] within each stratum? Another immense field, which remains to be worked over. It does not suffice to speak of a “principle of insufficient reason” (Bernhard Waldenfels): one can say much more than that. A theory of the effective types of connection ought at least to take account of the following modes (indicated here only as examples and without any claim to being systematic or exhaustive):

- the necessary and sufficient condition (as it is encountered in mathematics);
- the simply sufficient condition, what is usually meant by causality (it coincides with the first condition only by adjoining to the latter an indefinite number of necessary conditions picked up under the clause *ceteris paribus*);
- the external necessary condition (the existence of the Milky Way for the composition of *Tristan und Isolde*);
- the internal necessary condition (the previous history of Western music for this same piece);
- leaning on in the psychoanalytic sense;
- leaning on in the social-historical sense;
- the influence of one thought upon another thought (Plato/Aristotle, Hume/Kant, etc.).

kenōs, found, for example, in the *Eudemian Ethics* 1217b21.

These modes are in no way mutually exclusive. In particular, we encounter them all in the social-historical field (I have insisted on several occasions, notably in the first part of *IIS* (*MRT*), on the presence and importance of causality in social-historical life). Due to this very fact, it is clear that social-historical creation (as well as, moreover, creation in any other domain), while it is unmotivated (*ex nihilo*), always takes place *under constraints* (it does not occur *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*). Neither in the social-historical domain nor anywhere else does creation signify that just anything can happen just anywhere, just any time and just anyhow.

Relation to Inherited Philosophy

Society institutes itself, each time, in the closure of its S.I.S. The historical creation of philosophy is rupture of this closure: explicit calling into question of these S.I.S., of the representations and words of the tribe. Whence its consubstantiality with democracy. The two are possible only in and through an onset of rupture in social heteronomy and the creation of a new type of being: reflective and deliberative subjectivity. The creation of reflection—of thought—goes hand in hand with the creation of a new type of discourse, philosophical discourse, which embodies unlimited interrogation and itself modifies itself throughout its history.

Our relation with the history of philosophy itself creates a philosophical question of the first magnitude (*EP?* [1988]), which is natural since all reflection is also self-reflection, and reflection did not begin today. Among the multiple aspects of this question, one is particularly important here. As rupture of closure, reflection nevertheless tends, in an irresistible manner, to close back upon itself. This is inevitable (even when a philosophy does not take the *form* of

a system), since otherwise reflection would limit itself to being an indeterminate and empty question mark. The truth of philosophy is the rupture of closure, the unsettling of received self-evident truths, including and especially philosophical ones. It is this movement, but it is a movement that creates the soil upon which it walks. This soil is not and cannot be just anything—it defines, delimits, forms, and constrains. The defining characteristic [*Le propre*] of a great philosophy is what allows one to go beyond its own soil—what incites one, even, to go beyond. As it tends to—and has to—take responsibility for the totality of the thinkable, it tends to close upon itself. If it is great, one will find in it at least some signs that the movement of thought cannot stop there and even some part of the means to continue this movement. Both these signs and these means take the form of aporias, antinomies, frank contradictions, heterogeneous chunks.

This holds, too, on a gigantic scale, for the whole of Greco-Western philosophy—what I have called *inherited thought*. The soil that limits it, and that constrains us, is the soil of *determinacy* (*peras*, *Bestimmtheit*). In this regard, there is a closure of ontology and of Greco-Western philosophy. But this closure is not unsurpassable,¹² there is no “end of philosophy” as is proclaimed amidst the sterility and impotence of our age (*EP?*). The closure of inherited thought can and should be broken; not for the mere pleasure of doing so but because such is the exigency with which we are confronted by both things and our own activity of reflection. And—here is the sign of the grandeur of this legacy—a reflection worthy of this name would be able to find in Plato, in Aristotle, in Kant, and even in Hegel the points of departure, and some of the means, for a new movement. I

¹²Author’s addition: It would be better to say *definitive*.

have indicated above some of these points in relation to Kant. I shall do so below apropos of Aristotle.

But such was not my personal itinerary. I was subjugated by philosophy as soon as I knew of it, at age thirteen. (A sale of used books at Athens had enabled me to buy with my meager pocket money a “History of Philosophy” in two volumes, an honest “lifting” of Friedrich Uberweg and Émile Bréhier. Then, at the same time as Marx, came Kant, Plato, Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp, Heinrich Rickert, Emil Lask, Edmund Husserl, Hegel, Max Weber, pretty much in that order.) Since then, I have never ceased to preoccupy myself with it. I came to Paris in 1945 to do a doctoral thesis in philosophy whose theme was that every rational philosophical order culminates, from its own point of view, in aporias and impasses. But as early as 1942, politics proved to be too engrossing and I have always tried to conduct political activity and reflection without directly mixing therein philosophy in the proper sense of the term. It is as political, and not philosophical, ideas that autonomy (*QURSS* [1947], *SB* [1949]), the creativity of the masses, what today I would have called the irruption of the instituting imaginary in and through the activity of an anonymous collective (*PL* [1951]) made their appearance in my writings; it is starting from a reflection on the contemporary economy, from an immanent critique of his economics and his view of society and of history, and not as metaphysician, that I criticized Marx, then distanced myself from him (*DC* [1953-54], *CS I-III* [1955-1957], *PO* [1958], *MCR* [1960-1961]). And it is starting from a reflection upon history and the diverse forms of society that his system finally was rejected and the idea of the imaginary institution of society attained (*MCR*, *MRT*). Only then—as can be seen in the first part of [*IIS*](#)—was the connection with philosophy proper and its history made, was

Marx's belonging to rationalist metaphysics described, and were certain of the premises for the idea of imagination in German Idealism rediscovered. (I have given a more detailed description of this itinerary in *GI* [1973].) It is only after the publication of *MRT* (1964-1965) and the discontinuation of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* that the philosophical work began to absorb the best part of my free time (I have practically never ceased working professionally—as an economist until 1970, as a psychoanalyst starting in 1973). But this work is just as much, if not more, a preoccupation with the presuppositions, the implications, the philosophical meaning of the sciences, of psychoanalysis, of society and of history as a reflection on the great texts of the past.

Among these texts, none has any “privilege”—but it is accurate to say that Aristotle occupies a particular position, for reasons I shall state. It is certainly true, as Heller says, that Aristotle is a philosopher who comes “after the Enlightenment”—that therefore, in this sense, his historical situation offers analogies with our own. But this is only a part of the truth. Aristotle comes not only after the Enlightenment but after the most formidable reaction against the Enlightenment, organized by the greatest philosopher who ever existed, Plato. (I have never written the absurdity that Heller imputes to me, namely, that Plato would be a “theologian.” Plato created, it is true, theological philosophy—which is something else entirely.) But also, Aristotle, pupil of Plato and inconceivable without him, is in a sense “before” Plato: he belongs, to an essential degree, to the fifth century. Certainly, he ends up by placing the *bios theōrētikos* at the summit of everything. But he is also, contrary to the interpretational vulgate, a democrat in the Athenian sense (see *The Constitution of the Athenians*, as well as his ideal *politeia*). If he posits, by what (also) appears to

him as a necessity of thought, a God, pure thought, pure activity, this God—the sole one worthy of this name—has no relation with this world; He could not, without toppling over into ridiculousness, either have created it or have intervened therein. For all these reasons, the tensions and aporias of Aristotle's thought are particularly fecund.

Aristotle sets the bounds for Greco-Western ontology. On certain subjects, which in my view are crucial—*phantasia* (DI [1978]), *nomos/phusis* (VEJP [1975])—he straddles this boundary and is on the verge of crossing it. He does not cross it. He remains within determinacy: pure matter, like pure indetermination, is an abstractive concept, a limit of being and of thought. The idea of creation would have no meaning for him: the theory of *poiēsis* and *technē* is essentially a theory of imitation (T [1973], in [CLI](#), 292-97), even if at moments he vacillates. As such, it is obviously inadequate to the thing, and it is no accident that the idea of *mimēsis* returns so often in contemporary authors for whom creation remains an obscene (or divine) term.

Aristotle thinks the fifth century in his *Politics* and in his theory of justice (the fifth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*). He finds his way back to the fifth century on another point of capital importance—which is connected, moreover, to the preceding one. Not only does he debate constantly with the great Democritus (whose very existence we would have remained ignorant of, had he stuck merely with Plato, the organizer of the first great conspiracy of silence in the history of philosophy), but he positively rediscovers the latter's legacy, as well as that of Herodotus, the Hippocratics, the great Sophists, in the *phusis/nomos* distinction (obliterated in Plato, where it is replaced with the healthy and the corrupt). No need to recall that Aristotle's thought is essentially a thought of *phusis*. But when he comes to human affairs, he

cannot help but find his way back to the question of *nomos*. This explains the chaotic aspects of the *Politics*, and it explains, as well, that in his reflection on the *polis* and justice, when he cannot so easily find his way back to his (or a) *phusis*, he vacillates (*VEJP*). Likewise, in the domain of the psyche he discovers the imagination, but he cannot, despite his efforts in the most aporetic parts of *Peri psuchēs*, articulate it in terms of a functional and rational *phusis* of the soul (*DI*).

Someone who would have reflected solely on the basis of the history of philosophy and of Aristotle's text could, on the basis of these two themes—*nomos* and *phantasia* (which in appearance are strangely, and in truth essentially, connected)—have embarked upon the path of the imaginary institution of society (along which Vico, Montesquieu, Herder, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel would have been at once helpful and treacherous companions). Such a person could have taken up again the *phusis/nomos* polarity and the aporias to which it gives rise in human affairs, as well as the aporias created by the discovery of the imagination. This person could have accepted these aporias (instead of masking them) and settled them with the decision (which obviously would have engendered new questions): (1) that there is definitely no *phusis* of *nomos*, in any sense of the term; (2) that *nomos*—like *technē*—is created by humans, and that this refers back to a *phantasia* that is not imitative of or complementary to *phusis*, and, finally, (3) that there exists at least one type of being, human being, that creates, gives rise to, its own *eidos* in a “nonnatural” fashion, without this *eidos* being found already, *dunamei*, in its determinate potentialities. In taking account of this type of being, not only would the universality of *phusis* be ruptured but every ontology of determinacy, therefore also Aristotelian ontology, would thereby be ruined.

*Anthrōpos anthrōpon gennai.*¹³ And also, by and large, *Athēnaios Athēnaion gennai.* But what, then, is the ontological (or physical) site in which being-Athenian is rooted?

Someone could have done it. But why would one have done it? Why, among the innumerable knots of aporias that also constitute the inherited philosophy, would one have chosen those particular two? I have no answer to this hypothetical question, any more than I know why Heller labels “neo-Aristotelian” an author who began his reflection with a rejection of the central category of Aristotelian ontology. What I do know is that it is not from reading Aristotle or Kant that I got the idea of thinking the imaginary institution of society; rather, my thinking of the latter led me to reread Aristotle or Kant with another gaze. Dare I add that these rereadings convinced me of the pertinence of my questions and the inadequacy of their responses?

Let us return to the thing itself. *Phusis* for Aristotle is the end and the norm. But it is also the predominant effective actuality (*VEJP*). It has to be both at once. *Phusis* is what is almost always (save for aberrations and monsters) such as it has to be. *Phusis* cannot be a norm external to effective actuality, which would make of Aristotle a strange Platon-Kantian; nor is it a mere raw effective actuality—which, for Aristotle, would deprive it of both unity and intelligibility. Now, these two indissociable components of the idea of *phusis*—without this indissociability Aristotle’s ontology would collapse—find themselves irremediably dislocated once one considers the human domain. Aristotle says, *Logos* and *nous* are the end of nature (*to tēs phuseōs telos*) for us

¹³T/E: Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1070a28: “man (in the sense of humans) begets man.”

humans.¹⁴ How many people effectively realize this *telos*? And how many cities are effectively instituted in order to assure the *eu zēn*, the good life, such as the Philosopher would conceive it? And what is the relation, if there is one, between the *eu zēn* of the Athenians and that of the Egyptians?

Let us now take all this up again in our own terms. There is, if one wants to call it thus, a *phusis* of man in the sense of universal effective actuality. This *phusis* is, at its core and as *phusis* proper to man, radical imaginary: radical imagination of the psyche, social instituting imaginary at the collective level. But this *phusis* does not coincide with any norm (except in the trivial sense: a human being totally “without imagination” would be a monster in the Aristotelian sense); nor, as such, does *phusis* permit one to “deduce” or to “found” any norms. Certainly, it also appertains to this *phusis* of man to *create* norms, as well as to create significations (instituting imaginary). But there is *no content* to these norms that allows itself to be sifted out as effectively universal; there is, for humans, no *nomos*, no norm *materialiter spectata* that would be *phusei*, by nature, by human *ousia*. I shall not enter here into the question of social-historical universals, concerning which, as one knows, discussions, revived over the past forty years, have furnished nothing certain. I note simply (a) that one cannot consider as *normative* universals the trivial universals that express the universal constraints under which the social-historical deploys itself (production of “material” life, sexual reproduction, etc.), (b) that the universals of language, other than phonological ones, can concern only the *ensidic* dimension of language, code and not tongue, the instrumental and not the significant properly

¹⁴T/E: In *VEJP*, Castoriadis provided the reference: Aristotle *Politics* 7.15.1334b14-15.

speaking (it is here that all “categorization” of referents brought about by language belongs; in fact, the universals some linguists are trying to sift out all truly concern language’s code, for example, the elementary syntactic structures Noam Chomsky is seeking after simply embody a certain subject/predicate organization and its ramifications), (c) that the sole universals to offer a material normativity are the prohibition of incest and the prohibition of “free” murder (not murder in general!) *within* the collectivity. But these norms belong to the minimal requisites for the socialization of the psyche (*SII*, in *IIS*, 300-11E; *PoPA* [1988], in *CL3*, 148-51). The institution has to furnish to the psyche diurnal meaning, and to do this it has to force the psyche to exit from its own world, where at the outset desire for the other and hatred of the other know no limit. It is impossible to draw from these two prohibitions any positive, substantive, and universal normative prescription. Obviously, beyond these considerations an immense elaboration remains to be done, an elaboration that, as a matter of fact, is social-historical since both the prohibition of incest and the (limited) prohibition of murder take on some content and have different fields of application in different societies.

The sole “norm” consubstantial with the *physis* of man is that man cannot *not* posit norms. Society is human, and not a pseudo-“animal society,” inasmuch as it lays down norms in and through the institution, inasmuch as these norms embody significations, and inasmuch as their mode of being and of preservation possesses no specific biological substrate, nor does it answer to any “functions,” “adaptations,” “learning processes,” or “problems to be resolved.”

Now, starting from *a certain moment* (a very recent one), *certain* (ultrarare) societies raise a hitherto unprecedented question: that of the *de jure* validity of social norms and

significations. This, too, is a new social-historical creation, the creation of a new space, of a new mode of being, of new objects, and of new categories—which are consubstantial, obviously, with the creation of philosophy and of politics in the sense I give to this term (*PoPA*). It is this space that we presuppose, and into which we enter, when we discuss truth or justice. I shall return to this point at length below.

Psyche and Society

The psyche and the social-historical are mutually irreducible. One cannot make society with the psychical (unless one has already surreptitiously introduced the former into the latter, under the form of language, for example). The Unconscious produces phantasms, not institutions. Nor can one produce something of the psyche starting from the social—it is even unclear what this expression might mean—or resorb the psyche totally within the social, not even in an archaic society or in the society of *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*: people will always dream, they will always desire to transgress the social norm.

This *acknowledgment* seems unacceptable to Whitebook, who on this point happens to be in agreement with Jürgen Habermas: to say that psyche and society are mutually irreducible would, it seems, establish a “metaphysical opposition” between the two. A curious expression. If what I affirmed above were false, the opposition would not be “metaphysical,” it would be nonexistent. If it is a question of the idea of irreducibility as such, the remark is absurd. If I say that an air chamber and a balloon are (topologically) mutually irreducible, is that “metaphysical”? One should ask oneself, rather, what metaphysics is hidden behind the idea that every affirmation

of irreducibility is “metaphysical.” The answer is obvious: a unitary and reductionist metaphysics (whether “materialistic” or “idealistic” matters little). That there is nothing that is irreducible signifies: The Essence of the Whole is the Same; phenomenal differences boil down to differences of quantity, combinatory differences, and so on. This metaphysics is bad, not because it is “metaphysical”—but because it is false.

The psyche is not socializable without remainder—nor is the Unconscious translatable, without remainder, into language. The reduction of the Unconscious to language (where Lacan and Habermas curiously meet in agreement) is alien to the thing itself (and obviously also to Freud’s thought: “in the Unconscious there are only representations of things, not representations of words”).¹⁵ No dream is fully interpretable, and this is so not in fact but in principle (*ETS* [1968], *SII*). The choice of (figurative, not linguistic) tropes used in the dream is both over- and underdetermined. The requirement of figurability¹⁶ subjects the dream to an essential distortion; starting therefrom, one attempts, in the process of psychoanalytic interpretation, to restitute nonverbal—and, at the limit, nonrepresentable—contents. (It is not because one has *called* something “drive” that one elicits its essence in language.) The dream-interpretation redoubles this distortion,

¹⁵T/E: This may be a paraphrase from “The Unconscious” (1915), where Freud says: “but the conscious presentation comprises the presentation of the thing plus the presentation of the word belonging to it, while the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone” (*SE* 14: 201, with Jones’s translation of Freud’s *Vorstellung* as “presentation,” whereas Castoriadis always insists that “representation” is correct.)

¹⁶T/E: This is my English translation of the standard French translation or paraphrase of Freud’s *Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*. The *Standard Edition* has “conditions of representability.”

since the “dream’s navel” is drive-oriented and monadic and since the dream realizes once again the originary indistinction of affect/desire/representation every dreamer is familiar with (except, perhaps, if he is a philosopher). The “glossification” of the Unconscious not only does not elucidate anything, as Whitebook seems to think, it destroys the essential part of the Freudian discovery by rendering it infinitely flat. In this, it faithfully expresses the “linguistic turn” (which not only have I *not* “participated” in but which I have denounced upon several occasions: *MRT*, *ETS*, *MSPI*, *SII*). It also renders incomprehensible the process of socialization, which imposes upon the psyche an each-time *singular* tongue. Is one to believe, along with the young pastor in George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan*, that the Unconscious speaks English? Are not Yiddish or Viennese German better candidates? A “linguistic theory” of the Unconscious has to postulate (as Chomsky does) an *a priori*, semantically universal tongue (or the strict isomorphism of every “empirical” tongue with this *Ur-tongue*).

Can one climb back down and fall back upon a “potentiality toward language” that would be imminent to the psyche? Whitebook tries to do so. Obviously, everything depends upon the infinitely elastic term *potentiality*. He invokes Ricœur and “a signifying power that is operative prior to language.” Here again, we must agree on what we are talking about. There is not one “signifying power” but (at least) two dimensions of the psyche that render it capable of language and, more generally, of socialization (*SII*, *SST*, *PoPA*). Both have to do with the radical imagination. From the outset, the psyche is in *meaning*: everything must make sense, on the mode of making sense for the psyche. And almost immediately afterward, the psyche is in the *quid quo pro* (which led Lacan astray); it can see in a thing another

thing, this being the subjective correlate of the signitive relation (*SII*). But that does not mean that there is a language of the psyche whose functioning would be disturbed by the “barrier of repression,” nor even that there is a “heterogeneity” between something linguistic that would appertain to the Unconscious and conscious language. There is ontological alterity between (1) a universe that at the outset is monadic, then differentiated, but always tending to close upon itself and in which a representation can be posited as standing [*valant*] for another representation and (2) a diurnal universe of signs, which in good part obeys ensidic logic and bears/conveys *public*, somehow or other shared, significations.

It is said that my conception would render the mediation between individual and society impossible. But it is not a matter of establishing such a “mediation.” The individual is of the social, it is total fragment of the world as it is each time instituted. It is a matter of elucidating, as far as possible, the fact that the *psyche* is (though never fully) socialized. Whitebook thinks that I “never...adequately theorize” this question, and he believes that the sought-after theorization would be found in a “potentiality immanent in the psyche—dare we say: *Anlage*?”, a disposition of the psyche to be socialized. But the postulation of “immanent potentialities,” practiced with great success by Molière’s doctors, is quite the contrary of theorization: it puts a halt to reflection. That the psyche should be (imperfectly) socializable no more signifies that it possesses an *Anlage* of socialization than the possibility of making a statue from marble signifies that the marble has an *Anlage* of statufication. The “preestablished harmony” between psyche and society for which Whitebook rightly reproaches Habermas is reintroduced by Whitebook himself if the term “immanent potentiality” signifies anything else but

“possibility” (*SII*).

Freud said that the Unconscious knows nothing of time and contradiction.¹⁷ Would one now have to add, “But it *not only* knows society, it is even very favorably disposed thereto”? This is a question not of orthodoxy but of coherency. If there is a positive social *Anlage* of the initial psyche, then there certainly has to be a positive *Anlage* with regard to all society signifies—the postponement of satisfaction, the renunciation of pleasure, the abandonment of the omnipotence of thought, the abstract rule, the independent other and indefinite others, and so on. None of all that is compatible with what we see daily in the clinical setting or even with a mildly coherent theorization of the psychical world. Society, for the initial psyche, is *Anankē* pure and simple. It does its best to introduce itself to the *infans* under the most benevolent and seductive of guises—those of the mother—but it is still *Anankē*. The profound and almost ineradicable ambivalence toward the mother (reaching, in the adult individual, the point of the most intense hatred I have ever had the chance to observe) has its origin, even beyond the inevitable equation “absent mother = bad mother,” in the mother’s decisive role in the breakup of the psychical monad.

We must invert the usual way of looking at things in order to see what within the human being a “potentiality for socialization” is: it is the beast, the ruins of its animality. Like the majority of mammals, like in any case the higher apes, the “pre-man” cannot but be endowed with an “instinctive” quasi-sociality and an essentially ensidic, and nonreflective, “mental” apparatus, both of them *functional*: social animal,

¹⁷T/E: “There are...no negation, no doubt, no degrees of certainty [in the Unconscious].” “Reference to time is bound up...with the work of the system Cs” (*GW* 10: 286; in English, *The Unconscious*, *SE* 14: 186, 187).

reasonable animal. This is not what is proper to man, any more than what is found in the highly animalistic traits of imitation and learning. What is proper to man is the destruction these two functional apparatuses undergo via the emergence of the psyche in the strict sense. The malignant, as if cancerous, growth of the imagination without regard to functionality shatters these two apparatuses and subjects their debris to nonfunctionality (representational pleasure overtaking organ pleasure). This debris—like, too, for example, the “perceptual organization” of the world connected to a neurosensorial constitution that is quite obviously quite close, if not identical, to that of higher primates—becomes, thenceforth, parts or materials with whose aid the institution will construct a human Understanding, a human perception, a genuinely human socialization—all three eminently *variable* across societies and periods.

[No need to discuss the return of confused terms, such as “animal society” (for example, Maurice Godelier in *La Recherche*, November 1989).¹⁸ The hive or the herd is not a society. There is society where significations are *constitutive* of being-together, as symbolized by and embodied in a network of institutions; or, where there is the *explicit nonsense* borne and conveyed by the “material-abstract” and participable by an indefinite collectivity. Society is inconceivable without the creation of *ideality*.]

What, then, is there “in common” between psyche and society, where is the “mediation” or the “point of identity”? For both, there is and there has to be *nonfunctional meaning* (meaning in no way signifies *logos*!). But this meaning is, as was already said, of another nature in each of the two cases.

¹⁸T/E: Maurice Godelier, “Sexualité, parenté et Pouvoir,” *La Recherche*, 213 (November 1989): 1141-55.

Psyche demands meaning, but society makes it renounce (though never completely) what for the psyche is its proper meaning and forces it to find meaning in the S.I.S. and in institutions. To ask where the “mediations” are is strange: one could never stop enumerating them (*SII*, *ISR* [1982], *FISSI* [1985], *SST*, *PoPA*, *ISRH* [1988]). “Abstractly,” society furnishes objects to cathect, identificatory models, promises of substitutes (immortality), and so on. “Concretely,” socialization can never occur without the total presence and the intervention (be it catastrophic) of at least one already socialized individual, this individual becoming object of cathexis and way of access to the social world as it is each time instituted.

The mother is society plus three million years of hominization. Anyone who does not see that and asks for “mediations” shows he does not understand what is at issue. To have shown, in a relatively precise manner (beyond *anthrōpos anthrōpon gennai*), the unfolding of this process while taking into account the irreducible specificity of the psyche is the decisive contribution a correctly interpreted psychoanalytic theory can offer to the comprehension, not only of the psychological world, but also of a central dimension of society. I flatter myself in thinking that, against the sociological lethargy of the psychoanalysts and the psychoanalytic lethargy of the sociologists, I have furnished this correct interpretation in chapter 6 of *IIS*.

All this also goes to show that, while the mode of being of the Unconscious is that of a magma, magma in no way signifies, either here or anywhere else, an “amorphous clay”—quite the contrary, in fact, since one can “extract...an indefinite number of ensemblist organizations” from a magma (*SII*, in *IIS*, 343)—and it is to this, too, that the “practically unlimited malleability of the psyche” corresponds. The mode

of being of the magma signifies simply that the object under consideration is neither reducible to these ensidic organizations nor exhaustible by them.

To the question of “how hallucinatory wish fulfillment is ever renounced” by the psyche—which, according to Whitebook, would create insurmountable difficulties both for Freud and for myself—the main response is, obviously, that *the psyche does not renounce it*: the psyche renounces neither dreaming nor phantasying nor daydreaming. Nor does it renounce any of these in its socialized strata, though there the modalities are different.

Were the delirious crowds standing before Hitler at Nuremberg and the Pasdarans ready to die on orders from Khomeini trying to obtain some organ pleasure? But the question is fallacious, it makes sense only upon the Cartesian postulates it surreptitiously imputes to its adversary. I have written (*SII*) that the psyche is but the “form” of the body. If the nursling cannot feel *at the same time* both hallucinatory and “real” satisfactions, it will die—not from anorexia but from simple starvation. The predominance of representational pleasure over organ pleasure (*SII*, *SST*) does not signify that organ pleasure is suppressed; if this were so, there would have been no preservation of the individual nor sexual reproduction of the species. The body (more exactly, the “actions/passions” of the body) is source of pleasure, but this pleasure has to be “doubled” by representation. The nursling’s entire fate depends upon the way in which it weaves together, and the way in which its mother leads it to weave together, phantasmatic pleasure and “real” satisfaction. We are not speaking of a “Cartesian” psyche, external to the body “within” which it finds itself imprisoned and with which it has the pineal gland as its sole point of contact. We are speaking of a psyche/soma, of a psyche that is the

“imperceptible” dimension of the body, “duplicating” it through its entire length. (And obviously, all socialization is also simultaneously socialization of the body, just as the body is, reciprocally, prop [*étayage*] for socialization itself.) “Real” satisfaction is constantly immersed in the imaginary, and it is unclear how, in the human, it could be separated therefrom.

Of the immense work that remains to be done in these domains, here are the directions that appear most urgent to me. First, the elucidation of the specific modes of socialization, as instaurated each time by particular societies. Next, discussion of the nontrivial constants in these modes, beyond the ones I have just mentioned. At the same time, the question of the unity/difference of psyche/soma still also remains obscure, and discussion thereof has to be resumed not only from the “traditional” (“psychosomatic,” etc.) point of view, but also from the point of view of contemporary developments (the neurosciences, the *negative* paradigm of “artificial intelligence,” etc.).

Also to be treated from this angle is the question of the “*concrete*” *articulation* of society—for example, of intermediate bodies such as family, clan, caste, class, and so on, the particular significations attached to them, and the corresponding identifications on the part of individuals. I thank my friends who remind me of the existence of this question—and I permit myself to remind them in turn that it is not because I was unaware of it that I wrote, for thirty years, about classes, informal groups of workers, youths, etc. Would one reproach an algebraist who writes $x + x = 2x$ for ignoring or forgetting that $1 + 1 = 2$?

There is still the prescriptive/normative dimension, namely, the contribution these considerations can bring to a reflection on a form of education oriented toward autonomy.

Finally to be treated more amply than I have done so

far (in *SII* and *SST*) is the passage from the psyche and the heteronomous social individual to reflective and deliberative subjectivity (that is, the elucidation of *two* different modes of sublimation).

~

Some of these problems are discussed in Hans Furth's text. I am in agreement with the majority of his formulations, including his affirmation that "action *is* the imaginary product." But here distinctions are necessary. In *IIS*, I consider only the very first phases of psychical life, during which there can be no question of "action," save in a too-abstract and too-broad sense—whereas Furth concentrates on the period after two years. But I must also emphasize that, insisting all the while on the fact that the psyche is, indissociably, representational/intentional/affective flux, I had to speak there especially the language of representation for the reason I already mentioned above apropos of dreaming: it is this aspect that we can most easily and most directly discuss. And this holds, too, for S.I.S. (*PoPA*, [CL3](#), 157-58). But I would not say, as Furth does, that the child, even at a late stage, "freely constructs social imaginary significations." The child's assimilation of S.I.S. is certainly also always self-activity—therefore constructive and even "creative." This does not stop it from being essentially *introjection*—which, moreover, begins long before one's seventh year (in fact, as early as one's birth). That introjection presupposes projection (*SII*, *SST*) is something else. And children's attachment to norms is certain—but late: "at the outset," such attachment coexists with its opposite, and its roots are to be sought in repetition and the need for regularity and for stable bearings that accompanies the breakup of the psychical monad.

Learning and Progress

A tendency has arisen, for a long time now, to try to make learning play the role of a central category, and even more, of a *deus ex machina* that would miraculously succeed in bridging the gap between the animal world and the human one and, even further, in dissipating by a curious sort of alchemy the question of the new.

But learning—like its cousin, adaptation—as important and ineliminable as it might be, is a *biological* category. I do not need to underscore here what, in strictly biological terms, the notion includes that is both evident and infinitely enigmatic. Whether the biologists know it or not, this notion refers immediately to philosophical questions, those that a philosophy of the living being (and not a “philosophy of life”) ought to elucidate. One could contribute something to the understanding of the human domain if one began to specify what differentiates human “learning” from animal learning. I do not think that this has yet been done.

One evident fact immediately commands the attention. Whereas animal learning relates to a proper world that is given once and for all and on the basis of “subjective” apparatuses also given once and for all, learning in the case of the human being concerns only the functions of the human as “pure animal”: gripping, standing erect and walking, etc.—insofar as it might be legitimate to separate them in an abstract manner from the rest. The essential feature of human “learning” does not concern a proper world given once and for all; it relates to an other social-historical world, to other societies. This is manifest not only in the case of one’s tongue but also for all of one’s behavior. (One need only have seen Africans and Europeans/Americans dancing side by side to understand that one’s relation to one’s body is social-

historically determined.)

This refers us to two intimately connected points. Without this essential malleability of the human being, which permits it here to learn Bamileke culture and there Florentine culture, there would be no history, no different societies. Now, theories of learning—and, more generally, conceptions of history based upon them—offer nothing capable of elucidating this malleability. At best, it remains for them an indigestible particle. In contrast, an elucidation of the socialization of the psyche on the basis of the imagination and of the imposition on the latter of the each-time given institution of society allows us to view the entirety of the phenomena within a framework that renders it, in principle, comprehensible.

Moreover, if human behavior were only learning, one sees neither why nor how one would ever have exited from the “first society.” The existence of history and the diversity of societies force one to recognize as essential to the human this capacity for creation that makes it invent new forms of behavior, as well as to greet, should the case arise, the new (on the cardinal importance of this second aspect, see *SU* [1971], in [CLI](#), 172-74). Greeting the new has nothing to do with any sort of learning, since it amounts, at minimum, to a massive and sudden modification of the already established “subjective” apparatuses (in a process where “trials and errors” play practically no role). Of course, this capacity for greeting the new (always present to a minimum degree, otherwise there would be no alterations of society) itself undergoes an immense transformation with the historical creation of societies that break with the near-absolute closure of traditional societies.

But there is more. One tends, sometimes, to present the whole of the history of humanity as a cumulative

“learning” process across generations and social forms. It is almost fated for this viewpoint to interpret this alleged “learning” as an increasingly successful form of “problem-solving” and to connect the latter with a “process of rationalization.” How can one not see in this conception a vulgar, biologicistic Hegelo-Marxism that avoids all the questions by means of a dogmatic affirmation and blackmailing of “rationality”? If man is defined by learning, and if this learning is cumulative, what are we to make of the immense regression and massive losses that characterize Western history from the third to the tenth centuries CE? If this learning is a learning via “problem-solving,” one ought to be able to define what are the problems that are posed in general, everywhere and always, to humanity and in what their solution would consist (*MRT*, in *IIS*, 133-35). This question is not even envisaged—and if it were, what other response could it receive than false platitudes, of the type “satisfaction of needs” or “better regulation of the metabolism with nature”? Obviously, “needs” are defined each time by the institution of society (*MRT*), and so are the “problems.” The “problems” a ca. 450 CE member of the Christian faithful has to resolve are in no way the “problems” a ca. 450 BCE Athenian citizen has to resolve. And I would really like someone to show me, without some fallacious “dialectic,” what “progress”—or “cumulation”—there is between latter and the former.

The sole “problem” that the institution of society has to resolve everywhere and always and that, everywhere and always, it *does resolve* in a way that would be practically unassailable, were it not perturbed either from without or by its own imaginary, is the “problem” of meaning: creating a (“natural” and “social”) world invested with signification (*MRT*, *SII*, *ISR*, *PoPA*). To say that, *in this regard*, there

might be “cumulation” and “progress” is to subscribe to the incredible, even though banal, idea that there is a “meaning” of the world and that we are gradually approaching it. (And, subsidiarily, it is to engage in hierarchizing observed societies according to their greater or lesser proximity to this “true meaning of the world”). It is also to this that the view of the whole of history as “rationalization” is committed.

It is obvious, and banal, to state that, over the whole of human history considered from a bird’s-eye view [*en survol*] (though not in its details: see *T*, in [CL1](#), 306-314), there is a dimension along which there are “progress” and “cumulation”: this is the ensidic dimension, *legein* and *teukhein*, the logicomathematical and the technical (*SII*, in [IIS](#), 268-72). We would be able to draw from this the conclusion that there is “progress” and “cumulation” *tout court only if* we reduced the world and human life to ensidic entities—which is clearly absurd. But even in relation to this ensidic dimension we cannot forget that such “progress” and its maintenance refers back to philosophical questions of capital importance. On the one hand, both are evidently impossible without cosmological conditions (*OIHS*): it is because *there is* an ensidizable dimension of all that is that the Understanding can exercise its “fantastic potential.” On the other hand, the deployment and unfolding of such ensidic progress depends on the human imaginary—and so does its *maintenance*, as well as its reception. When I was young, the peasants in Greece (and no doubt in a host of countries) rejected the methods agronomists proposed they adopt, saying, “That is not what our fathers taught us.” (In this they were not necessarily and always wrong, as the ravages created in Africa by Western “experts” now show—but that is another story.) This might appear idiotic to a late twentieth-century Western intellectual—idiotic or not, it is, first and foremost,

the attitude *princeps* of every human community. And today, the uncritical acceptance by everyone of all that “modernity” offers is, to begin with, simply a *received* attitude, just as “idiotic” and, potentially, infinitely more catastrophic. During the supposed destruction by fire of the Library of Alexandria, the Caliph uttered the immortal phrase, “If these books say what the Koran says, they are useless; if they say something else, they are pernicious”¹⁹—the story may almost certainly be apocryphal from the point of view of factual truth, it nevertheless possesses a profound truth from the social-historical point of view. The attitude imputed to the Caliph is the sole one worthy of a true believer; it has been, on a massive scale, that of true Christians over the centuries, when, for example, they covered over Greek philosophical manuscripts in order to write thereon the life and miracles of Saint Paphnutius (learning? problem-solving? progress?). It is also the attitude of the later Blaise Pascal.

Ensidic “progress” wins out in the long run, when it wins out and where it wins out, as a function of the *potential* it confers (this is why the inventions most easily accepted from another culture are inventions having to do with weaponry: from the Arabs to the Redskins and to Peter the Great, not to mention Stalin and Brezhnev). This potential assures a sort of quasi-Darwinian “potential for survival” in the struggle among different societies. But even that is not absolute. The incredible Islamic conquests during the seventh and eighth centuries had nothing to do with some sort of technical superiority; they resulted from traits of the Islamic religion and from its capacity to arouse passion and affects

¹⁹T/E: This is simply a translation of Castoriadis’s unreferenced French, not a return to Arabic and Latin sources or to varying scholarly or other translations and paraphrases in various modern languages.

(“fanaticism”) and, to a lesser extent, from Islam’s social arrangements. But nothing *imposes* philosophy, democracy, the type of society that includes them.

The true questions of historicity are situated beyond “learning,” “rationalization,” “problem-solving,” and “progress.” The task of elaborating these questions remains for me a priority.

Meaning and Validity

It would seem that I am unaware of the distinction between meaning and validity (*Sinn* and *Geltung*). This criticism, first formulated by Habermas, is now taken up under different forms, notably by Heller and Hugues Poltier.

The reproach amounts to saying that I cannot (or will not) distinguish between the statements “The Eiffel Tower is in London” (a statement that is *sinnvoll*, meaningful, but not valid) and “The Eiffel Tower is in Paris” (a statement that is both significant and valid). All false statements have a meaning: those that do not have one we call meaningless, absurd, etc.—not false. “The square root of the Fifth Republic is a Jerusalem artichoke” is not a false statement.

Meaning, signification, ideality are created by society; validity, too. The meaning/validity distinction is *constitutive* of the institution of society. It is the presupposition of the distinctions correct/incorrect, licit/forbidden, etc. The attempt to suppress this distinction is the horizon for an unimaginable totalitarianism, brilliantly imagined by George Orwell in *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* as the ultimate objective of Newspeak, when it would finally become not incorrect or illicit but grammatically absurd to say “Big Brother is ungood.”

This distinction, however, is completely inadequate. Another, much more serious question arises once we

recognize, as we are obliged to, that each society creates not only what for it is meaning but also what for it is validity, and valid. One can dispute this only if one totally forgets what history and ethnology have shown us. Paul, who was neither a historian nor an ethnologist, knew it, and he made the same distinction: We preach Jesus crucified, which is for the Jews *skandalon* and for Gentiles *mōria*. For the Jews, the idea that the Messiah was crucified (and not powerful, victorious, etc.) has a meaning, but it is *skandalon*—scandalous, blasphemous, outrageously false. For the Gentiles, the very idea of a Messiah, his crucifixion, and his resurrection is simply *mōria*—childish prattling, meaningless sound. Paul was in the process of instituting a universe full of affirmations (the incarnation of a God who is otherwise transcendent, faith in the Christian sense, etc.) that would not be invalid, or false, but simply absurd (and in fact incomprehensible) for Aristotle. This took place, historically speaking, just yesterday morning. Our philosophers of today have already forgotten it.

The underside, or corollary, of the acknowledgment that each society institutes what is, for it, meaning and validity is that this is not so, in principle, for another one. I say “in principle” expressly: this affirmation has to be qualified in several ways. There obviously is no “solipsism” to societies, but there very much is *essential alterity*. If such were not the case, there would be no essential misoxeny (conditioning both racism and wars), nor any almost insurmountable difficulties for ethnological and historical knowledge (GPCD [1983], in [CL2](#), 202-209; *ReRa* [1987]; T/E: *SH* [1991]).

The question presents itself from two angles. First, it must be considered “in itself”—the way in which each society experiences and *institutes* the other ones. This is a vast domain of research, where one has hardly just begun to break

some ground. I shall limit myself to a few general indications.

It is almost an *a priori* proposition that a society cannot accept the *validity* of another society's institutions, unless they would be "identical" to one's own, or very close to them. Otherwise, it would adopt them (*ReRa*). And it is a fact (the interpretation of which is in no way simple) that this nonacceptance almost never takes the form, "They are other, they have other institutions," but almost always, "They are bad, inferior, corrupt, diabolical." Go reread, then, the foundation of your culture, the Old Testament. You will see what the non-Hebrews were for the Hebrews: not "barbarians," but sources of defilement. And recall that just yesterday, you burned these same Hebrews and, more generally, those who did not acknowledge the same God as yours, or not in the same way. This becomes truly (though not without difficulty) different only with Greece and modern Europe.

To state this is quite obviously to state that each foreign society makes sense for the society "Ego"—and that this meaning [*sens*] is affected, as a whole, with a negative (or, at best, deficient) validity. Even if the others are posited as subhuman or nonhuman, they are quite obviously cathected with meaning *in toto* and as such. That is of minor import for the present discussion. On the other hand, what matters are the "details": to what extent, in what fashion, under what conditions do the rules, the acts, the ways of making/doing of society B make sense for society A. This, too, is an immense question that remains to be worked out. But this, at least, is certain: to the extent that A encounters B (trade between tribes, war, etc.), A will have to work out a meaning for the "acts," etc. of B sufficient as to need/usage. This elaboration will necessarily contain a strong "projective" element (one need only look at the work of Western ethnologists)—this

element already being present, quite obviously, in the postulate that it really is a matter of a society, which has institutions, goals [*finalités*], privileged ways of making/doing “like ours,” even if the “content” is entirely other. But this elaboration will be almost exclusively *instrumental*: I do not think an Arapesh feels the intense need to “understand from within” the imaginary significations of the Nugum²⁰—any more than Isaiah was trying to understand what might be the religion of the “idolaters” whom he “refuted.” What renders possible this elaboration by A of meaning for B is the obligatory ensidic dimension of every social institution. They, like us, know that 100 is greater than 50, that night follows day, that if one wants X, one must posit Y, and so on. In this ensidic elaboration and the practical syllogisms to which it leads, the “knowledge” that can exist about the S.I.S. (“irrational beliefs”) of the others evidently enters as links in a chain (Cambyses, Egyptians and their cats);²¹ no profound understanding is required. One simply acknowledges an “unanalyzed fact.” Here two antinomic considerations

²⁰T/E: “Nugum is a general term for the people to the southeast of the Arapesh,” Margaret Mead explains in n. 6 on p. 334 of *The Mountain Arapesh: V. Record of Unabelin with Rorschach Analyses*, vol. 41, pt. 3, *The Anthropological Papers of The American Museum of Natural History* (New York, 1949).

²¹ Author’s addition: According to a tradition whose source I have not succeeded in finding, during the conquest of Egypt the king of Persia Cambyses, knowing that the Egyptians venerated cats as sacred animals, had ordered each of his soldiers to bear on his chest a cat. Not daring to strike the cats, the Egyptians were beaten. Military history contains several examples of such stratagems taking advantage of the enemies’ beliefs. [French Editors: The anecdote is found in Polyænus’ *Stratagems* 7.13; Cambyses also placed in the first rows of his troops other sacred animals: dogs, ibises, etc.]

intervene. Every society has to institute itself in the ensidic, as well; there is, therefore, something like a nonempty intersection of the institution of all societies (a common part). The equation $2 + 2 = 4$ is instituted (and correct) everywhere. But this dimension (*legein* and *teukhein*) is not absolutely separable from the strictly imaginary dimension of society: Persian cats are not Egyptian cats, in Christian societies $1 \neq 3$, save when the most important matters are at stake (the three divine persons who are only one while being three). Today's philistine can consider this example merely amusing, forgetting that during several *centuries* countless persons were persecuted, exiled, killed due to subtle variations in the interpretation of the "equal" sign in $1 = 3$; the *Filioque* itself and the great East/West schism are part of it. Today's philosophers of history read too much Kant and not enough history and ethnology, not enough Montaigne, Swift, Montesquieu, and Gibbon. This dependence of the ensidic "part" of the institution upon its strictly imaginary "part" illustrates, once again in this case, the magmatic character of S.I.S.: the possibility of separating out the ensidic part, the impossibility of doing so without damage.

Meaning and validity are social-historical creations. They constitute the mode of being of the institution, which is without precedent and analogy elsewhere. (I must leave aside here the question of "meaning" for the living being—as well as also meaning for the psyche.) They are expressive of the fundamental fact that each society is a being-for-itself and that it creates a world of its own.

Such is, on the whole, the situation in itself, in effective social-historical life. This does not exhaust the question. For each society, the validity of its institutions is almost always unquestionable and unquestioned. There would have been no combat of the gods in history if, for each

society, its gods were not the only “true” ones and its laws the only valid ones. For us, however, the question cannot stop there. We acknowledge this plurality of incompatible laws, and the domestic validity of each. From then on, two attitudes are possible:

1. We limit ourselves to this acknowledgment, and we proclaim that this difference is indifferent. Did the Aztecs practice human sacrifices? Such is the *nomos* of the Aztecs, such is their “interpretation” (their hermeneutic) of the world, such is their “narrative,” such is the fashion in which Being was dispensed to them. One can, as one pleases, choose the vocabulary of Critias, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, or their Franco-American epigones. The consequence thereof is a full relativism with respect to both knowledge (philosophy, like differential calculus, is part of the *nomos* or the *epistēmē* of the West, and has validity only in the West) and acting (we do not wish to decide between these different *nomoi* and if, by chance, we might wish to defend our own—it seems that the French Nietzscheo-Heideggerians are now flirting with the “rights of man,” and even with ethics—this is a pure fact: we are like that). It must strongly be emphasized that this relativism, just like all skepticism if it dares be sufficiently radical (which is never the case), is *irrefutable*, both practically and theoretically speaking. Practically, because a consistent skeptic is never lacking in sophisms, changes of definition, eristic arguments, and so on. Discussion with him is a combat with the Lernaean Hydra. If one disputes this person with a ten-term statement, he will endeavor to show that each of these

terms is ambiguous, contestable, and so on. (“You are contradicting yourself.” “What does ‘you’ mean? I am not me.” Foucault almost literally wrote that.) At the end of n exchanges, there will be 10^n terms in the discussion. The presupposition of every discussion and every refutation is the common aim of truth: what distinguishes the philosopher from the sophist, Aristotle already said, is *prohairesis*, the intention. It is also the common acceptance by the discussants of a requirement [*exigence*] of coherency or of plain noncontradiction—and it is this requirement (this axiom or postulate, if you wish) that the skeptic or the relativist rejects. One cannot force someone to accept the principle of noncontradiction—all the less so as the principle itself has only a restricted or partial validity, as its correct usage requires *phronēsis*, and as its tenor and its reasonable employment wholly change when we pass to higher modes of thought. (Parenthetically, I am completely in agreement with Vincent Descombes on the question of identity. As I already wrote in chapter 5 of *IIS*, identity is never but identity *as to*.... See also *LMQA*, in *CL2*, 373.) There is no answer to the sophist who commands you to say whether capitalist society in 1880 is strictly identical to that of 1890, except to list exhaustively the moments of identity and nonidentity between the two—and who concludes from this, triumphantly, that one cannot speak of capitalist society.

But it also known, also since Aristotle, that it is not only when faced with the skeptic or the sophist that the principle of identity is unprovable; it is unprovable *in itself*, since every proof of this principle presupposes it. In terms both philosophical and social-

historical: Identity is inaugural institution; without it, nothing is possible (neither in acting nor in thinking); and it is, moreover, totally insufficient (*SII*, in [IIS](#), 205-206).

2. If we do not want this incoherency, this “anything goes,” we have to introduce an obvious and elementary distinction—but one which opens up a profound, difficult discussion that touches upon the ultimate stakes, at least for our own historical period: the distinction between right and fact. There is not just one form of validity; there are two. (This is what today’s incense-bearing altar boys of “validity” miss without even catching a glimpse of it.) There is social-historically created *de facto* or *positive* validity, which is the validity of each society’s institutions for itself (validity, not only prevalence, imposition, etc., and which is not simply *meaning*: for a traditional society, if there were no meaning/validity distinction, there would be no correct/incorrect distinction). The stoning of adulterers is a valid rule for Judaic society and its validity is unquestionable (it is prescribed by Yahweh). But *we question* this validity. We raise the question of the *de jure* validity of this rule. We ask ourselves: What *ought we* to think of this rule, and what *ought we to make of it*? We acknowledge the indefinite variety of historical *nomoi*, and we pose the question: Do all these *nomoi* have the same *value*, and what *nomos* ought we to want for ourselves? That is equivalent to saying that we introduce (we accept) the metacategory of *de jure* validity. It is easy to show that this is equivalent to the instauration of *reflection* and *deliberation*, both taken in the radical sense (not

halting, for example and especially, before our own institution), or of what is the defensible content of the term *reason* (see the Preface to [CLI](#)).

~

De jure validity gives rise to, at least, two questions.

First, the question of its social-historical origin. We must exit finally from the (geographical and chronological) provincialism of contemporary philosophers. Humanity, in a meaning congruent with what we today intend by this term (language, institutional social regulation, the antinatural treatment of the dead, etc.), has existed for at least 100,000 years. We know very few things about the greatest part of this history and about the majority of types of societies that have existed on Earth, but we can infer much about them, based on the hundreds of savage societies we have been able to observe directly as well as on traditional societies. Not that Australian aborigines “represent” the universal state of humanity in the year minus 15,000 and the Tupi-Guarani in the year minus 5000, but it would be somewhat extravagant to suppose that philosophy, for example, abundantly practiced by the first Cro-Magnons, subsequently was lost. What is decisive in this regard, and what is of eminent interest to me in this discussion, is what we can presume with great probability about societies that existed between 100000 and 1000 BCE and what we know categorically about almost all societies existing ca. 1900—and not what happened in Königsberg between 1770 and 1781. Now, the fact, as large as the Pyramid of Cheops, is that all these societies are almost totally resorbed within their institution, that is to say, the question of validity is posed in them only as a question of *positive, de facto* validity, in relation to existing institutions

(and instituted representations), not as a question of *de jure* validity. This is compatible with the most highly developed intelligence (I have written on several occasions that the intelligence of those who were the first to ascertain, even approximately, the length of the solar year, to invent weaving or pottery, is far superior to, if the expression has any meaning, or at least is infinitely more striking than, that of people today). Expressed in philosophical language: In these societies, all questions can be posed, except the question of principles. Now, reason is not only, but certainly also essentially, the faculty of principles (Kant), or better, the faculty of interrogating oneself about principles. This amounts to saying that reason is unlimited interrogation. This interrogation—and the space of *de jure* validity it constitutes—was created for the first time in ancient Greece, around the end of the seventh century. *De jure* validity, and reason, and truth in the full and strong sense of the term are social-historical creations. This creation undergoes, with true Christianity, a prolonged eclipse. It is reproduced, under the influence of the “discovery” of the Greeks but also of other historical factors, in Western Europe—and undoubtedly it is not a mere “repetition,” or “interpretation,” of the original creation (as Alfred North Whitehead thought).

Under these conditions, what does the “universality” of reason mean? Certainly it means, first of all, the universality of the *object* of interrogation: in principle, no theme is or can be removed from it. It also means something factual: once reason, in the sense indicated, is created, every human being is *amenable* to reason. To call that an *Anlage*, an innate disposition, would be a sophistical tautology. The *Anlage* in question is “simply” that every human being can, in principle, *reimagine* what another human being has *imagined*. If *Anlage* there be, it is certainly, among all human *Anlagen*,

the one whose actualization is the most astronomically difficult. And what does one say of the inverse *Anlage* that led Heidegger to Nazism, Georg Lukács to Stalinism, thousands of intellectuals to a “sacrifice of conscience,” and today still leads some philosophers to religious conversion? What is at stake here is the astonishing potential, and “universality,” of the faculty that is most singular in its texture—the imagination—not the universal innateness of reason. But in order to lead a human being to reason something else is needed: that his adherence to a heteronomous institution of society, his internalization of the representations in which this institution is embodied, cease. I willingly would advance the costs if someone would organize a public discussion between two German philosophers and two Iranian mullahs. But I believe that the expense would be in vain: one knows the results in advance. Two years ago, during a colloquium in which Cardinal Lustiger participated, I recalled a phrase from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, namely, that the Enlightenment implies the rejection of all Revelation, of all interventions by Providence in the world, and of any idea of eternal Damnation. The Archbishop of Paris (whose unparalleled intelligence no one will contest) shrugged his shoulders and muttered something like, Why harp on these old-fashioned ideas?

I certainly shall not be insulting Poltier if I say that he is, perhaps, as intelligent as, though certainly not more intelligent than, Saint Augustine. Yet Poltier, despite his eristic sophistics, is right, and Saint Augustine not. For, as Saint Augustine writes in his *Confessions*, no restrictions are acceptable when discussing with our Christian brethren; with them, everything can be called into question. But no discussion is possible with those who would not accept the sacred authority of the Scriptures. For all those for whom a

revealed Truth exists, whatever their intelligence, their genius, their subtlety, there is one “principle” before which their mind must halt: the Scriptures. This holds [*vaut*], too, for the immense intellectual effort deployed in the Talmud or on the basis of the Koran. And it also evidently holds, in a pathetically ridiculous mode, for all the “Marxists,” for whom the truth of *Capital* must be saved at any price, via interminable “interpretations.”

But it is, of course, reason itself that tells us that social-historical origin is not to be confounded with *de jure* validity. Reason is the very establishment of this distinction. And here we come to our second question. Reason cannot be defended *erga omnes*; it can be defended only against those who accept both the distinction between right and fact *and* a certain number of (not simply procedural) rules that render rational discussion possible. That is the *de facto* situation. But there is also a *logical* situation. We are being asked from all sides to furnish a “rational foundation” for the rational attitude, to justify *de jure* the choice of right, and so on. These demands are accompanied by what must very well be called demagoguery. For, first of all, those who speak thus would be hard pressed to furnish this “rational foundation” (we shall soon see why it is excluded *a priori* for them to do so); next, because it is left understood that if one rejects these pretensions, one is fatally “antirationalistic,” a cosmologist, a partisan of a “philosophy of life,” and I know not what else.

We pose the question: What is valid *de jure* (as thought, as law, etc.)? We are told: You also have to demonstrate that the *question* of *de jure* validity is itself valid *de jure*. We are told: You have to prove rationally that reason is valid [*vaut*], you have to furnish a “rational foundation.” But how can I even raise the question of the *de jure* validity of the question of *de jure* validity without having already

raised it and having thus posited both that it makes sense and that it is valid *de jure*? How can I rationally ground [*fonder*] reason without presupposing it? If a foundation of reason is rational, it presupposes and utilizes what it wants to prove; if it is not (as *is not*, and strikingly so, the idea that “all men naturally possess reason,” assuming that anyone could ever take this as a “foundation”), it contradicts the result it is aiming at. Not only social-historically, but logically (“transcendentally”), the positing of reason is inaugural, it is *self-positing*. It seems that certain people are entertaining the illusion of a third possibility. But it is impossible to see what it would be. To “ground” reason upon language or communication is absurd under several headings. From the standpoint of the rigorous requirements of what traditionally is called a “foundation,” language, like communication (including the “intentions of the participants in intersubjective communication”), is a pure fact, which can serve for anything one wants, save for grounding anything at all. Language is necessary condition for reason (for thought), it becomes its living and marvelous body as soon as reason is created, but it does not “contain” reason. One might say abstractly that the unlimited question is always a possibility immanent to every language—but this would be false; a language can close upon itself in its effective institution and put a halt to interrogation. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same thing is true for communication. The “foundation” of reason upon reason itself, the rejection of the “deductive,” the announcement of a sort of self-evidence of reason—it is this that really should be called mystical. No great philosopher ever claimed to “ground” reason. Plato postulates the vision of something that is “beyond essence”; Aristotle postulates a *nous*, concerning which he explicitly states that it is not subject to *logos* (and which is *infallible* as to the *ti ēn einai*!); Kant postulates *at least* the coherency of

experience *and* ordinary logic; Hegel postulates nearly everything. From this standpoint, I do not feel I am in such bad company.

All this resembles some braggart's tale. No one is holding you back. If you can produce a foundation for reason owing nothing to the usage of reason, why don't you do it? If it is something other than reason that would produce the foundation for the latter, on what, then, would this other thing be founded? *Anankē stēnai*, said a rather well-known simpleton twenty-five centuries ago.²²

But let us suppose, impossible though it would be, that such a foundation might be exhibited. What then? In what way would that advance us? If reason was capable all alone of producing necessary consequences, starting from this foundation, the ignorant would perhaps have been able to miss them—but what about the philosophers? Why has one been discussing since Thales, and why is one not on the verge of stopping? Has one seen mathematicians disputing for twenty-five centuries about the infinity of prime numbers or the irrationality of $\sqrt{2}$? Would the tribe of philosophers be so corrupt, stupid, and envious that the discovery of a rational *and fecund* grounding of reason at Frankfurt, say, remains a local event, confined to a few seminars, instead of provoking a worldwide wave of enthusiasm and unanimous agreement? Why are there oppositions within philosophy, why is there a *history* of philosophy? Were this due to “empirical” factors (the perverting influence of ruling classes or difficulties in philosophers' digestive systems, whatever), it would still be necessary to admit that in its effective social-historical actuality philosophy is determined much more heavily by

²²T/E: Aristotle *Metaphysics* 12.3.1070a4. On p. 196 of [IIS](#), Castoriadis translates this phrase as follows: “it has to stop somewhere.”

nonreason than by reason. But if one cannot find reason in philosophy, where then shall one find it?

I try to reflect and to deliberate. I ask myself (before Habermas or Poltner ask me): And why should I reflect and deliberate? I answer myself (though I would dare not answer this way to Habermas and Poltner): Poor simpleton, in posing this question, you are still in reflection and deliberation, you are posing the question, “Why should I...?”, and you are leaving it understood for yourself that you would accept as an answer only “good reasons”—without yet even knowing, moreover, what defines a “good reason.” You have already unconditionally given value to unlimited reflection.

Socrates says: *Ho anexetastos bios ou biōtos*,²³ The unexamined life, the life without reflection, is not livable, I prefer to die. He was not trying to *demonstrate* to his judges (or to anyone) that one *must* philosophize, nor was he, as he did in other cases, trying to “force them to admit” that (*Symposium* 223d). Less naïve than the philosophers of the twentieth century, Socrates knew that he could prove it only by philosophizing. But philosophizing and living as he lived, he *showed*, he *realized* the value of philosophy—the *de jure* value of a life devoted to reflection, of someone who refuses to act and to speak without sufficient deliberation. And it is on this account that we do not cease looking at him.

Apropos of this—as well as apropos of politics—one speaks of “voluntarism.” This term of disparagement leaves me cold. Can I reflection without *willing* [*vouloir*] to reflect? Can I deliberate without *willing* to deliberate? Can I try to be free (autonomous) if I do not *will* to be autonomous? But why do you want [*vouloir*] to be free?, Poltner nearly asks me. Are you not a slave to your desire for freedom? According to your

²³T/E: Plato *Apology* 38a5–6.

ideas, won't an autonomous society be heteronomous inasmuch as it will be devoted to autonomy? Childish sophisms. When Tocqueville said in a phrase that no doubt had classical antecedents (and which is certainly insufficient *downstream*), He who wants liberty for something other than liberty is unworthy of it—was he being an “irrationalist,” “Bergsonian”? There is an inaugural position, a self-positing, which is impossible without the participation of the will: reflecting and deliberating.

What can rightly be called *voluntarism* is expressed very well in the maxim Waldenfels ironically flings at me: *Wo ein Wille, da ist auch ein Weg* (Where there's a will, there's a way). Its meaning is precise and clear: the will is, by itself alone, self-sufficient condition for the way, for the solution. Had I ever thought that, I would not have spent the past forty-three years of my life questioning myself without respite about the state and the tendencies of the society in which we live, trying to detect what might herald autonomy in the struggles and the gatherings of French or American workers or the Hungarian and Polish people, in the new movements of students, women, ecologists; nor would I have accorded such heavy weight to the process of privatization in contemporary society (*MCR*) and to its incrustation within a weighty social-historical material situation (*CWS* [1982] and *DE?* [1987]). But Waldenfels, by making a greater effort at reflection, could have found the true maxim, the one that is also my own: *Wo keiner Wille, da ist auch kein Weg (sondern bloßes Geschehen)*, Where there is no will, there is no way, there is only becoming.

A certain intellectualist rationalism has reserved “will” for “ethics” or for “practical reason”—as if there could be a “subject of pure thought” without will—or as if “will” were a “Prussian” or “Bolshevik” faculty. The will is tension

toward...reflective and deliberative subjectivity, it is *constitutive* of such subjectivity. It is not a matter of “psychology” in the derogatory sense of the neo-Kantians and Husserlians. If reflection does not *will* something, it *is* not as reflection. The quest for truth is the will for truth. (This phrase evidently has no meaning if truth is a dispensation of being—which, as one knows, just as well dispenses nontruth, *Verborgenheit*—and if one must “*sein lassen*” both of them.) It is a matter of the ontology of this mode of the for-itself that is reflective and deliberative subjectivity (*SST*). The quest for truth presupposes the will for truth, it also presupposes a cathexis of truth (and not, for example, of saintliness), and both presuppose, already, a certain idea of truth. There is, at this level, no anatomy of subjectivity—or, if one prefers, such an anatomy can only kill subjectivity. The moments of subjectivity—the sublimation of desire into will, of representation into thought, of the pleasure of representation into pleasure in the freedom to do and to think—are indissociable.

To the question, “Why autonomy? Why reflection?”, there is no foundational answer, no response “upstream.” There is a social-historical *condition*: the project of autonomy, reflection, deliberation, reason have already been created, they are already there, they belong to our tradition. But this *condition* is not a *foundation*. One now offers as an objection to me what I was the first to underscore a long time ago: our tradition does not include only that; it includes the Gulag and Auschwitz, as well (*GPCD*, 211). But I have never claimed to have “grounded” the value of autonomy on “our tradition” (that would be a funny idea). *On the contrary*, the value of our tradition is that it has *also created* the project of autonomy, democracy, and philosophy, and also that it has created, and given value to, the possibility of *choice* (impossible, for

example, for true Jews, Christians, or Muslims). We value this possibility of choice unconditionally, and we employ it by choosing in favor of autonomy and against the heteronomy present both in our tradition and in our present times, both flabbily and monstrosly. No one is preventing Poltier from joining a Nazi or Stalinist party, the order of Jesuits, or the Islamic religion. But this possibility is offered to him only through our social institution, as realized fragment of the project of autonomy. If someone says that he detests this possibility of choice, that he would have infinitely preferred being born in a society where the very idea of a choice would be, by its construction, inconceivable, discussion halts, and one can only wish him “Bon voyage.”

There is, certainly, more. The project of autonomy is not a lightning flash in a clear sky. It *goes with* something else; it conditions, motivates, incites something else: briefly speaking, the best of the creation surrounding us. It can reasonably be defended, at length and substantially, *downstream* from this position and from this choice. It can be so defended, starting from its implications and its consequences. But with regard to whom? With regard to the person who has *already accepted* reasonable discussion, the person who has thereby already situated herself *within* reflectiveness. Would anyone undertake the “rational refutation” of Blaise Pascal or Søren Kierkegaard?

But the most important thing lies elsewhere. The scholarly and scholastic repetition of a pseudo-Kantian arguing gambit occults the great questions that are posed precisely by the fact that we cannot reflect without creating the horizon of *de jure* validity—and that it is *we* who reflect. *We*, this means beings who are also psychical (therefore conditioned by the Unconscious), also social-historical (therefore conditioned by the institution of our society), and

always beings-for-themselves (therefore obligatorily placed, even from the most abstract point of view, at a “point of view,” seeing from a “perspective,” creating a meaning and creating it necessarily in a closure). One cannot continue covering up the (second) great black hole of Kantianism: What is the relation of the effectively actual to the transcendental? How can “we humans” exit from “empirical” determinations? On this immense question, which governs all the others, I can provide here only two indications (cf. *EP?*).

First, we have to recognize, on the psychical side, the fact of sublimation and the psyche’s capacity to sublimate; on the social-historical side, the creation of a space and a time in which the questions of the true and the just can effectively be posed, and are so posed; and, finally, we have to elevate ourselves to another conception of the truth. In brief: If we do not recognize the *philosophical* status of the social-historical, as the site where fact *can* become right and right *can* become fact, we are not being consistent.

The second indication concerns the meaning of this *de jure* validity. Can we qualify it as “transhistorical” or even “extrahistorical”? I leave aside the procedural, tautological, and empty answer, namely, If I could transport myself back 200 million years, if I were as I am and the rest the same, I would think the same thing for the same reasons. Let us note, first, that the *question* itself has meaning only for a reflective subjectivity and for a society in and through which such a subjectivity has become effectively actual. Things certainly go otherwise for the “results” of reflective activity. It seems evident to me not only that the generalized Pythagorean theorem (equality of the square root of the measure of the sum of two orthogonal vectors and the sum of the square roots of their measures in every pre-Hilbert space) could be proved to every being capable of following a reasoned argument who

would accept certain axioms, *but also* that this very relation between axioms and this conclusion is “outside time” in the sense that, in the world of “reinforced” ideality that is that of mathematics, “time” is as external to the thing as scarlet red or nostalgia. The same goes for the ensidic dimension of all that is (of statements bearing on this dimension). Mathematically speaking, the Pythagorean theorem is not only true, in its infinitely thin and infinitely thick truth, “in every possible universe”; it is (conditionally) true *outside universes*. But the Pythagorean theorem is not and cannot be “purely mathematical,” for it happens that this-here universe (and every universe conceivable by us) also includes *in itself* an ineliminable ensidic dimension. To this extent, mathematics is applicable thereto and a mathematical physics results therefrom. The mathematics applicable to our universe includes the Pythagorean theorem (not only first—which is decisive—in the first natural stratum, but also in the most elaborate conceptions, since in general relativity an analogous theorem is locally valid). From this standpoint, the theorem is “valid” here as well as in a galaxy of the Coma Berenices constellation, now as well as 10^{-40} seconds after the Big Bang. And in the same way (though much more conditionally), the results of mathematical physics are “valid.” Everything we know and everything we do would collapse into incoherency were we to suppose that there was gravitation only beginning in 1687. Newton certainly did not “discover,” he invented and created, the theory of gravitation, but it happens (and this is why we are still talking about it) that this creation *encounters* in a fruitful way *what is*, in one of its strata. In this case, too, we could show its validity to every being capable of following a reasoned argument who would accept, in addition to the mathematical axioms, certain rules and principles (Ockham’s razor, consistency, “agreement” with observational and

experimental facts, etc.; of course, all these terms can and should be discussed for volumes).

It is to be noted that such a being, rigorously conceived, would be able to accept the axioms of Newtonian theory but would never be able to *invent* them: it is the theoretical imagination that posits them. No point in entering here into the discussion (the most important of all in this regard) whether our mathematical physics is also correct for every possible universe—or for every universe that includes a class of effectively actual observers. But one can affirm that, to the extent that it is axiomatized, it is, *as* the physics of such a universe, also correct *outside universes*.

We create knowledge. In certain cases (mathematics) we also create, thereby, the *outside time*. In other cases (mathematical physics) we create under the constraint of encounter; it is this encounter that validates or invalidates our creations.

In a sense, this also holds for social-historical knowledge. That the Caduveo²⁴ paint their faces has the same status as every empirical statement bearing upon facts (that there was a supernova in 1987 in the Great Magellanic Cloud, for example). But what about the Caduveos' *significations*? Leaning on certain ensidic elements, we have to try to re-create them—here again, under constraint of encounter. It is radically false to say that one can “write history” just any way at all. The proof is that the number of stupidities one can say about history (or about societies from other times and places) is unlimited. Why are these stupidities? Because they do not encounter what the society or period considered truly was. Let

²⁴T/E: An indigenous people of Brazil, now designated as the Kadiwéu, who were examined in the Structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*.

us leave aside the obvious, but purely negative, criterion of inadequacy or inconsistency (a perfectly coherent paranoid interpretation of some savage society is not for all that true).

To the extent that we can effectively comprehend something about a foreign society, or say something valid about it, we proceed to a re-creation of significations, which encounters the originary creation. It is again the theoretical imagination (a variant thereof) that, under various constraints, is at issue here. It is clear, on the one hand, that this task is infinitely more difficult (difficult in another way) than that of theoretical physics, for example, and, on the other hand, that here it does not suffice that a being might be capable of following a reasoned argument for this being to agree with us. A being without the re-creative capacity of the imagination will understand nothing about it. In physics one presents the person with hypotheses [*postulats*], one assumes that he accepts them, and one draws out the consequences. But the relation of a society's S.I.S. with its "observable reality" has nothing to do with the relation of premises to consequences, and the S.I.S. cannot be formulated and presented as hypotheses. What could one understand of a Christian society if one does not understand what faith is? And how can one present or define faith logically?

If we leave the domain of knowledge, the discussion loses its object. The question of the transhistorical value of the work of art, for example, plunges us into aporias I have already discussed (*GPCD*). *The Art of the Fugue* is central to my Imaginary Museum (and also, I am certain, to Luc Ferry's). Is there any meaning in saying that it *ought* also to be central to Lady Murasaki's, or even Aristoxenus', *such as they were*? (That it might *become so after acculturation* obviously creates a presumption of historicity, and not the other way around.)

But the same goes for practical values. *Ought* democracy and autonomy *to be valid* for the Incas or for the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Dahomey in the tenth century? This statement is empty, meaningless, pointless. For something to become an exigency (an “ought-to-be”), it must first *make sense*, it must *be able* to make sense for the addressee. To say that the people of the Neolithic age *should have* aimed at individual and social autonomy is to say quite simply that they should not have been what they were and should have been what they were not and what no retrospective discourse can make them become.

Things proceed in quite another direction for those alive today, whatever their own culture may be, for they can, in principle, accede to this meaning (to the constellation of significations created in Greco-Western history)—and they do accede to them in fact (democracy, demanded by the Chinese last Spring [1989], in no way belongs to the Chinese “tradition”). To “reasonably convince” people today means to assist them in attaining their own autonomy. Why do so? Because we want [*voulons*] autonomy for everyone—because we submit everything, including others’ institutions, to the question of right. This is to affirm, Poltier complains, the superiority of Western culture; it does not respect others’ difference. We are not affirming the superiority of Western culture but, rather, one dimension of Western culture, which we also affirm, as already stated, against another, opposite dimension of this same culture. If someone does not accept this superiority, he is agreeing that he remain in this culture because chance has put him there, that he could just as well have become a Buddhist priest or a Sufi, and that, if tomorrow neo-Nazis or neo-Stalinists want to take power in his country, he would find no reasonable reason to combat them—save, possibly, motives of personal convenience.

It is quite obvious that, in defiance of the hardly enticing rose water amply being sprinkled about everywhere today, I do not respect others' difference simply as difference and without regard to what they are and what they do. I do not respect the difference of the sadist, of Adolf Eichmann, of Lavrentiy Beria—any more than of those who cut off people's heads, or even their hands, even if they are not threatening me directly. Nothing in what I have said or written commits me to "respect differences" *for the sake of* respecting differences. I do not respect heteronomy; it is something quite else to say that the idea of imposing autonomy by heteronomous means is a pure absurdity, a square circle.

Autonomy: Ethics

It is strange that Heller finds me uninterested in ethics. Granted, I have never attacked the problem, as decisive as all others: A friend who has entrusted me with something dies; do I or do I not have to return it to his heirs?²⁵ But one has to be ignorant of all I have written about praxis, and the definition I provide of it (*MRT*, in [IIS](#), 75-77 and 101-107), its significance for psychoanalytical, pedagogical, and political activity (*ibid.*, *PPE* [1977], and *EP?*) not to see the basic outlines of an ethics and the content of a maxim that should guide all activity involving human beings (myself as well as others).

This misunderstanding is matched by the strange notion that I have taken up Aristotle's idea of praxis—an idea

²⁵ Author's addition: A typical example of traditional ethical casuistics. If I do not return the deposited item, I create a situation that, when generalized, would render depositing items impossible. Impossible, therefore, to present my act as a case of applying a universal maxim.

launched by Habermas. As it is out of the question that neither Habermas nor Heller has not read Aristotle, the only alternative is to assume that they cannot read a contemporary author except as if he had to be copying ancient ones. The same thing goes when I am said to be taking up *legein* and *teukhein* as “concepts” from Greek philosophy. *Legein* and *teukhein* are not *concepts* of Greek philosophy but Greek *words* I have used to name new concepts I explicated in chapter 5 of [IIS](#). One can, strictly speaking, compare *legein* with *some* meanings of *logos* in Aristotle, certainly not all of them, and one would still have to forget that Aristotelian *logos* appertains to the soul, whereas *legein* for me is a protoinstitution of every *society*. Still further removed is the relation of *teukhein* to Aristotelian *technē*, sturdily rooted in *phusis* (*T*). We are sent on an analogous adventure with autonomy in Kant, which is unrelated to the meaning I give to this term. In short: For Habermas and Heller, if someone says, “I think,” this person can only be Cartesian.

For Aristotle, *praxis* is the human activity that has its end in itself, and not in a result that is external to it. Let us note in passing that the Aristotelian *praxis/poiēsis* distinction *depends* on the category of substance, form tied in an ongoing way to matter. What is one to say, then, of Themistocles or of Vaslav Nijinsky, of the naval battle or the dancer’s performance? Do they belong to *praxis* or to *poiēsis*? Let us also note that it is this same distinction, and the category of substance governing it, that “grounds” in Adam Smith, as well as in Karl Marx, the distinction between “productive” labor (the transforming of material entities according to the Aristotelian categories, including transport, *kineisthai*) and “unproductive” labor (commerce, services, etc.).

For me, *praxis* is a *modality* of human making/doing (and in no way *identical* to the latter, another misunderstand-

ing into which several of my critics have fallen). This is the activity that considers the other to be capable of being autonomous and tries to assist him to accede to his autonomy. *Other* is taken here in the broad sense; it includes me as “object” of my activity. As such, praxis belongs [*est le propre*] not to human beings in general but to reflective and deliberative subjectivity. Therefore, it *does not have* and *cannot have* its end in itself (which is its very *definition* in Aristotle!): it aims at a certain transformation of its (human) “object.” This “object”—the other—can be concrete, nominally designated, as in psychoanalysis and pedagogy. It can also be indefinite, as in politics. This is why, taking up the question again (see *ETS*), I ultimately defined psychoanalysis as practico-poietic activity, which holds just as well for pedagogy and for politics (*PsyPo* [1989]).

Does this answer all questions: What am I to do?, What can a man encounter in life? Certainly not. But what ethical maxim does? Leaving aside here the *positively immoral* character of an injunction that is unachievable and guilt-inducing, does “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”²⁶ tell me whether I should devote my life to music rather than to philosophy, whether I should join a mass in revolt, go to sleep, or tell them to go home? Do Kant’s categorical imperative and maxims tell me whether one should or should not stop, and when, the treatment of someone who is vegetating in an irreversible coma? Does the Christian or Kantian ethic even have the means to respond to the question whether or not it is permissible to kill a brigand or a terrorist in order to save someone else? If human life is an absolute—as it categorically has to be in these two ethics—no arithmetic is allowed. Now, what we have to do is

²⁶T/E: Mark 12:31.

face up to our tragic condition—which is what post-Hellenic ethics, since Plato, has tried to occult: human life ought to be posited as an absolute, but it cannot always be so. People clearly don't like that. They have transferred the Hebraic and Christian Promise onto the requirement for a "rational foundation" and the Decalogue onto the demand for a book of ethical recipes or for a "rule" that would give in advance the answer to all cases that might present themselves. Fear of freedom, desperate need for assurance, occultation of our tragic condition.

Human life ought to be posited as an absolute because the injunction of autonomy is categorical, and there is no autonomy without life. But the fact is that there are several lives, they can be opposed to each other, and one might be obliged to choose. I have seen no philosopher pose to himself even for an instant the following question: Is it moral to spend, for a single artificial kidney, in a rich country, the amount that would save hundreds of children from famine in the poor countries? I am certain, even, that he has no moral scruple when he happens to need costly treatment. If we want to exit from the duplicity and hypocrisy of all ethics, philosophical or instituted, we have to recognize that we are faced with a categorical injunction that we cannot help but relativize.

The Kantian subject, like the Platonic (and Christian) subject, *recognizes conflict only with himself*—and this conflict is not really one: it does not pose any true problem; all problems are, *de jure*, resolved in advance. If this subject suffers, it is that he "would like" to do what is Good (which he *always* knows or ought to know), but he "cannot"—or, if he "can," it is on the basis of "empirical determinations" and not pure ones. But in truth, no problem is resolved in advance. We have to create the good, under imperfectly known and

uncertain conditions. The project of autonomy is end and guide, it does not resolve for us effectively actual situations.

How can one not be struck, and moved, at this place by the unsurpassable depth of the Philosopher? “Virtue is a deliberative acquired disposition (*hexis*) ...defined by *logos* and as *phronimos* would define it.” *Hexis* is a disposition that is not “pure,” nor is it “spontaneous”: it is, and has to be, acquired (whence the decisive role of *paideia* and of *nomos*). It is *prohairesetikē*, in two senses. In the sense of its “object,” transitively, it concerns choice; it is a *habitus* bearing on choosing well. But it is also *prohairesetikē*, deliberative, because it is a *habitus* of deliberation (reflective and deliberative!); it is not mere *habitus*, an automatic mechanical operation; it preserves *prohairesis*, intention and choice. It is defined by *logos*—it contains, therefore, a reasonable element open to discussion. But it is neither mechanizable nor simply universalizable: it is such as *phronimos*, the person who possesses *phronēsis*, shall define it. Clearly, Aristotle does not know what he is saying: since there is *logos*, what need is there of *phronimos*? And who shall define *phronimos*, and on what basis? He must be forgiven: he did not have the chance to read late-twentieth-century authors.

Phronēsis neither “grounds” autonomy nor allows itself to be “deduced.” But without *phronēsis* there is no effective autonomy, and no praxis in the sense I give to this term. There is not, moreover, even any *theoretical thought* that truly holds together. Without theoretical *phronēsis*, delirium is close at hand (see Hegel).

Autonomy is not *disinsertion* with regard to effective actuality (as Kantian autonomy is) but rather lucid transformation of effective actuality (of oneself and of others), *starting from* this same effective actuality. *Starting from* does not signify that effective actuality furnishes causes, or norms.

Here again, we have an original relation, a model of itself, unthinkable within the inherited categories. Autonomy is self-positing of a norm, starting from some content of effective life and in relation to this content.

Norm has no meaning without connection with effective actuality (with the content of life) and a “transcendental reduction” of this connection is not possible. In the Kantian attempt at reduction, the *pure fact* of the existence of an indefinite multiplicity of subjects (totally heterogeneous to transcendental space) and even of a regularity of the world is implied; otherwise, it would be impossible, short of word games, to give any meaning to the idea of the universality required by the maxim of action (= for anyone under all sufficiently similar circumstances). The effective actuality of the subject’s “empirical” (psychical) “determination” is implied just as well—otherwise, it is unclear why a norm is needed.

[I note in passing: “the categorical imperative” wants one to recognize “all human duties *as* divine commands” (Kant, *Opus Posthumum*, tr. Eckart Forster and Michael Rosen [Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993], p. 208). Kant is far from being a pure *Aufklärer*. The postulates of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, the rejection of the Revolution, and the above quotation show how much, in him, theoretical audacity is wedded with obedience toward the instituted and respect for *Obrigkeit*.]

What remains valid in Kant is the idea of universalization, but in an entirely abstract way. Rid of abstraction, it becomes what I call *reasonability*. The “maxim” of my act has to be defensible before “all,” and of course before myself, at another moment and in other circumstances. But how far do these “other circumstances” extend? The entire difficulty lies between the “maxim” and

the “circumstances.” What is the “maxim” in the apologue of the thing entrusted without witnesses to someone’s care? In truth, it is a *political* maxim, destined to regulate the shared existence of autonomous beings: *pacta sunt servanda*. The trust is a contract. What would happen if some contracts were violated? Kant’s pragmatic argument—that there would no longer be any contracts—is naive, for since the beginning of recorded history one hasn’t stopped violating the most important contracts of all, treaties between States, whereas this has prevented neither treaties from proliferating nor history from existing. (No need to recall in this connection the congenital blindness of this type of philosophy, and of modern philosophy in general, with regard to the most massive and important facts. All philosophers of the rights of man proclaim the sovereignty of the Nation—but nowhere have I seen any philosophical “foundation” of this eminent dignity, the Nation. They all also discuss, interminably, the most subtly exquisite ethical cases—but not the ethical character of murder, by tens of millions, during a war. Philosophical Reason, one must conclude, is crushed before *Raison d’État*.) Pragmatic arguments such as Kant’s can lead only to probabilistic considerations and evaluations.

Kant’s pragmatic argument nonetheless masks a profound aporia in his conception: How is one to pass from the abstraction of “universal law” to the *categorical justification* of the particular “maxim” that presides over some supposedly ethical act? How is one to justify the maxim’s *content*? In fact, in the moral fable [*apologue*] of the thing entrusted without witnesses to someone’s care, the “maxim,” as I said, is *pacta sunt servanda*; its justification is that the respect of mutual commitments is a manifestation of one’s responsibility toward oneself and others, which in turn is a *political* exigency that flows from the existence of a

collectivity of subjects who aim at autonomy and want to live under the laws they give themselves.

And in fact, Kant's least debatable formulations refer necessarily to some content (*GPCD*, 214-16). "Be a person and respect others as persons" is *empty* without a nonformal idea of the person (who cannot, here, simply be someone who is placed under the "moral law," for from this standpoint, in Kant's outlook, I could do to him anything you wish, but I could never *reach* him). This content is autonomy such as I define it, and the practical imperative is: Become autonomous, and (not: "respect others as autonomous beings," which would once again imply a formal, static, and unreal conception of autonomy, but) contribute as much as you can to others becoming autonomous. Respect for others is requirable [*exigible*] because they are, always, bearers of a virtual autonomy—not because they are "persons," which they may very well not be (if, once again, *person* has any content at all). It follows immediately that this imperative is not only "ethical" (concerning the private and private/public spheres, to use terminology I shall explain below), but just as much political (concerning the public/public sphere), since it immediately encounters both indefinite others—the collectivity—and the conditions for their existence—the institution.

~

Before arriving there, a final explication concerning the traditional position may be useful.

Waldenfels raises the aporias of "legislation intimately connected with a factual instance of authority" and evokes the old dilemma: Either the legislative instance acts according to laws, and then it is not autonomous in the radical sense, or

else it acts without obeying laws, and then it is not autonomous but anomic. And he adds, making an allusion to a well-known phrase of Heidegger: “Kant already knew what he was ‘recoiling’ from when he removed practical reason from the competence (from the powers [*attributions*], *Befugnisse*) of a productive imagination.”

But if one conceives autonomy in the “radical” sense presupposed by Waldenfels, then only the God of Duns Scotus is “autonomous.” Neither the demiurge of Plato (who is subject to mathematics and to the being-thus of the receptacle), nor the God of Aristotle (who can do only what He does, namely, think Himself), nor a God of Love (tied by His being and loving by necessity), nor, certainly, the practical subject of Kant (to whom, despite the false label of autonomy, the moral law and the categorical imperative are necessarily given as such *and* in their slight content) is autonomous. This “radical” idea of autonomy is a pseudoidea, that is, an absurdity. It implies a being removed from *all* determination, including that of being itself (it is this absurdity Poltier’s eristics is nourishing). I have been denouncing it for a long time (*MRT*, in [IIS](#), 103-107). Were one to say, Autonomy (Kantian autonomy), lying at an infinite and insuperable distance from all effective actuality, is not affected by these considerations because, as pure requirement, it concerns *nothing* that might ever be determined in any way whatsoever—then it is fitting that this requirement address itself to the *nothing*, not to “us men.” But suppose I did respond to this requirement: according to Waldenfels’s logic, if I respond to it *motivelessly* (Sartre: nothing can be a motive for an act of freedom), I am simply anomic. If I respond to it because I obey (pure, not empirical) motives, I am conforming to the law (*nomos*) of these motives, I am therefore heteronomous; there are, “before” autonomy, the

reasons for which I have to respond to the requirement of autonomy (even if, empirically, this requirement has to remain forever unfulfilled). More simply: If you can “ground” autonomy “rationally,” then autonomy is *rationally necessary* and it is unclear why you are calling yourself autonomous: you are simply rational (cf., with a different terminology, Spinoza). And why, then, *do I have to* obey rational motives (in the most sublime sense of the term *rational*)? The answer, “Because man *is* a rational being,” infinitely ridiculous in itself, obviously refers back again to a *de facto* being—thus, to a “nature” of man, and “flattens the ought-to-be onto being” (which Poltier does while reproaching me for doing it). (Let us note, parenthetically, that behind the scaffolding of his arguments Kant’s ultimate position is clear: One ought to want the Good for the sake of the Good. I am still waiting for someone to show me a genuine “foundation,” a *Grundlegung*, for this statement.) But what matters to me is the *effective* autonomy of *effective* men and women, not the fiction of a requirement that itself posits itself straight off as forever unaccomplishable. It is not noticed often enough that the situation is strictly identical to Kant’s theoretical philosophy: if the structure of transcendental subjectivity is *effective*, that is to say, *realized* in empirically given exemplars of *uns Menschen*, both the *history* of knowledge, in the weighty sense of this term (MSPI, in [CLI](#), 164-79E; OIHS, *passim*) and nontrivial “errors” become unintelligible. If this structure is simply “ideal,” it is irrelevant. The task of philosophy is not only to raise the question *quid juris*; this is the beginning. Its task is to elucidate how right becomes fact and fact right—which is the condition for its existence, and it is itself one of the first manifestations thereof. *There are* beautiful works; *there are* true thoughts; *there are* (autonomous) ethical acts. A philosophy that begins by positing that, in

essence, it is a matter of forever-ineffectible idealities has already smashed to pieces the branch on which it is sitting.

Let us consider now, from the *de facto* (*faktischen*) standpoint, the instituting imaginary and the radical imagination. Their creation is certainly not “absolute” (what meaning is one to give to this term, if not again by referring to the God of Duns Scotus?), save in a quite precise sense: the created form is, as such, irreducible to the already-there; it cannot be composed, ensidically, starting from what is already there. (To speak of “new aspects,” as Waldenfels does, only eludes the hard core of the question: When is an “aspect” *new*? What is the new?) In this sense, creation is *ex nihilo*. But as I have already written, it is certainly not *in nihilo*, nor is it *cum nihilo* (innumerable passages from [IIS](#) show this, and I have specified it again recently: *PoPA*, *ISRH*).

Creation is thereby also, evidently, limited. But it is really quite unmotivated and lawless. To the question, “Why do certain classes of living beings grasp certain electromagnetic waves *as* colors and *as these* colors?” there is no answer, any more than there is to the question, “Why are the psyche and society always in meaning and signification?” This faculty of making be, of bringing out of itself modes of being, determinations, and laws that will henceforth be the self’s laws, determinations, modes of being is what I call *radical creation*. But what is this “self” that makes itself be, without “yet” being a determinate something, but which *is going to determine* itself thus and not otherwise? This is what I call the Groundless, the Chaos, the Abyss of the (singular or collective) human being. Here, the term “nothingness” seems to me mere literary posturing, and a possible source of useless sophisms. But while it is certain that this creation becomes manifest to us in a strong and dense way in the human domain, one cannot remove this domain from total

Being/being. If creation appertains to the human, it appertains *due to this fact alone* to total Being/being. Beyond, there are all the elaborations and elucidations that remain to be done.

Let us restrict ourselves to the human domain. Can this self-creation be called autonomy? A gross error. As Dupuy recalls, I radically distinguish self-creation or self-constitution—terms that apply just as well to the emergence of the living being, to paranoid delusion, and to *every* society that institutes itself in heteronomy—from autonomy. Autonomy, like praxis, is not a “given” of human nature. It emerges as social-historical creation—more precisely, as creation of a project, which happens to be in part already realized.

Autonomy: Politics

I have defined the object of politics as follows: “To create the institutions that, by being internalized by individuals, most facilitate their accession to their individual autonomy and their effective participation in all forms of explicit power existing in a society” (*PoPA*, in [CL3](#), 183). I have added thereto: “It also becomes apparent—this is, in fact, a tautology—that autonomy is, *ipso facto*, *self-limitation*. ... This self-limitation can be more than and different from mere exhortation if it is embodied in the creation of free and responsible individuals” (*ibid.*). As these formulations do no more than condense and prolong what I have written for decades, I find it of no use to discuss the phantasmagorical ideas Heller (that I would be opposed to a Bill of Rights) and Poltier (that I would be discrediting sites of democratic discussion, or that I might secretly be possessed by the phantasm of indivision) impute to me. It seems to me more useful to discuss the thing itself by extending my reflection

and being more precise about points on which I have until now expressed myself to a lesser extent than other ones.

I shall begin by making an obvious distinction, which is there on a factual level, but, without being ignored, remains implicit in all authors (*SRR* [1978], now in [CR](#), 218-38; Andrew Arato recalled it in his text). We can distinguish in an abstract way three spheres in which the relations of individuals and of the collectivity are played out among themselves and with their political institution: the private sphere (*oikos*); the public/private sphere (*agora*);²⁷ the public/public sphere, which in the case of a democratic society I shall, for brevity's sake, call *ekklēsia*. This distinction makes sense, abstractly speaking, for all societies; I mean by this that it permits us to think them all, in a significant way, according to the distinction/articulation they institute among these three spheres.

It is not my fault (I hope Heller will forgive me) if the full deployment of the three spheres and their distinction/articulation in a democratic direction takes place for the first time in ancient Greece. It is there that, at the same time the independence of the *oikos* is posited, a free *agora* (the public/private sphere) is created and the public/public sphere becomes *truly* public. (These latter two aspects have been merged into one in current discussions, in fact since Hannah Arendt, under the heading “public space.”) The becoming-truly-public of the public/public sphere is, of course, the core of democracy. As for the rest, here is what Aristotle says about it (*Nicomachean Ethics* 10.9.1180a24-29): “It is only,

²⁷T/E: In previous instances, Castoriadis had written “private/public.” Here he reverses the two terms, for some unspecified reason or perhaps just through inattention or a desire for variation, and switches back later on in this same article.

or almost only, in the *polis* of the Lacedaemonians that the legislator seems to have taken care of education (*sc.* that of citizens) and of occupations, but in the great majority (*pleistais*) of *poleis* these objects have not preoccupied his attention, and each lives as he pleases, legislating Cyclopes-fashion about his children and wife.” Aristotle does not express himself here with his usual rigor. In the mythical image of the Cyclopes (*The Odyssey*), no public or other law prevents the Cyclopes from killing wife and children, which is obviously not the case in any Greek city. But it will be noted that, contrary to the stereotype put into circulation by Benjamin Constant, vulgarized by Fustel de Coulanges, and since then become the meager stock-in-trade of intellectuals when speaking of the Greek city, the Athenian regime—which left individuals undisturbed to do what they pleased (Pericles in Thucydides 2.37)—is considered, rightly, by Aristotle to be the rule, not the exception. The exception is the *polis* of the Lacedaemonians, where everything is regimented. Why the Spartan mirage, as Pierre Vidal-Naquet has called it,²⁸ was valued so highly in Modern Times, especially in the eighteenth century and during the French Revolution, is another story.

Totalitarianism is characterized (*SRR*, now in [CR](#)) by the attempt to unify by force these three spheres *and* by the full becoming-private of the public/public sphere. The first characteristic is necessary, but not sufficient: the unification

²⁸ Author’s addition: Vidal-Naquet has pointed out to me that he was in fact referring to the dissertation, published before the War, of François Ollier, *Le Mirage spartiate* [T/E: now available as *Le mirage spartiate: étude sur l'idéalisation de Sparte dans l'antiquité grecque de l'origine jusqu'aux cyniques, et étude sur l'idéalisation de Sparte dans l'antiquité grecque du début de l'école cynique jusqu'à la fin de la cité* (New York: Arno Press, 1973)].

of the three spheres is more or less achieved in most archaic societies. This attempt failed to achieve its own goal in the case of Stalinism; its effects were no less terribly real.

I am not trying to do here a general typology of political regimes. I note simply that the emergence of the State and its development (whether it is a matter of “oriental despotism,” absolute Monarchies, or even the modern State) is practically equivalent to the *becoming-private* of the public/public sphere. This is entirely independent of the status of the *oikos* and even of the existence or not of a free *agora*.

The contemporary liberal²⁹ oligarchies—the alleged “democracies”—claim to limit to the maximum or reduce to an unavoidable minimum the public/public sphere. This pretension is clearly deceitful. The most “liberal” of contemporary regimes (the United States, England, or Switzerland) are profoundly statist societies and committed to remaining so: the rhetoric of Margaret Thatcher and of Ronald Reagan has changed nothing of importance (the change in formal ownership of a few large enterprises does not essentially alter their relation to the State). The bureaucratic structure of the large firm remains intact, and our political philosophers continue to close their eyes to the question: What is the large modern business enterprise as a *political* structure? Bureaucracy, the interminable and absurd centralized rules and regulations, continue to proliferate. One shamelessly labels “democracies” societies where not only citizens but even lawyers *do not know the law* and *cannot* know it (for this or that category of case law, you need a lawyer with the corresponding specialization). But there is something more important. The contemporary liberal

²⁹T/E: “Liberal” in the Continental sense of a conservative belief in the “free market.”

oligarchies share with totalitarian regimes, Asiatic despotism, and absolute Monarchies the following decisive trait: the public/public sphere is in fact, in its greatest part, *private*. It certainly is not so legally speaking; the country is not the domain of the Monarch, nor the State the entirety of the servants of his “house.” But on the factual level, the essential features of public affairs are still the private affair of various groups and clans that share effective power, decisions are made behind closed doors, and the little that is brought onto the public stage is masked, prefabricated, and belated to the point of irrelevancy.

The first condition for the existence of an autonomous society—of a democratic society—is that the public/public sphere become *effectively* public, become an *ekklēsia* and not an object of private appropriation by particular groups. The implications of this condition are innumerable; they affect the organization of all power existing in society as well as the designation and control of all individuals charged with the exercise of any parcel whatsoever of this power (we can call them *magistrates*), the production and the diffusion of information (a matter that certainly in no way is technical but instead decisively *political*, as I have written since 1957), as well as, at the profoundest level, the *paideia* of individuals (to which I shall return). “Constitutionally” speaking, the becoming-effectively-public of the public/public sphere implies that the legislative, judicial, and governmental powers effectively belong to the people and are exercised by the people.

Here we encounter the question of “representation.” It is saddening to read from Heller’s pen that my opposition to the idea of representation comes from that fact that it was not practiced at Athens. I have not ceased reiterating that Athenian democracy cannot be for us anything but a *germ*,

and in no way a *model*; one would have to be a fool to claim that the political organization of 30,000 citizens might be copied so as to organize 35 or 150 *million* citizens, and someone who has flipped, even casually, through the pages of *CS II* (1957) or *HS* (1976) ought to have glimpsed that this folly is not mine. But there is something graver still. Heller forgets the devastating critique of representation made in *Modern Times*, at least since Rousseau (I nevertheless recalled it in *GPCD*), as she also forgets—and she is far from alone in this—the equally devastating criticisms of the capitalist “market” (to which I shall return). She lives in the United States; doesn’t she know that a Senator, once elected, is practically assured reelection until the end of his days (since all PAC money goes to him)?

More generally, we may ask: Why don’t our political philosophers ever mention the *metaphysics* of representation, and why do they disdainfully leave its *effective reality* to “sociologists”? This is typical of contemporary “political philosophy” (or theory): the idea of “representation,” which is central, is given *no* philosophical elucidation *and* talk about it has *no relation* to reality. As for myself, as a man who aims to be free, I willingly agree to obey magistrates I have elected so long as they act legally and have not been recalled from office in good and due form. But the idea that anyone could *represent me* would seem to me unbearably insulting, were it not highly comic.

“Representation” is, inevitably, in the concept as well as in actual fact, *alienation* (in the legal sense of the term: transfer of ownership) of sovereignty, from the “represented” toward the “representatives.” In a democratic society, magistrates whose function requires a particular competency are to be elected (not because the Greeks invented elections, which is true, but because elections are the sole reasonable

means for choosing in this case: see *GPCD*, 237-40) and subject to recall. Every form of irrevocability, even when “limited” in time, logically and really tends to “autonomize” the power of elected officials.

Elections are not the best means of designating magistrates in other cases (where no particular competency is required) for reasons I have explained at length elsewhere (*GPCD*, *ibid.*)—and excellently summarized by Sunil Khilnani: they create a *division of political labor*. Politics has to do with power, and the division of labor in politics does not signify and cannot signify anything other than the division between the governors and governed, dominators and dominated. A democracy will accept, obviously, a division of political *tasks*, not a division of political *labor*, namely, the fixed and stable division of political society between directors and executants, the existence of a category of individuals whose role, whose profession, whose *interest* is to direct others.

It goes without saying that instituted provisions for self-limitation are required in a democratic regime more than in any other. I shall not draft here the Charter of the future society; I am simply recalling that maintenance of the gains of democratic revolutions is implicit in everything I have written on the question and that I have emphasized (e.g., in *SAS* [1979], in [PSW3](#), 317) that the critique of “rights” cannot be aimed at their allegedly “formal” character (as is done by the Marxists) but rather at their *partial* character. Rules like those (imperfectly) expressed by the “rights of man,” *nullem crimen nulla poena sine lege*, due process of law, and the objection of illegality or unconstitutionality are an essential minimum.

My friends who felt chagrined by my remarks on constitutions (*GPCD*, now in [CL2](#), 248-50) have misconstrued their meaning. These remarks were directed

against the fetishism of constitutionalism, the constitutional illusion; I recalled that the country in which “human rights” are perhaps best respected (or least violated) over the past three centuries, Great Britain, has no constitution (“Parliament can do everything but make a woman a man and a man a woman,” is the English legal saying),³⁰ whereas perfectly “democratic” constitutions have served to mask the bloodiest tyrannies and continue to do so. I recalled, too, that a constitution cannot “guarantee” itself. The question is therefore not “fundamental”; it is a pragmatic question, one of political symbolics. If I had the opportunity to express myself before an *ekklēsia* on the opportuneness of a constitution, I would certainly be in favor of it, because a condensed text that solemnly affirms certain principles and that could be modified only by means of special procedures and qualified majorities seems to me useful both pragmatically and, above all, pedagogically.

Among these provisions for self-limitation, the “separation” (though the term is bad) of powers seems to me equally basic. It, too, was first broached in ancient democracy: Athenian juries, drawn by lot, do not have to obey the Assembly and can even censure it. This “separation” has been much developed in theory, though less so in reality, within modern liberal regimes. Here again, the inconsistency of modern “political theory” leaves one flabbergasted. Under these regimes, legislative power and governmental power are in the hands of the *same* effective instance of authority: the majority party. Where is the “separation” of powers? Does Madame Thatcher change her dress when she proposes (imposes) a law and when she makes governmental

³⁰T/E: Expression coined in 1771 by Jean-Louis de Lolme (see [English Wikipedia, s.v.](#)).

decisions? And what is the status of the *party* in political philosophy? It would be ridiculous to say that it embodies a pluralism of opinions; it is not their sole conceivable form of expression; in fact, it strangles them, cooks them up, and hardens them. We have been talking for the past forty years about the Party-State in totalitarian countries. Certainly, the situation is tangibly different in liberal regimes. But who reflects on the fact that the *effective site of power*, for the decisions that truly count in liberal regimes, are parties? Communist constitutions, which affirmed “the leading role of the party,” were, on this point, more sincere. And why does political philosophy obliterate the essentially bureaucratic nature of modern political parties, ignoring the fact that power is exercised therein by a self-coopting hierarchical structure? For my part, I have never proposed the “prohibition” of parties; the free constitution of groupings of political opinion belongs, obviously, among the imprescriptible liberties of the *agora*. What I said about them, and what Ferenc Fehér seems to me to interpret badly, is that *if* the essential elements of political life continue to unfold within parties, *then* the democratic organs of collective power will be emptied of all substance (*CS II*). I mention here, only as a reminder, the “independence” of the judicial power in contemporary societies. Two Republican presidents in the United States have sufficed to produce a partisan Supreme Court, and the justice system’s scandalous dependency upon the government in France, not only on the factual level but in legal texts, requires no commentary.

I return to the distinction among the three spheres—*oikos*, *agora*, *ekklēsia*—and to the question this distinction raises. It is certain that an autonomous society will have to guarantee their greatest possible mutual independence. The freedom of the private sphere, like the freedom of the *agora*,

is a *sine qua non* condition for the freedom of the *ekklēsia* and for the becoming public of the public/public sphere. Just this alone makes any idea of “indivision”—whatever that may mean—absurd.

But no more than any other society, an autonomous society cannot simply “separate” these three spheres; it must also articulate and join them. Their absolute “separation” would be an unrealizable absurdity—and it obviously does not take place in the most “liberal” societies today. The State and the law intervene in many ways in the “private” sphere through the penal and civil codes, and especially (to mention only the most important aspect) through the education of children. They also intervene, in innumerable ways, in the *agora*. The incoherency—rather, the shameless trickery—of contemporary “Liberalism” in this regard defies the imagination. Where and when has one ever seen an economically, politically, and socially neutral budget (on the side of revenues as well as on the side of outlays)? When, as is the case everywhere today, half of the national product transits the public sector in one way or another (State, local governmental organizations, Social Security), when between half and two-thirds of the price of goods and services entering into the final national expenditure is in one way or another fixed, regulated, controlled, or influenced by state policy, and when one notices that this situation is irreversible (ten years of Thatcher and Reagan made no essential changes therein), neoliberal discourse appears for what it is: a gross farce intended for imbeciles.

An autonomous society will have to guarantee the intangibility of the private sphere, short of criminal laws (I do not think that anyone is proposing that we remain indifferent to spouses murdering each other, or to parents raping their children, the penalization of which signifies that the *ekklēsia*

intervenes to limit what can take place in the *oikos*). Short of education, too. It will also have to guarantee the greatest freedom possible for the *agora*, all the while articulating the latter in relation to the *ekklēsia*. This is an immense field, which covers, directly or indirectly, the totality of social life. Let me recall that also belonging here are the question of the ownership of the means of production as well as the prohibition, or not, of “pornography,” the status of theater or publishing, and the question of the market in general (as one knows, *agora* also signifies “market”), the utilization of public buildings for public/private meetings as well as the regulation of language (if the Liberals, in their naivety, express astonishment at this last question, I remind them of France’s officially sanctioned policy against “franglais,” or, in the United States, the *political* questions raised by the ever-stronger challenge to English as the “national language”). I shall limit myself here to mentioning three points:

1. The relations among the three spheres have nothing “natural” or self-evident about them; they are always instituted. In the great majority of cases, however, they are instituted in an implicit and tacit way (as are language, mores, etc.). An autonomous society is a society that self-institutes itself explicitly and lucidly. This explicit and lucid self-institution could never be total and has no need to be (*PoPA*). But nothing, theoretically or “rationally,” allows the limits of this explicit activity—in other terms, what should and what should not be an object of legislation—to be fixed *a priori*, once and for all. The idea of autonomy, which also takes concrete form in another idea—no autonomous society without autonomous individuals—implies that the *ekklēsia* guarantees and promotes the largest possible sphere of autonomous real activity on the part of individuals and of the groups these individuals form, whatever their nature—

therefore, the greatest possible extension of the private sphere and of the private/public sphere. A very strong presumption in favor of *minimal legislation* follows from this. But once again, nothing allows one to settle *in abstracto* this optimal minimum. Whoever would say that legislation ought not—or cannot—intervene in psychical life, or even in the conscious thought of individuals, would show only that she does not know what she is talking about: What else is education (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.10.1179b29ff.)? Historically speaking, it never was a question for the Athenians to challenge the status of private property as such, but the Assemblies of the French Revolution on several occasions voted prohibitions against proposing an “agrarian law”—which shows, precisely, that the question had been posed (and as one knows, it remains so). But these same Athenians never thought of setting by law the permissible modes of sexual relations—whereas only the missionary position is tolerated by the State of Georgia in 1989. (According to the *International Herald Tribune* of January 1, 1989, p. 3, James D. Moseley, of Decatur, Georgia, served an 18-month prison sentence for having had oral sexual relations with his wife. In the State of Georgia, “sodomy,” defined to include oral sex, is an offense even among consenting adults. Moseley’s wife had accused him of raping and sodomizing her. Moseley had been acquitted of the charges of rape and forced sodomy. But, having admitted during the trial that he had engaged in oral sex with his wife, he was sentenced for sodomy without aggravating circumstances. This, too, perhaps is *constitutio libertatis*?)

2. The perversion of Liberalism and, more generally, of what passes now for “political philosophy” is also the failure to see in the public/public sphere, in the power of the *ekklēsia* (or even of the existing State) *anything but* the

question of its relations with the private or public/private sphere—individuals and “civil society”—and that of their protection. But the public/public sphere has always been, is, and ought in an autonomous society to remain also the domain and the instance where are discussed and decided works [*œuvres*] and undertakings that concern and commit the entire collectivity and that the collectivity cannot, will not, or should not leave to private or private/public initiative: to speak in images here, the erection of the Parthenon, the establishment of the Alexandrian Library, the construction of Campo de Sienna. To say that everything—except, perhaps, prisons (and even then...)—have to be left to “civil society” signifies not only a monstrous misconstruing of the reality of social life (what about urban planning? highways? the environment?) but also, implicitly, a denial of the right and the effective possibility for the collectivity as such to form long-term projects, to invest its future with a meaning, to see itself and recognize itself in its works. Why? Why would only Messrs. Carnegie, Ford, Rockefeller, and so on have the right to establish institutes and foundations, and not the American people?

3. Finally, there is the toughest point, the question of the public/private sphere, of the *agora*—as such in general and as *agora* in the particular sense of the term, that is, as market. Undoubtedly, an autonomous society will have to not only guarantee but actively promote the greatest possible autonomy of the public/private sphere: the sphere where individuals encounter each other and group themselves together without explicit regard to political questions, so as to give themselves over to all activities and all exchanges that may please them. (Here again, I am assuming that no one is proposing to fund or even to tolerate associations of headshrinkers.)

Among these activities and exchanges, there are “economic” activities and exchanges—production and market, and their organization. On this terrain, too, one observes today the same amnesic reversal as on the political terrain. Just as one forgets completely the critiques of the Liberal Republic, just as one does not even bother to discuss the critique of the representational system of government broached at least since Rousseau, continued for two centuries, and corroborated by experience, and just as one limits oneself to the confounding argument, “Mrs. Thatcher or the Gulag,” so does the entire critique of capitalism and of the capitalist pseudomarket seem to drop down a memory hole, their reality and their effects are passed over in silence, the sole available choice seems to be between the endless lines in Moscow to obtain a pound of rotten carrots and the Western economy such as it is. While excusable among victims of bureaucratic totalitarianism, who now fling themselves upon parliamentarianism and “the market” as the sole solutions conceivable for themselves (the people of the Eastern-bloc countries have exhibited and continue to exhibit unparalleled courage and tactical genius, but their political imagination, theirs too, is at degree zero—which very well goes to show that this is a universal state), this amnesia is entirely inexcusable when voiced by the “radical” ex-critics of the Western capitalist system.

Here, ignorance is not an excuse. Where there is capitalism, there is no genuine market (*VEJP*, in [CL1](#), 341-52), and where there is a market, there can be no capitalism. The scaffolding of rationalizations and justifications for the “economic science” collapsed under the blows struck by the representatives, the best representatives, of this “science” during the decade from 1930 to 1940 (Piero Sraffa, Joan Violet Robinson, Edward Hastings Chamberlin, Richard

Ferdinand Kahn, John Maynard Keynes, Michał Kalecki, George Lennox Sharman Shackle, and several others). The snake-oil salesmen of “neo-Liberalism” have succeeded, amid the politico-ideological atmosphere of the past fifteen years, in throwing a smoke screen over its ruins, which should be enough to fool hack journalists, not real thinkers. I myself have written at length about these questions and I shall not return to them here. I shall simply recall the most massive points. Political economy does not define and cannot define a concept of capital. It has nothing to say about the distribution of national income. It could never explain, still less justify, wage and income differentials. It has to concede that, under capitalism, there is no spontaneous macroeconomic equilibrium or full employment. I could go on for pages. I shall limit myself here to mentioning the most weighty point (*VEJP*; *RDR* [1976]; *DG*, 128-31): it—like Marx—presupposes that there is a possibility of *imputing* the product in a rigorous way to different “factors” and “units” of production—whereas this idea is *strictly meaningless*. This destroys any bases for wage differentials other than previously acquired situations and existing relations of force (which, objectively speaking, govern the distribution of income and incomes today).

An autonomous society will instaurate a genuine market, defined by consumer *sovereignty* (not mere freedom) (*CS II*). It will decide democratically the overall allocation of resources (private consumption/public consumption, consumption/investment), aided by a technical device (the “plan factory”) subject to its political control, which will also help to assure general equilibrium. Finally, it is inconceivable that it would institute the self-government of collectivities at all levels of social life and would exclude it in collectivities dealing with production. Self-management of production by

the producers is but the realization of democracy in the domain in which individuals spend half of their waking lives. (I have already emphasized in *CS II* that there could be no question of “collectivizing” small producers by force.)

Today

For reasons that will quickly become apparent, I have left aside from this discussion of the project of an autonomous society one point—the equality of wages and incomes—to which I shall return. A few explanations about the status of this project are indispensable beforehand.

The added specifications to the project discussed above, the outline of a “charter” of an autonomous society, are quite evidently mine. Fehér should not fear that I would want to impose “a single authentic version of socialism.” A movement that would try to establish an autonomous society could not take place without a discussion and confrontation of proposals coming from various citizens. I am a citizen; I am formulating, therefore, my proposals.

Why must they be formulated in this fashion, which seems to some too precise and to others too imprecise? Apart from flaws on the part of the author, apart, too, from the fact that such an institution can only be the work of collective democratic activity, two considerations have guided me, since 1957 and even beforehand, in these efforts. On the one hand, faced with the horrors of “real socialism,” with the discredit into which the idea was falling, with the criticisms of adversaries, and with the silence of the “classics,” it seemed to me at the time and it still seems to me now of capital importance to show that the project of autonomy is not just anything, that it can give itself the means for its ends, and that it does not present, as far off as one can see, any internal

antinomy, incoherency, or impossibility. On the other hand, it would be both absurd and ridiculous to describe a pseudoconcrete utopia, given that the data change daily, given, especially, that the alpha and the omega of the whole affair is the deployment of social creativity—which, were it unleashed, would once again leave far behind it all we are capable of thinking today.

But on the other hand, let us also recall that, even with the specific formulations I have given to it, this project is not “mine.” Mine is only the labor of elucidation and condensation of a historical experience that began twenty-five centuries ago and that has been particularly dense and rich over the past two centuries. Those who believe that I am inspired exclusively or essentially by ancient history simply have not read me completely. My reflection began not with Athenian democracy (only starting in 1978 did I truly start working on it) but with the contemporary workers’ movement. To cite the texts that, since 1946, put this reflection on record would be to cite the tables of contents of the eight volumes of my *Socialisme ou Barbarie* writings;³¹ in these three-thousand pages, there is in all but one allusion to Thucydides and another to Plato. What is constantly discussed, described, analyzed, and reflected upon therein is the modern experience: the Russian experience, of course, but also struggles, great and small, of workers in the Western

³¹T/E: Castoriadis is referring to the Éditions 10/18 reprints (1973-1979) of his *Socialisme ou Barbarie* writings, which were accompanied in these reprints by several new texts. The 10/18 texts were excerpted in English translation as *PSW I-3* ([1988](#), [1988](#), [1993](#)). We hope to translate the eight volumes of his posthumously-published *Écrits politiques* (*EP I-8*), including all the texts that have since appeared in that collection along with the new *EP* reprints of all the 10/18 texts, and to publish them in full as *Political Writings* in a multivolume series.

world since 1945, the Hungarian and Polish Revolutions of 1956, the struggles of the 1960s, and so on. *One will not find a single sentence* in *CS II*, for example, that fails to refer to a real historical experience, to a form invented by the workers' movement, to a problem this movement encountered or was inevitably going to encounter had it continued to develop, or to a new question posed by changes in the contemporary world. I am saying this, obviously, not in order to "ground" or to "justify" my ideas (which are based, when all is added up, on a political choice to which they give concrete form), but in order to recall their relevance. If one knows the history of the last two centuries, and quite particularly the twentieth, it is impossible to read me without seeing the guiding thread running throughout my writings: the preoccupation, the obsession with the risk that a collective movement might "degenerate," that it might give birth to a new bureaucracy (whether totalitarian or not)—in short, with the question of overcoming the division of political labor, to borrow Khilnani's elegant expression. This "degeneration," this bureaucratization are to be found, and I have found them, in the Russian experience, as well as in strikes of secondary importance, in the student unions, and in tenants' movements.

Khilnani asks to what extent I have remained faithful to my prior formulations. I believe that I have already responded to him. I do not see how an autonomous society, a free society, could be established [*s'instituer*] without a genuine becoming-public of the public/public sphere, a reappropriation of power by the collectivity, the abolition of the division of political labor, the unfettered circulation of politically pertinent information, the abolition of bureaucracy, the most extreme decentralization of decision-making, the principle "No execution of decisions without participation in the making of decisions," consumer sovereignty, the self-

government of producers—accompanied by universal participation in decisions that commit the whole and by self-limitation, some of whose most important characteristics I sketched above. On one point, *CSII* is “dated”—and I made the necessary corrections rather early on, much sooner than others in any case (*RR* [1964], *AR* [1968], and *T*): neither quantitatively nor qualitatively can one attribute any longer to the proletariat, in the proper sense of the term, the privileged role imputed to it by classical Marxism—as had, formally, remained the case in *CSII*.

Has nothing changed, then, since 1957? Oh, yes indeed—and this is what has become the center of my preoccupations since 1959 (*MCR*, *RR*, *AR*, *GI*, *CWS*). Through a host of factors I do not have to reanalyze here (but which, at bottom, *explain* nothing), the attitudes of laboring people as well as of the population in general have changed profoundly—at least, what is manifest in them. Of the two core imaginary significations whose struggle has defined the modern West—the unlimited expansion of pseudorational pseudomastery and the project of autonomy—the first seems to be triumphing all down the line, the second suffering a prolonged eclipse. The population plunges into *privatization* (*MCR*), abandoning the public domain to bureaucratic, managerial, and financial oligarchies. A new anthropological type of individual emerges, defined by greediness, frustration, *generalized conformism* (which, in the sphere of culture, is pompously labeled postmodernism).³² All this is materialized in structures of massive weight: the mad and potentially lethal race of an autonomized technoscience, consumeristic,

³²T/E: See now *RA* (1992), a lecture that was first delivered in English at Boston University in September 1989, a few months before the present text was published.

televisual, and advertising onanism, the atomization of society, the rapid technical and “moral” obsolescence of all “products,” “wealth” that, growing nonstop, melts between one’s fingers. Capitalism seems to have finally succeeded in fabricating the type of individual that “corresponds” to it: perpetually distracted, zapping from one “enjoyment [*jouissance*]” to another, without memory or project, ready to respond to every solicitation of an economic machine that is increasingly destroying the planet’s biosphere in order to produce illusions called commodities.

I am obviously talking here about the liberal and wealthy societies (one seventh of world population). The image becomes more complicated, but hardly more rosy, when one considers the Third World (which till now has adopted from the West only the worst of what the latter has produced) or even the countries of the East. (The admirable struggles for freedom currently [1989] developing in the latter countries do not succeed in sifting out any new objective—which certainly may be “explained” historically, but which changes nothing in the diagnosis. That Poland or Hungary might become like Portugal is certainly infinitely preferable to the present-day situation, for the Polish, for the Hungarians, and for everyone. But no one can make me think that Portugal—or even the United States—represents the finally-found form of human society.)

Certainly, this situation is deeply menaced by two factors. The first concerns the consequences of the present form of capitalism for the continued self-reproduction of the system. The individuals present-day society fabricates cannot reproduce it in the long run; or, to put it in another way, if everything is up for sale, capitalism can no longer function. The second deals with the ecological barrier the system will encounter sooner or later. Capitalist “wealth” has in fact been

purchased through the now and henceforth irreversible destruction (continuing on at an accelerated pace) of resources of the biosphere accumulated over three billion years.

But this internal antinomy and this external barrier in no way “guarantee” a “positive” solution. With the populations of the West such as they are at present, a great ecological catastrophe would more likely lead to a new type of fascism rather than anything else.

We thus arrive at the Gordian knot of the political question today. An autonomous society cannot be instaurated except through the autonomous activity of the collectivity. Such an activity presupposes that people strongly cathect *something other* than the possibility of buying a new color television set. On a deeper level, it presupposes that the passion for democracy and for freedom, for public affairs, will take the place of distraction, cynicism, conformism, and the consumer race. In short, it presupposes, among other things, that the “economic” cease to be the dominant or exclusive value. This, to respond to Fehér, is the “price attached” to a transformation of society. Let us put it more clearly still: the price to pay for liberty is the destruction of the economic as central (and, in fact, *unique*) value.

Is this price too high? For me, certainly not: I infinitely prefer a new friend to a new car. A subjective preference, of course. But “objectively”? I willingly abandon to the political philosophers the task of “grounding” (pseudo-)consumption as the supreme value. But there is something more important. If things continue on their present course, this price will have to be paid *anyway*. Who can believe that the destruction of the Earth will be able to continue at its present pace for another century? Who fails to see that it would accelerate further still if the poor countries were to industrialize? And what will the regime do when it no

longer is able to exercise a hold over populations by constantly furnishing them with new gadgets?

If the rest of humanity is to escape from its unbearable poverty, and if humanity in its entirety wants to survive on this planet in a steady and sustainable state, it will have to accept a good *pater familias* management of the planet's resources, a radical check on technology and production, a *frugal life*. I have not redone the calculations lately, which in any case would be tainted with immense margins of uncertainty. But, to get a grip on the ideas, one can say: It would already be good if we could "indefinitely" assure to all the inhabitants of the planet the "standard of living" of the rich countries in 1929. This can be imposed by a neofascist regime, but this can freely be done by the human collectivity, organized democratically, cathecting other significations, abolishing the monstrous role of the economy as end and putting it back in its rightful place as mere *means* of human life. Independent of a host of other considerations (*HWI* [1974], *SMH* [1974]), it is in this perspective and as moment of this reversal of values that the equality of wages and incomes appears to be of essential importance (*VEJP*, in [CLI](#), 431-32).

Certainly, as I have seen and said before many others, this does not seem to correspond to the aspirations of people today. Even more than that must be said: the world's peoples are in active complicity with the evolution presently underway (*DE?* [1987]). Will they remain so indefinitely? Who can say so? One thing, however, is certain: it is not in running behind "what is being worn" and "what is being said," it is not in emasculating what we think and what we want that we will increase the chances for freedom. It is not what is, but what could be and should be, that has need of us.

May-November 1989

[T/E: A list of all the contributors and the titles of the texts that appeared in *Autonomie et autotransformation de la société. La philosophie militante de Cornelius Castoriadis* (1989) may be found here: <https://www.agorainternational.org/fr/frenchworks.html#FR1989b> and here: <https://www.agorainternational.org/englishworks.html#EN1989p> and here: <https://www.agorainternational.org/de/germanworks.html#DE1989a> and here: <https://www.agorainternational.org/it/italianworks.html#IT1989a>.]

List of Abbreviations Used in “Done and To Be Done”

<i>AR</i>	“The Anticipated Revolution” (1968), now in PSW3
<i>CSI</i>	“On the Content of Socialism, I” (1955) now in PSW1
<i>CSII</i>	“On the Content of Socialism, II” (1957) now in PSW2
<i>CSIII</i>	“On the Content of Socialism, III” (1958) now in PSW2
<i>CWS</i>	“The Crisis of Western Societies” (1982), now in CL4
<i>DC</i>	“Sur la dynamique du capitalisme” (1953-1954), now in <i>EP8</i>
<i>DE?</i>	“Dead End?” (1987), now in CL3
<i>DI</i>	“The Discovery of the Imagination” (1978), now in CL2
<i>EP?</i>	“The ‘End of Philosophy?’” (1989), now in CL3
<i>ETS</i>	“Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science” (1968), now in CL1
<i>FISSI</i>	“First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions” (1986), now in CL6
<i>GI</i>	General Introduction (1973), now in PSW1
<i>GPCD</i>	“The Greek <i>Polis</i> and the Creation of Democracy,” now in CL2
<i>HS</i>	“The Hungarian Source” (1976), now in PSW3
<i>HWI</i>	“Hierarchy of Wages and Incomes” (1974), now in PSW3
<i>ISR</i>	“Institution of Society and Religion” (1982), reprinted in CL2
<i>ISRH</i>	“Individual, Society, Rationality, History” (1988), now in CL3
<i>LMQA</i>	“The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983), now in CL2
<i>MCR</i>	“Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (1960-1961), now in PSW2
<i>MRT</i>	“Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” (1964-1965), now the first part of IIS
<i>MSPI</i>	“Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (1973), now in CL1

- OIHS* "The Ontological Import of the History of Science" (1986), now in [CL2](#)
- PL* "Proletarian Leadership" (1952), now in [PSW1](#)
- PO* "Proletariat and Organization, I" (April 1959), now in [PSW2](#), and "Proletariat et organisation" (July 1959), now in *EP2*
- PoPA* "Power, Politics, Autonomy" (1988), now in [CL3](#)
- PPE* "Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation" (1977), now in [CL1](#)
- PsyPo* "Psychoanalysis and Politics" (1989), now in [CL3](#)
- QURSS* "Sur la question de l'URSS et du stalinisme mondial" (1947), reprinted in *SB1* and *SB(n.é.)*, now in *EP5*
- RDR* "Reflections on 'Development' and 'Rationality'" (1976), now in [CL2](#)
- ReRa* "Reflections on Racism" (1987), now in [CL3](#)
- RR* "Recommencing the Revolution" (1964), now in [PSW3](#)
- SAS* "Socialism and Autonomous Society" (1979), now in [PSW3](#)
- SB* "Socialism or Barbarism" (1949), now in [PSW1](#)
- SH* "The Social-Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge" (1991), now in [CL6](#)
- SII* "The Social Imaginary and the Institution" (1975), now the second part of [IIS](#)
- SMH* "Self-Management and Hierarchy" (1974), now in [PSW3](#)
- SST* "The State of the Subject Today" (1986), now in [CL3](#)
- SRR* "The Social Regime in Russia" (1978), now in [CR](#)
- SU* "The Sayable and the Unsayable" (1971), now in [CL1](#)
- T* "Technique" (1973), now in [CL1](#)
- VEJP* "Value, Equality, Justice Politics: From Marx to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Us" (1975), now in [CL1](#)

PSYCHE

From the Monad to Autonomy*

Question: I would like to set aside for a moment the rather convergent set of questions that were addressed to you during and after the Gulf War. You are usually asked to summarize your writings and to discuss them in detail, or to give an opinion on the pressing items of the day. You are also asked to take a position, to offer prescriptions, or, better, to prophesy; in short, you are asked to accept the status of a “Master Thinker.” We miss their like a lot today. But you have contributed to our progressive sense of critical disaffection toward those among these “Master Thinkers” who had “held up” the best.

How are we to proceed now, so as to avoid erecting you into a position whose potential for “heteronomy” we know so well? Perhaps—and this is what I would like to propose to you, in going back into the “fields”—we could examine your “practicopoietic” history. Of the three identities whose ethical importance you postulate—those of thinker, of psychoanalyst, and of citizen—let us leave aside the first; the “proof” will be in your responses.

We could, consequently, speak of politics, of activism, of your subversive trajectory, of the break with Lenin, and then with Marx...and also of the craft of analyst, of your encounter with Jacques Lacan, of another break, of your manifest singularity within the Freudian world. ...Still more,

*Interview with Jean-Claude Polack and Sparta Castoriadis in Paris, June 15, 1991. Originally published as “De la monade à l’autonomie” in *Chimères*, 14 (Winter 1991-92): 95-124. Reprinted in *FAF*, 85-108 (101-29 of the 2008 reprint). [T/E: The English translation first appeared in *Free Associations*, 34 (1995): 123-49, with an introduction cowritten by David Ames Curtis and Sparta Castoriadis that is now available here: <https://kaloskaisophos.org/rt/rtdac/rtdactf/rtdactfspartamonad.html>. The translation itself was reprinted in *WIF*, 172-95.]

I would like you to tell us what the activist experience of the “social-historical” sheds light on or shakes up within the field of analysis and what, of your position as an analyst, seems to you useful, exportable, or extrapolatable onto the political “scene.”

Precious few are the occasions when one encounters the kind of double personality whose dealings with Marx and Freud are not only theoretical but also “on the ground”: in the street and on the couch. Social struggles and listening to dreams are rarely associated or consecutive within one and the same existential framework. Some people—I am thinking of Aron Zalkind,¹ but especially of Wilhelm Reich—have even paid with their lives for this attempt to square the circle. How have these two experiences been constituted in your life? Are they intermixed or do they contradict each other?

Cornelius Castoriadis: I am not going to retrace my path here. I have already done so on many other occasions, notably in the General Introduction (1972) to my *Political and Social Writings*,² where I explained its main features, especially on the political side. As for the psychoanalytical or Freudian side, that came later. At a very early age, I was interested, even passionately so, in Freud. There are some relatively old texts, such as the first part of “On the Content of Socialism” (1955),³ where I underscored the necessity of taking the psychosexual dimension of the individual into account in whatever is done or thought in the political

¹See Antonella Salomoni and Marc Ferro’s article “Discours médical, révolution et maladie en URSS,” *Chimères*, 12.

²T/E: [PSW1](#), 3-36.

³T/E: [PSW1](#), 290-309.

domain. I did not really attempt to think the two things together, however, until 1960. It was at that time that I began a personal analysis, but it was also the moment when it was becoming impossible for me to continue to be Marxist, or even Marxian, in any precise sense at all of the term. What appeared to me as a fundamental lacuna, and more than a lacuna, in Marx's conceptual framework was not only the dimension of the singular individual, it was the "imaginary creation of the social-historical," the imaginary as collective, anonymous, radical, instituting, and constituting imaginary. It was then that the connection was made, in reflection and thought.

Q: When you say that your critique was not simply that of the misfire of subjectivity in the Marxian approach to subjects and personalities, are you, among other things, making an allusion to Sartre's whole polemic with Marxism, back when he was beginning to speak of Flaubert or Flaubertian personalities and when he restored to psychoanalysis the merit of singularizing an author or a hero?

C.C.: I have followed Sartre's work very little. I read, for conscience' sake and by sad duty, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, but that never truly was of interest to me. I never read *The Family Idiot*. Sartre never understood anything about Freud, he opposed Freud with idiotic arguments: What is this concept of an Unconscious that is not conscious of itself? That is an argument of some petty prep-school teacher [*professeur de khâgne*] who has grasped nothing of what there is to grasp in Freud, nor anything of what there is in things. "Consciousness that is not consciousness of itself": this is self-evident; this is evident in the subject, society, history.

Let us consider the constitutive dimension of society and of history, the instituting dimension. We see therein

something that, for lack of a better term, must be called a *source*, a capacity of human collectives to give rise, in an unmotivated—though conditioned—way, to forms, figures, new schemata that, more than just serving to organize things, are creative of worlds. It is in virtue of these schemata that the ancient Greek world is populated with nymphs and gods; that the Hebraic world is a product of the action of God, who also created man; that the modern capitalist world is a world devoted to an indefinite expansion of the forces of production. All that is neither necessary nor contingent. It is the way of being that human beings in society create, and each time they create it *ex nihilo* as to what truly matters, that is to say, as to its form or *eidos*. But, of course, never *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*, for something that was already there is utilized. The Greek *polis* constitutes itself in making fantastic use of Greek mythology. Tragedy uses Greek mythology, and it makes something else out of it. Modern Europe uses at once Greece, Rome, Hebraism, Arabic elements, Germanic elements, and something else again that it itself creates. In itself creating something else, however, it gives another signification to what it borrows from these earlier worlds.

The parallel with the subject can be seen immediately. In both cases, we have this mode of being—which is the mode of being of the for-itself—that one finds already on an elementary level in the living being [*le vivant*]. “For-itself” means proper world, source of creation of a proper world. Just as nothing can enter into a cell except on condition that this something traverse the filter of the cell’s outer membrane—and once it has entered therein it must be metabolized by the cell, or it kills the cell—so nothing can enter into a singular psyche except on condition of being metabolized by it. And nothing can enter into a society that is not reinterpreted—in fact recreated, reconstructed—so as to take on the meaning

that that society gives to all that presents itself to that society. A society, like a psyche, as a first approximation, like a cell, like a living organism, is in closure, in the algebraic sense of the term. An algebraic field is closed if every solution that can be written in this field admits of a solution with elements of this field. In Hebraic society, for example, everything that appears finds its solution on the level of signification; it can be interpreted therein. Whence this fantastic paradox that even the Holocaust, from the Hebraic point of view properly speaking, has to be full of signification. What appears to us as the height of monstrosity and absurdity is one more sign of the election of the Jewish people. That is what is meant by the algebraic closure of the system.

This closure has been shattered twice in the history of humanity. It was shattered a first time in ancient Greece. It was then closed up again with Christianity, true Christianity. It was shattered anew with modern Europe as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when questions began to arise, and, finally, one opens onto the time of Revolutions, the Enlightenment, the workers' movement.

This instituting dimension of the social was not seen by Marx. There are one or two phrases here or there: "the bee and the architect" in *Capital* (to which the President of the French Republic has given such a sorrowful fate),⁴ a few phrases in the *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. In the last analysis, however, Marx remains a Hegelian. He replaces Mind or Spirit with the forces of production. He is rationalistic. This can be seen very clearly when he writes that every mythology subdues and fashions the forces of nature for

⁴T/E: François Mitterrand, *L'Abeille et l'architecte* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), published three years before his first successful presidential election.

as long as and because man cannot really master them: once, therefore, they really will be mastered (it is understood), mythology will no longer have any room to exist and will disappear. The imaginary is thus presented...

Q.: ...as a symptom?

C.C.: As a symptom and as a compensation. Even in Freud, moreover, the imaginary plays the role of compensatory *Phantasie*. It is the lack of the object that gives rise to the phantasm. Well, the object and its lack first have to be constituted—and they can be constituted only through the *Phantasie*, that is to say, by the imagination.

Q: Your ferocious, and precocious, critique of Stalinism led you to put Lenin on trial, too. You have broken with a great portion of Marxian doctrine. Can one say that beyond the denunciation of the misdeeds of Lacanianism, its deviations and impasses, you initiate a much more radical rupture with Freud himself? In that case, what can one “save” or retain of these two ideological demigods of our century? What hybridization, between them, seems to you still possible, and fecund?

C.C.: The situation is not symmetrical.

Marx is a great thinker. He will remain, however, in this portrait gallery alongside two dozen or so others, alongside Tocqueville, Montesquieu, Hobbes, Plato, Aristotle....

Two things that we have learned from Marx will remain. The first—whatever the defects of its expression in Marx—is the concentration on the social perspective when looking at human beings, the break with all methodological or substantialist individualism. In Marx himself, moreover, this remains rather confused, ambiguous, obscure. The horizon, the ideal, is to be a singular human being, fully developed, who cooperates “freely” with the others (as if one

could “freely” cooperate with others, as if one had “freely” chosen to be born, and to be born French or Chinese...). He taught us, however, to see society as a totality, both functional and torn; functional in its very tornness, torn in its functionality.

There remains, on the other hand, the political appeal. For him, it is not a matter of drawing up a new utopia or of defining once and for all the “just” city, but of trying to seek in the effectively actual movement of people in society what allows its transformation for another future. This way of positing the problem nevertheless leaves open immense questions. Of what kind of movement of people in society is it a question? Marx in a sense was happy—theoretically and politically happy—because he believed that he had found in the proletariat both the subject of an effective social movement and the bearer of the values that were those that were dear to him. In the same stroke, he rid himself of the need to think through the question: What should one say of the effectively actual movement if this effectively actual movement is, for example, Nazi-inspired? Or what if this effectively actual movement is simply “consumeristic”? Must one lend one’s approval to the “real” movement, even if this movement leads toward ever more televised stupidity, for example? He thus set aside the question (for which he had only contempt and derision) of political judgment or of value judgment.

In relation to Freud, the situation is not symmetrical. What, in Freud’s thought, is dated, or is very clearly marked by his social-historical environment, is manifest: the patriarchal side of his theory, the sometimes positivistic character of his epistemological or philosophical positions (which is elsewhere contradicted by the content of his conceptual model).... All that, however, is revisable, or

removable without great damage. The dissymmetry lies in this, that the essential of what Freud discovered remains true, though one must go much further. This is a labor I am attempting to begin.

I think that there is an essential inadequacy to Freud's notion of the Unconscious. As strange as this might seem for someone who was "positivistic," who began with the physiology of the nervous system, Freud remains, after his own fashion, a dualist. We rediscover in him a dualism of body and soul. That creates some very grave problems. And first of all, because this dualism is not eliminable. There is a take on things, a mode of being of psychical phenomena as such, that we cannot crush onto the mode of being that is proper to somatic phenomena. This is absolutely clear and evident. It is just as clear and evident, however, that there is a permanent and essential interdependence between the psychical and the somatic. This is so not only because one dies, because when a hole is drilled into one's skull the psychical process is interrupted, but also on account of many familiar, everyday examples: give someone some alcohol and this person will start to tell tales that would not have been told without the alcohol; say something and the person blushes, or slaps you, the words set off some kind of corporeal movement.

There cannot be, on the philosophical level, any essential ultimate distinction between soul and body, psyche and soma. As Aristotle already said, "Socrates' corpse is not Socrates," even if it is still warm. It is impossible to conceive of the mind of Kant in the body of Ava Gardner, and *vice versa*. Aristotle was right when he said that the soul is the form of a living body. The soul is, first of all, life—and life is the very existence of the body. In the simple living being, the body, starting from a certain moment, is lined [*se redouble*]

with a representation of the ambient surroundings, the environment, with a specific mode of being affected, and with a push. In the simple living being, in 99.99 percent of the cases, this all remains within the strict framework of biological functionality. In the human being, it becomes undone. There is a neoplasia, there is a cancer that results not only from a quantitative expansion of the nervous system but certainly, as well, from the extraordinary complexification of its organization, and probably still other things. This cancer is expressed not so much by an increase in one's logical capacities (it is a traditional bit of stupidity to say that "Man is a rational animal": he is much less reasonable than animals) but by an immense deployment of the imagination. And of a defunctionalized imagination.

This imagination inhabits, already, the body of the simple, nonhuman living being. Insects see colors. Now, in the fact of seeing colors or hearing sounds, there is a creation. Philosophy always neglected that fact, obsessed as it was by the problem of primary qualities and secondary qualities: colors, tastes, it says, aren't important; what matters is the ball of wax that subsists. But it is not the ball of wax that really matters, it is that we should see blue or red, whereas in nature there is neither blue nor red but simply electromagnetic wavelengths of so many angstroms. No physical law can explain why we see blue and red instead of seeing red and blue for these same wavelengths. Physics might be able to say, at the very most, that it is normal that something different is produced in the for-itself that is receiving these shocks, but it can say nothing about the *quality* of *this* different thing. And biology can tell us that, the world being what it is, living beings would not have survived had they not developed such and such a type of reactive sensation specific to such and such a type of shock, but it has nothing to say about the qualitative

content of this specificity. There is, therefore, an *imagination* that is already there, in the living being; there is the creation of something that very well must be called *images* corresponding to the shock the living being receives from the external world. In the living being, however, this imagination is both enslaved to functionality and given once and for all. It is defunctionalized and perpetually creative in the human being and this is what traditional philosophy has not seen.

Even Kant, who went the furthest, with the “transcendental imagination,” speaks of the “passivity of impressions.” Now, there is no passivity of impressions. There is no such thing, not only because perception is an active and intentional attitude but because, if one could isolate simple sensation, there still would be no passivity in this sensation. What is passive is the shock. The retina undergoes a shock, my eardrum is struck by waves of air, but they make something quite other of these shocks, they are not passive. Kant is thinking of a body that is an automaton for producing blind sensations. But this is not true. The body creates its sensations. Therefore, there is a *corporeal imagination*, which, in the human being, goes hand in hand with a new dimension of the radical imagination properly speaking, the emergence of this incessant flux that is at once representational, intentional, and affective. Through the two of them is created a “proper world” of the human subject, which is no longer the proper world of the animal; it is not given once and for all, and it is defunctionalized.

If one remained at this point—and here is the risk the inherited philosophy would like to guard against—one would end up with insoluble aporias and solipsistic positions: “Why and how does this proper world communicate with anything else, and notably with other proper worlds?” Similarly, history would become unintelligible. It is here that the social

imaginary comes in. I shall return to this point later.

Let us now take the imagination from the psychoanalytic point of view. As you know, Freud never speaks of imagination, he speaks of *Phantasie*. This was both a positivistic and a self-protective attitude. He had already told enough abracadabra-like stories for his contemporaries; if he had told one more—namely, “All this is due to the patients’ imagination”—it would have spelled his ultimate ruin! One only has to look at the timidity with which, in the story of the “Wolf Man,” he admits, in the end, in a footnote, that perhaps the primal scene (the famous *coitus a tergo*) has never been but a phantasm on the part of the patient. Freud speaks of the Unconscious as being centered solely on one certain type of psychical products that relate to drives, and especially the sexual drive; this Unconscious will deal with the other *qua* object of desire, it will have to do with repression, and so on.

I do not know if I will have the capacity, the forces, and the time to work out this idea truly and, especially, to give to it, beyond a theoretical interest, some practical relevance, but I think that the human Unconscious surpasses the Freudian Unconscious.

There is a *human Nonconscious*, of which the Freudian Unconscious, including the one described in the “second topography,” constitutes only a part. The body is already imagination, because it transforms external shocks into something. The embryo moves around in the amniotic fluid, something happens with its intestines as something happens with our intestines, its heart beats. When we are in contact with the air and when we breathe, things happen, and all that does not concern some Cartesian machine connected, through its pineal gland, to our mind or our soul. It is one and the same thing—although there is an extraordinary difference,

which enables us to go against our own body, to impose incredible things upon it, or to overcome pain.

There is, here, something that should not even be called “unconscious,” because the term *Unconscious* remains definitively under Freud’s seal. Let us call it, provisionally, the *human Nonconscious*, which is not even necessarily nonconscious; it has a strange status, it being in part radically unconscious and never truly able to be conscious, save under the form of pain or pleasure. Someone who has an illness in an internal organ is not conscious of it, the sole thing of which that person is conscious is pain. The same goes for pleasure, including organ pleasure and the more general pleasure of being in one’s body and of being well in it. Nevertheless, there is not only that. Leibniz already said somewhat analogous things about the “infinitesimal perceptions of monads.”

There is, therefore, a sort of globality to the human being that is at once body and soul, wherein the body is always, in a sense, psychical and the psyche always, in certain regards, somatic. This cannot be described simply on the polar mode of conscious/unconscious, still less that of repressed/nonrepressed. I do not repress the functioning of my heart, it takes place almost noiselessly. And as long as it takes place imperceptibly, I have this sort of infinitesimal and vague sense of well-being of an organism that is functioning well. And when this functioning breaks down, it no longer is a matter of a quiet heartbeat, it’s tachycardia, arrhythmia, and so on. To me, it seems certain that there is, here, something that is not purely somatic. It is in following along this path that we will perhaps one day be able to understand, or rather to think, not only the philosophical aspects of the question but also much more specific phenomena such as hysterical conversion, psychosomatic illnesses, or autoimmune diseases.

I do not believe that one encounters cases of autoimmune diseases in other mammals.⁵ Defunctionalization of the psyche, defense organisms that turn against the subject they are supposed to be defending. Treason. Internal conflict. The results: multiple sclerosis, allergies, and so on.

Let me add one phrase in order to intensify the paradox of this man “who is two that are one.” I simply recall what I wrote about the psychical monad in chapter 6 of [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#) and in “The State of the Subject Today,”⁶ and in another new text, “Logic, Imagination, Reflection”:⁷ the defunctionalization of the psyche, the defunctionalization of pleasure, the very strong cathexis in representational pleasure to the detriment of organ pleasure. All this happens as if the psyche wanted to continue on its path all alone, truly wanted to leave the body. An anorectic infant—or, perhaps, an autistic child—wants to leave the body and the environment. It cannot, therefore it starves. When we are speaking of this division, we are not inventing anything, we are expressing something that is there in this monstrosity that is the human psyche, in this cancer, in this neoplasia, something like a tendency to nourish itself as psychism, exactly like cancerous cells do, to the detriment of all the rest. This may open some perspectives on certain

⁵T/E: A quick glance online at the literature turns up cases of what are deemed to be autoimmune diseases in domesticated animals (dogs and cats) and ones in captivity (e.g., a polar bear at the Berlin Zoo); autoimmune diseases can be induced in mice for experimental study purposes.

⁶Author’s addition: “The State of the Subject” appears now in [CL3](#).

⁷Author’s addition: See now “Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection,” below in the present volume.

psychoses. And here again we encounter the fundamental role of the social imaginary. The goal of society also is to bring the psyche back, by force, to “reality” and to reinsert it in a setting [*milieu*] in which there are other individuals and there are things that are “really” things.

Q: Can this idea of the defunctionalization of the human psyche be related to the essentially Kleinian—but also Freudian—concept of the “the bodily Ego’s integration into the psychical Ego”?

C.C.: It is not the same thing. There it truly is a question of “integration”—which, indeed, always has to occur if the individual is to survive. I am speaking of something “prior”: I am saying that this begins by a sort of dehiscence, a rather radical sort of separation between the psychical monad and “its” body.

Until a certain age, a baby is completely self-centered: the body is forced to function in an almost suppressed way, in relation to the power of phantasying, hallucination, and so on. It is only in this way that one can understand the anorexia of a nursling or a whole series of other things. There is this dehiscence. Are we speaking about the psychical subject and the bodily subject or the “psychical Ego” and the “bodily Ego”? The Ego is something much more precise, much more elaborate—including in the Freudian conceptual model—and it gradually constructs itself or creates itself much later on.

Q.: Does not the term “imagination”—with its strong connotations of the image, the imaginary, and therefore a whole series of “scopic,” visual, aesthetic, optical, etc. references—rapidly risk becoming inadequate with regard to what, I believe, you designate as a process—what you call the “incessant flux”—of semiotization of the real? The latter would concern cœnaesthetic images, olfactory things, territorial bearings, things that do not necessarily have to be

seen with the eye, but also rhythms, musical components, scansions, therefore a certain temporality, the imagination being a constant capacity for semiotization, which the ethologists of nursing infants describe as a very powerful capacity.

C.C.: That is certain. However, I am not using the term imagination in its inherited sense. The imagination is the capacity to give rise to something that is not the “real” such as common perception, the *Lebenswelt* of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, or physics describes it. It is therefore the subject’s whole *creation of a world for itself*. The imagination is already the deployment of a space and of a time. And each of us has our own proper space and time. How do we arrive at having a common, collective, social space? More difficult still: a common time? It is something, moreover, that we never attain. Nowhere else does the fully developed, conscious, adult individual feel more its ineradicable solitude than in this perpetual difference and alterity between its proper time and common time. The alarm clock has sounded, it’s 8:00 AM, I have to go to work, but to hell with work! Or the time of my mood: it is sunny out, and I am infinitely sad, or I am very gay, even though it is raining, etc.

The “presubjective” world is a compact, blind, and dull mass; the blossoming forth of the imagination is a local explosion that digs a hole into this mass, that opens an interior space within it, a chamber that can swell enormously. And this chamber is not a room. It is a kind of cylinder since it is, at the same time, *a time*; it therefore also has a fourth dimension. And that constitutes, for itself, on the inner linings [*les parois*] of the cylinder, an organized world. This is, I think, what you call “semiotization.”

There are olfactory objects, tactile objects that are, at

the outset, much more important than visual objects. I am not fixated on the “scopic”; one of the gross inadequacies of Lacan’s conception of the imagination is his fixation on the scopic. For me, if one is speaking of stages that are worked out, the *imagination par excellence* is the imagination of the musical composer (which is what I wanted to be). Suddenly figures surge forth that are not in the least visual. They are essentially auditory and kinetic—for there is also rhythm. There is a marvelous excerpt from a letter of Mozart, cited by Brigitte Massin, in which Mozart describes how he composes. Like every self-respecting composer, he composes, obviously, in his head. When deaf, Beethoven heard—imagined—in his head. A true composer writes and hears chords, chordal progressions, as I, in closing my eyes, can review some scene or imagine some scene, bring into mutual presence characters who have never really been present to each other. Mozart explains that the piece composes itself in his head, and he says the following hallucinatory thing: when the piece is finished, it is all laid out simultaneously before him in its progression. He hears in one moment the beginning, the middle, the end of the first movement of the sonata. As Galileo says of God, the proofs we arduously traverse step by step are laid out before Him *instantaneously*. That is an imagination. When Mozart says: I have the entire piece laid out in my head, it is not that he sees the score, it is that he hears the totality of the piece. That appears incomprehensible to us because our musical imagination is rather poor: to be able to hear simultaneously the beginning of the *Symphony in G Minor* and the minuet. Nor is there anything “visual” in the social imaginary. The social imaginary is not the creation of images in society, it is not the fact that one paints the walls of towns. A fundamental creation of the social imaginary, the gods or rules of behavior are neither visible nor even audible,

but *signifiable*.

Q.: Does that not entail a disconnection of the concept of the radical imagination from all rootedness in representation, repetition, reunions with what is already old, what has already been perceived, known? There is a passage in *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* where you say very clearly that the Unconscious does not deal only with the past, that it is not just repetition. There is something actual, “emergent,” concerning which Freud’s analysis, and especially that of Lacan, has often reached an impasse because it ties together the imaginary, representation, and repetition in a common hallucinatory source. You, on the contrary, have taken, I believe, a completely prospective outlook.

C.C.: Let us say temporal. It is a *surging forth*, and this surging forth is—if the abuse of language may be permitted when speaking of the subject and not of the social-historical—historical. It always retains something of the past, and it occurs for someone for whom things have already occurred. Nevertheless, it is a surging forth, and this surging forth can be creative, is creative. Always nominally, since it is something else. But this is already Heraclitus’ position: You will never dream the same dream twice. Beyond Heraclitus, however, we may say that neither is this a simple temporal difference, but rather an alterity, because another form has surged forth. From this standpoint, indeed, it is not a matter of a repetitive imagination or an imagination anchored in the past; quite the contrary.

Q.: One might think that the radical imagination, phantasying, plays the same role in your work as Nietzsche’s “will to power,” “subjectivity” or “structure,” “subjectivity-structure” in Lacan, “desire” in Jean-François Lyotard or others. It is nevertheless clear that it is not a question of a new universal, of some kind of basis, of a *primum movens*, or of a

biological substrate of the psyche. Could you, as the Maoists in 1968 said, return “once more” to this question?

C.C.: It is not a matter of a new universal, and certainly not of a biological substrate. It is the core of being and of the mode of being of the psyche of the singular human being, on the one hand, of the social-historical on the other. It is because there is radical imaginary that there is institution, and there can be no radical imaginary except to the extent that it is instituted. It is the circle of the created and the elements of creation: the different elements have to be posited simultaneously. Without them, the created cannot be, but they themselves are what they are only by means of their “result,” the creation. Being in general is creation. The imaginary and the imagination are the mode of being that this *vis formandi* of being in general takes on in this offspring of overall Being/being [*l'être-étant global*] that is humanity. It appears there with this particular form, this density, and, especially, these singular creations, such as, for example, signification, explicit ideality. The living being is not *explainable*, still less comprehensible, on the basis of strictly physical laws. The living being is an emergence. In this emergence we read this formative potentiality of overall Being/being, a potentiality that in itself has, of course, no personality, and no finality either; it is not teleological. Being is that. If it were not that, being would always be the same. The human being would not exist, life would not exist, and so on. Now, being is always also *being other* and *making the other be*. In the human being, we see an infinitely intensified, amplified echo of that in the radical imagination and the radical imaginary. That in no way implies a subjectivation of being.

The “will to power” of Nietzsche is something else. I do not want to get into a discussion of Nietzsche, as it would take too long.

You know very well that I absolutely do not share Lacan's conceptual model. "Structure," which he invoked constantly, excludes what is, in my view, the essential: temporality. At the same time, he appealed to "structures" that have no place in the discussion, either psychoanalytic or otherwise. Take, for example: language. The subject is nothing without language—which is obvious, but it is also as old as the world (Aristotle).

Well, language? What about it? Where does it come from? What does psychoanalysis have to say about it? There is a paragraph in Freud's manuscripts sent to Wilhelm Fliess, where Freud expressed confidence that the path on which he was engaged was going to lead him to explain the origins of language. Obviously, he explained nothing at all on this score, neither at that moment nor later on. In Lacan, there is the language the subject finds before her. Either Lacan is Heideggerian, and language is a gift of being, man does not speak, but being speaks itself through man in giving him language—this kind of ideological, theological metaphysics does not interest me—or else one is obliged to acknowledge that language is a creation of the radical imaginary, that is to say, of society. Language as such and singular languages are, each time, a creation of the corresponding collectivity. Here, a digression is necessary.

Creative and therefore irreducible, inexplicable, and indeducible, the poietic dimension of the human being seems to leave the entire dimension of logic by the wayside. Now, in no way is this the case. One of the first things we notice when we begin to reflect is that there is a dimension—what usually is labeled "logical," and which I call "ensemblistic-identitary," or "ensidic" for short—that is everywhere present, in the psyche as well as in society, in the living being, in physical being. A billy-goat cannot be at the same time billy-

goat and stag; two plus two make four; there is no smoke without fire; determinate causes produce determinate consequences. That sort of thing is everywhere, but it is only *one* of the two dimensions that make up what is. Let me take an example from psychoanalysis. Take an analyst and her patient on the couch; the patient recounts a dream, and the two of them, together—at least one would hope so—attempt, following the rules, to interpret the dream. The dream is a fantastically complex formation in which the imagination intervenes to an extraordinary degree, often dazzling in the creativity of its connections, in its inventions, in its plays on words. In this dream, however, one also encounters, for example, calculations. The creative, poietic imagination of the dream has to become instrumentalized in calculations in order to be able to say what it has to say.

Likewise, when Bach writes a fugue, he counts the notes of the theme, he counts the fifth in order to repeat the theme transposed to the fifth, he counts the notes of the countertheme, he knows the harmonic relations of this construction. A structuralist would have to say that Bach himself is exhausted in his calculations, which is lovely bit of asininity. These calculations are also present in a great work of painting. There is a fantastic logic even in a surrealist poem. If this logic were not there, the meaningful effect of a phrase's apparent or real absurdity would not be a meaningful effect—it would be nothing at all. It is by opposition, by contrast, but also by constant insertion of logical fibers that what goes beyond the logical can not only *be said* but, quite simply, *be*. In positing that everything that *is* has to be determinate and determinate in all its parts—which is not true—philosophy has remained the victim of the metacategory of determinacy. What is true, however, is that nothing can *be* if it is not also determinate. Contrary to what Lacan believed,

the Unconscious is not a machine. Nevertheless, the Unconscious is determinate *qua* Unconscious. It has a mode of being that is its own and that is not that of a kangaroo or of a theorem from topology.

It is determinate in its mode of being and in the nature of its manifestations, but it is not determinate in the content of what unfolds therein. In what unfolds therein there is emergence, a surging forth. To try to comprehend this surging forth we are obliged to relate its manifestations more or less successfully to something else, until the moment we encounter the famous “navel,”⁸ and, finally, the entire history of the subject. Freud spoke of the choice of neurosis: as he was a bit positivistic, he also was thinking of constitutional factors. These constitutional factors, however, are almost like the “slumbering virtues” attributed to opium by a Molière character. In truth, it is a question of the subject’s irreducible, inexplicable way of being, of her capacity to, of the necessity to constitute a proper world and to constitute it as a neurotic, as a psychotic, as a pervert, or as a “normal everyday neurotic.”

The ensemblistic-identitary, the ensidic dimension is everywhere present, and even when we transgress it knowingly and with considerable results we still once again discover that this dimension has been utilized. When Hegel says, to ridicule Schelling, “In the night of the absolute, all cows are black”⁹—a splendid phrase, which borrows from a

⁸T/E: Freud speaks of “the dream’s navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown” in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter: *SE*), vol. 5, p. 525.

⁹T/E: In the Preface to *The Phenomenology of Mind*.

popular saying—whence derives its trenchant character? From the fact that it quite knowingly makes very logical use of terms and relations in order that there may be an absurd result, and this absurd result is logical and makes sense. This is why I say that the two dimensions—the ensidic and the poietic—are everywhere dense, as one says in topology: however close you wish to approach an element of one of these dimensions, you will find an element of the other one. This is evidently true even in madness.

Q.: I believe to have understood that you are taking the psychical monad of the omnipotent *infans*, which is turned inward, and making it confront, interact with the rigid or supple process of socialization that its entrance into society and human culture imposes upon the unconscious magma. This is undoubtedly what you name “sublimation” and what passes, among other things, by way of language and words. What, in this case, does the process of autonomization mean for you? Can it be valid on both scenes? Would it be, on the social scene, the democratic or libertarian revolution? And on the analytic scene, the famous undoing of transference?

C.C.: You have spoken, quite rightly, of the omnipotent *infans*. In this regard, let me take the opportunity to correct Freud, who spoke of the imaginary all-powerfulness of the psyche.¹⁰ The all-powerfulness of the psyche is, to begin with, real. It is effective, actual. It is the formation of representations that give it pleasure. And it is this omnipotence that is then breached—by the body, of course, but especially by others.

Left to itself, the newborn dies of hunger or, in the

¹⁰T/E: Castoriadis may be thinking of Freud’s phrase about the “omnipotence of thoughts.” See the third chapter, “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts,” of *Totem and Taboo*, SE 13.

best of cases, becomes a wild child and irreversibly loses its capacity to be truly human. Socialization is therefore constitutive of the human being. What is stupidly called in political, philosophical, and economic theory the “individual”—and which is opposed there to society—is nothing other than the society itself. These are the successive strata of socialization, if one may use this image, that are agglomerated around the monadic core—in a very bizarre fashion, moreover. It is not like the depositing of metal ions on a magnetized pole. It is complex, contradictory, conflictual. Freud had some very beautiful images. He speaks of conglomerates and of breccia [*brèches*], volcanic rocks in which hard fragments are caught within solidified lava flows. At moments, this lava brings back up to the surface (as we see all the time in our life and in clinical practice) elements from the deepest magmas.

This more or less gentle process of socialization is in fact essentially violent. What it signifies is that the psyche has to renounce omnipotence, must renounce being the center or the totality of the world. Yet, if we are just a little bit sincere, we must admit that this is something we never renounce and cannot renounce. I am always the origin of the coordinates. It is from me that the axes x , y , z , and t depart, and they depart from my here and now. To bring these axes into agreement with the axes of other observers is a whole effort.

The *infans* is faced with the need to cease believing that the breast is its object, that the mother is at its disposal, that it forms an exclusive couple with the mother; it must recognize that the mother (this is Lacan’s contribution toward restoring the meaning of the Oedipus complex in Freud’s work) desires someone else. There is a relationship between two others from which I am forever excluded, and if I do not accept it, I never will be a socialized individual.

Even that, however, does not suffice. When Freud broached the problem of the Oedipus complex, it was exclusively from a psychogenetic angle. In *Totem and Taboo* one sees, nevertheless, that he had perceived very quickly the sociogenetic dimension of this affair. The psychoanalysts' sociological blindness may be observed in the fact that, when they read the myth of *Totem and Taboo*, they see only the murder of the father and ignore the oath of the brothers who swear to renounce their omnipotence, who swear not to kill each other, not to want, each for himself, all the women of the phratry. In the Freudian myth, a substitute for the dead father is the core of the institution: the totem. One can perfectly well conceive of a family unit, completely pathogenic and yet partially instituted in history, that has sometimes been called the Cyclopean family. One of the rare times Aristotle expressed himself without great rigor was when he spoke of the Greek cities, saying that it was only in the city of the Lacedaemonians that the legislator thought he had to impose rules for the education of children and the occupations of citizens; in all the other cities, Aristotle said, the legislator left the fathers to rule their women and their children as they wished.¹¹ Now, that is false. This is the regime of the Cyclopes in the *Odyssey*, where there are no laws, no assemblies, where each man can kill wife and children, eat them, do with them what he wants. This is the regime prior to the murder of the father in *Totem and Taboo*.

In the Greek cities, however, as in every city, the power of the father—as great as it might be in the *oikos*, in the *familia*, in the home—is nevertheless limited by the power of the other fathers, and not just by an impersonal law. The father refers to a collectivity instituted by means of a law, and

¹¹T/E: Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.9.1180a24-29.

it is a living collectivity that limits his power. Otherwise one would have a child who would forever be slave to the father, or his enemy, eaten up by inextinguishable feelings of hatred. The assumption of a filial relationship cannot occur unless one assimilates the idea of the father's limitation, the fact that the father is one father among other fathers. One must also assimilate that there is something—the collectivity and its institution—that is more general and that goes beyond him. Here, too, Lacan has (in speaking of the symbolic, the Law, etc.) mixed things up that are totally unconnected with any living, concrete collectivity. In all this, the process of sublimation is of capital importance. Sublimation is the fact that one renounces simple organ pleasure, one renounces even the simple pleasure of private representation in order to cathect objects that have only a social existence and value. We must be done with this aberrant position of the psychoanalysts, for whom painters alone sublimate because, instead of handling their excrement, they play with paints. Starting from the moment one speaks, instead of sucking one's thumb or one's tongue, one is in the realm of sublimation, for one has cathected a social activity, an object created by society, one instituted and given value by the latter. The same thing goes for work—without our making here any prejudgments about the nature of work, whether it is alienated or not, and so on. Work is always a kind of sublimated activity.

Nevertheless, within sublimation one must distinguish two further aspects. One is purely descriptive. There is sublimation in every human society. Let us rid ourselves of the stupidities that surround us. There is sublimation not only when the Athenians build the Parthenon, or Parisians Notre-Dame. It is also there when the Athenians massacred the

Melians, because they massacred them for political reasons.¹² It was a monstrous crime, and undoubtedly one of the reasons that contributed to the downfall of the Athenian democracy, but it is a sublimated activity nonetheless, for it procures no organ pleasure. Sublimation is at work in a concentration camp. There were, perhaps, sadistic SS guards among those who led people to the gas chambers. I doubt it, because if they had truly been sadistic they would have preferred to keep these persons alive, torture them, disembowel them, or I know not what else, rather than execute them in an abstract fashion. It was a sublimated activity. Undoubtedly it was accompanied by representations that are, perhaps, of another nature—who knows? No one has done the psychoanalysis of those people to see what representation accompanied this activity.

Q.: One can assume representations...

C.C.: There necessarily are representations, there necessarily are pleasant representations. There also are pleasant representations when I do philosophy or make music. Sometimes also not so pleasant ones, too. The question does not lie there. I mean that the activity does not exhaust itself in this subjective state of pleasure. It cathects a socially created and socially valued object, even if this object is criminal. The Holocaust is disturbing. But the Aztecs conducted human sacrifices. The priest who officiated was not ejaculating while sacrificing the victims. He was performing a rite. And the entire Aztec nation considered it absolutely essential—for the order of the world, for the gods to continue to exist, and for

¹²T/E: The massacre of the Melians, as recounted by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, may be found at 5.84-116. Castoriadis also refers to the Melians in “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy” (1983), now in [CL2](#), as well as in “The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary” (1991) and in “The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions” (1993), both now in [CL4](#).

the Sun to continue to revolve around the Earth—that these victims be sacrificed.

We cannot prevent ourselves, however, from adopting another point of view on sublimation, as well, one involving a value judgment. Nor can we prevent ourselves from doing so in analysis. We have another objective, autonomy, which is also a social objective, a particular type of sublimation. In the ends of analysis, and also in the ends of politics and in the sublimation of a different order that these ends convey, there is a recognition of the fact that I should be autonomous, not so as to suppress the knowledge of my Unconscious but so as to filter what of my desires, of my drives, can reach expression or be acted out. The others are not simply pure objects of my desire, or instruments; rather, they too should accede to their autonomy. The end of analysis, when well conceived, goes beyond undoing transference, it goes all the way toward the instauration of a new instance of subjectivity: a reflective and deliberative subjectivity capable somehow or other of establishing another relation with the Unconscious, which is still its basis. The relationship is not one of elimination. Freud's "Where Id was, Ego shall come to be" is insufficient. It is ill-conceived, even: what followed shows that Freud was thinking of it as the draining of the Zuider Zee, the drying up of a stinking marsh on which tulips should be raised. It is not a matter of drying up the Unconscious, which never lends itself to such an operation. Were one to succeed, the result would be suicidal, because it is precisely from the Unconscious that everything surges forth. It is a matter of not being slave to the Unconscious, that is to say, it is a matter of being capable of stopping oneself from speaking out or acting out [*passage à l'expression ou le passage à l'acte*], while being conscious of the drives and of the desires that push one in this direction. It is this sort of subjectivity that can be

autonomous and it is this sort of relation that is autonomy.

This is what should also inform the project of politics. The political project aims at the creation of an autonomous society, that is to say, of a society that has with its institution another relation than the traditional one, which is that of heteronomy. That means that the society posits its institutions, knowing that it is doing so, therefore that it can revoke them, and that the spirit of these institutions should be the creation of autonomous individuals.

One more word on the sociological and political blindness of the psychoanalysts and the psychoanalytic blindness of the sociologists and the philosophers. The philosophers, the sociologists, the political scientists, and all the rest continue to speak today of “the human individual” as if there were a human individual. There is no “human individual.” There is a psyche that is socialized, and in this socialization, in the final result, there is almost nothing individual in the true sense of the term. And the more society is heteronomous, the less of the individual there is. Genuine individuation begins when societies broach a movement toward autonomy. Two folkloric potters cannot be distinguished from each other, and an Egyptian sculptor of the eighteenth dynasty cannot be distinguished from an Egyptian sculptor of the twentieth dynasty, unless one is an Egyptologist. If, however, you know just a little Greek, you cannot confuse a verse of Sappho’s with a verse by Archilochus. We are at 700 BCE, it is the beginning of “learned” Greek poetry, and these two persons write in completely different fashions. Likewise, you cannot confuse Bach and Handel, two Germans writing contrapuntal music during the same era. Perhaps there are one or two pieces concerning which, to be strict about it, one might hesitate, but the essential elements of their respective creations are

completely recognizable. These are individuated individuals, not exemplars of a tribe or nation. To create individuated individuals, however, one needs an individuating society. Heteronomous and traditional societies are not individuating. They are uniformizing, collectivizing. As for the sociological blindness of the psychoanalysts, I believe that I have spoken about that in relation to Lacan. They take the all and sundry of the given institution of society to be partaking of “reality” and, at the same time, of “the Law”; they make of it something infrangible, immutable, untransformable, whereas these are in fact social institutions.

Q.: They can at least be given credit for doing so at the moment their patients talk.

C.C.: I entirely agree. That is something else. The only “reality,” however, is social reality. Here there is a cascade of misunderstandings. When one speaks of the “reality principle” in psychoanalysis, of what kind of reality is it a question? I have never seen a madman, however mad he is, not know that fire burns or that, if he falls from the fifth floor, he will kill himself; if he throws himself out the window, he knows very well that he is going to kill himself. The reality he does not want to know about, however, is social reality, filial relationships, one’s relationship to objects of desire. Reality is social reality. This reality has no privilege other than pragmatic. The attitude the analyst ought to have, to the extent that she would speak of it, would not be to say to the person, “You have to accept it, it’s reality” but, “That is what instituted reality is today. It serves no purpose, if you are standing in front of a wall, to beat your head against it believing that you are going to make it move. If you want to move it you must take another approach. In the meantime, you should know that the wall is there and that it hurts.”

Q.: That brings us to our fifth question. Does your

social-historical approach to the state of the subject lead you to any practicotheoretical hypotheses in the domains of analysis and politics? Might that approach have some formal, political, “technical” implications, not only for the manner in which one conducts analyses, but also for the way in which one unites with others, organizes, or struggles? More precisely speaking, do you think that “militant” practices and modes of organization have to take a new path, adopt a new style? How would you see this revolution in the revolution?

C.C.: There are, first of all, some theoretical implications. In my view, there is a new way of seeing the end of analysis in both senses of the word *end*. Likewise for the end—not in the two senses, but in that of the objective—of politics. There will never be an end of politics in the sense of a finishing off, any more than there is a finishing off of analysis. The end of analysis is the capacity of the subject, henceforth, to self-analyze himself [*s’auto-analyser*]. In the case of politics, where one cannot speak of an “end,” there will always be debates over common collective objectives and there will always be problems of institution. It is not a question of establishing the once-and-for-all-perfect society.

These implications are clear cut. They may be understood, in fact, as the abolition, within the field of praxis, of the distinction between end and means. All one would have to do is to state the thing to see the absurdity of it. One cannot make someone autonomous by heteronomous means.

Autonomy is both the goal sought after and that whose presence—virtual, let us say—has to be supposed at the outset of an analysis or of a political movement. This virtual presence is the will to autonomy, the will to be free, were it only to be free from suffering in the case of analysis or to be free *tout court* in the case of society. All devices are to be set to this orientation, and they already partake of the objective.

I do not think that free association, in the case of analysis, is a means. The patient who is capable of making free associations has taken an enormous step; she has already broken through an enormous partition of censorship, of defenses. Of course, free associating is inadequate as such, but it partakes of the ends sought after. When people who want to struggle, instead of asking their union, their boss, or the government to do something for them, organize themselves, if only in order to discuss what must be done, one is engaged in the same movement. Here an embryonic autonomy has already been achieved, and it serves as the condition for its own later development—if it develops! For, everything can always screw up. The sole guarantee we have is that we are going to die.

These implications, clear in their principles, are much more difficult to translate into reality, in the domain of practice, in the narrow sense of “mode of action.” In the case of analysis, one can certainly ask oneself about the classical device we employ. I believe that this device can be justified, including from the point of view at which I am this instant placing myself. The rules of this device are well known: the reclining position, the paradoxical injunction “Don’t hold back, say whatever comes into your head,” regular sessions, the fixed duration of these sessions, which is indispensable as a counterweight to the enormous imaginary and real power the analyst has in the analysis; these formal contractual limitations (and as we know, alas, they can very well be transgressed on the part of the analyst as a function of her power in the analytic situation) are there in the interest of the patient and of the treatment, they absolutely must be respected, they are not mere means. They already constitute steps toward the patient’s liberation. All this also considerably affects the whole analytic process properly speaking, the labor

of interpretation. The golden rule for interpretation is that it has to facilitate the patient in her subsequent journey, that it not clinch things, that it not block them, that it not give false definitive answers, that it keep the process open while enlarging the patient's capacities to pursue the process and to deepen it.

It is true—and this is a question that arises—that one is often disappointed at the relative length of the analytic process, that sometimes this process brings none of the results one might have hoped for. I admit that I have nothing to propose on this score. All the attempts at modifications that one has made—which began already in Sándor Ferenczi's time, if not before—have never yielded anything worthwhile. Most of the time these attempts necessarily pass by way of an intensification of transference alienation on the part of the patient. All the changes one could imagine went in the direction of increased intervention on the part of the analyst. I say this even though I am perhaps, among those who practice today, one of the most interventionist—not that I issue injunctions, give advice, or pronounce prohibitions, but that the sessions during which I am completely silent are very rare indeed.

Q.: Is it that these interventions are always on the order of interpretation?

C.C.: They are almost always the stand-in for an interpretation. They are based on the principle that the patient cannot gauge the extent of her phantasmatic construction unless at some moment or other something that is not this construction is opposed to it. To leave her all alone to make this discovery could easily take seventy years! I am not talking about psychotic personalities, just good old neurotic men and women. There are moments when one of the functions of the analyst is to make the phantasm appear as

phantasm.

As for the political sphere in general [*le politique*], the repercussions on the content are very profound, indeed. The formulation I have tried to give in such texts as “Power, Politics, Autonomy”¹³ shows clearly that the entire content of politics [*la politique*] and political activity itself can and should be reconsidered starting from an idea, from an objective of autonomy whose inspiration is visibly twofold, it being both psychoanalytical and historicopolitical. I am speaking of an autonomy that is both social and individual: we make our laws, the collectivity is effectively sovereign, individuals are effectively free and equal as concerns their participation in power. It is easy, on paper, to detail the institutional consequences. An autonomous society means a society in which collective reflectiveness has reached its maximum. Democracy is the regime of reflectiveness, it is the regime in which one reflects and decides in common on what is going to be done, whether one is talking about the law or collective works. One also reflects in another sense. One can come back to what one has said, thought, and decided so as to take it up again and make modifications. Starting from the moment that this has been posited, the institutional implications are not difficult to lay out. Take, for example, democratic rights, which today remain quite partial. The measures that would have to be taken for these rights to go beyond their present partial character imply changes on the economic level, on the level of the organization of production, on the level of the orientation of our lives, and so on. All that pertains to the discussion of political objectives and institutions.

A problem that is much more difficult—because we

¹³T/E: This 1988 text now appears in [CL3](#).

live in a society that is in great part heteronomous and because the individuals in it are what they are—is the one you raise concerning the way in which one gets organized, the modes by which one struggles. It is easy to say, and it must be said, that one must escape from the deadly quicksand of traditional organization, not only from “democratic centralism” but from everything that, in the traditional organizations, nourished the tendency toward bureaucratization and hierarchy; that we must invent new modes of being together, of discussing together, and of deciding together in a political organization. One can see on what basis these new modes ought to be defined, what should inspire them. When, however, one wants to pass to the stage of actual realization, one runs up against a constantly resurgent pathology of groups in contemporary capitalist society, which proves extremely difficult to surmount. The question would require another discussion, almost as long as the present one.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE WORLD IN PSYCHOSIS*

The need to provide a succinct title for my talk has made the result appear to be a manifestation of megalomania. It would have been much more appropriate, though less elegant, to title it *Fragments of Some Preliminary Considerations on a Few Aspects of Certain Questions That Are Relevant to a Reflection on the Problem of the Construction of the World in Psychosis, Notably with Reference to the Work of Piera Aulagnier*, all the more so as a good part of what I shall have to say will—in an attitude I always shared with Piera—be situated in the realm of the interrogatory.

I am going to begin this interrogation upstream. How do we know that psychosis is a psychical phenomenon—names can be deceiving—and not, for example, an organic one? Why would it be situated in the field of psychoanalysis at all? We may justify the first interrogatory statement in light of the age-old controversy surrounding the relations between body and soul, a controversy that has returned in force the past few years (cf. psychotropic substances, neurosciences, and so on). The second is also justified if one recalls that Freud did not doubt the psychical character of psychosis but deemed psychotics unanalyzable.

Why would psychosis not be, instead, like epilepsy or Alzheimer's disease? It is an inadequate answer to state that,

*“La Construction du monde dans la psychose” is the written version of a lecture delivered on October 3, 1992, during a “Day of Studies” devoted to “Piera Aulagnier and Psychosis.” It originally appeared in *Psychanalyse à l’Université*, 71 (July 1993): 41-54. It was reprinted in *FAF*, 109-22 (130-46 of the 2008 reprint). [T/E: My English-language translation first appeared in the *Psychoanalytic Review*, 83 (1996): 929-44. Reprinted in [WIF](#), 196-210.]

in these latter cases, one notices alterations in the nervous tissue not found in psychosis. This answer is inadequate, first, because the objection is quite foreseeable: tissue lesions (or the molecule or gene, or the wiring problems) responsible for psychosis might not have been found *yet*. Let us recall that Freud himself wrote in 1925 that, for the discovery of the “hypothetical substances” that would be determinative of neurosis, still for the moment [*vorläufig noch*] “no such avenue of approach...is open”¹ and, again, in 1927 he stated that while “we may look forward to a day when [new] paths...will be opened up, leading from organic biology and chemistry to the field of neurotic phenomena[, t]hat day still seems a distant one.”²

This answer is also inadequate because the interaction and interdependence between the psyche and the central nervous system, or even the soma in general (cf. psychotropic substances, hallucinogens, alcohol, electroshock treatments, and so on), cannot be doubted. Still today, the frontiers between the two domains, the modes of their interaction, remain totally unknown to us. The response to this difficulty was already given by Freud himself when he spoke of dreams and neurotic symptoms. His answer issues from a decision that is not only “methodological” or “epistemological” in character but properly philosophical and, more precisely, ontological. Freud decided that dreams have a meaning [*sens*], just like symptoms. A “direct relation” between psychical life and the nervous system, he wrote in 1939, “[i]f

¹Freud, *Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter: *GW*), 14: 101; in English, *Resistances to Psycho-Analysis*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter: *SE*), 19: 215.

²*GW* 14: 264; in English, *The Question of Lay Analysis*, *SE* 20: 231.

it existed...would at the most afford an exact localization of the processes of consciousness and would give us no help towards *understanding* them.”³ These phenomena obey a psychical form of causality—or better, are dependent on a type of codetermination, or are conditioned by essentially psychical processes.⁴ Why call this decision ontological? Because it concerns the status and the mode of being of dreams and symptoms: both belong, it is stated, to the world of *meaning*.



The question, therefore, is whether the same can be said of psychosis. That is to say, we are asking whether psychosis or, at least, certain forms of psychosis—and, like Piera, I shall speak here only of schizophrenia and paranoia—is a heap of scrap and waste material thrown off by the functioning of the psyche, or simply a defective mode of psychical functioning (as compared to its “normal” functioning), or, yet again, whether, on the contrary, psychosis belongs, as strange as this might seem, to the world of meaning. We know that Freud, too, had made this decision concerning psychosis (paranoia) as early as the years of his correspondence with Wilhelm Fliess.

To say that psychosis belongs to the psychoanalytic field is to say that psychotic phenomena make sense [*font sens*]. It is therefore to confront oneself with the formidable

³GW 17: 67; in English, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, SE 23: 144-45 (emphasis added).

⁴GW 14: 101-3; in English, *Resistances to Psycho-Analysis*, SE 14: 214-16.

obligation to make sense of the kind of delusion that is the mark of the psychotic's "alienation," her estrangement and separation from the common world of meaning. It is also to place oneself in the position of having to produce the psychical causality, or codetermination, of these phenomena. I would say, straight off, that these two obligations can, at best, be fulfilled only imperfectly—not because psychosis would not belong to the world of meaning, but because, in both these regards (namely, the content of the delusion and its "function," or its causation), we are dealing with psychical *creations* that are, in relation to the common world, much more eccentric than is the case with dreams or neurotic symptoms.

The value of Piera's work on psychosis is correlative with an analogous decision, itself dependent on a more general attitude. This may already be seen in the titles of her books: *The Violence of Interpretation*⁵—to interpret is to start from a "text" that makes sense in order to reach another one that also makes sense—or *Un Interprète en quête de sens*,⁶ that is, an analyst-interpreter in search of meaning, not of *the* meaning. This decision is threefold, for it entails: (1) that psychotic phenomena have a meaning; (2) that this meaning is not *reduced* (I shall return to this term); and (3) that psychosis can and should be elucidated psychoanalytically, under penalty of psychoanalysis's very demise. As she said in her seminar at the Saint Anne Psychiatric Hospital (Paris) in

⁵Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier, *The Violence of Interpretation: From Pictogram to Statement* (1975), tr. Alan Sheridan (Philadelphia, PA and East Sussex, UK: Brunner-Routledge, 2001).

⁶Author's addition: Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier, *Un Interprète en quête de sens* (Paris: Ramsay, 1986; Paris: Payot, 1991).

1975-1976 (I have previously cited this statement in my book, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*):⁷ “If we do not understand psychosis, that means that we do not understand something essential in the functioning of the psyche in general.”

Let me recall, apropos of this statement, a few formulations found in *The Violence of Interpretation*. The idea that psychosis would deliver the Unconscious in its transparency, that it would pertain to a nonprogression from, a regression to, or a repetition of “an initial phase of psychical activity,”⁸ is, she says, a myth that is as false as it is persistent (and, no doubt, Lacan’s “foreclosure of the Name of the Father” also should be included therein). Delusion offers us “highly elaborated...psychical...productions.”⁹ There is a “something more [*en plus*]” to which psychical *creation* (her term) attests, there is a “prodigious work of reinterpretation” performed in psychosis.¹⁰ Reinterpretation, highly elaborated psychical productions, a “something more” in psychotic creation: all this boils down to characterizing psychosis in terms of the creation—starting from an initial “non-sense” for the subject—of something meaningful [*un sens*] for this subject that is nonsense for others. Moreover, in the construction of psychosis “the Ego’s relation to the register of

⁷Author’s addition: “Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation” (1977), in [CLI](#), 109.

⁸*The Violence of Interpretation*, p. xxvii.

⁹*Ibid.* [T/E: translation altered to reflect the French original].

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. xxviii [T/E: translation of the first phrase altered to reflect the French original: sometimes Sheridan translates *en plus* as “addition,” as here; sometimes as “plus quantity”].

signification” is, she says, “deliberately privilege[d].”¹¹

These statements boil down to saying that, in psychosis, there is a construction—or better, creation—of a world that makes sense for the subject (and does not make sense for others). Here, however, we must be careful; we must specify what kind of meaning is involved and how this term is intended. For, an “organic” kind of meaning also exists. Organic phenomena and processes have meaning, too, for they express ordered, functional, end-oriented [*finalisées*], category-making relations. Such phenomena and processes are ruled by an ultracomplex matrix of relations of equivalence, order, and proximity. They appear as the manifestation of an integrational and functional hierarchical combinatory. They operate under modalities that combine causality and finality, “knowledge” and “action,” the “if..., then...” relation. By means of this set of operations and relations, which are creative of meaning for the living being, the living being creates, each time, a proper world, a world for itself, one that “has meaning” for it. So far as we know, however, “having meaning” means here simply: corresponding to the biological ends [*la finalité biologique*] that permit the living being to function (self-preservation and self-reproduction), perhaps with the addition of some “pleasure” (which is itself essentially functional in character).

To establish a line of demarcation, we are obliged to posit that the meaning of psychical phenomena is essentially nonfunctional, beyond biological functionality, and capable, even, of bringing on the destruction of this functionality. Of this, human life—both on the individual and the collective levels—offers us massive and repeated examples.

In the human being, of course, the intricate

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. xxix [T/E: translation altered to reflect the French original].

entanglement between the psychical and the organic (or the “leaning” of the former on the latter) is such that it is only with difficulty that one can separate out either of these two dimensions from the other. We cannot, however, understand psychical phenomena on the basis of “functional” categories, such as the reality principle or even the pleasure principle, if by “pleasure” *organ pleasure* is intended. In the human being, pleasure is essentially the pleasure of representation, it is a defunctionalized sort of pleasure. However, even such pleasure in representation gives way before the imperative need to *make sense*—even when at the price of immense psychical (and somatic) displeasure. This is, in extreme form, what we witness in psychosis. Such “meaning making” [*faire sens*] is henceforth to be understood as the instauration of a certain sort of representational coherency, even when it is to the detriment of the organic, to the detriment of pleasure (even of representational pleasure), and to the detriment—in psychosis—of coherency with respect to others’ representations, their social significations, what Piera called “the discourse of the whole.”¹² The riddle—which cannot be discussed here—is that, as the possibility of one diverging radically from others’ (social) representations shows, the very postulates on which this coherency is to be judged are, or can be, *created* by the subject; failing that, there would be no psychosis (just as, from another point of view, there would be no alterity, no change, in the institution of society and therefore no history).

¹²T/E: The “discourse of the whole [*discours de l’ensemble*]” is discussed in the first sub-subsection of the “Narcissistic Contract” subsection, pp. 108-109. Sheridan, who had neglected to cite the extant English translation of *IIS* by Kathleen Blamey, translates *discours de l’ensemble* as “discourse of the group.”



What remains to be examined is another “antipsychoanalytic” line of defense regarding psychosis: namely, psychotic phenomena might have a meaning, but, due to organic alterations or deficits, this meaning is “reduced,” retracted. I am thinking not so much of the organicists here, but of a person as eminent as Kurt Goldstein (*Der Aufbau des Organismus*).¹³ Confronted with some “deficits” (especially organic ones), a first reconstitution of a world that is sensible/meaningful [*sensé*] for the subject takes place via a reduction of the field and of the richness of its organization. Next, at higher degrees of organic destruction, there occurs what Goldstein calls the catastrophic reaction, that is to say, a collapse of both the functioning of and the attempt at meaning making, whatever acceptance one grants to this term.

One cannot simply reject out of hand this point of view, which, it seems to me, is correct in certain cases (and taken independently of the question of its organic basis or conditioning). There are, indeed, some psychical reactions that are reactions of “shrinkage,” and they can be quite far reaching in scope (as may be seen in extreme cases of obsessional neuroses), just as there are also catastrophic psychical reactions. The difference between such psychical reactions and psychotic phenomena is not always obvious. Here we may appreciate the importance and the relevance of the criterion Piera Aulagnier implicitly laid down in *The*

¹³T/E: Originally published in German in 1934 and translated into English in 1939, this book appeared in a new translation in 1995 from Zone Books with an introduction by Oliver Sachs: *The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man*.

Violence of Interpretation: from the psychoanalytic point of view, the kind of psychosis that in essence matters to us is the kind in which there is delusional creation—in my terms, construction and creation of a proper world. Such delusional creation is not in its essence a reduction, a mutilation, or the sum of the debris of the common world, but rather an alteration in certain of the latter's organizing principles and a disappearance or a vanishing of the very *wish* to participate in this common world.



Before all else, the subject has to create a certain meaning for itself. In Piera's conception—with which, I suppose, people at this conference are familiar—the subject's representational activity starts from an initial foundation that she calls the “pictogram,” an image that is fundamental for the subject and the matrix for everything that could, subsequently, make sense. The subject next makes meaning through “phantasmatic production.” Finally, in a third stratum, the subject has to make sense in its thoughts, in the thoughts of its Ego. What makes sense, however, in the thought of the subject also has to make sense for the “whole,” that is to say, society. For the thoughts of the Ego, validity essentially means conformity or coherency with respect to the discourse of the whole. Questions arise at the fringes of this statement—what about Galileo, for example?—but such questions concern highly particular societies and cannot be discussed here. Nevertheless, if one states that the validity of the subject's discourse signifies in fact its conformity with the society's discourse, this implies—given the existence of a host of other societies—that in *our domain* the question of the validity of the social discourse cannot be raised. In other

words, the institution of society is essentially arbitrary. Piera, moreover, explicitly recognized the social relativity of psychosis, notably as concerns the naming of kinship relations.

We must insist on this point. For Freud, religion—the cornerstone of almost all social edifices of which we are aware—is an illusion, and this illusion is defined by him as an error cathected with affect. This definition is certainly inadequate in the absolute, for this “error” comes from somewhere and goes somewhere: it is due, as a matter of fact, to the search for meaning, and, as long a time as it “holds together,” it fulfills this role, it performs the *Sinngebung*—or better, the *Sinnschöpfung*—necessary for life in society. This is, however, an adequate definition for present purposes, for clearly this “error” is collective and instituted;¹⁴ it is an affect that runs through the entire collectivity and serves to mobilize the collectivity. Thus, the Virgin Birth, an object of firm belief in a Christian society when bearing upon Christ, will be considered a delusional thought by this very same (and by every other) society when it bears upon the subject.

Psychosis therefore is a conflict, or essential noncoherency, between what makes sense for the thought of the subject and what makes sense for “the whole.” If this definition may be granted, we must admit that, in its essence, psychosis has to do with the Ego. Psychosis is the creation of delusional thoughts, of thoughts that contradict the discourse of the whole, that is to say, its social significations—or that do not cohere with the latter—but that make sense *for* the subject of those thoughts, though most of the time they may be a source of suffering for this subject and though they may conflict not only with what others think but with what *is*

¹⁴T/E: See “Institution of Society and Religion” (1982), now in [CL2](#).

known by the subject to make sense for others. Indeed, there always is, in the soul of the psychotic, a recess from which she looks out at the rest, knowing that what makes sense for her does not make sense for the others (cf. Percival).

If all this may be granted, three major questions arise:

- Why does such an evolution occur on the part of certain subjects, which leads them to psychosis?
- What can we say, in general and generally, about the content of delusional discourse?
- Finally (to pose an impossible question), what can one say about the psychoanalytic treatment of psychosis?

I shall make a few remarks about the third and the first questions before coming to my subject here, the content of delusion, that is to say, the construction of the world in psychosis.

~

The tasks confronting us in the psychoanalytic treatment of psychosis seem to me, in order, to be the following:

1. To overcome the radicality of the conflict between delusional discourse and the common discourse, to create a breach in the psychotic's isolation—what Maurice Dayan has very well labeled “the merciless reign of solitary conviction”¹⁵—by lending an ear to the psychotic's discourse and by seeking to create with her an “interlanguage.”

¹⁵Preface to *Un Interprète en quête de sens*, p. 20.

2. To show, in this conflict and in the delusional construction, the source of the suffering—a task wherein one collides (more forcefully, to be sure, than in neurosis) against an “economy of suffering” and the relations such suffering entertains with a basic masochism.
3. To show that the world can make sense *otherwise*.
4. To make sense of the nonsense (for “the whole”) of the psychotic’s history—which *collides against the fact that, in a certain manner, this history makes no sense*, not only because, ultimately, *nothing* makes sense (which is true) but also because the surging forth of the delusional construction and its content are contingent *and* contain a component of *creation*, and also because the therapist, as well as the psychotic, would therefore be obliged to accept the terrible *it is so, it has been so*.

In other words, there would have to be a sort of general theory of psychosis that could account for, and “make sense” of, singular histories—which is almost a contradiction in terms. It is true that we encounter this contradiction in neurosis, as well, but in the latter case the contradiction is not so great an impediment. This may be because, in the case of neurosis, the psychoanalytic interpretation of it refers us back to desires that have already been worked out thus or otherwise within the framework of the human condition—e.g., Oedipus. We can say to a neurotic, or leave it understood: It is “normal” that you should have desired your father or your mother, it is “normal” that, beneath various masks and figures, you should have continued to do so, and it is “normal” that you should have given up direct satisfaction of this desire with the help of some substitute objects. It is much

more difficult, however, to win acceptance for the idea: You are, or have been, mad because your mother hated you (and she did so because her own mother..., etc.)—or because *you* have constructed things in this way. That might work, but the patient would also be perfectly within her rights to respond, A fat lot of good that does me.

This brings me back to the first point, the question of the origin of psychosis—perhaps the most essential part of Piera's work on the subject—apropos of which I should note my own questions and hesitations concerning her conception of the matter. These interrogations are first of all of a theoretical nature: according to Piera, delusional thought basically aims at responding to the question of origin and has a “psychically hereditary” character.¹⁶ The question of origin is always the myth of personal history, as well as of collective history, and I am unsure that a fracture in this myth would be either the necessary or the sufficient condition for the advent of psychosis. There are, on the other hand, empirical difficulties: I have had, and I still have, patients in whose histories I have not, despite my efforts, succeeded in turning up traces of a hateful parental discourse, or of a desire on the parent's part for nondesire, or of a desire for the death of the child.

¹⁶*The Violence of Interpretation*, pp. 137-40 and 141ff. [T/E: “The Question Concerning the Origin” runs from pp. 137-40 and “The Space in Which Schizophrenia Can Come About” runs from pp. 141-45. Castoriadis may have placed within quotation marks the phrase *psychiquement héréditaire*—which does not appear in the original French version of either of these two sections—because “psychical inheritance” is questionable when taken literally, though it does signal in a figurative way what Aulagnier is describing here as the mother's influence on the schizophrenic.]



What I am concerned with today is the content of delusion, the construction of the delusional world, the creation of a world that breaks with the common world.

The world is always a world *for* a subject. Its construction necessarily implies the (generally implicit) construction:

- of the *self*, both as “psyche” and—especially—as body; and of others, which begins with the construction of the other *par excellence*, the “spokesperson,” the mother. This may be called the *prosopological* construction;
- of “objects,” of their attributes and of their relations. This may be called the *pragmatological* construction, because it concerns, of course, things in the most general sense but also their practical organization, without which these things would not exist at all, would simply turn to dust.

It is important to note that, generally speaking, psychotic discourse shares, in the immense majority of cases, the prosopological and pragmatological constructions of the society to which the psychotic herself belongs. There is no negation of reality in general. The psychotic speaks our language, knows what a table is, how to board the subway. She knows that fire burns and she does not burn herself—or she does so on purpose, doing so because she knows that fire burns. It is always a (negatively) privileged domain of the common world that she constructs, and she constructs it in a radically different fashion. This domain involves, in general:

- one's own body, as suffering-body, and not as body of pleasure;
- the affects, which have more or less been devastated,¹⁷ along with desires;
- the functioning of phantasying [*phantasmatisation*], which has vanished; delusion and hallucination come to replace phantasy [*le phantasme*] in the usual sense—the latter becoming more and more impossible—without, obviously, fulfilling the same function;
- finally, certain relations between and certain properties of objects (including one's own body), which become “delusional.”

Why this delusional construction in general? Why does it affect these specific points instead of others, and why in this fashion? Why can we distinguish between paranoia and schizophrenia not only with regard to their “origin” but also as regards their organization? Why are there delusional episodes or an onset of delusion at such and such a moment and not another? These would be some of the questions every theoretical conception of psychosis would have to confront. I shall consider here only a small portion of these questions in order to show what, in affinity with Piera Aulagnier's work, an attempt to comprehend the world constructed in and through psychosis could be.

~

It goes without saying that the construction of the world and the construction of the subject (of one's own self-

¹⁷Author's addition: Generally, pulverized by anxiety and replaced on a massive scale by the latter.

image) are, for essential reasons, correlative and homologous—as they also are in the case of society. They *have to* correspond, or neither the one nor the other would make any sense. What sense would it make for the subject to have a world in which the subject itself would have no place? And what meaning could the being-subject of the subject have in a senseless/meaningless [*a-sensé*] world? Philosophically speaking, both are a function of the same matrix of meaning. Nevertheless, the world in which the subject must, essentially and from the outset, place itself is not a world of forests, oceans, and stars; it is the human/social world, such as it presents itself to the subject *by delegation* via the parental couple and, in the very first place, via the mother or the person who takes the mother's place, what Piera called "the spokesperson of the whole,"¹⁸ society's maternal ambassador. First and foremost, therefore, the *infans* has to make sense of "itself" and of what is immediately presented as the *infans*'s closest or only close relation, in vital contact with the *infans*'s somatic as well as psychical reality. Here intervenes what Piera called the pictogram as first sensible/meaningful image and matrix for all images.

The socialization of the psyche is the internalization of social imaginary significations. For such internalization to be possible, the first mediating link in this internalization must, one way or another, be *cathected* by the *infans*, and cathected in such a way that the *infans* might also be able to cathect itself. Of course, such self-cathecting is always there—it is condition for life itself. Its modalities, however, are what really matter. And it is here that all stories and histories [*les histoires, dans tous les sens du terme*] begin.

¹⁸T/E: Sheridan has opted for a literal translation, "word-bearer," for *porte-parole*; see *The Violence of Interpretation*, pp. xiii and 232, n. 1.

The construction of the delusional discourse is an activity of the Ego. Why? Because the Ego is the (subjective) site of language. And language is the explicit bearer and conveyer of every organization of the world, of society, of the latter's logic, and so on. What is proper to psychosis is, if not the suppression, at least the shortcircuiting of phantasmatic activity. Why? Because the other has been lived either as nondesirer or as bearer and conveyer of an unbearable desire—namely, for the death of the subject—or of hatred. The subject therefore finds herself on a shortcircuit between the Ego and the pictogram—and this pictogram is mainly a pictogram of *rejection*. In this sense, everything, for Piera Aulagnier, issues from this removal of phantasmatic activity from the circuit.

Here there is a point on which I would have criticized Piera. As creations, delusion as well as hallucination manifest an extraordinary amount of activity on the part of the subject's radical imagination—and the latter is inseparable from phantasying in the most general sense. Piera, moreover, almost always spoke as if “staging” [*mise en scène*] and “bringing into meaning” [*mise en sens*] were separable; in my opinion, they never are so. For the subject, there is no image that would lack a minimum of meaning, no meaning that would fail to be borne/conveyed by an image. Meaning has to be supported [*étayé*] by an image—and therefore inscribed in the works of the radical imagination, which is phantasying in the most general sense of the term.

The contradiction can be removed if it is understood that, for Piera, the phantasm is the staging of a *desire* in the strict sense of the term. Indeed, it is this dimension that is, not suppressed (in that case, it would never be able to reappear), but deactivated by psychosis.



The entire problematic can better be understood if it is broached as follows. All human psychical activity is defined by and exists along a triple vector, that is, a vector deployed in three solidary spaces: the space of representation, the space of desire, the space of the affect. In psychosis, desire is replaced by the most general category of the *intention*—a category that is always there in the living being, otherwise the latter would not be able to survive. There is an erasure of desire and a replacement of the latter by pure, dry, abstract intention. Piera used the term will: will without desire, a will (intention) that can be imputed to a disembodied other—for example, to voices—and that exists as *pure injunction* (whether positive or negative). Why is that so? Because the other has been constructed from the outset as pure injunction, cold order, voluntary organization—or because, in the other, desire had given way to pure hatred. The question whether the other has been constructed in this way because the other actually was like that, as Piera clearly intended, or because it is only thus that the subject has been able to experience/construct the other (which, in my opinion, can perfectly well also be the case), has to remain open here.

The effects of this construction on the subject itself may be seen in the absence of manifest desire and manifest affect. The effects on the subject's relationship with the world and, to begin with, with the human world are just as devastating. The obliteration of the dimension of desire conditions the psychotic's *separation*. This is what renders it impossible for her to enter into negotiation with others, to come to terms with them. The other without desire is perforce the inexorable other, and is comparable to a natural force or to a mechanical-bureaucratic law. If I myself and the others

are constructed as desirers, some kind of treaty, a contract, would still be possible, for there would be a possibility both of phantasmatic identification with the other's desire and of a *do ut des*, a *quid pro quo*, a mutual dependency between the subject and the other.

Phantasmatic identification, I said. There always is an identification of this sort, as we know, even in the most extreme cases of sadomasochism, for example. Both subjects not only are in all the places of their fantasies, they are the phantasmatic scene itself, with a stage light oscillating between one and the other. Mutual dependency, I also said, and this on both the psychical and the operational levels. No masochist without a sadist, and *vice versa*. It is sadistic desire that excites the masochist, masochistic desire that excites the sadist: one knows of sadistic personalities who insist that their victims *avow* their pleasure. This sheds light, let it be said in passing, on the absurdity that consists in positing "desire" as quasi sovereign and solipsistic (Lacan: "the phallus desires and the subject demands").¹⁹ Desire and demanding certainly need to be distinguished, but desire demands inasmuch as it is dependent. Desire is, as Piera said, also and especially desire of the desire of the other—and in this sense, it is *dependent* on the other's desire.

In psychosis, however, the other, whether personal or impersonal, is literally *implacable*: the other exacts, prescribes, condemns without discussion, without negotiation, without any possibility of appeal—and obedience is slavery without pleasure. The other thus becomes the *separate* and the *separating*—roles finally achieved *by* the psychotic subject itself.

¹⁹T/E: In Lesson 16 (April 4, 1962) of the ninth Seminar, Lacan states: "the subject demands the phallus and the phallus desires."

Why is the other constructed in this way? Piera Aulagnier responded: Because, for the psychotic subject, defense via phantasmatic causality, which could have imputed the subject's suffering to a desire on the part of the other and thus placed the subject in a, so to speak, "normal" masochistic position, has become impossible.²⁰

~

I think that it is along this path, as well, that one can come to understand another striking characteristic, if not of all psychosis, at least of a great number of cases, namely, the obliteration of the difference between the natural (the physical) and the human. Contrary to how, upon a superficial glance, things look, it is not a generalized animism but rather a generalized "thingism" that is at work in psychosis, as may be seen in schizophrenia but also, though less clearly, in paranoia. This thingism is, in its turn, both condition for and component of the psychotic's separation and exclusion. Other humans, or persecutory objects, are not really animated, they are rigid entities defined solely by the injunctions that emanate from them and by their pure will to harm the subject and to make the subject suffer. Piera spoke of the "bureaucracy of an anonymous power or of 'haters.'"²¹ I would have said the malevolent or the malfeasant. Whence, also, the strange sexuality, or rather sexual activity, of psychotics, the cool ease of the schizophrenic, the torrid absence of the paranoiac. The other, the sexual partner, is not "object," in the sense one spoke of women as "sex objects" in

²⁰"La 'Filiation' persécutive," in *Un Interprète en quête de sens*, p. 326.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 327.

the 1970s; this partner is sexual thing, as sustenance is not good- or bad-tasting food, endowed with qualities that are creative of pleasure, but just edible thing. An aspect of this may be seen in the Marquis de Sade, who is certainly much more complex and composite a personality, but in whom the psychotic component should not be overlooked or mistaken: the treatment of others as things, the general tendency toward quantification, the use of a mechanical combinatory, the relentless denial of the distinction between nature and humanity, the heavy stereotypy found in his descriptions of women, of organs, and of scenes, orgasmic pleasure [*jouissance*] taking on the features of a natural catastrophe and sometimes coinciding with the latter, as with Juliette at Naples.



I shall end my talk with a twofold warning.

First, on the universality of theory. If we recognize the extraordinary creativity of the psyche as it manifests itself also in psychosis, we have to admit that a theory could, at best, only construct *ideal types* that shed light on its reality and that are indispensable for thinking it, but that diverge from it, by a little or a lot, depending on the case. Piera Aulagnier's theory admirably elucidates key aspects of the process of delusional creation but ought not to be taken (even in the cases of schizophrenia and of paranoia, to which, like she, I have exclusively been referring) as responding to all cases. Notably, the question remains open whether the parent actually was as the theory postulates the parent to be, or whether the parent simply was constructed as such by the subject (and thus belongs to *the subject's* construction of the world). Piera wrote that we can speak of the necessary

conditions, but not the sufficient conditions, of psychosis.²² This is indeed an important distinction (one constantly forgotten by psychoanalysts, as well as by others who practice the “human sciences”) that eliminates all pretension to a *causal* theory of psychosis, for such a theory would obviously require one to furnish the necessary *and* sufficient conditions. But, as I have previously remarked, this distinction itself does not suffice. In numerous cases, clinical practice defies us to discover the “necessary conditions.” We are often faced with psychotics (and so many autistic children) whose parents do not answer to any standard description. I believe that Piera would easily have granted this point.

Second, on the exhaustiveness of theory. In this regard, too, Aulagnier formulated fairly well the reservations that need to be made.²³ To speak, as Piera does, of the extraordinary creativity of delusional thought signifies that one has given up trying to “explain” key parts of the content of delusion—as we try, with more or less success, for the content of a “normal” or neurotic dream. This signifies, even, that one has admitted that this content as such, in its specificity, almost always remains incomprehensible to us. To say that it might become comprehensible to us does not mean only that we would be able to enumerate exhaustively the necessary and sufficient conditions for its production but also that we could share the significations and the world of signification in which it emerges. Never is that totally possible. A psychoanalytic treatment of psychosis is not a vain endeavor. Quite the contrary. But it does not pass and cannot pass by way of such a complete understanding of the

²²*The Violence of Interpretation*, pp. 133-34.

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 131-32.

content of the delusion.

In concluding, I shall illustrate this last point by means of an actual example. A schizophrenic confined for many long years, whom I saw twice a week and with whom we had made some good progress, one day recounted to me a dreadful memory. Several years earlier she had been with her boyfriend of the time in a hotel room so that they could make love. This proved impossible, and even awful, “because the sheets were so sweet they were on fire.” To my question—a stupid one, I admit—how sheets could be sweet and why that made them burn, she responded quite rightly, and with the tone of a great philosopher reprimanding a dull pupil: Mr. Castoriadis, if you never had dreamed, would I be able to explain to you what a dream is and what it is like to dream? In this response we see the schizophrenic’s genius, so admired by Piera, which can, indeed, sometimes rival that of an Immanuel Kant. Thank you.

Passion and Knowledge*

Everything that exists within what we call *thought* is not formalized or formalizable, that is, comparable to a mechanical operation (Church's thesis). Rather, all that exists within thought brings both human imagination and human passion into play.

I have already written quite extensively on the imagination,¹ so I shall limit myself here to recalling the essential points. At the two extremes of knowledge, but also constantly in the middle, stands the creative potential of the human being, namely the radical imagination. It is the radical imagination that presents an outside world formed in this way and not otherwise. It is this radical imagination, too, that creates the axioms, postulates, and fundamental schemata that underlie the constitution of knowledge. And, finally, it is radical imagination that is constantly furnishing the hypotheses-models, the ideas-images, that nourish every breakthrough and every elaboration. Now, this imagination, in itself and in its basic modes of operation, as well as the

*Lecture read in the Summer of 1991 at the Spoleto Festival and published in *Diogène*, 160 (October-December 1992): 78-96, "Passion et connaissance" appeared in *FAF*, 123-40 (147-68 of the 2008 reprint). [T/E: A translation by Thomas Epstein, which has been consulted on occasion, appeared in *Diogenes*, 160 (Winter 1992): 75-93. The present translation first appeared in [FTPK](#).]

¹See "The Discovery of the Imagination" (1978), in [CL2](#), and, more recently, "Logic, Imagination, Reflection" (1991) [T/E: both published in [WIF](#)]. Concerning the latter text, see now "Imagination, imaginaire, réflexion," *FAF*, 227-81 (270-336 of the 2008 reprint). [T/E: This last text is described as a "weaving together" of "Logic, Imagination, Reflection," mentioned above, and "Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary" (1994), which was reprinted in [CR](#). It now appears as "Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection," the last chapter of the present volume.]

social imaginary that is its counterpart on the social-historical level as creation of the anonymous collective, is neither formalized nor formalizable. Certainly, it always also contains—like everything that is—an ensemblistic-identitary (or, for brevity's sake, *ensidic*) dimension.² Yet, in its operations as well as in its results, the essential thing is not to be found there, any more than, in a Bach fugue, is the essence in the arithmetical relations among tones.

Why is a computer unable to replace the human mind? Because the former is devoid of imagination. Because, therefore, it can neither go beyond the rules that make it function nor go back before they were laid down (unless, precisely, one has specified this as a rule, and obviously, in this last case, it would be impossible for the computer to posit a new rule capable of leading to meaningful results). And because it is devoid of passion and therefore incapable of suddenly changing its object of inquiry on account of some new, hitherto unsuspected idea of which it has become enamored along the way. None of these deficiencies can be made up for by random operations.

The Paradoxical Relation Between Passion and Knowledge

At first glance, it seems absurd to bring together the terms *passion* and *knowledge*, which seem to exclude each other absolutely. A moderately educated individual, bolstered, moreover, by most philosophers, would probably affirm that this relation could only be a negative one, passion (as well as

²On this term, see, for example, “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983), now in [CL2](#).

the imagination, the “mad woman in the attic”) being able only to perturb or to corrupt the labor of knowledge, which is said to require instead scholarly coolness and detachment. It would be easy to answer this individual that every great work of knowledge has been moved by passion and tyrannical absorption with a single object—from Archimedes, who was killed after refusing to let his circles in the sand be disturbed, to the frantic last writings of Évariste Galois, who scrawled his theorems on paper all night long before his fatal duel. Our hypothetical, but not implausible, interlocutor could offer us the rejoinder that he did not intend the passion for knowledge itself, which bears on the object of knowledge or on the truth, but extrinsic, impure passions: envy, hatred, and resentment, love of money, power, or even glory, or yet again, and perhaps especially, the extension of the researcher’s egoism to “his” ideas and “his” results.

Remembering our Hegel, we could answer him that, as in other domains, in this domain, too, the cunning of reason knows very well how to bring the least noble passions into its service. How many times has a rivalry between masters or schools, with cloudy motives (Newton-Leibniz, Leopold Kronecker-Georg Cantor, etc.), played a driving role in the development of knowledge? Today especially, who would dare maintain that the passions for power, for renown at all costs, and even for money are not powerful stimuli for scientific research—as our contemporaries’ utter rage to be first abundantly shows?

We can, and should, delve into a deeper stratum and, to that end, give a more rigorous meaning to the term *passion*. It can be said, along with Piera Aulagnier,³ that there is

³Piera Aulagnier, *Les Destins du plaisir* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979), pp. 14 and 163ff.

passion when the object of pleasure is transformed into an object of need—in other words, when the object is one that could not be missed, when the subject cannot conceive his life without the possession of the object, its absorption, its pursuit, in a sense, ultimately, without identification with the object of the passion, which has become a matter of life or death. Does such a relation exist in the domain of knowledge? Certainly so. It is not only experience that shows this; there are, so to speak, *a priori* considerations that oblige us to admit that there can be no nonroutine work of knowledge without passion thus defined, without the subject's total dedication to its object. But what, in the case of knowledge, is this object?

Knowledge begins with the interrogation *What is...?*, or *Why...?*, and so on, but becomes knowledge, even in the case of philosophy, only if it leads to certain results. We must insist on this last point in an age when people are talking only of questioning [*interrogation*], indetermination, deconstruction, and weak thought.⁴

What, then, is cathected in the passion to know?

The first answer that presents itself is, obviously: the truth. And there is no need to enter into a philosophical discussion of the question *What is truth?* in order to affirm, as a first approximation, that the truth has to do with the *results* of knowing. But it is here that the paradoxes reemerge. The passion for truth cannot be separated from the passion for the results in which this truth is embodied or seems to be embodied for the researcher, the scientist, or the thinker. Now, this truth can lead her, and most often does lead her, to

⁴T/E: *Il pensiero debole*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovati (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988); *Weak Thought*, tr. with an intro. Peter Carravetta (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

a fixation on these (her) results, with which she more or less identifies—to the point that any calling into question of them can be felt by her as a calling into question of her own identity, her very being. The subject's narcissism necessarily extends outward to encompass—and this is so not only in the domain of knowledge—what the subject has produced, objects henceforth of a categorical and unconditional cathexis.

Yet this cathexis, which transforms the truth into an object of possession and so often becomes, in philosophy especially but not exclusively, attachment to a system, stands in contradiction to the initial motive and driving force of the search for truth. It cannot help but halt the movement of interrogation, preventing the latter from turning toward its results, and still less from turning back on the postulates that rendered these results possible. Here we find one of the roots of various dogmatisms and fanaticisms in the domain of knowledge.

Here we have a dilemma. Either one becomes passionate about the results—without which the truth remains but a phantom (or, at best, a Kantian regulative idea, with the antinomies that follow therefrom)—at the risk of becoming fixated on these results, or one becomes passionate about the search for the truth itself, therefore ultimately passionate about boundless interrogation, at the risk of forgetting that this interrogation would then remain suspended in midair for lack of any fixed points. Is there any way out of this dilemma?

The answer to this question is many-sided. On the philosophical plane, it imposes a new idea of the truth as an open relationship between an interrogation and its results, as a *sui generis* movement going back and forth between processes and pauses, between excavation and encounter (“correspondence”). On the psychoanalytical plane, it obliges

admission of a singular, and historically new, type of cathexis, the cathexis of self as creative source and of the activity of thought in itself as such.⁵ Under what conditions can knowing be cathected as process and activity and not simply as result? And to what extent can one cathect oneself as origin and actor of this process?

Philosophical Aspects

If you told me, "Socrates, we are acquitting you, but on the condition that you abandon this search and no longer philosophize...", I would tell you...that I shall not stop philosophizing...the unexamined life is not livable (*ho de anexetastos bios ou biōtos*).⁶

Undoubtedly, Socrates dies on account of several factors and motives, but above all because examination, interrogation have become the object of his passion, that without which life is not worth living. Let us note this point well: Socrates is not speaking of truth; he has always proclaimed, albeit in an ironic fashion, that the only thing he knew with certainty was that he knew nothing. He speaks of *exetasis*, examination, inquiry. The two strands we have loosened stand clearly apart here: passion, which makes its object worth one's life; and the nature of this object, not as possession but as quest and inquiry, examinatory activity.

⁵See my text, "Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to be Presented as a Science" (1968), in [CLI](#), 50-56.

⁶Plato *Apology* 29c-d and 38a. Twice in the *Apology*, Socrates envisions the case of his being offered acquittal (or exile), but on the condition that he keep quiet, and twice he refuses.

In the *Phaedrus* and especially in the *Symposium*, in the mouth of Diotima, Plato sets amorous passion, Eros, at the base of knowing—as well as, moreover, at the base of everything that is truly worthwhile in human life. Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics* with the famous phrase, “All human beings, by their nature, desire knowledge.” The contrast with Modern Times is striking: excepting Spinoza, for whom knowledge of the third kind, true intuition, is *amor Dei intellectualis*, intellectual love of substance (and still it must be remarked that the term *intellectualis* curiously attenuates the term *amor*), one notices that from René Descartes to Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, not to forget Anglo-Saxon philosophy, knowing becomes a strictly intellectual affair. We shall illustrate this point by a single example, that of Immanuel Kant.

Kant, as one knows, poses the question of the “human being’s interests,” and lays out this question in three moments: What can I know, what ought I to do, what am I allowed to hope for? His huge elaboration of the first moment becomes an inquiry into what he calls the transcendental conditions of knowledge, in other words, into the question: How are synthetic *a priori* judgments (necessary and nontautological judgments) possible? From the point of view of interest to us here, the outcome of this inquiry is the construction of a transcendental ego, wherein the “imagination” plays a certain role. But this role, which is subordinated to the requisites of an assured and certain form of knowing, consists in the perpetually unchanging production of forms that are given once and for all. At the same time, this transcendental ego necessarily is, by its very construction, totally disembodied, and not somatically but psychically. It is a mental machine—today, we would say a sort of computer. There are, moreover, two computers rather than one, and they

do not communicate with each other. Indeed, Kant establishes an abyssal divide, a split between transcendental subject and psychological subject. The former is supposed (postulated) to function under the sole requisite of producing *a priori* judgments; the latter is subjected to the laws of empirical psychology and therefore emits judgments that are not motivated but determined (in the natural-sciences sense) by psychical causes. Despite some of Kant's expressions (as when he speaks of the Schematism as an "art hidden in the depths of the human soul"),⁷ it cannot even be said that this soul is, in him, split in two; it must rather be said that, for him, the soul is entirely on the side of pure fact (subject to the question *quid facti*) and looks hopelessly toward the other edge of the abyss, where the transcendental requisite and the Idea of a pure morality (they alone being capable of responding to the question *quid juris*) shine forth. At best, there is a split between a transcendental consciousness (or a practical reason)—about which it is not known whether it represents a pure, inaccessible "ought to be" (in which case, we are given over to empiricist relativism) or the effectively actual reality of "us men," *uns Menschen* (we would then be totally outside nature)—and the empirical psyche, which, even when it speaks the truth (or does what is good), can speak it (or do it) only for bad (empirical or impure) reasons. In the field of knowledge, in any case, this empirical soul could be only a source of perturbations and errors, when, for example, the "empirical imagination" or, still worse, the passions, interfere (yet, one wonders how) with the functioning of the transcendental consciousness.

⁷T/E: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (first division, book 2, chapter 1: "Of the Schematism of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding"), tr. F. Max Müller (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1966), p. 123.

Cutting a long discussion short, we have to limit ourselves to a few assertions that the preceding remarks will have rendered at least plausible.

What really matters to us is the effectively actual knowledge of effectively actual subjects, not a transcendental phantom or an inaccessible ideality. The following paradox is but apparent: exclusive preoccupation with such an ideality can end only in skepticism and solipsism.

These effectively actual subjects are always social-historical subjects. Their sociality and their historicity are not scoria, accidents, or obstacles but, rather, essential positive conditions for their having access to any knowledge. This is so already because there is no thought without language and because language exists only as social-historical institution.

These effectively actual subjects are also subjects in the full sense of the term. They are not mere products of social-historical conditions but, rather, subjects for themselves and, more particularly, human psychisms.

Let us take a step back and ask a question. What are, not the conditions of possibility, but the components of the effective actuality required for any being-for-itself (from a bacterium to the human) to exist and to undertake any activity whatsoever?

The effectively actual existence of a for-itself implies that the latter:

- creates a world of its own, a “proper world,” that it itself places itself therein, and that, at a minimum, it interacts with the substrate of this world according to the modes dictated to it by the constitution of its proper world;
- pursues certain objects and flees from other ones (for, without that, it would cease to exist); and

- evaluates, positively or negatively, the objects and results of its activities.

Let us translate this now into the language of the human psyche. The psyche has to itself create an image of the world and of its place in this world. It has to desire and detest. It has to feel some pleasure with the objects it desires and some displeasure with the objects it detests.

But also, the psyche can exist only if it is socialized. That means that it receives, in the main, its image of the world and of itself, its cathected objects, its evaluative criteria, and its sources of pleasure and displeasure from the society in which it finds itself.

These images, these objects, these criteria are cathected in a passionate way by the singular psyche as well as by the social collective in which it finds itself immersed. And without this cathexis, neither one could exist. These considerations are neither empirical nor transcendental. They appertain to the ontology of individual and collective human being and to the ontology of the human being's relation to the world that it creates and that it makes be in making itself be. This being and this relation exist only as social-historical. Here we have the central dimension of all these questions. We are going to broach one of its aspects briefly.

Belief, Knowledge, Truth

This passionate cathexis of one's self-image and one's image of the world, of which we have spoken, does not yet, in itself, relate to any kind of knowledge. It appertains to the domain of belief. Belief is everywhere there is human being, as individual and as collectivity. Living is impossible without a pragmatic belief in the being-thus and regular flow of the

things of the world. We share such belief, undoubtedly, with every living being—even if we are the sole ones for whom it is more or less explicit and conscious. For humans, however, this belief goes far beyond the perceptibility [*l'être perceptible*] of the things of the world and of their relationships.⁸ It is also and especially belief in the significations that hold together the world, society, and the life and death of individuals. It is the subjective side of the imaginary institution of society. Nearly all of its contents (or objects) are social in origin and nature; they are individual only in a marginal and accidental way, inasmuch as they depend on individual experience and idiosyncrasies. This is why they are almost everywhere, almost always, unquestionable. One can call into question this or that material fact, not society's imaginary significations. The institution of society has always been grounded on and sanctioned by religion, in the broad sense of the term.⁹ And no believer will place in doubt the dogmas of his religion. Even in societies more or less released from the grip of religion, like some contemporary societies, there is an innumerable quantity of ideas a normal citizen would never think to place in doubt. He believes in them—without even necessarily knowing that he *believes* (he believes that he *knows*).

In the strict sense that alone matters to us here, knowledge begins when a process of interrogation and inquiry starts that calls into question the beliefs of the tribe and thus creates a breach in the metaphysical niche the collectivity has itself constituted. Certainly, it is necessarily propped up

⁸Author's addition: Because of this, belief goes well beyond Merleau-Ponty's "perceptual faith" and conditions it.

⁹See my text, "Institution of Society and Religion" (1982), now in [CL2](#).

[*étayée*] on belief: as Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg underscored, the strange goings-on in general relativity and quantum theory presuppose the world of common everyday experience and have to be confirmed in that common everyday world. Knowledge, however, questions belief and, as a general rule, subverts significations and the system by which established meanings are given.

To be sure, the distinction is not always as clear cut in effectively actual history, and intermediate zones exist between the two. To take the most eloquent example, in the three monotheistic religions the content of beliefs can become an object of investigation—generally, one about the “true meaning” of the sacred texts—that has fed some long-standing scholarly disputes (and a good number of massacres, too). Yet this interrogation is necessarily bounded, in the mathematical sense of the term: it always has to remain within the postulate of the indisputable—because revealed—ultimate truth of these texts.¹⁰

Belief, like knowledge, is a creation of beings-for-themselves—living beings, the psyche, society. But this belief is established in closure. It suffices that belief allow the for-itself under consideration to exist within the world; indeed, belief constitutes its vital setting. This is why, totally in the simple living being, and in humans in its instrumental part, belief has to be, in one manner or another, adequate to what is. This constraint ceases, however, when we consider the truly important part of human beliefs—their imaginary part, the part that has to do with signification. For the latter, the sole constraint of import is the closure of meaning, the

¹⁰Augustine (*Confessions* 12.16) thus agrees to discuss matters with all possible opponents, though not with those who reject the authority of the Holy Writ.

“capacity” to respond to every question that can arise in the society under consideration.

It is this closure that is broken through interrogation and the process of knowledge. Of its own accord, knowledge subjects itself to another constraint, that of *logon didonai*—giving an account of and reason for—and rejects everything that avoids the question. This constraint can be itemized in the following two exigencies: internal coherence and an encounter with what is. These two exigencies already, in themselves, raise new questions. For this reason alone, interrogation is unending.

How can such an activity be cathected by the subject? What meaning does it have for the psyche? These are the questions toward which we are now going to turn our attention.

Psychoanalytical Aspects

The following particular psychical activities—believing, thinking, knowing—ought to form a central object of preoccupation for psychoanalytic theory. After all, they are the very presuppositions for its existence. And yet, an elucidation of these particular psychical activities was barely broached by Freud, and this elucidation remains, among his successors, nearly in the same state as he left it.¹¹

¹¹It is out of the question for us to consider here the secondary psychoanalytic literature on the question—which, moreover, has not contributed much that is new. One notable exception is to be found in the works of Piera Aulagnier. See, in particular, in addition to the book cited in n. 3 above: *The Violence of Interpretation: From Pictogram to Statement* (1975), tr. Alan Sheridan (Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis and East Sussex, England: Brunner-Routledge, 2001), and *Un Interprète en quête de sens* (Paris: Ramsay, 1986; Paris: Payot, 1991).

In his initial conception of the problem (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*),¹² Freud invokes a drive for knowledge—*Wißtrieb*—whose status, it must be recognized, is strange, to say the least. According to what Freud writes elsewhere (*Triebe und Triebschicksale*, 1915), the drive is “the frontier between the somatic and the psychical”:¹³ it necessarily has a “somatic source” and a “delegation” into the psyche by means of a representation (*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz des Triebes*). It is difficult to see what a “somatic source” of a “drive for knowledge” might be. It certainly has to be recalled that in 1907 Freud did not yet possess a worked-out theory of the drives and that what is at

¹²*Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter: *GW*) 5: 95-97; *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter: *SE*) 7: 194-97. In fact, as one knows (see the Editor's Note, *SE* 7: 126), the sections on the sexual theories of children in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* were added in the 1915 edition. But that changes nothing about the text's argument, for this addition just resumes, in the main, what he was saying in a text from 1907, *Über infantile Sexualtheorien* (*GW* 7: 171-88; *On the Sexual Theories of Children*, *SE* 9: 207-26), adding to it the notion and the term *Wißtrieb*, of which it is said that “it cannot be counted among the elementary instinctual [*sic*] components, nor can it be classed as exclusively belonging to sexuality,” but that “its activity corresponds on the one hand to a sublimated manner of obtaining mastery, while on the other hand it makes use of the [libidinal] energy of scopophilia [or, of the desire to see, *Schaulust*],” *GW* 5: 95; *SE* 7: 194. The question of the drive to know or of the drive to seek, in Freud, of its nature and of its privileged object (sometimes it is the question “Where do children come from?”, sometimes that of “What is the difference between the sexes?”), and of the development of these notions in the history of his thought would merit a long examination that cannot be undertaken here.

¹³T/E: In “Instincts [*sic*] and their Vicissitudes” (*SE* 14: 12), the phrase appears as “the frontier between the mental and the somatic.”

issue in the *Three Essays* as well as in *On the Sexual Theories of Children* is the child's sexual curiosity. That certainly furnishes this "drive" with a certain psychoanalytic respectability, but it does not allow one to bridge the enormous gap that separates infantile sexual curiosity from religion, cosmological theories, or theorems about prime numbers. Why do cows not have religion—and why do sexed animals in general not produce infantile sexual theories and even seem devoid of all curiosity on this topic, going instead, in general, straight to the point? The answer would no doubt—or, in any case, ought to—be that, in animals, the sexual function is fully "instinctual," that is, its paths and goals are predetermined, constant, assured, and functional, whereas in humans we are dealing, precisely, not with an "instinct" but with a "drive."

What is to be said of this difference that, after all, governs, from the Freudian outlook, the difference between animality and humanity? Neither his 1915 text nor the other ones ever directly confront this question. We may note, rather, in Freud both a number of sketches of an answer and something like an avoidance of the problem. At one of the extremes is situated the "biologistic" response, which, when pushed to the limit, would lead to the erasure of this difference. Freud certainly did not do this, but it may be asked what pushes him to extend the struggle of Eros and Thanatos to the entire kingdom of living beings and, in particular, to believe that he had also discovered the "death instinct" in the most elementary organisms.¹⁴ At the other extreme is situated

¹⁴See, for example, *GW* 13: 269 (*Das Ich und das Es*) (in English, *SE* 19: 41 [*The Ego and the Id*]); *GW* 14: 478 (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*); (in English, *SE* 21: 119 [*Civilization and its Discontents*]); *GW* 16: 22 (*Warum Krieg?*) and 88 (*Die endliche und unendliche Analyse*) (in

the admission, several times repeated, that we know nothing about an essential quality of at least one part of human psychical phenomena: the quality that is consciousness. At times, the invocation of “our God Logos” (*The Future of an Illusion* [T/E: SE 21: 54]) makes one think that he is postulating one irreducibly human attribute, which would be rationality. But obviously, rationality does not imply consciousness (every predator acts rationally), and consciousness does not imply rationality (as is shown by the most perfunctory observation of human behavior, both individual and collective). The founding myth of *Totem and Taboo* could at the very most account for the origin of a specific “religious” belief, not for consciousness, for explicit rationality, or for the activity of knowing. It hardly needs to be added that neither could one link the movement of knowledge to that other “instinct,” self-preservation, which is itself also universal among living beings—not even by sticking on it a genetically higher form of “rationality” in the human sphere [*chez l’humain*], for such a “rationality” could lead, at best, only to the growth of a purely functional and instrumental form of knowledge that would remain enslaved to the satisfaction of perpetually identical “needs.”

It is important to dwell on this question here within the very parameters set by Freud. Why would there be—why, in fact and in effect, *is there*—in human children a sexual curiosity that is absent among the young of other mammals? And why does it lead to such bizarre infantile sexual theories? It would be laughable to claim that the cause of this is the “secretiveness” of parental sexual activities among humans; children’s observation of animal sexual activities has been the

English, SE 22: 210-11 [“Why War?”] and SE 23: 243 (*Analysis Terminable and Interminable*).

rule in all human societies, with the (unclear) exception of the nurseries of some well-off city-dwelling layers of Victorian society. “Sexual curiosity” could spark off a search only as a function of another factor, which we shall tackle straight away.

Freud nevertheless furnishes—involuntarily, it could be said—the framework within which we can bring reflection to bear on our question.

Above, I wrote that Freud never faces head on a discussion of the difference between animality and humanity, and this is indeed the case. If, however, it is understood correctly, his 1915 text on “Instincts [*sic*] and their Vicissitudes” offers, in its recesses, the beginnings of a response. The drive—whose source is somatic, but which, in order to make itself heard by the psyche, has to speak the latter’s language—induces in this psyche a representation that acts as delegate or ambassador (*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz des Triebes*). Up to this point, there is no difference from what goes on in the animal psyche. The difference appears when one notices—which Freud did not do, though it is true that this was not his topic of investigation at that moment—that this representation is constant in the animal and variable in the human. Without fear of being mistaken, we can affirm that, for each animal species, the “representative” representation of the drive is fixed, determinate, canonical. Sexual excitation is provoked, each time, by the same stimulating representations, and the very unfolding of the act is, in the main, standardized. (The same could be said of nutritional needs, and so on and so forth.) While there are exceptions, these really are exceptions or aberrations. In humans, however, the exception is, so to speak, the rule. In psychoanalytical terms, there is no canonical representative of the drive across the whole species, nor even for the same

individual in different circumstances or moments.

To the question *Why this difference?*, the answer is not hard to find: The function of representation—an essential component of the imagination—always furnishes the animal with the same products, whereas this function is released, liberated, or driven mad, as you wish, in the human. The living being in general possesses a functional imagination whose products are fixed and settled; the human possesses a defunctionalized imagination whose products are indeterminate. This goes hand in hand, in the human, with another decisive trait: representational pleasure tends to overtake organ pleasure (a daydream can be as much a source of pleasure as an act of coitus, if not more so). This fact is in turn a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the emergence of another process that is uniquely characteristic of humans (and whose importance, as well as obscurity, Freud recognized): sublimation. For the human being, cathexes of objects and of activities that not only procure no organ pleasure and could not procure any, but whose creation and valuing are social and whose essential dimension is not perceptible, are a source of pleasure (and are capable of dominating biological needs or even of standing in the way of one's mere self-preservation).¹⁵

This elucidation can and must be complemented on the basis of another element sifted out by Freud (already in the *Three Essays*): the desire for “mastery” of reality (and already that of the subject's own body). What are the status and origin of this desire for mastery? And what is its relation to sexual curiosity? The answer to these two questions leads

¹⁵See ch. 6 of my book *IIS* (1975), especially 311-20 of the 1987 English-language edition, as well as “The State of the Subject Today” (1986), now in *CL3*, and “Logic, Imagination, Reflection,” already cited in n. 1, above.

us to leave Freud behind (but not, I think, to betray him). The desire for mastery is the offspring and the transposition into “reality” of the originary narcissistic omnipotence, the omnipotence of the monadic subject¹⁶ (which, under the name “magical omnipotence of thoughts,”¹⁷ Freud rightly rediscovered in everyone’s Unconscious, that of children as well as that of adults). Now, at its origin, and always in the Unconscious, this omnipotence is, let us note, omnipotence over representations (for the psyche, representation is the genus, “reality” the species), and it is in the service of the pleasure principle, which is the cement of meaning. At the psyche’s origin, a “sensible/meaningful [*sensée*]” representation is a representation that is a source of pleasure, and a representation that is a source of displeasure is senseless/meaningless [*a-sensée*] (like a cacophony). Here we have the matrix of meaning: everything holds together; everything has to hold together, and this holding-together is something sought after, positively valued, a source of pleasure. Organ pleasure itself is the holding-together of the object as source of satisfaction and the erogenous zone as seat of this satisfaction. Coitus is copulation, or reunification of the separated (see Aristophanes in the *Symposium*).

On the other hand, the basic intention of sexual curiosity in the child is to respond to the question: Where do children come from? This is an abstract and generalized formulation of the question: Where do I come from? And this question has meaning only on the basis of an interrogatory investigation of origin—which is one aspect and one moment

¹⁶See, in ch. 6 of *IIS*, 273-311.

¹⁷T/E: See the third chapter, “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts,” of *Totem and Taboo*, SE 13.

of the question of *meaning* (an aspect and a moment of the causes of and conditions for meaning). More than milk or sleep, the psyche demands meaning; it demands the holding-together, *for* itself, of what presents itself to the psyche as apparently disordered and unrelated. The question of the origin is the question of order and of meaning in the temporal (“historical”) dimension. The question of the origin perforates the plenitude of the present; it presupposes, therefore, the creation of a temporal horizon properly speaking (which is a work of the subject’s radical imagination): that is, a horizon upstream, birth and beginning, and a horizon downstream, horizon of the project but also of death. Of course, this temporalization can occur only in step-by-step combination with the socialization of the psyche, which furnishes it with a more and more differentiated world and which compels it to recognize this ever-more-differentiated world. But that aspect cannot detain us here.

To respond with an infantile sexual theory to sexual curiosity is therefore, on the part of the child, to try to instaurate the mastery of her thought over her origin, in other words, to sketch out a meaning for her history. This is what will later be prolonged into a question about the origin of everything, a question to which socially instituted theology and cosmology will always give an answer. Let us put it another way: Sexual curiosity tends toward a certain form of mastery, and mastery as such always also has sexual connotations. (The ways in which all this is also related to a kind of instrumental mastery—to which Freud attached great importance, as is seen in *The Future of an Illusion*—cannot retain us here.)

Whether we are talking, therefore, about sexual curiosity, mastery, or sources of pleasure, the break with animality is conditioned by the emergence of the radical

imagination of the singular psyche and of the social imaginary *qua* source of institutions, therefore of objects and activities capable of nourishing sublimation. This emergence destroys the animal's "instinctual" forms of self-regulation, adds representational pleasure to organ pleasure, gives rise to the requirement [*exigence*] of meaning and of signification, and responds to this exigency through the creation, at the collective level, of social imaginary significations that account for everything that can, each time, be presented to the society under consideration. Borne and conveyed by socially instituted, desexualized, and essentially im-perceptible objects, these significations are, under penalty of death or madness, cathected by singular subjects. It is the process of this cathexis and its results that we are to call *sublimation*.¹⁸

Sublimation, however, is a condition for there to be knowledge, not knowledge itself. For, in almost all societies, its objects are unquestionable *beliefs*: the world rests on a great tortoise, or God created it in six days, after which time he rested, and so on and so forth. These beliefs guarantee a saturation of the requirement of meaning by giving an answer to everything that can be, in a sensible/meaningful manner for this society, an object of questioning. And they ensure a *closure* of interrogation by instaurating an ultimate and catholic source of signification. In order to elucidate the origin of *knowledge*, we have to go further.

Knowledge and Passion for the Truth

Let us dare to contradict Aristotle. What the psyche, as much as society, desires, and that of which they both have

¹⁸See the texts cited in n. 15. The term *sublimation* appears for the first time in Freud in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

need, is not knowledge, but belief.

The psyche is born, certainly, with the requirement of meaning. Or rather, it is born in that which, for it, is meaning and will remain the model for meaning its whole life long: that is, the closure of the psychical monad upon itself and the plenitude accompanying it. Under pressure both from corporeal need and from the presence of another human on whom the satisfaction of this need depends, closure and plenitude cannot help but be ruptured. Nonsatisfaction of need does indeed appear and can appear only as non-sense ("the end of the state of psychical quiescence," Freud writes).¹⁹ Therefore, the person who ensures the satisfaction of this need is straight away erected into a position of the Master of meaning: that is, the Mother, or her placeholder.

In its initial form, interrogation is a moment in the psyche's struggle to exit from the senseless/meaningless and from the anxiety to which this senselessness/meaninglessness gives rise. (The senseless/meaningless can appear at this stage only as a threat of the self's destruction.) To this anxiety, the search for mastery responds in the form of the mastery of meaning (which, at the outset, is effectively total as "hallucinatory" or "delusional" mastery).

The search for meaning is a search to bring into relationship [*mise en relation*] the entire dust cloud of "elements" that presents itself, bound together with the pleasure that comes from the more or less successful restoration of the integrity of the psychical flux: that is, a reestablished coalescence of representation, desire, and affect.

¹⁹T/E: A search of the Index to the *Standard Edition* did not turn up this precise quotation. See, however, *SE* 3: 132, n. 1, regarding "psychical quiescence" and *SE* 12: 219 for the phrase "the state of psychical rest was originally disturbed by the peremptory demands of internal needs."

Considered from the psychoanalytic point of view, *that* is the meaning of meaning, and it is not difficult to see how it relates to the meaning of meaning in philosophy (the *eudaimonia* of the theoretical life).

Searching and interrogation generally reach the saturation point via the social imaginary significations the human being absorbs and internalizes during this tough schooling process that is its socialization. And these significations themselves are almost always instituted in *closure*, for the exclusion of interrogation is the first and best means of ensuring the perpetuation of their validity. It will be said that “reality” might call them back into question—but “reality” itself *is*, for each society, only in its being caught within the network of significations instituted and interpreted by this network. Only significations that are purely “instrumental”—or, better, only the instrumental dimension of certain significations—can sometimes be shortcircuited by “reality”-testing.

What, then, is passionately cathected is instituted social “theory,” namely, established beliefs. The mode of adherence is here precisely that of *believing*, and the affective modality of this believing is *passion*, which manifests itself almost always as fanaticism. Passion is in effect brought to its maximum intensity on account of the fact that the socialized individual has to, under penalty of being faced with its own non-sense and with the nonsense of all that surrounds it, identify itself with the institution of its society and with the significations that society embodies. To deny the institution or to deny these significations is, most of the time, to commit suicide physically and, almost always, to commit suicide psychically. The obvious underside of this passion, of this boundless love for self and one’s own is the hatred of all that denies these objects, namely, the hate of the institutions and

of the significations of the others and of the individuals that embody them.

Such has been, such is the state of humanity almost everywhere, almost always. We would not be speaking of knowledge as opposed to belief, however, if this state had not sometimes been ruptured. And it effectively has been broken up at least two times, in ancient Greece and in Western Europe, after which time the effects of this breakup have become potentially accessible to every human being and to every human collectivity.

We cannot know “why” such a break has occurred. And to tell the truth, the question has no meaning. The rupture has been creation. We can, however, be more precise in characterizing its content. As a resurgence of a kind of interrogation that no longer accepts being saturated by socially instituted responses, this break is conjointly: creation of philosophy, or an indefinitely open calling into question [*mise en question*] of the idols and certainties of the tribe, even if we are talking about a tribe of wise men, and creation of politics as democratic politics, or the equally open challenging [*mise en cause*] of the effectively actual institutions of society and opening of the interminable question of justice, and finally, and perhaps especially, crosspollination [*fécondation réciproque*] of these two movements.²⁰

If we restrict ourselves to the domain of thought properly speaking, what henceforth becomes an object of

²⁰It is undoubtedly in this conjunction and crosspollination of theoretical research and properly political (*instituting*) activity that the singularity of the West is to be sought, as contrasted with the more or less acosmic or, in any case, apolitical philosophies of Asia and with the “democratic” but “closed” institutions of certain archaic societies.

passion is the search itself, as the term *philosophia* itself says so well. Not already acquired wisdom guaranteed once and for all, but love or Eros of wisdom.

There is a threefold condition for this passage to be effectuated. The three conditions are ontological, social-historical, and psychical in character.

Clearly, the knowledge process presupposes two conditions that have to do with being itself. Curiously, only one of these two has especially been put forward by the inherited philosophy. For there to be knowledge, at least something of being must be *knowable*, since obviously no subject of any kind would ever be able to know anything about an absolutely chaotic world. Being, however, must also be neither “transparent” nor even exhaustively knowable. Just as the mere existence of beings-for-themselves assures us that there are a certain stability and a certain orderedness to at least one stratum of being—its first natural stratum, the one with which the living being deals—so the existence of a history of knowledge has its own weighty ontological implications. This history shows in effect that being is not such as it would be if an initial interrogation or a first effort at attaining knowledge could exhaust it. If one pursues this line of questioning, one will note that these facts are thinkable only by positing a stratification or fragmentation of being.²¹

The social-historical condition has to do with the emergence of open societies, namely, ones that are such that established institutions and significations can be called into question and ones in which the knowledge process itself would be positively cathected and valued as such. Given that the institution of society has effectively actual existence only

²¹See my texts, “The Ontological Import of the History of Science” (1986) and “Time and Creation” (1990), now in [CL2](#) and [CL3](#), respectively.

in being borne and conveyed by individuals and in being incorporated, so to speak, within them, this amounts to saying that the emergence of such societies entails and presupposes the educational formation of individuals capable of sustaining and deepening the interrogation.

Finally, if, as has been said, what the psyche desires above all is not any form of knowledge [*le savoir ou la connaissance*] but, rather, belief, a question of capital importance arises in relation to the psychical conditions of possibility for knowledge [*connaissance*]. What can the supports and the objects of cathexis be within the field of knowledge that are capable of having a meaning from the properly psychical point of view?

Here, curiously, the psychical support can be only a narcissistic passion, though one that presupposes a transubstantiation of one's cathected self-image. The self is no longer cathected as the possessor of the truth but, rather, as source of, and incessantly renewed capacity for, creation. Or, what boils down to the same thing: the cathexis spreads to the activity of thought itself as apt to produce true results, yet beyond every particular given result. And this goes hand in hand with another idea of truth, both as philosophical idea and as object of passion. The true no longer is an object to be possessed ("result," as Hegel said precisely),²² nor is it a passive spectacle of the play of Being's veiling and unveiling (Heidegger). The true becomes creation, ever open and ever capable of turning back upon itself, of forms of the thinkable and of contents of thought capable of having an encounter

²²"Of the Absolute, it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only at the end is it what it is in very truth," G. W. F. Hegel, Preface to *The Phenomenology of Mind*, tr. J. B. Baillie (New York and Evanston: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), p. 82 (emphasis added).

with what is. The cathexis is no longer cathexis of an “object,” or even of a “self-image” in the usual sense, but of a “nonobject/object,” activity and source of the true. The attachment to this truth is the passion for knowledge, or thought as Eros.

Psychoanalysis and Philosophy^{*}

One of the difficulties inherent in the topic I have chosen, and rather specific to it, is this: Which psychoanalysis, which philosophy? The answer to the second half of this question seems less difficult: to philosophize means, first and foremost, to ask oneself constantly, “What is it to philosophize and what kind of philosophy does one wish to practice?” Such an interrogation is, at the very most, only implicit in psychoanalysis. Since Freud, one calls psychoanalysis the sort of investigation that concerns what he called psychical reality and, in the main, its unconscious dimension, and at the same time the shared activity of two subjects who aim, via an exploration of this reality, at achieving a certain modification of one of the subjects (this being called, since Freud, “the end of analysis”).

But on the other hand, the question “Which psychoanalysis?” takes on its full weight when one recalls the multiplicity of psychoanalytic “schools,” their mutual denigration (Leibniz did not say, and never would have said, when reading Spinoza, “That’s not philosophy,” whereas “That’s not psychoanalysis” is common currency in polemics

^{*}Text that served as the basis for a number of talks given, in particular, in Madrid (November 1993), at the New School for Social Research in New York (April 1995), and in Buenos Aires (May 1996). “Psychanalyse et philosophie,” *FAF*, 141-54 (169-86 of the 2008 reprint). [T/E: Translated in [CR](#), 348-60, from the original unpublished French typescript (“Paris, November 1993”) at a time when it was scheduled to appear in *FAF*. The translation also appeared in *Freud Under Analysis. History, Theory, Practice: Essays in Honor of Paul Roazen*, ed. Todd Dufresne, (Northvale, NJ and London, England: Jason Aronson, 1997), pp. 249-63; that version was edited by Dufresne, without final authorization from either the translator or the author, for this Roazen *Festschrift* whose publication Roazen himself later criticized. The present version takes into account the definitive *FAF* version.]

among psychoanalysts), the proliferation of interpretations—and, still more, the complexity—of Freud's work, his ambiguities, especially the ceaseless unfolding, throughout his life, of his thought, his discovery and his creation of new ideas and ways of seeing.¹ To take but one example, one of Freud's propositions that I consider most important, *Ich bin die Brust* (I am the breast), appears for the first time only in 1938, jotted down on a piece of paper containing only a few lines.²

Although it must be stated here, it is therefore tautologous to say that I am speaking on the basis of my own conception of psychoanalysis and of my reworking of the problematic of the psyche, both of which are very different from those that have general currency.

~

A few words on what psychoanalysis's contribution to philosophy, and more generally to our mode of thinking, is not and cannot be. It is certainly not the idea, as old as philosophy and more than doubtful from the psychoanalytic viewpoint itself, of some sort of determinism of psychical phenomena. Nor is it the discovery of the "splitting of the subject." Certainly, the "discovery of the Unconscious" is something basic, and I shall return to it. But, independent of

¹See my texts "Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science" (1968) and "Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation" (1977), both in [CL1](#).

²"Ergebnisse, Ideen, Probleme" (note of July 12, 1938, in London), in *Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter: *GW*) 17: 151; in English, "Findings, Ideas, Problems" (1941 [1938]), in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter: *SE*) 23: 299.

its long and rich philosophical and scientific prehistory,³ the conscious/unconscious distinction—save for extreme Cartesians, and even then...—appertains to something that long ago had attained its philosophical status. The “splitting of the subject,” for example, is envisaged in a much more radical way in Kantian philosophy than it is in the “subversive” discourses of the past few decades. Indeed, in Kantianism the effectively actual man in his entirety is found to be caught in empirical determinations, which act, must (*müssen*, in the sense of the necessity of physical law) act, as “causes” for his (practical, and certainly also, in strict rigor, cognitive) behavior in general. Opposed to this effective man is a Transcendental Ego that must (*soll*, in the sense of the exigencies of law and right) escape these determinations. It changes nothing that in these empirical determinations might be found some motivations generated by egoistical interest (and, for example, a pleasure principle and a reality principle); that these “interests” might be of a libidinal, economic, or other nature; that they might be conscious or, in part or wholly, nonconscious; that there might even be “causes” that compulsorily render these motivations unconscious. That would merely serve to underline psychoanalysis’s status as a sector of empirical psychology. And the antinomy the Kantian position encounters here—namely, that the effective subject is caught up in effective determinations in which there can be no question of truth or value but simply concatenations of fact, whereas this very assertion stakes a claim to be true—is no different, except for being clearer, than the one a naïve psychoanalysis encounters. I shall return to this point below.

³See, for example, Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (1970; New York: Basic Books, 1979).

Nor is psychoanalysis's contribution to philosophy to be sought on the side of the reinforcement given to the slogan that was fashionable not so long ago, that of the "death of the subject" (of man, of history, etc.). If psychoanalysis shows anything, it is rather the plurality of subjects contained within the same envelope—and the fact that it very much is a question of an instance or agency (*Inстанz*) that possesses the essential attributes of a subject. This idea, too, is of venerable antiquity: let us recall the Platonic image of the horses pulling the soul, each in its own direction, and of the rational instance that tends to play the role of *auriga* (charioteer), an image Freud borrowed almost verbatim. But with the theory of psychical instances, this idea begins to be elaborated in a way that will lead from a mere acknowledgment to the intricacies of topographical and dynamic analysis. And far from crying over, or rejoicing over, the death of the subject, it is toward the instauration of the subjective instance *par excellence*, reflective and deliberative subjectivity, that psychoanalysis tends or ought to tend. Psychoanalysis's contribution is to elucidate the structure of every subject, whatever kind it may be—that is, it provides a capital elucidation of the organization of the *for-itself*.

Finally, we may say that, far from teaching us that we should establish the unlimited reign of desire, psychoanalysis makes us understand that such a reign would end, rather, in generalized murder.

~

Here, in brief, are the principal points whereby, in my opinion, an elucidation of the psyche, one inspired by psychoanalysis but also continuing it, is of capital philosophical importance.

1. *On the level of ontology.* As elucidated by psychoanalysis, the psyche brings into view for us a mode of being that has more or less been ignored by the inherited philosophy. This mode of being is in truth universal, but it appears here with striking clarity.
2. *On the level of philosophical anthropology.* Psychoanalysis obliges us to see that the human being is not a “rational animal” but essentially an imagining being, one endowed with radical, unmotivated, defunctionalized imagination. It also helps us to understand the process of socialization and, thereby, the deep roots of its cathexes, which may seem aberrant, and the almost unbreakable solidity of its heteronomy.
3. *On the level of practical philosophy.* As practicipoietic activity, psychoanalysis sheds light on the idea of praxis and indicates, in the case of the singular human being, both a path toward the transformation of this being and autonomy as the goal of this transformation.

Ontology

Psychoanalysis obliges us to think, to endeavor to render thinkable, a new mode of being that is embodied in and exemplified by the psyche and that proves, once grasped and elucidated upon the example of this particular being, to be of universal import. I have called this mode of being the magma.⁴

⁴See, for example, my text “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983, now in [CL2](#)), where one will find references to previous texts dealing with this topic.

In large part and in its main current, the inherited ontology is founded upon the equation being = being-determined. This latter term does not concern simply the “determinism” of phenomena (or of “things,” or of “ideas”), which is but a derivative thereof, but the status of every particular being as well as the “meaning” (the content, the signified) of the term *being* as such. This is true even when this determinacy is presented as an inaccessible limit or an ideal. Thus, for example, in Kant the statement “*everything which exists is completely determined*,” does not signify only that one of every pair of *given* contradictory predicates, but that one of all *possible* predicates must always belong to a thing.”⁵ That Kant considers this requirement unaccomplishable matters little: it is within its horizon—or, to express it better, under its threat—that what it is to exist or to be is defined for him. And this concerns not only the “effective mode of existence” of things but also the *logical conceivability* of everything that can be an object of thought. It was Parmenides, breaking with the pre-Socratics who preceded him, who first made this decision (in full opposition, for example, to Anaximander and Heraclitus). Limits to this requirement were already laid down, certainly, by Plato (in the *Sophist* and in the *Philebus*) and by Aristotle (this is what the concept of matter, when pushed to the extreme, represents). But these limits (or objections) are, first of all, presented, precisely, as limitations and most often are tied to our human frailties: nothing would be indeterminate for God or for an “infinitely powerful” mind, both Kant and Laplace went on to say. Second and especially, these limits are never taken into account and elaborated *for their own sake*.

⁵Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. F. Max Müller (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1966), p. 388 (emphasis in the original).

To this ontology corresponds “ensemblistic-identitary” (for brevity’s sake: ensidic) logic. This is the logic of the principle of identity, of contradiction, and of the excluded middle, the logic that is at the basis of arithmetic and mathematics in general and that is formally and effectively realized in set theory [*la théorie des ensembles*] and its interminable ramifications. This logic is everywhere present—everywhere “dense,” to use a term from topology—in everything we say and everything we do. It is a logic that must be, and is, each time instituted and sanctioned by society.

Now, in the psyche we are not dealing with a set or an organization or hierarchy of sets. Sets, and determinacy, are present therein, but they far from exhaust the being of the psyche.

This may be seen clearly in the mode of being of that which is the element of psychical life (I mean “element” here in the sense one speaks of water, earth, and fire as elements): representation, especially unconscious representation, but even already conscious representation. We cannot say how many elements (in the sense, now, of set theory or simply of enumeration) there are “in” a representation; we cannot even say what makes a representation *one* representation. We cannot apply to representations the basic schema of partition. It is impossible to separate my representations into two classes, for example, where the intersection would be empty.

That, far from being limited to the psyche, this mode of being extends at least to the entire human world may be seen immediately when one considers what is basic to language, namely, its significations. Each signification in language, like each psychical representation, *refers* to an indefinite number of other significations, or other representations. And in their indefinite and ever-open totality, these *referrals* constitute the “content” of the particular

representation, or signification.

This structure of referral is fundamental here. It is effectively expressed in the psyche, and in a psychoanalytic setting, through the process of free association. No one can predict, when a patient recounts a dream, where his associations will lead and how they will do so. Despite appearances, Freud knew that very well. Speaking of dream analysis, he wrote:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is *a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled* but has also made no further contributions to the dream's content. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation have to, in an even obligatory and quite universal fashion [*müssen ja ganz allgemein*], remain without any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly dense that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium.⁶

⁶*GW* 2: 529-30 (with reference to p. 116, n.); in English, *SE* 5: 525 (with reference to 4: 111, n. 1), emphasis added. [T/E: The Freud quotation in English has been altered to reflect Castoriadis's own French translation of the German original around "*müssen*" but also after "*unravelled*"; on the latter alteration, see n. 25 to "Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science," in [CL1](#), for Castoriadis's explanation of the inadequacy of what was at the time the standard French translation.]

It is clear, in reading this passage and several others, and contrary to every “deterministic” exegesis of Freud, that for him (a) not all dreams are interpretable and (b) no dream is completely interpretable. And as the passage cited above clearly states, it is not simply resistances on the part of the patient, but the very nature of the psychical world, that is opposed to “complete” dream-interpretation. One could, obviously, say as much about all other phenomena of the unconscious psychism.

In order to illustrate what has been said above concerning the universal character of the ensidic element, let me note in passing that, both in psychoanalytic interpretation and in the very being of the dream, ensemblistic-identitary logic is constantly present, it is everywhere dense. Dream-interpretation is a strange undertaking, wherein one could not take even the first step without applying this logic and wherein one could say nothing essential if one confined oneself to it. This state of affairs results from the very nature of (conscious or unconscious) representation, considered in itself. But it is just as much the manifestation of representation’s indistinction (in the classical sense of this term) with respect to the two other vectors of psychical life, from which representation is indissociable: the affect, and intention or desire.

There certainly would be a “logical” and trivial way of sorting out these three vectors—representation, affect, and desire—and linking them via the mode of determination. For example, one might isolate a representation, which would “cause” a desire, the satisfaction of which would provoke an affect of pleasure. (And one could, should one wish to do so, change the order of the terms and the direction of causation—which already would, in truth, raise questions profoundly challenging to the very idea of “causation” in this domain.) Such may be the case in the life of members of the animal

kingdom and in certain aspects of conscious human life. But in unconscious life we truly do not have the possibility of performing this separation and this simple linear linkage. Representation, affect, and desire are mixed together in a *sui generis* fashion, and in general it is impossible, except in trivial cases, to separate them from each other in a clear-cut way and to establish an order for their appearance. In the clinical setting, the processes involved in depression provide an exemplary illustration of this fact. One could also show, in the case of music, that it is meaningless to separate out representation and affect. For lack of space, I cannot insist upon this point here.

Using in particular the example of representation, we can elucidate further what, in the case of the psyche, makes this magmatic state inevitable. First, the ineradicable ambivalence of unconscious affects signifies the coexistence of attitudes of love and hate toward primordial psychical objects. And this ambivalence, in turn, is the inevitable result of the necessary passage from the initial state of the psychical monad—which is closed upon itself, all-powerful, and all-encompassing within itself—to the socialized state of the individual. But obviously, the ambivalence of affects goes hand in hand with the coexistence of opposing—or, in any case, highly different—representations referring to the same “object.”

Next at issue is the very texture of the representation. What Freud had sifted out as the dream’s modes of operation—condensation, displacement, the requirement of “figurability”⁷—*always* in fact holds for representations and

⁷T/E: This is my English translation of the standard French translation of Freud’s *Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*. The *Standard Edition* uses “conditions of representability.”

condemns them to polysemy. One need only reflect for a few moments to glimpse that, far from ever being able to be “clear and distinct,” to form a “mirror of nature,” to “give things in person,” and so on, a representation, even a conscious one, can have being only by condensing, displacing, and giving figure to that which, in itself, is strictly “unfigurable” or, in any case, is without any figure previously determined for the psyche. In representation, it may be said that something is *always* there for something else, or for something else as well—or, finally, that, in any case, it can be so. The idea, never thematized as such by Freud (this will have very heavy consequences for his overall views), is nevertheless there under the title—wrongly considered enigmatic—of the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz des Triebes*, the delegation of the drive (to the psyche and within it) by means of a representation. For humans, there is no representative or “canonical” object of the drive; contrary to what occurs in animals (though, in certain species, one can glimpse the beginnings of this phenomenon under the form of *imprinting*), its figuration is arbitrary or contingent. This indetermination relative to the representational object of the drive has decisive importance for the process of hominization.

Finally, we must mention the riddle of the relations between body and soul, psyche and soma. Of course, it was not psychoanalysis that discovered this riddle, but psychoanalysis has considerably reinforced its strangeness. I think that the failure of philosophical as well as scientific theories that have aimed at explaining or “understanding” this relation comes from the fact that they remain prisoners of ensemblistic-identitary logic: one proceeds, in these theories, as if one were faced with two separate entities, of which sometimes one, sometimes the other would be, according to the personal choices of the theorist, the “cause” and the other

the “effect.” But what we notice—already in daily life—is that such a relation does not exist in the present case. The soul depends upon the body (lesions, alcohol, psychotropic substances) and does not depend upon it (one’s resistance to or failure to resist pain and torture, the deliberate choice to take one’s own life). The body depends upon the soul (voluntary movements, psychosomatic illnesses) and does not depend upon it (at this very moment, fortunately and sometimes unfortunately, hundreds of billions of cells are functioning within me without my being able to do anything about it).

Despite appearances, therefore, psychoanalysis demolishes the claim of determinism in psychical life. At first sight, to be sure, it “reinforces” this claim in an infinitely richer and more precise way than had ever been done before when it introduces “causation” via representation. But this sort of “causation” is of a strange character. Not only is it not categorical (or even probabilistic), it can never be noted except after the fact, which prevents it from having any predictive capacities. But above all, to speak of causation under these circumstances constitutes a monstrous abuse of language: representation cannot be a “cause” because it is not rigorously determinable and because the incessant flux of representations, affects, and desires is still less so.

This rejection of determinism is not there explicitly in Freud. On the contrary, he certainly considered himself a “determinist.” It is nevertheless there within his work, in its recesses. I have shown it in the case of dreams, and it can also be shown in the famous problem of “the choice of neurosis,” to which Freud returned many times without ever finding a solution that satisfied him. Starting, notably, in the early 1920s, and in particular in his writings on female sexuality, Freud clearly described several possible “destinies” for girls

and finally admitted that one cannot know what factor determines one personal evolution rather than another. He simply advanced some vague hypotheses concerning the “quantity” or “quality” of libido, hypotheses that obviously do not lend themselves to any sort of control. In other contexts during the same period, he spoke of “temporal changes” of the libido.⁸ (An analogous idea, that of frequency modulations in nerve pulses as carriers of information, was formulated much later by von Neumann.)⁹ Often, innate (which does not necessarily mean hereditary) “constitutional factors” are invoked to account, for example, for the conspicuous phenomenon of original differences among subjects in their levels of tolerance and frustration. Clearly, all this does is recognize, not explain, the singularity of each human subject.

At the basis of this indetermination, in the specific case of the human being, we find what radically differentiates this being from any other being, namely, the radical imagination. I shall return to this point below.

⁸T/E: If it has been identified and translated correctly, this phrase (*modulations temporelles* in French) may be found in Freud’s 1913 text “The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis, a Contribution to the Problem of the Choice of Neurosis,” *SE* 12:318, n. 1.

⁹See John von Neumann, *The Computer and the Brain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958). The texts written by Freud that are alluded to in this paragraph include: “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman” (1921), “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes” (1925), “Female Sexuality” (1931), as well as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), *The Ego and the Id* (1923), and “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (1924).

Philosophical Anthropology

Every living being is a being for itself. This signifies, first and foremost, that it creates its own world—a “proper world,” an *Eigenwelt*. This, in turn, implies that it presents—that it “has” or that it is (and it is this that makes its being a *living* form of being)—a soul. Everyday language evinces a clear recognition of this when it opposes animate to inanimate objects, and this is what Aristotle affirms straight out in his text *De Anima*. Although it was clearly discovered by Aristotle in the third book of that treatise under the name *phantasia*, the fundamental determination of the soul—namely, the imagination—has been relegated, by the whole of inherited philosophy, to the status of one “faculty” or “function” of the soul among others, a faculty that is treated most of the time as secondary and a function that is generally considered (with the notable exceptions of Kant and Fichte) deceptive.¹⁰

Imagination is the capacity to make be what is not in the simply physical world and, first and foremost, to represent to oneself and in one’s own way—that is, to present for oneself—that which surrounds the living being and matters for it and, undoubtedly also, its own being. In the case of “external” representation—of perception—this presentation is conditioned, but not caused, by the being-thus of the environment and of the “objects” it encounters there. At the same time, the living being makes be the equivalent of what we call affect (pleasure/displeasure) and intention (search/

¹⁰See, for example, my texts “The Discovery of the Imagination” (1978), now in [CL2](#), and “Logic, Imagination, Reflection” (1991), reprinted in [CR](#) and since “woven” into “Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection” (1997), as translated/edited below in the present volume.

avoidance). The living being aims at something, relative to its “self” and relative to what it creates as its “environment.” The affect is, to begin with, a decisive “signal” of its relationship with the environment.

In the case of the simple living being, however, this relationship is in its essence *functional*. The *imagination* of the living being is, in the main, enslaved to its instrumental functions: conservation and reproduction. (The question, in certain categories of living beings, of the *excess* of the labor of the imagination over strict functionality is a highly complex one and cannot concern us here. Whatever the conclusions one might reach, they could not affect the principal line of argument being set forth here.) It is easy to see that the living being’s creation of a proper world and its self-finality are mutually self-implicating. Its functional enslavement, moreover, goes hand in hand with another of the living being’s fundamental traits: closure, the closure of its proper world, which is given once and for all. The products of the generic imagination of each living species are stable and indefinitely repetitive.

Now, the rupture that is expressed in the emergence of the human is tied to an alteration in this imagination—which becomes, henceforth, radical, constantly creative imagination, the uninterrupted surging forth, in the (unconscious as well as conscious) psychical world, of a spontaneous and unmasterable flux of representations, affects, and desires. The key traits may be summarized as follows:

- Human psychical processes become defunctionalized relative to the human being’s biological substrate; often they are antifunctional and most of the time they are afunctional. Human sexuality is not functional, nor is war.

- In the human sphere [*chez l'humain*], there is a domination of representational pleasure over organ pleasure. This domination is connected to what Freud called the “magical omnipotence of thoughts”¹¹—which is, in truth, an effective omnipotence within the world of the Unconscious, where to “think” is to “do”: if a desire arises, the representation that fulfills it also appears immediately.
- The imagination (conceived not only as representational but just as much as affective and desiderative) becomes autonomized. As was already stated, for the living being creation takes place once and for all and it remains enslaved, in the main, to the functionality of the living being. In the human sphere, the spontaneous flux of the specifically human aspects of the imagination is released from the requirements of biological finality. Here we have the condition for the human being’s capacity to break the (cognitive, affective, desiderative) closure in which the simple living being remains shut.

These, then, are the attributes of the imagination that, generally speaking, the inherited philosophy has ignored, or in any case has never thematized, by restricting the imagination to the simple reproduction of the already “perceived” and to the recombination of its elements. Even Kant, who had already raised himself to the idea of a transcendental imagination (which means: the condition for one to have *a priori* knowledge of something), confined this imagination to producing always the same forms (which are

¹¹T/E: See the third chapter, “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts,” of *Totem and Taboo*, SE 13.

enslaved to the functioning of the conscious and knowing Ego; characteristically, he always speaks of the *produktive*, never the *schöpferische Einbildungskraft*). It is this autonomization of the imagination, its disconnection from functionality, that permits human beings to pass from the simple signal to the sign, to the arbitrary *quid pro quo* of language.

It is equally the autonomization of the imagination and the replacement of organ pleasure by the pleasure of representation that is the condition for this decisive determination of the human being without which there would not have been any hominization, namely, sublimation. Sublimation is the capacity to cathect imperceptible, socially instituted "objects" that have no other kind of existence but a social existence, and to find therein some pleasure (in the psychical sense).

It is not the human being's "late maturation" that "explains" socialization and the existence of a society. Nothing would change in a group of chimpanzees if the maturation of the young lasted ten or twelve years instead of one or two.¹² The psychical condition for human beings' "need" for society is to be sought in the nature of the initial psychical monad, which is closed upon itself, absolutely egocentric, all-powerful, and lives in the felt experience of the original identity that I = pleasure = meaning = everything = being = I. *Ich bin die Brust*. There one finds the prototype of meaning for the human being. This meaning is forever lost

¹²It lasts up to five years in the case of bonobos (*Pan paniscus*). They exhibit behavior that is fascinating in several regards. See Frans B. M. de Waal, "Bonobo Sex and Society," *Scientific American*, 272 (March 1995): 58-64. The bonobos also exhibit a remarkable development of nonfunctional sexual activities (including homosexual ones). Christiane Mignault, "Les initiatives sexuelles des femelles singes," *La Recherche*, 293 (December 1996): 70-73.

due to the very fact that we have exited the monadic world of psychical self-sufficiency, though we always try to find it again in a mediated way, by means of instituted social imaginary significations, through religion, philosophy, or science. Society always furnishes us with a substitute for it that is nevertheless incapable of measuring up to the initial prototype.

~

It is through its socialization, its social fabrication *qua* social individual, that the human subject accedes to what we call “reality” and “logic.” This socialization is at the same time a *history*, a history of the subject and accession to a collective history—which is something entirely other than a matter of “apprenticeship” or a “learning process” (as some would now once again have us believe). It leans on two fundamental psychical modes of operation, projection and introjection, the first of which is always preponderant and the presupposition for the other (whose essential condition is the psychical *cathexis* of that which is internalized). Here we have the role of Eros in *paideia*, which Plato saw in general, though he could not render it comprehensible. Psychoanalysis now permits us to understand it. Through its successive phases, moreover, this history is the origin for the stratification always manifested in the human psyche (absolutely nothing analogous could be said concerning the animal psyche, which has no genuine history), where traces of previous stages coexist with the most recent ones (without their ever being “harmoniously integrated”), as well as crystallize into psychical “instances” and persist in a contradictory or incoherent and ever-conflictual totality.

These determinations of the human society heavily

condition the constitution of society. Society is a totality of institutions—but these institutions hold together because they embody, each time, a magma of social imaginary significations. There never has been and there never will be a purely “functional” society. Social imaginary significations organize the proper world of each society under consideration and furnish a “meaning” to this world. The proper world of each society must hold together, in and for itself, but it must also furnish meaning to the individuals of this society. This absolute exigency for meaning comes from the psyche.

Practical Philosophy

How can psychoanalysis aid in the elucidation of the questions of practical philosophy?

A detour is required before we broach this question. It concerns the antinomy I mentioned at the beginning: psychical reality, with which psychoanalysis is concerned, is pure effective actuality. A desire is a desire; it is, as such, neither good nor bad, neither beautiful nor ugly, neither true nor false (it is “true” only in the sense, simply, that it *is*). How, then, can the psyche maintain any sort of relation to truth or to value?

In Kantian philosophy, and in nearly all inherited philosophies, this question presents itself as an insoluble antinomy. If everything I say as an effectively actual individual is effectively determined (as it must be, since the psyche exists only as a phenomenon, and therefore is subjected to causality), the term *truth* no longer has any meaning. There are, hypothetically speaking, as many sufficient reasons when I say $2 + 2 = 4$ as when I say the Moon is made of blue cheese. But furthermore, to say that psychical processes are in large part indeterminate does not

extricate us from this difficulty: the propositions I state are then, from the standpoint of their truth, simply aleatory. The indeterminacy of psychical processes helps us to elucidate the effective possibility of truth only if this indeterminacy is accompanied, paradoxically, by its contrary: causation via representation. And when we speak of truth, or more generally of value, such causation presupposes sublimation, namely, the cathexis of imperceptible (or, if you prefer, ideal) representations; in psychoanalytic terms, it presupposes the conversion of the drive into an intention aimed at a sublimated object. We are capable of truth because we can cathect this activity that offers no libidinal pleasure in the proper sense of the term: the search for what is true. And this possibility refers us back, in turn, to the social-historical: it refers us back to a history wherein the idea of truth has been created and to a society that has found itself capable, somehow or other, of breaking the closure of meaning characteristic of traditional heteronomous societies.

~

The question of practical philosophy appears in psychoanalysis as the question of the end and of the finality of the psychoanalytic treatment, but also that of its “means” and its “modes.”

Why are people brought into psychoanalysis? One answer is: Because they are suffering. But if it were only a question of easing their suffering, perhaps one might limit oneself to administering them tranquilizers—which, indeed, is what is being done more and more. The goal [*finalité*] of the psychoanalytic process is already inscribed in its “means” and its “modes”: no consolation or “psychotherapy”; no advice or interventions in reality; the accent is put on the

patient's associations and dreams in order that the unconscious psychical flux might come to light; interventions on the part of the psychoanalyst via interpretations ought progressively to give way to reflective self-activity on the part of the patient. Why? Clearly, what is being sought is the patient's gaining access to his Unconscious, namely, his attaining to some lucidity about his own history, his own world, his own desire. Such lucidity can be attained only by means of the patient's self-activity, his own self-questioning, the development of his own reflectiveness. What is sought is certainly also the translation or the expression of this lucidity in the effectively actual life of the patient—and that requires the constitution, the emergence in the patient, of a new psychical instance, a reflective and deliberative subjectivity, one capable of filtering his unconscious pushes and desires, of shattering the coalescence of phantasy and reality, of calling into question not only the subject's thoughts but also the subject's practices. This emergence of a reflective and deliberative—that is to say, autonomous—subjectivity can be defined as the end of the analytic process ("end" taken here in both senses of the term: the finality or goal and the final ending or termination point).

We can consider this type of subjectivity as the human being's formal norm. And we can also consider the activity of the genuine analyst—who aims at the emergence of the autonomy of the patient by "using" for this purpose the potential elements of this same autonomy—as a formal model for all human praxis. Such praxis may be defined as the activity of an autonomy that aims at the autonomy of one or several others—which is what genuine pedagogy and genuine politics also do or should do. Here we find the answer to the question: How is the action of one freedom upon another freedom possible?

LOGOS

Merleau-Ponty and the Weight of the Ontological Tradition*

Representation pertains to the radical imagination; it is radical imagination manifesting itself and taking shape [*se figurant*]. It is so just as much when it is perceptual representation and when it “leans” [*s’étaye*]¹—to reprise a term of Freud’s, which we often shall use—on a being-thus of the sensible, the evident and unintelligible coalescence of “what senses” and “what is sensed.” No eye in act without light, and no light without an eye in act. The image, what is seen, however, is not in the eye, or in the light, or in “the thing,” any more than it can be, as such, “explained” by any of them. Nor is the image any more “here,” “in my head,” than “over there,” “at the thing” or “among things”; it is that by which and in which a “here” and an “over there” arise. I cannot see without spacing or spatializing—and I space or spatialize as soon as I imagine, since every figure, whatever its quasi-matter (visible, sonorous, or even noematic), is immediately (*hama*) the positing of ordered gaps. It would not suffice to say that perceiving presupposes imagining. To

*“Merleau-Ponty et le poids de l’héritage ontologique,” *FAF*, 157-95 (189-235 of the 2008 reprint). Chapter from *L’Élément imaginaire* drafted in 1976-1977. [T/E: Two texts from this never-published volume on “the imaginary element” appeared during Castoriadis’s lifetime: the present chapter and “The Discovery of the Imagination” (1978), now in [CL2](#).] Translated into German as “Merleau-Ponty und die Last des ontologischen Erbes” and published in *Die leibhaftige Vernunft—Spuren von Merleau-Pontys Denken*, ed. Alexandre Métraux and Bernhard Waldenfels (Munich: Fink Verlag, 1986), pp. 111-43. David A[mes] Curtis’s English-language translation originally appeared in *Thesis Eleven*, 36 (1993): 1-36. [T/E: The *Thesis Eleven* translation, from Castoriadis’s typescript, was reprinted in [WIF](#), 273-310, but without the introductory “Notice” that appeared on pp. 1-4 and that was also dropped from the first French publication, in *FAF*.]

perceive *is* to imagine, in the literal and active sense of this term. To perceive (as well as to remember) is a species of imagining, perception a variant of representation. That it raises an indefinite number of specific and interminable problems (though no more grave than remembering, dreams, or fiction) in no way suffices to dislodge it from its being as representation or to confer upon it, in relation to other species thereof, any ontological privilege, except by virtue of the same slippage (by homology, not analogy) that has regularly, for twenty-five centuries, made one seek in the characteristics of the being [*étant*] *par excellence*, of the *ens realissimum*, the signification of “to be” [*être*] *tout court*.

Now, this privileging has continued throughout the philosophical tradition. From the idea that perception gives access to “things,” one continually slides toward the idea that perception alone truly gives access to something (or, symmetrically, but in the same logico-ontological organization: that, since perception does not truly give access to things, nothing can dislodge the “subject” from the sphere of “its” representation), that, therefore, every other species of representation at the same time finds its origin in perception and is only a carbon copy, an enfeebled variant, a lacunary and deficient residue thereof. Whence comes, then, this privilege? Obviously, it is only the other side of the ontological prejudice philosophy has always granted to the *res*—whether it be *extensa* or *cogitans*, or even brought back to the *idea*, *ousia*, or *Wesen*—even when philosophy has, on occasion, striven to show that *there is no res* (or that the *res* is not “truly” *res*), thereby testifying once again that for philosophy this question has remained primary. But what is the *res*? And what is perception? Is it truly primary, or has a fatal preemption taken place here that has set in a determinate rut everything that was to follow, whatever might have been

the modalities and variants?

Why is the philosopher, even when pledged to abandon or to call into question the classical dichotomies of the “subject” and of the “object,” still carried away toward the triadic situation in which there is “the one who” gazes, the “thing” gazed upon—the eternal table, the eternal inkwell, essential instruments of the profession, or else, when the philosopher boldly innovates, “the mountain that rises from the landscape”¹—and their canonical relationship, which is never anything but one of *theōria*, of vision—not only and not inasmuch as the metaphor of vision constantly impregnates the philosopher’s language but inasmuch as the structure of this relationship has always been posited as “passive” reception of a “given” or of something that “gives itself”?

The positing of this situation as primary and canonical carries with it an indeterminate number of prejudices and prior decisions henceforth imported unreflectively into allegedly *ab ovo* constitutions, descriptions of what gives itself such as it gives itself, and decisions to “let” the beings “be” and to let them “come forth.”

How tenacious this philosophical situation is may be seen in the final labors of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, at least such as we know them through *The Visible and the Invisible* and the accompanying *Working Notes*.² There is obviously no

¹T/E: “The mountain range lies in the landscape. Its presence is the rising entry into what is unconcealed within unconcealment, even and especially when the mountain range keeps standing as it is, extending and jutting” (Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* [1954], tr. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray [New York: Harper & Row, 1968], p. 236).

²T/E: Page references are to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Le Visible et l’invisible*, suivi de *Notes de travail*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), tr. Alphonso Lingis as *The Visible and the Invisible*, followed by

question here of “criticizing” an author whose work was interrupted at the very moment when it was embarking on a new flight, still less of polemizing against it, but rather of showing, on the basis of a case that to us seems exemplary, the enormous weight the implicit prejudices of the inherited ontology bring to bear upon someone’s thought at the very moment when it is struggling to free itself therefrom. An exemplary case, not only insofar as Merleau-Ponty affirms his programmatic intention to break with the traditional ontology and the egology that is consubstantial with it, but also insofar as, in him, this intention was beginning to achieve realization. That, in turn, is due to the fact that Merleau-Ponty was one of the first (and remains one of the rare) contemporary philosophers to show himself to be *philosophically* attentive and open to the properly philosophical interrogations to which politics, society, psychoanalysis, the institution, and art imperiously give rise; that, in ceasing to be dominated by the cognitive, he was able to see regions and “objects” as worthy of consideration as “knowledge” is; and that he often knew how to talk about them, not by “applying” to them a ready-made philosophy, but by shedding light on their specific mode of being and by renewing, in this way, his own thought, thus showing through actual deeds that an effort to go beyond the inherited ontology cannot but jeer at “ontological difference.” Thus, in particular, and in a domain that for us enjoys a central importance, when he reprises from Edmund Husserl the idea of institution [*Stiftung*]¹—an idea that, in the latter, is essentially taken up only within the horizon of the cognitive and has only a quite determinate and very narrow function, namely, to ensure the presence of significations within the

Working Notes (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968); these references appear in the text in parentheses, with the English pagination.

immanence of a history that, itself, is seen, when finally it is seen, only as a teleology of Reason—is he able, due to the very fact that he had been able to see history as history, and not as external contingency or as “destiny of Being,” to give to the term an incomparably stronger signification and does he go so far as to speak of an “institution of Being.” Thus, too, in his last writings, do the term and the idea of “imaginary” return frequently—even if these remain indeterminate due to their equivocality—and can one see therein the outlines of a movement that, had it been prolonged, would perhaps have permitted, not to “*shake up the divisions of traditional ontology*,”³ but to outmaneuver [*prendre à revers*] the whole of this ontology, from its origins onward.

This movement aborts, however, at the very moment it is sketched out—and for that, it is not his death that is responsible. Certainly, it is not that Merleau-Ponty would have been unable, had he been given the time, to resume this movement, to continue it, and to affirm it. Rather it is that he would then have had to set aside *The Visible and the Invisible*, and not only the statements in this work, but its unvoiced [*silencieuse*] orientation, the quality of its ontological intention. For, in that case, he would have had to abandon, to begin with, “reality” and the traditional ontological illusion,

³T/E: Castoriadis had just asserted that, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, “Merleau-Ponty affirms his programmatic intention to break with the traditional ontology.” In the text’s unreferenced quotation or, more likely, paraphrase, Castoriadis may instead have in mind Heidegger, so as to contrast again the latter’s approach with Merleau-Ponty’s. Indeed, Heidegger often speaks of “traditional ontology” and “traditional metaphysics,” as well as of their “destruction,” and his term *erschüttern*, also used in such contexts (Castoriadis writes *ébranler* in French here), is usually translated into English as “shaking” or “undermining.”

exacerbated by Martin Heidegger and taken up again from him by Merleau-Ponty, the one that makes of being the self-giving of what is given and that is fatally obliged, therefore, to adjust itself to the being-given. The few attempts at the imaginary in *The Visible and the Invisible* remain and could remain only attempts because they are deeply heterogeneous with respect to what is essential to the thinking deployed therein and ultimately incompatible with it.

Thus, in what seems to have been a first bid at the beginning of the book, Merleau-Ponty wrote:

[W]e also do not allow ourselves to introduce into our description concepts issued from reflection, whether psychological or transcendental.... We must, at the beginning, eschew notions such as “acts of consciousness,” “states of consciousness,” “matter,” “form,” and even “image” and “perception.” We exclude the term perception to the whole extent that it already implies a cutting up of what is lived into discontinuous acts, or a reference to “things” whose status is not specified, or simply an opposition between the visible and the invisible. ... We do not yet know what to see is and what to think is, whether this distinction is valid, and in what sense. For us the “perceptual faith” includes everything that is given to the natural man in the original in an experience-source, with the force of what is inaugural and present in person, according to a view that for him is ultimate and could not conceivably be more perfect or closer—whether we are considering things perceived in the ordinary sense, or his initiation into the past, the imaginary, language, the predicative truth of science, works of art, the others, or history. We are not

prejudging the relations that may exist between these different “layers,” nor even that they are “layers”; and it is a part of our task to decide this, in terms of what questioning our brute or wild experience will have taught us. (157-58)

We will not discuss here whether it is possible to discuss something without prejudice, which would take us away from our present purpose. Moreover, this residue of Husserlian naivety being espoused here is in fact abandoned in the course of the work and in the *Working Notes*. Let us retain the refusal to cut up what is “lived,” not only for what would be temporal discontinuities but also “qualitative” oppositions: visible/invisible, things perceived/language/imaginary, and so on. But here is what immediately follows the passage just cited:

Perception as an encounter with natural things is at the foreground of our research, not as a simple sensorial function that would explain the others but *as the archetype of the originating encounter, imitated and renewed in the encounter with the past, the imaginary, the idea* (158; emphasis added).

How, after having affirmed that one was not prejudging the relations that might exist between different “layers,” “nor even that they are layers,” could one distinguish and oppose perception as “encounter with natural things” and the “encounter with the past, the imaginary, the idea”? What has authorized us, at this stage, to tell apart absolutely perception and the imaginary? Above all, what allows us to consider perception, not as explanatory principle, but, what is infinitely weightier, as “archetype,” and to affirm that the “encounter with...the imaginary” is the imitation and the renewal

thereof? All the ontological decisions have already been made with the enunciation of this simple word: perception is *archetype*; the past, the imaginary, the idea, its “imitation” and “renewal.”

This is not some accidental manner of expressing oneself; we shall see it again. When it becomes a question of undertaking anew an examination of “presence,” of the “thing,” and “of the something,” what naturally flows from his pen, this “something” that presents itself and that is present to us, is “this pebble or this sea shell” (160). Similarly, in what is by date the last version—and little matter the dialectic within which the formulation appears—Merleau-Ponty is able to declare without difficulty: “Now that I have in perception the thing itself, and not a representation....” (7).

Say, however, that some outlandish person rejects the rules of the game and refuses to “begin” with tables and pebbles. Let this person say, “I am beginning without any prejudice, without privileging one form of lived experience over against the others, I want to consider what gives itself such as it gives itself. *Let us therefore take my dream from last night...*”—and, *voilà*, all of philosophy is knocked out of order. Will that person have “the thing itself,” the “representation” thereof, or the “representation” (in a waking state) of a “representation” (the dream)? And if that were posited as “experience-source” under the same heading as any other—after all, it is a “lived experience” like another—are there many pages of any book of philosophy whatsoever that could follow thereafter? What philosophy has discussed interminably has always been the calling into question of the “reality” of a correlate of perception on the basis of the “evidence” of the absence of an “objective” correlate of the dream—and always on the presupposition that at least an indubitable *idea* of “reality” is furnished by this reference to

an “objective” correlate, as Merleau-Ponty quite well has shown (5-7)—but never the dream, for example, *as such*, the mode and the type of being that it makes be and that, if it is a matter of beginning “without prejudices,” are just as valid as any others. What traditional philosophy would object to in this approach would be that the dream does not furnish us an “originary” mode of being, since when the dream is there we are not “fully” there, which in fact means: as dreaming *and* thinking the dream—and, when we think the dream, we do not have the dream “in person,” “in flesh and bone,” but only its reproduction in a difficult remembrance. The tacit postulates of this argument boil down, however, to a doubtful thesis and to a logical blunder [*glissement logique*]: the sole legitimate and admissible experience is the “presence in person” of something to a lucid consciousness; *therefore*, only what gives itself in such an experience (and, rigorously speaking, what can necessarily be inferred therefrom) *is*.

This thesis is certainly not Merleau-Ponty’s. After having shown that Pyrrhonism shares with a naive realism the idea of “a Being that would be in itself only” and noted that “we answer Pyrrhonism sufficiently by showing that there is a difference of structure and, as it were, of grain between the perception or true vision, which gives rise to an open series of concordant explorations, and the dream, which is not *observable* and, upon examination, is almost nothing but blanks [*lacunes*],” he continues:

To be sure, this does not terminate the problem of our access to the world; on the contrary it is only beginning. ...[I]f we can withdraw from the world of perception without knowing it, nothing proves to us that we are ever in it, nor that the observable is ever entirely observable, nor that it is made of another

fabric than the dream. Then, the difference between perception and dream not being absolute, one is justified in counting them both among “our experiences,” and it is above perception itself that we must seek the guarantee and the sense of its ontological function. We will stake out that route, which is that of the philosophy of reflection [*la philosophie réflexive*], when it opens. But it begins well beyond the Pyrrhonian arguments. (5-6)

Why, then, would the route that would pass “above perception itself” necessarily be that of the philosophy of reflection, and why, when it becomes a question of coining the idea that the difference between the observable and the dream is not absolute, will one rediscover only the “conversion to reflection,” by means of which “perceiving and imagining are now only two modes of *thinking*” (29)? What the imaginary becomes in such a philosophy Merleau-Ponty has nevertheless described with a rigor that is not lacking in irony: “the narrow circle of objects of thought that are only half-thought, half-objects or phantoms having no consistency, no place of their own, disappearing before the sun of thought like the mists of dawn, and that are, between the thought and what it thinks, only a thin layer of the unthought” (30). And yet, the philosophy for which, in effect, the imaginary necessarily has this place—and which, for this very reason, topples over completely to the side of incoherent fiction as soon as the question of the imaginary is seriously taken into consideration—is challenged only to the extent that it forgets that it is only a half-circle, that “it dissimulates from itself its own mainspring”—namely, that “in order to constitute the world, it is necessary to have a notion of the world as preconstituted” (34).

The critique of Descartes and of the philosophy of reflection [T/E: 28-49] rests entirely on the evidence of “the perceptual life of my body...presupposed in every notion of an object, and...that accomplishes the primary openness to the world” (37); the difference between real and imaginary suddenly becomes again as absolute as it could be, their qualities opposed, the consubstantiality of the first with the true and of the second with illusion massively affirmed (“the real is coherent and probable because it is real, and not real because it is coherent; the imaginary is incoherent or improbable because it is imaginary, and not imaginary because it is incoherent” [40]). There is a “presence of the whole world in one reflection” and “irremediable absence in the richest and most systematic deliriums...and this difference is not a difference of the more and the less” (*ibid.*). It could be remarked that it is difficult to exclude delirium from the world (for, where then to include it?), and that a world without delirium is another incoherent philosophical fabrication. In this philosophy, *The Castle* and *Tristan and Isolde* must also be incoherent and improbable, *or else* “imitations.” What must especially be seen, however, is that in fact we have here a characteristic amphibology on the term “world” and a just as characteristic slippage [*glissement*] (neither accidental nor the result of some “negligence”) from a narrow sense of “world,” in relation to which these statements are apparently justified, to a broad sense, in relation to which they are untenable, but which actually is aimed at since what is at stake here are the true itself and Being, the different perceptions of which are “perspectives” and which “in any case [is] itself beyond contestation” (41).

Thus also does Merleau-Ponty write in another context, before taking up again the Husserlian approach in order to expose it to criticism and while reaffirming a thesis

of the world and trying to show that no doubt could affect it absolutely: “[W]hat remains [after the destruction of beliefs] is not nothing, nor of another sort than what has been struck off: what remains are mutilated fragments of the vague *omnitude realitatis* against which the doubt was plied, and they regenerate it under other names—appearance, dream, Psyche, representation. It is in the name and for the profit of these floating realities that the solid reality is cast into doubt” (105-106). As there was, as early as the *Republic*, an *ousia* that was so to such an extent that it no longer was *ousia* but beyond the *ousia*, and as the *ens entium* always fatally turns out to be the sole genuine *ens*—and from then on, how is one to distinguish it from the *esse*?—so is there in the *omnitude realitatis* a reality more “solid” than the others, and from then on how is one to avoid its being the archetype and the “floating” residues having little of anything to teach us about what solidly *is*?

Certainly, there is just as much of a double sense, or rather a floating sense, to the term “imaginary.” Sometimes second-order, derived productions of the imagination or of the radical imaginary are intended; sometimes it is the mode of being of the imaginary as such that is at issue; sometimes, finally, it is the imaginary as *dunamis*, origin, source that is in question. Thus is one able to attenuate the incompatibility or the nonhomogeneity of statements that are quite close to one another: “Conversely, the imaginary is not an absolute inobservable: it finds in the body analogues of itself that incarnate it. This distinction, like the others, has to be reconsidered and is not reducible to that between the full and the void” (77).⁴ Also, however, apropos of Sartre’s

⁴Let us note again the character of ontological discriminant implicitly imputed to the notion of the observable. [T/E: In the original typewritten

“imaginary In-Itself-for-itself”: “We only say that the In-Itself-for-itself is more than imaginary. The imaginary is without consistence, inobservable; it vanishes when one proceeds to vision” (85). And finally, a few lines later: “The truth of the Sartrean In-Itself-for-itself is the intuition of pure Being and the negintuition of Nothingness. It seems to us that on the contrary it is necessary to recognize in it the solidity of myth, that is, of an operative imaginary, which is part of our institution, and which is indispensable for the definition of Being itself” (85).

Let us consider the view taken of the being of representation when it is explained in relation to the visible. The visible is not “a representation for a mind: a mind could not be captured by its own representations; it would rebel against this insertion into the visible which is essential to the seer” (139). It is not the idea of the visible, nor that of the “flesh,” that we are discussing here, but what this incident highlights. Whence comes this idea of a mind that “has” representations but could not be “captured” by them? That *against* which thought here defines itself—and that is what, as always, is decisive—is only the vulgar idea of representation constructed by Heidegger in 1938 by way of a straw man to be knocked down and since then accepted uncritically nearly everywhere. To what extent this vulgar idea can be backed up by certain statements by Descartes, and to what other, much greater extent by textbooks in psychology, is of no interest here. What alone matters is to note that it has been able to be granted a measure of credence only by means of a massive and monstrous deformation of Greek thought (which itself constituted itself, straight off, in

French version, this note, originally a parenthetical phrase, ended, after “observable,” with (as now translated into English): “and of the body.”]

a bodily struggle with the problematic of *doxa*) and a repeated occultation of Kantian thinking on *Vorstellung* and on imagination.

Indeed, it is only against this vulgar idea that Merleau-Ponty is setting himself off here. This idea rests on a mechanical model of vision, of which it is only a carbon copy. I am supposed to be quite distinct from what I see, not implicated therein; sight is, in a sense, at my disposal inasmuch as, for example, I can always close my eyes or turn my head. Likewise, therefore, I dispose of an internal screen, on which I project at will this or that image. There is a metaphorical third eye, an internal dark room, a projection screen. Behind the third eye stands a “mind” that, by flipping a switch, lights up the screen and then “has” a representation. Demolishing this ridiculous fabrication allows one to forget what is here in question; it allows one, above all, to avoid demolishing fabrications that are just as arbitrary but that cling much more firmly to the entire fabric of inherited thought.

The mind does not “have” representations. The mind [*esprit*], if one wants to use this term, *is* that: representational flux (and something else as well, of course). The “mind” is, first and foremost, this perpetual *presentation* of “something” that is not there *for* something else (re-presentation, *Vertretung*) or *for* “someone.” Perception, dreams, reverie, memory, phantasm, reading, hearing music with eyes closed, thought are first and foremost that, and they rigorously enter under the same heading. Whether I open or I close my eyes, whether I listen or I stop up my ears, always, except in dreamless sleep, *there is* that itself—and, to begin with, nothing but that—which is in and through this presentation; there is (since the metaphor of vision, and not by chance, dominates) absolute “*spectacle*,” which is not spectacle of

another trans-spectacle, nor spectacle for a spectator, the spectator herself being, inasmuch as she is at all, on stage. It is again by a second-order thought, by a reflection, that this is described as a clearing [*éclaircie*] that would occur “within” what would be unlit [*non éclairé*], in a preceding night of identity, through a dehiscence of and in something else. The night of identity is a thought of *turning back on* (on the *there is*), a supervening metaphor, certainly legitimate in its moment, but nonetheless constructed. *There is Vorstellung*, representation in the “active” sense, a *putting forward*—a *positing* in advance—a before that is not “before” or “in front of” something else, that is not placing-something-in-front-of-someone but rather is that by which and in which every placing and every place exist, originary positing starting from which every position—as “act” of a subject or “determination” of an object—has being and meaning.

Inherited thought cannot conserve within itself for one instant this primary ontological region, for such thinking hastens immediately to ask, *Positing of what by whom?*, thus covering it over straight off by means of ulterior logico-ontological determinations, and thereby immediately dissociating that which there is in *something* for *someone*, therefore transforming, even before having felt it, the originary surging forth of an impersonal and non-thing-like there is—that by which there always is a world and that which always *is*, even in the most extreme delirium, *only* as: There is a world—into an “intraworldly” or thing-like relation; whence results, the following instant, the almost ineluctable necessity of thinking this relationship under the habitual “real” determinations (from container to contained, from cause to effect, from matter to form, from producer to product, from reflection to object reflected), and, immediately afterward, the interminable (and vain) effort to rid oneself of

these determinations, which are ineffaceably inscribed in the very enunciation of the question. Nevertheless, the “something” (as ob-ject, *Gegen-stand*, whatever its particular tenor incidentally might be, but as holding itself [*se tenant*] apart from the representational flux) and the “someone” (as subject, whatever the “interpretation” thereof: man, soul, consciousness, “mind,” or *Dasein*) are separations resulting from reflection; they are inevitable and legitimate—but of a second order. They are “real,” and “logical,” and even “solid” so far as they can be—but of a second order. That in the *there is* of the representational flux the (allegedly full-bloomed) perceptual thing rapidly (though not inevitably) blossoms forth is of importance and even decisive—but of a second order. This blossoming forth, moreover, will never be total separation—save as limit of objectivating thought (a limit that, it too, possesses, in its time and in its place, its relative legitimacy). It never can be so, for perception is not separable from the radical imagination, though it could not be reduced to the latter, either. Likewise, that, within the representational flux, a reflection of the flux (which always remains caught within the flux) and a subject of this reflection emerge is again decisive—but of a second order. And in this case, there can be no question of separating, even “partially,” the subject and the flux (save in contexts so reduced and specific that they hardly have any interest but technical, as in the “transcendental subject,” for example), still less of placing the latter at the former’s disposal. The subject is not possessor of “its representations,” “its affects,” and “its intentions”: the subject *is* that, representational-affective-intentional flux in which has emerged the permanent possibility of reflection (as modality of representation, implying a re-presentation of the representation) and in which the raw [*brute*] spontaneity of the radical imagination has in part converted itself into

reflected spontaneity.

That, within the representational flux (we are limiting ourselves to this abstraction for the moment in order to be brief), there emerge, as quasi-separated, perception of something “real” and reflection referred to a subject of the reflection, in a time that is at once psychogenetically, logically, and ontologically *of a second order*, does not signify that we would be dealing here with mere “derivatives.” Perception of the real and reflection supervene as true *syntheses*; while they presuppose, from beginning to end, the representational flux, they could at no moment be deduced, produced, or constructed starting from the latter. As much as thought itself, the thing as it is perceived is a creation of the social-historical radical imaginary (this proposition, which might appear scandalous, is an immediate consequence of the facts that there is no thought without language and no “transcendental language,” any more than there is any perception without elementary logical forms). This is the reason why the interminably difficult questions they pose have been rendered properly unthinkable within the traditional outlook [*perspective traditionnelle*], which is sometimes “realist,” sometimes “egological,” and in fact almost always both at the same time.

What the true way of considering representation, the representational flux, shows us, therefore, is something else entirely than a “mind that has representations” and infinitely more than the “insertion (of the seer) into the visible”: an indescribable reciprocal implication of the “subject” of the representation and of the “representation,” which we must think starting from itself. Representation “of the subject”—and outstripping the subject. Subject “of the representation”—and outstripping every given representation. For, the subject *is* only as synthesis supervening in the emergent

representational flux, but always also this indeterminate representational flux; and representation *is* as representation “of the subject” only starting from the moment when a subject *is*, that is to say, by means of the creation and social-historical institution of a language and of a public world. This reciprocal inherence that is neither identity, nor simple difference, nor covering over of the one by the other, nor intersection defining an assignable common part, has no name among the relations of inherited logic.

In particular, we cannot think it as “insertion” (of the seer into the visible, or of the “subject” into the “represented,” the “representable,” or even the representational flux), for we would still then be missing its absolutely decisive aspects. We would miss, on the one hand and above all, the fundamental fact that there is nothing visible that is fully given and completely made in which the seer could insert herself, any more, indeed, than there is a “representational picture,” but rather emergence, continued creation, incompleteness [*inachèvement*] that is never filled out but rather transforms itself into another incompleteness. We would remain in the rut of the traditional ontology, with a being-of-always (*aei*), always and simply given and given *to be seen/shown* [*donné à voir*]. We would thereby also miss the genuine essence of the question of temporality, since for a “seer inserted into the visible” what could time be if not either an “objective” time, an hour the seer reads on the visible, or a clock that she transports “within herself,” but really apart—in a watertight pocket—so that it might not interfere with her functioning as a seer? Finally, we would render ourselves incapable even of beginning to think the question of subjectivity, since this way of conceiving the “relationship” of the seer and of the visible makes it impossible to comprehend how the seer could ever take some distance with regard to what *is* as visible, a

distance that is qualitatively other than the one that might metaphorically be posited between “parts” of the visible, how she ever could turn herself away from it, “relativize” it other than by comparison with “spatial” viewpoints, still less dream, enter into delirium, invent something, or compose music.

In this way we would remain—and this is what actually occurs in *The Visible and the Invisible*—with a series of brute aporias, of interrogations totally disarmed before the being of the subject (see 190, 194, 202), before both what always qualifies it and what, at the same time, makes of it each time a “being-mine” in a sense other than descriptive and external, and we would continue to be condemned to posit it simply as an *X* that would come “to animate the perceived world and language” (190)—therefore in this mysterious schema of “animation” Merleau-Ponty knew so well how to denounce apropos of behavior and of perception, and which, whatever one might do, inevitably refers back to an already completed circuit that lacks only a *breath of air* for it to begin its operation. Like its venerable Kantian ancestor, this *X* would have to be different each time, since it is “from my side” (*ibid.*) and yet, being only *X*, it cannot but be everywhere and always essentially the same—therefore, a concept that contradicts itself simply and not mediately, a negative nothingness, an absolute nothing. “I do not perceive any more than I speak—Perception has me as has language” (*ibid.*)—these Heideggerian pronouncements, which are but mere negations and inversions of the corresponding “anthropological” or “transcendental” pronouncements, are rigorously situated on the same terrain as what they contradict, they posit the same structure of relations between the two “terms” they take into consideration while limiting themselves to a permutation thereof, and

therefore they belong to the same order of thought. From a profound point of view, there is strictly no difference between the pronouncements “man has language” and “language has man.” Both posit the “relation” (which is not even, properly speaking, a relation) between these two “terms” on the mode of one of them “having” the other (whatever commentaries one might hasten to present on the metaphoricalness of this usage of “having”; after all, it may be doubted that the most insipid “anthropologists” have ever thought that they “have” language as they have their shirt), and thereby show that they are incapable of thinking what is at issue here in its irreducible originality, as *eidos* of itself, the *sui generis* relation of language and the speaking subject. The “thinking of Being” reveals here its essence, which it succeeds better in masking in other contexts: this negation of anthropology is but a concealed theology.

One can also detail what Merleau-Ponty thinks of as “representation”—and the immediate aporias to which what he thinks of it leads him—starting from a Note of May 1960 titled “‘Visual Picture’ → ‘representation of the world’ *Todo y Nada*” (252-53). It is a matter of “generaliz[ing] the critique of the visual picture into a critique of ‘*Vorstellung*,’” to arrive at a

critique of the meaning of being given by both to the *thing* and to the *world*. That is, the meaning of being *In Itself*—(in itself not referred to what alone gives it meaning: *distance*, divergence, transcendence, the flesh)...if our relation with the world is *Vorstellung*, the world “represented” has the In Itself as the meaning of its being. For example, the Other represents the world to himself, i.e., there is for him an internal object which *is* nowhere, which is *ideality*,

and apart from which there exists the world itself. What I want to do is restore the world as a meaning of Being absolutely different from the “represented,” that is, as the vertical Being which none of the “representations” exhaust and which all “reach,” the wild Being.

Yet, the *second-order* question of the meaning of being of the world, and the decision to refuse to it the meaning of being In Itself—which we shall not discuss here—cannot make me deny the being of the representation if the latter elsewhere offers itself primordially and indubitably. Nor does the suppression of the representation by a pistol shot eliminate the problem posed by the other and by *his* perception of the world, opening to being, or what you will. The pistol, moreover, jams and this suppression of the representation reveals its own impossibility in the very phrase that intends it: the obvious—but astonishing, in view of the foregoing—affirmation that the representation never “exhausts,” but always “reaches” the wild Being at the same time restores the representation in a primordial place, puts it back into a position of exteriority relative to this Being that it “reaches” (Being [*Être*] here visibly and simply means the totality of beings [*étants*]), and leaves wholly outstanding the question raised by the other and by “his” representation of the world. For, granting that his representation, like mine, reaches the wild Being, how can I know that *what* his representation reaches of it and *what* mine reaches of it are identical, comparable, or participable by him and by me? Such a participability, and even, much more, a rigorous identity, would be self-assured if there were in effect a means of “exhausting” Being—including, for each mind, that “moment” of Being that is another mind (Hegelianism). This

path being closed off, how is one to avoid, in Merleau-Ponty's way of posing the problem (which comes from Husserl), that participability cannot be conceived except on the basis of a postulate bearing on its own conditions of possibility: *that which*, each time, is reached is "the same" or "comparable" or "homogeneous." As that, quite obviously, is not literally true (or is true only for a thought of the In Itself and of its "reflections"), a supplement of plausibility has to be solicited from the unending progression of concordant explorations: there is a path along which one can show that what I reach of Being and what you reach of it tend to be concordant or to correspond with each other as one advances. Three idealities, therefore, instead of one.

The question posed by the duality of private world and public world—of an indefinite number of private worlds and a still greater indefinite number of public worlds, since quite obviously our public world is not the same as that of the Aztecs or of the hunters of Altamira—on an ultimate foundation of *one* world is completely independent of the theory of perception or of representation—even if the latter is understood in the flattest and most insipid sense possible. It is posed as soon as I ascertain that the other is thinking something that he is not saying, which is to say that it is constitutive of the already double world of a two-year-old child, long before the child's contamination by a bad philosophical theory of the In Itself. It is posed as soon as I ascertain, in learning a tongue, that this tongue includes words without strict equivalent in mine (and, more exactly, that none of its words is equivalent to those of mine). It is posed, quite simply, as soon as I look at an African statuette.

Now, *that which* the other thinks without saying it, *where* is it? And *what* is it? What the African *sees* in his statuette, and what I shall never, properly speaking, see, all

the while knowing categorically that it *is*—*where* and *what* is it? That I might say that that is “for him an internal object which *is* nowhere, which is *ideality*” [T/E: 253]; or that I might say that it is a moment and a manner for him to reach the wild Being without exhausting it, a moment and manner that will never be mine and that I shall never be able to do more than think-and-represent-to-myself—does that really change anything at all in the situation and in its interminable riddles, which we constantly settle in life? In any case, as also for all “subjective ‘lived experiences,’” I must “enter” it in the “‘register’ which is Being” (185). (Here again, therefore, we have an interminable catalogue of beings [*étants*], simple *Inbegriff alles Seienden*.) I therefore cannot prevent, even if the other has never spoken of it, that “something” has been, and therefore is forever on the mode of having once been so, due to the simple fact that it once was for a single person as a fleeting thought and for me a mere ideality I cannot even designate except in empty fashion.

How then is one to escape the following dilemma? *Either* the meaning of being of the world is effectively In Itself and ideality, since partaking interminably of this world are the innumerable “somethings” essentially and necessarily inaccessible to me and to all save one (the last thought of the last person entered on the death register of the city of Beauvais for the year 1788). This is an In Itself and an ideality that are infinitely more pronounced than those that science is, for example, obliged to postulate: “the continents 200 million years ago had such and such a form” has, as its “meaning”: “scientific subjects abstractly identical to us would have observed that...,” and, in this case, the abstraction can be effectuated, just as the content of the statement is interminably justifiable. However, the phrase, “if you were the last person entered on the death register, etc., you would

in the end have thought..." is doubly empty; it claims to designate an undesignatable content and postulates an essentially ineffectible operation. *Or else*, the meaning of being is equivalent to "having been for someone," and then there is not *one* meaning of being, save nominally, since this meaning of being, "to have been for someone," is essentially empty, there being no means to allow one to give an identical or different content to "being for me" and "being for *X*"; thenceforth, whatever our interpretation of perception, of representation, and so on, we are plunged hopelessly into the Ocean of the compossibility of an indefinite number not only of worlds, but also of private meanings of being, which in other respects are completely unassignable.

These aporias are immediate, we have said, and they result from the way in which the problem is posed. How, indeed, is one to think the question of the public world, of the *kosmos koinos*, while eliminating or while forgetting what *public* means, while wanting to think it in the active forgetting of the *koinotēs* and of the *koinōnia* and of that which makes them be—namely, the social-historical and its institution? To the extent that one wants to escape from them, to the extent, too, that it has been recognized that the phenomenological attitude, by an essential necessity, must make of the *alter ego* an intractable impossibility and cannot escape from solipsism except by committing suicide—therefore, that one cannot escape from solipsism when adopting this attitude—there remains only one recourse, the return to the idea of a conaturality or a conativity of seers, be it of a different quality or of a higher order. And this in effect is what, for the *visible*, is proposed in the chapter titled "The Intertwining—The Chiasm": "Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each?" (142). Surely, "there does not exist some huge animal whose organs our bodies

would be,” but there is “a ray of natural light that illuminates all flesh and not only my own.” That the “colors” or “tactile reliefs” of the other are for me “an absolute mystery, forever inaccessible,”

is not completely true; for me to have not an idea, an image, nor a representation, but as it were the imminent experience of them, it suffices that I look at a landscape, *that I speak of it* with someone. Then, *through the concordant operation of his body and my own*, what I see passes into him, this individual green of the meadow under my eyes invades his vision without quitting my own, I recognize in my green his green.... There is here no problem of the *alter ego* because it was not *I* who sees, not *he* who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general, in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh, being here and now, of radiating everywhere and forever, being an individual, of being also a dimension and a universal (142; emphases added for the first two italicized phrases).

What we have here is only the exploration of another impasse—and we shall not linger over it. Quite obviously, the description “is not completely true,” to borrow Merleau-Ponty’s expression; the “as it were...imminent experience” does not amount to the experience without qualifications, and the existence of a single Daltonian (color-blind person), hallucinating person, or drunk would suffice to challenge it. One guards against this by giving oneself “the concordant operation” of different bodies—that is to say, by preventing in advance the other from being “*he* who sees” while plunging

him into a natural generality that will permit anonymous visibility to inhabit both of us. That such a natural generality not only exists but plays an ineliminable role in all of the questions that are of concern to us we would be the last to doubt, but this role—of leaning on and of induction into the social-historical institution of the world—absolutely does not suffice to resolve them. If it sufficed, there would never have been any philosophy, nor even any discussion whatsoever—for, then one no more sees where and why the concord of operations would cease and why it would not be prolonged into concord and identity of all discourses than, indeed, one can see why and how “anonymous visibility,” “vision in general” is coined or converted in such different fashions among Giotto, Rembrandt, and Picasso. The “what I see passes into him” and “I recognize in my green his green” is true only *cum grano salis*—a grain so large, truly speaking, that it would suffice to salt the foods of all generations to come.

In fact, Merleau-Ponty renders the individual *unthinkable*. For, “what I see passes into him” would be *true* only if *I* passed into him, completely, with my childhood memories and especially those ones that I do not know, these gardens of Athens where for the first time and forever afterward I have seen and been green, the *Verde que te quiero verde*⁵ that so often obsesses me, my way of aging in relation to the light and to colors that do not cease to amaze me, my preoccupations of the moment, and so on, interminably. Or else, it would then be necessary to state categorically that neither does this green, nor I, have flesh, that we hold to

⁵T/E: This is the first line from Federico García Lorca's *Romance Sonámbulo*: “Green, how I want you green.”

nothing and are held by nothing outside this atomic encounter, this flat coincidence, sectionable and made of a freely transferable product: *this* green, which passes from me into him without alteration—and rightly so, since “it is not *I* who sees, not *he* who sees.” If seeing, however, is something other than a tale of retinas, as Merleau-Ponty elsewhere has shown quite well, then it is in effect the entire seer that is at issue in vision, and not only the seer’s corporeal synergies: his or her entire history, thought, tongue, sex, world—in brief, his or her “personal institution,” if we dare permit ourselves this expression. The encounter of two seers then challenges something other and something much more than anonymous visibility and vision in general, it can only be a more or less broad and deep coincidence of two “personal institutions,” highly dependent on their social-historical institution that makes them each exist as an individual; all the while being possible, this coincidence is never assured, though it must be said, more specifically, that in a sense it always succeeds, whatever the social-historical and personal “distances” involved, and, in another sense, that it *always fails*, whatever the “proximity” of the two seers. Now, this way of posing the question *excludes* one from ever being able to think this *necessity* of the failure of concordance—in the same manner in which and for reasons profoundly analogous to those that make it, like all inherited thinking, exclude the possibility of thinking the being of error other than as a deficit and absence of truth.

To have the colors of the other as an imminent experience, writes Merleau-Ponty, it suffices “that I speak of it with someone.” *I speak*, therefore—and to “someone.” The transferability, the participable “part” of color passes therefore—can pass? must pass?—by way of speech [*la parole*]. And surely Merleau-Ponty would be the last to think

that speech can be, here or anywhere else, pure instrument or diaphanous medium. And just as little would he think that it could be limited to being only speech. Or, let him have to speak of red—and let him have done so as in the beautiful passage (130-33) that opens the chapter discussed here and concludes with “a certain red is also a fossil drawn up from the depths of imaginary worlds.” It “is also”: it is perhaps especially so, for, apart from “certain terrains near Aix or in Madagascar” and the red of blood, all the reds evoked in this passage are historical reds, and all of them inseparable from—indefinable without—their heavy imaginary charge: the tiles of rooftops, the flags of gatekeepers and of the Revolution, the dresses of women, robes of professors, bishops, and advocate generals, adornments and uniforms, pure essence of the Revolution of 1917, the eternal feminine, the public prosecutor, and finally gypsies, dressed like hussars, who reigned twenty-five years ago over an inn on the Champs-Élysées. As much as the description justifies the important final idea—that a color is “less a color or a thing...than a difference between things and colors, a momentary crystallization of colored being or of visibility”—so much does it also show that if I speak of it to someone, “what I see” “passes into him” only by means of all these references implicitly at work—references that, quite evidently, do not concern solely an anonymous visibility, a vision in general, but a becoming and a historical institution of this visibility and of that which at once “fills” it and renders it participable. “To fill” is, moreover, a very bad expression, and it is rather “to make be” that must be said: the red of the eternal feminine is certainly not so for other cultures, it is likely that my grandchildren, unless they are buffs of fossilized films, will understand nothing about these gypsies on the Champs Élysées (will *see* nothing therein), and

none of the examples cited would make Aristotle see anything at all.

To say that one might find others that would have the same (visible) meaning would be to annul, precisely, the signification of this whole description, since that would amount to affirming that in all this it was a matter only of strictly intersubstitutable instances of a generality given in its essence once and for all. For, obviously, the Red of the Revolution introduces another and a new differentiation, another and a new modulation to those that the color red had made until that point. But also, he adds it not only *for* those who *see* therein the red of the Revolution. And then we no longer can speak simply of a “fossil drawn up from the depths of imaginary worlds”: as these imaginary worlds continue to *make themselves*, the red is not *finished*; there is no “natural” red given once and for all; the natural red—the one whose physical characteristics could, moreover, be specified perfectly in terms of wavelengths, scales of brightness, of saturation, and so on—is here again only a support [*étayage*]; the red of which it could be a question is a historical red, and as such it continues to make itself as part of the concretion of visibility, itself part of the institution of the world that continues to make itself in and through history.

All that, Merleau-Ponty knew perfectly well. If, at moments, certain formulations still accredit the idea of a naturality, unmixed with perception, that would be, *de jure* and even *de facto*, thinkable apart from the rest—thus: “there is to be sure a question...by what miracle a created generality, a culture, a knowledge come to *add* to and recapture and rectify the natural generality of my body and of the world” (152, emphasis added)—the developments in the last pages of his manuscript (144-55), notably through the place accorded to language and to speech, render this idea impossible. Yet

this knowledge does not succeed in becoming the point for a new departure that it nevertheless demands to be, and this is not by accident: the path it opens leaves immediately the ontological field in which Merleau-Ponty continues to situate himself. In this way, what expresses it or proceeds therefrom ultimately is only *juxtaposed* to the central inspiration, and its ambiguous character is thus constantly renewed.

This may be seen again in the same May 1960 Note previously cited (252-53). "Moreover the distinction between the two planes (natural and cultural) is abstract: everything is cultural in us (our *Lebenswelt* is "subjective") (our perception is cultural-historical) and everything is natural in us (even the cultural rests on the polymorphism of the wild Being)." The remark on the cultural-historical character of perception, far from being accidental or isolated, links back up with numerous previous formulations.⁶ It is clear, however, that the implications have not been drawn therefrom as concerns the thematic treatment of perception. If our perception is cultural-historical, as it incontestably is, not only could it not be a question of maintaining for it any ontological privilege whatsoever or the status of "archetype" relative to other forms of access to what is, of "giving itself" something or of making it be, what you will; it becomes important and urgent to explore the consequences of this fact, to ask oneself what "components" of perception are social-historical in origin and in what manner they are so, whether one can thus distinguish any "components" therein and impute them in a distinct way to this or that origin, and, finally, whether one can even preserve the traditional sense of "perception."

⁶For example, *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort and tr. John O'Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 42-43, 51, 69.

To say that our perception is cultural-historical is to say that, in part and according to modalities to be explored, it too originates in the institution. But the institution of what? As culture does not install in us mechanical devices for the transformation of sensory data, or minicomputers for the elaboration of these data differently programmed in Babylon and in Venice, this institution can concern only representation itself, the shared mode of representing; it is therefore—we shall return to this point at length—the institution of schemata and figures that render representation possible as participable and making/doing [*le faire*] collective. These schemata have to, each time, render possible the “perception” of what is, each time, posited as a “thing.” But they have to do much more than this, since they have to organize the totality of the effectively actual social sphere [*du social effectif*] as well as of what is, each time, thinkable. It is quite obviously impossible for these organizations—of things, of people, of acts, of thoughts—to be separated from and to be independent of each other; there is, for each society, cohesion, internal solidarity, reciprocal inherence—which we shall have to explore—of the positing and view of “natural things,” of people’s status, of the rules and references of making/doing and of saying (Merleau-Ponty remarks, in the same Note, that “a way of thinking oneself within a society is implied in its social structure”).

There is therefore institution, by society, of the world *qua kosmos koinos*, a shared and public world *of* and *for* this society, and *in* which this society necessarily also itself posits itself. We cannot, short of falling into absurdity, think this institution either as “reflection” or as “sublimation” of the “real” conditions in which society would be placed, since such conditions are, trivialities apart, ungraspable and unassignable outside this social institution, any more than we

can see therein a “moment of Reason,” would it only be because such an affirmation makes of the one who enunciates it Absolute Knowledge in person. One cannot give oneself anything “real in itself,” anything “rational in itself” from which this institution might be derived; a discourse could have such a pretension only by forgetting naively, not to say stupidly, that it itself proceeds from a particular social-historical institution and from the social-historical institution of discourse as such, that it always remains enveloped therein, and that, while its relationship to the institution from which it proceeds is characterized by this fantastic freedom that permits it to take, in relation to the institution, all conceivable distances, this relationship accords this freedom only inasmuch as the relationship remains this relationship, inasmuch as these distances, be they infinite, remain distances of and within this space, and inasmuch as one could escape from them only in order to enter immediately into another space, that of pure inanity. The social-historical institution as such, and each institution of a society, always will be/will appear therefore, as to the real as well as to the rational, *arbitrary* and *unmotivated* in its essential elements. It is creation, which could never find necessary and sufficient conditions outside itself, would it only be because the thought of the necessary and sufficient conditions is only a minuscule byproduct of the social-historical institution. It is a making-be, manifestation of the radical imaginary.

~

In what sense, then, can one say that it would also be “natural” because it would rest “on the polymorphism of the wild Being”? Let us limit ourselves to noting the naturalness of Being as it is thus incidentally affirmed, and let us ask

ourselves what could be meant here by “resting.” If this signifies a simple negative condition—that, within limits so broad that they have no interest, an indefinite number of different social-historical institutions of a public world is possible, that the diversity of modes of institution of society refers us back ineluctably to a plasticity or lability of a “substrate” that reveals itself, each time, in and through this institution—this is evident (which certainly in no way dispenses us from having to explore this evidence). If, however, this signifies that across these diverse simultaneous and successive institutions is deployed and actively expressed a polymorphism that could not, save by a fallacious tautology, be made into the materialization of possibilities fully preconstituted “elsewhere” and since an intemporal “always”—then it must very well be understood that it is the entire outlook of the inherited ontology that is being abandoned, along with the implicit but always sovereign signification of: Being. For, we no longer then can make of this polymorphism the polymorphism *of* something acquired and *de jure* already determined or determined in itself, *kath’ auto*; this polymorphism is emergence of the other; the forms—the *eidē*—far from being exhausted, surge forth as new and original—and thereby the “relationships” between “already given” forms are retroactively modified. The signification “to be” implied in *being* [*étant*]*—the on hē on or the einai of the on—no longer can be thought, save under a provisional or path-breaking heading [à titre provisoire ou de cheminement], on the basis of appearing, phainesthai, of presence-for, any more than on the basis of self-sameness [soi-ité], autotēs, of self-presence, or, more generally, on the basis of any presence whatsoever. For, presence is an excrescence of the requisite of determinacy, that is to say, of de jure achievable determinability—therefore a determinability achieved since*

the intemporal always. Presence has never been anything else but coincidence (implicitly and not consciously posited very early on in Greco-Western ontology), the impossible identity of a now-instant and an intemporal “eternity.”⁷ Perhaps one day will be discovered a pre-Socratic fragment containing the phrase: *nun to aei* (the always is now). In any case, the thinking of being canceled itself out as soon as it became the thinking of determination, that is to say, as soon as it attempted to make ontology be absorbed by logic—as soon as it tried, not to suspend temporality provisionally by transcendental hypothesis, but truly to suppress it. More clearly than everywhere else—more clearly still than in the second-order, derived character of time found in Plato’s *Timaeus*⁸—this may be seen in the determination of the Being of being [*l’être de l’étant*], of *ousia*, by Aristotle, as *to ti ēn einai*, what it was to be, what it had to be. The essence or *ousia* of the being [*étant*] consists in its being-something-determinate (*ti*: the *what...*), and this determination, determined since always in the imperfect of eternity (*ēn*), determines it forever through the infinitive of eternal finality (*einai*).

Into the essence of the being thus fixed are contracted originally the fact of being and the being-thus, since nothing *is* except in being and from the fact that it is a *determinate this*: the *ti* of the *ti ēn einai* is indissociably the interrogative of the determination (*ti estin?*) and the definitive of the being-something (*esti ti*). *To ti ēn einai*: what, since always, that [*cela*] was determined forever to be and which thus makes it that that [*que cela*] is in being this. This contraction of a past

⁷See [IIS](#), 201 and 387, n. 47.

⁸[IIS](#), 186-201.

beyond every simply past (bygone [*révolu*]) past and of a future exceeding every conceivable future, which Aristotle forces to meet by teleological fulguration (every teleology uses time only in order to abolish it: the *telos* immanent to becoming signifies literally that the end is posited before the beginning, and that temporality is purely external), like the conflation of the grammatical significations of the insignificant and infinite vocable *ti*, which materializes the conflation of the *Dass-sein* with the *Was-sein* and through which Aristotle ultimately affirms that to be signifies to be something determinate (since always and forever), explain the apparently insurmountable difficulties and the indefinite commentaries of very learned and very competent translators confronted with this little expression whose Greek construction [*facture*] has nothing exceptional or mysterious about it. The least bad translation into modern language is undoubtedly the one Heidegger offered when speaking of *Geschick des Seins*: that to which (something) was destined or assigned [*approprié*] by Being and that makes that it is. This fidelity, as involuntary as it is unexpected, to the spirit of Aristotle, in spite of so many electoral proclamations, undoubtedly should make one reflect again on the question of “ontological difference” and of its possibility.



If one comprehends the deep-seated, and almost fatal error implied in this assimilation of “the” ultimate or initial signification—the signification: “to be”—to destination, assignment [*appropriation*], determination, therefore predetermination (all of them interminably being coined as presence of the cause in its effects, immanence of the end to the origin, and so on) as expressed in this tiny syntagma—to

ti ēn einai, what it was to be—one will also comprehend the propaedeutic utility, and the limitations, of the following proposition: the essence of the being is the *to ti estai einai*, the what it will be to be. This formulation is of some utility inasmuch as it shatters determinacy and, in place of fixing the *einai* in the *ēn* of destination, deports it into an *estai* of open alterity. This utility is only propaedeutic and limited, however, inasmuch as it helps to shake up the traditional thought of Being-achieved but does so only by inverting the signs within a temporality that risks, in turn, becoming *the given*, and being thought as a positivity whose fulfillment is constantly deferred. These risks can be reduced (but never eliminated) by means of an exploration of temporality, which will be done elsewhere.

If, therefore, we want to think “the polymorphism of the wild Being” in relation to the being of the social-historical and as something other than an external description; if we want, starting from the mode of being of this being that is the social-historical, to shed further light on the signification of: to be, we ought to say that, in truth, this signification is: to-be [*à-être*]. But then, also what Merleau-Ponty calls Being—namely, the reciprocal inherence of “that which” is and of “the manner in which” it is—can no longer be thought as Being-given, Being-achieved, Being-determined, but as continued creation, perpetual origination, which concerns not only “concrete existents,” and is not reproduction of other exemplars of the same, but also and essentially the forms, the *eidē*, the relationships, the types, the generalities, which we are therefore unable in any way to exhaust within the horizon of any sort of determinacy whatsoever, be it real or rational, and which we see at work in its most eminent manner in human history. But then, neither can we say without equivocation that “everything is natural in us”: to call

“natural” the obligatory perception of another as traffic cop, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, or representative of Christ on Earth is to force the meaning of words. We can say that everything is natural in us (and outside us) on the condition that we no longer refer to a *phusis*, the production of what is in the repetition of what has been according to given norms, but rather to a *hyperphusis* as an engendering irreducible to the engendered, ontological genesis, emergence of *other* types, *other* relations, *other* norms.

If perception is, as it incontestably is, “cultural,” namely, social-historical; if, therefore, some nontrivial components of perception, of perceiving, are instituted (for that which relates to the mode of being of the “natural” object as well as for some formative schemata of perceiving—such as perspective, to take an example often cited by Merleau-Ponty), that already leads to a radical condemnation of the entire egological frame of reference within which, and within which alone, perception has until now and has always been considered. We are then obliged to question ourselves about the ways in which and the means by which the institution of the social, *qua* institution of a public world, forms thus or otherwise the subject’s perception—and, what is most important, to do so without our being able to refer to an allegedly “natural” perception, or perception “outside culture” that would furnish us the *tertium comparationis* relative to which such and such a historical specification of perception would appear as a “variant” demanding, and capable of, explanation. In other words, our situation with regard to perception ceases to be essentially different from our situation with regard to tongues. In the latter situation, we are equally obliged to explore the ways in which different tongues take on a specificity, relative to a saying, that is something entirely

other than a “deviation” from or a “variation” of the *same* universal saying, and that nevertheless does not prevent them all from saying each other, or from being, in a certain sense, mutually participable. And here it is a question not of a comparison but rather of a profound homology, for neither logically nor psychogenetically is it possible to separate the acquisition of perception *qua* “cultural” perception—that is to say, *qua* perception *tout court*—and acquisition or appropriation, by the subject, of its tongue. It boils down to the same thing to say that it is impossible to separate the organization of the public world posited by the society under consideration from its manifest presentation-representation that is language.

Thus may it be seen that neither “perception,” nor anonymous visibility, nor, finally, even the notion of flesh or reciprocal invagination, inherence, or reversibility of the visible and the invisible allows one to “resolve,” or even to think more clearly, the question of the world, or to shortcircuit the problems the philosophical tradition was attempting, without success, to aim at by using the terms of In Itself or of ideality. They even render these problems more acute. For, if there is no separability of the visible and the invisible; and if the invisible is something entirely other—as it is, quite evidently, for Merleau-Ponty—than system of essences or network of ideal relationships, given once and for all and serving as a pivot for perceiving and sensible appearing; if it ineliminably includes language, significations, thought, “subjective lived experiences,” “social structures,” “musical ideas,” and “cultural beings,” then I cannot guarantee myself of any “communication” of the visible in and through the visible, all communication essentially passes also through the “invisible” and therefore also through the subjective and social imaginary, the semblance of

indubitableness “solid reality” seems to offer vanishes, to the distinction of private world and public world comes to be added the distinction, infinitely weightier, of an indefinite number of different “public” worlds among different cultures, and, *on this terrain*, it is hard to see how *the world tout court*, on which this polymorphism of historical cultures would “rest,” could have any status other than that of being In Itself, any meaning of being that would not be ideality. For, I can then only say, once more, that each culture “reaches it but does not exhaust it,” which makes of it, here again, an inexhaustible provisioning certainly, but one already given, of which each culture is partially revelatory, and which therefore truly is apart from them all—in a “Where?” and a “When?” that can be only the no-place and the non-instant, illocality and intemporality, the *aei* of the In Itself and of ideality (with, as ultimate fallacious recourse, a transfinite Hegelianism reuniting the In Itself and the For Itself in a totality, again purely and doubly ideal, of all possible cultures).

Neither the suppression of representation nor any other philosophical artifice will ever allow one to annul the distance between private world and public world, or between such and such a public world and another such one, to reduce one of them to the other (little matter which to which), or to reunite them by the (purely nominal) invocation of a world that would “precede” them. For, to want to annul this gap is literally to want to annul the *there is*, since the *there is* is only in and through alterity, and the “differentiation” or the “modulation” that brings together the blue of a star and the meridian blue of the Mediterranean or makes the one be by way of the other is still almost nothing compared to the alterity that separates me from the being closest to me, whom I am trying to think in this moment of the tumult of universal

theory, a *n'dop*⁹ of a day of dialogue in the Academy and of a night in the cellar of Lubyanka prison. Now, this alterity can truly be alterity only inasmuch as *some other makes itself be*.

The gap between private worlds obviously is not abolished by the institution, each time, of a public world; rather, as we shall see, the public world is what it is and is *tout court also* because it achieves each time this miracle, that of arranging and assuring the possibility of an indefinite number of different and indefinitely renewed private worlds, which are for its existence and its functioning something entirely other than an external boundary or a heap of formless shavings. It remains the case that this public world *is* only in being instituted; it is social-historical creation as such, and even coexistence and succession of such creations. One cannot limit oneself simply to noting this fact while continuing to talk as if nothing had changed.

~

Let us open a parenthesis here, which no longer concerns Merleau-Ponty. If the public world is each time instituted, the first consequence that follows therefrom is the inanity of every attempt aimed at *constituting* it in one way or another, and, in a typical and even ineluctable fashion, starting from an *ego* that necessarily is a *solus ipse*. The situation of the philosopher when he proceeds thus—and which Husserl last incarnated in exemplary fashion—cannot but be strikingly noticeable. At no moment does he seem to suspect that, had the riddle he poses to himself not already been settled in fact, it would not exist for him any more as a

⁹A West African magical healing ritual.

riddle than he would, himself, exist as someone for whom there is a riddle—which certainly in no way abolishes it as a riddle, but does mark off and irrevocably condemn certain exploratory “paths.” In merely probable university lecture halls he gives courses to students who, as *ego*, are redundant and, as *alter*, impossible; furthermore, nothing guarantees that they perceive the sounds he emits or that they are not thinking that they are attending a course given by David Hume. He interminably attempts a *constitution*, which signifies: he tries to undo [*défaire*] completely the *institution* that makes him exist as thinking subject, in order to remake [*refaire*] it starting from the pure activity of thought that would owe nothing to anything and everything to itself. Of course, he undoes hardly anything at all, incapable as he is, for example, of undoing language (*this* language, German in its *de facto* state at the time) while continuing to think. He discovers, finally, at the age of seventy, that he is caught in a *Lebenswelt* and even in a history, and that all the significations with which he is dealing have been instituted or presuppose other ones that have been so. He then falls into this other bit of naivety, still conditioned by the same egological phantasm, that of the “reactivation” of this bygone institution—as if the Ocean of significations in which he bathes could ever be remade in an originary reactivation, as if it could be the product of a few acts of consciousness signed, dated, and lending themselves to “reactivation,” as if the idea that there might ever be “reactivation,” reproduction by a consciousness of the ontological genesis of significations such as other, tongue, norm, society, were not disqualified in its very enunciation.

Such naivety is nevertheless inevitable, inasmuch as he never thinks except within the egological coordinates of the *cogito*. He remains caught up therein even when he tries, in a last effort, to break free therefrom, for then he speaks of

“transcendental subjectivity as intersubjectivity,”¹⁰ an expression that appears mysterious to other philosophers but which one must not hasten to condemn. For, indeed, on the one hand, starting from the moment one is really obliged to grant, despite thirty years (and thirty centuries) of efforts, that the *alter ego* resists constitution and subsists as a brute aporia, “transcendental subjectivity” no longer can be individual subjectivity, nor can its “constitution” be carried out within the framework of the latter; similarly, once it is admitted that tongue is neither accidental nor external to thought, this subjectivity is no more “subjectivity” than it is thinkable as simply “transcendental”—for, how is one to distinguish in tongue what is “transcendental,” and necessary and sufficient to pure expression, to the saying as such of something in general, from what is “empirical” or “contingent” to this-here tongue spoken by these-here people in order to speak their world? Understood in the necessity of the path that leads to it, translated from the tangled language of philosophical egotism into more direct language, the phrase “transcendental subjectivity is intersubjectivity” signifies the following: “transcendental subjectivity” is sociality-historicity, the “site” in which a thought can intend the true and in which the idea of the true emerges is an indefinite and anonymous collectivity in and through its social-historical institution—therefore: “transcendental subjectivity” is non-subjectivity and non-transcendental. The phrase appears mysterious

¹⁰T/E: While Merleau-Ponty presents this phrase several times in his writings as an actual quotation from Husserl’s unpublished MSS, it has been judged merely a “seeming quotation” by Herbert Spiegelberg in *The Phenomenological Movement*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 1971), p. 557, n. 1 (see also *ibid.*, p. 517, n. 1). It certainly has gained considerable currency since then among many phenomenologists and others.

because it signifies the negation of what it says.

The inseparability of speaking and of thinking, clearly affirmed by Merleau-Ponty as early as his *Phenomenology of Perception*, is more than confirmed in *The Visible and the Invisible*—"as soon as we distinguish thought from speaking absolutely we are already in the order of reflection," he writes (130). It is, however, to this same order of reflection that the distinction, taken as absolute, of thinking-speaking and of perceiving pertains. If it is true, as Merleau-Ponty wrote (*The Prose of the World*, p. 42), that language could not take "root" except "in a sensible world which had already ceased to be a private world," it is just as true, and for the same deep-seated reasons, that it is only by means of language that the sensible world has been able to cease to be a "private world." Again, this expression here becomes abusive, since it is in truth not possible to think of a "private world," after which there would be a public world. It is, in any case, evident that the institution of a public world cannot but be at the same time and indissociably institution of language and institution of perception in the full sense of the term, which implies "things" in a "world." If, however, this is the case, one cannot speak of an "'amorphous' perceptual world" (*V.I.*, 170), except as a limit concept pertaining to reflection or *ens rationis*, or of the "perceived world" as "an order where there are non-language significations" (171), for one will never effectively be able to strike from this perceived world what language has contributed to its organization. The problem is not that of "the passage from the perceptual meaning to the language meaning, from behavior to thematization" (176)—a formulation that, one more time, implies some sort of "priority" for perception; it is rather that of the passage from a "before," indescribable and yet quite indubitable, to perception *and* to language, a perception and a language that

can be neither confounded nor dissociated.

The “prelinguistic Being” that speech “does not modify...first” (202) is only a reflective abstraction, supported by the continued phenomenological illusion that makes the philosopher believe that he might be able to find in perception a “pure lived experience” of perception. For, as Merleau-Ponty says in the same Note, it is in effect “the same being that perceives and that speaks” (not in the sense that sometimes it perceives and sometimes it speaks, but that it perceives only *qua* speaking and speaks only *qua* perceiving), though that in no way entails that, because of this fact, seeing and feeling would become “the ‘thought of seeing and of feeling,’ the Cogito, the consciousness of...” (*ibid.*). The Cartesian-Husserlian tangent is here presented as the fatal trajectory of thought—at the same time that one sees the defense against this illusory fatality overdetermine Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical decisions: we *ought* to posit a prelinguistic (because prereflective) Being, under penalty of performing Cartesian hard labor for life. Yet, no more than perception’s inherence in speech would suffice to make of speech a seeing and feeling of thoughts would the inherence of language in the world of perception be able to dissolve the world into a simply thought-spoken world or reduce its being to being-thought: this reduction could have a semblance of justification only for someone who has previously decided that, as soon as a thing is thinkable, its being boils down to its being-thinkable and, reciprocally, that it is only inasmuch as it is reducible to its being-thinkable that anything whatsoever is. In still other terms, that to be signifies that, and only that—to be capable of occupying the place of suspension points in the incomplete syntagma: consciousness of....



When one gauges what speaking means, everything on which speech depends, and everything that it conveys, the inherence, in perceiving, of speaking-thinking is nothing other, in a sense, than the shakeup of the distinction, posited as absolute, between real and imaginary (or between the “natural” and the “cultural”). Merleau-Ponty affirms this shakeup in a Note of May 1959 titled “Transcendence of the Thing and Transcendence of the Phantasm.” Returning to the criterion of the “*observable*” already laid down elsewhere,¹¹ he writes: “But the thing is not really *observable*: there is always a skipping over in every observation, one is never at the thing itself. What we call the *sensible* is only the fact that the indefinite [succession] of *Abschattungen precipitates*—But, conversely, there is a precipitation or crystallization of the imaginary, of the existentials, of the symbolic matrices—.” What does “there is always a skipping over in every observation” mean if not that I see by means, also, of that very same thing [*cela même*] that I do not see—not only in the sense that I see within a horizon, or that the thing is “inexhaustible,” which is a banality, but in the sense that I always “see” more than I see and, moreover, than I am? And yet, during the same period (May 20, 1959), he says, “Inadequacy of the Bergsonian representation of a soul that conserves everything (*this makes it impossible that the perceived-imaginary difference be a difference in nature*)” (194, emphasis added). Here again, certainly, there is a wavering over the meaning of “imaginary,” but how can one avoid seeing that this wavering expresses the ambiguity of the thought?

¹¹See the quotations provided above, 215-18.

This ambiguity reaches fullness in a Note of November 1960 titled “Dream. Imaginary” (262-63). After having noted that “the *other stage* [scène] of the dream” remains “incomprehensible” in every philosophy “that *adds* the imaginary to the real—for then there will remain the problem of understanding how all that belongs to the same consciousness,” Merleau-Ponty writes that the imaginary must be understood “not as a *nihilation* that *counts as* observation but as the true *Stiftung* [institution] of Being of which the observation and the articulated body are special variants.”¹² One will agree that it would be difficult to go any further. Nevertheless, reality, the body, and the sensible live a hard life, for these formulations would still have to be read starting from the affirmation that precedes them: namely, that one must “understand the dream starting from the body: as being in the world without a body, without ‘observation’, or rather with an imaginary body without weight. Understand the imaginary...through the imaginary...of the body...,” and of the one that follows them: “the dream is *inside* in the sense that the internal double of the external sensible is *inside*, it is on the side of the sensible wherever the world is not—this is that ‘stage,’ that ‘theater’ of which Freud speaks, that place of our oneiric beliefs—and not ‘the consciousness’ and its image-making [*imageante*] folly.”

Why must one at any price understand the imaginary starting from the “imaginary of the body”—and how could one ever assign to this expression a meaning proper to it? What is at issue here is not, of course, accounting for the “content” of the dream by the sense-filled [*à teneur sensible*]

¹²T/E: It is Castoriadis who (rightly) adds the word “institution” in brackets here, and “institution” and “originary institution” in later quotations from Merleau-Ponty that use the German word *Stiftung*.

imagery entering into it (which is at once always tautologically possible and always radically absurd) but accounting for the *mode of being* of the dream, for the ontological region to which it belongs and that it *makes be*. Now, to speak of an “imaginary body without weight” is either to use a gratuitous metaphor that risks introducing confusion (in psychoanalysis one speaks of the “imaginary body” as the second-order, derived product of the functioning of the psyche) or else to define, one more time, the imaginary by negation, as did Sartre who was justly criticized by Merleau-Ponty on this score. The dream, however, is not a negation, nor is it a flip side or mode of the “internal double”: the dream *is* and it is dream, it is everything to begin with. Here it must be stated that the philosophical import of the Freudian discovery has, once again, been missed—and it is missed just as much when Freud is accused of “positivism” (196 and n. 34; 231-32) as when he is presented as having practiced a “philosophy of the flesh” (269-70).

The dream is as dream. It is on the mode of pure presentation, of the emergence of images that, taken as such and such as they “give themselves,” come from nowhere and go nowhere, make themselves of themselves and abolish themselves (as *these* images) in producing themselves (as *these other* images). It is as presentation for *no one*—or, what boils down to the same thing, presentation in which the difference between the image and the one for whom there is image has no “weight.” It is, finally, for us not to stray from the essential, presentation in which *all* determinations, including the most elementary, of the traditional *noein-einai* can find themselves shaken up and canceled out. It is this, first of all and interminably, that is to be thought in Freud—and that, as one must really fear, a philosopher’s entire organization forbids him from thinking. What Freud

has contributed to thought as new and solid material (and little matter what he himself, child of tradition, might explicitly have thought about it) is neither repression, nor interpretation, nor sexuality, nor Thanatos (and still less, obviously, the Oedipal triangle, as a few of today's impostors stupidly repeat). What he has contributed lies, in the first place, in the following two short phrases: "Nothing allows one to distinguish, in the psyche, reality from a representation cathected with an affect,"¹³ and "The Unconscious knows nothing of time [which signifies here temporal order] and contradiction."¹⁴ It would be a salutary propaedeutic exercise for those who want to philosophize to try to think starting from the following few working hypotheses:

- to be = representation cathected with affect;
- logic of being = "contradictories" are compossible, no necessary relation is known, and the before-after is devoid of signification;
- mountains, pebbles, sea shells, tables, etc. = bric-à-brac fabricated by social "consciousness" and its "reality-making [*réalisante*] folly."

¹³T/E: In his September 21, 1897 letter to Wilhelm Fliess, Freud states "there are no indications of reality in the unconscious, so that one cannot distinguish between truth and fiction that has been cathected with affect" (*SE* 1: 264; in *IIS*, 292, the English-language translator had merely translated the French for this quotation without furnishing a full citation, since none was provided by Castoriadis). In the same endnote tied to this quotation (*IIS*, 401, n. 26), Castoriadis also cites "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning," *GW* 8: 230ff.; in English, *SE* 12: 218ff.

¹⁴T/E: "There are...no negation, no doubt, no degrees of certainty [in the Unconscious]." "Reference to time is bound up...with the work of the system Cs" (*GW* 10: 286; in English, *The Unconscious*, *SE* 14: 186, 187).

This exercise is not, however, to be counseled lightly. For, given the constitutional hemianopsia with which those who take up philosophy so often seem to be stricken, it is to be feared that they would no longer be able to think *anything but* that, just as until now they have been able to think *only* the contrary.

But in any case, it is this ontological region, in its own specificity, in its mode of being inseparable from its being—thus, that we have to recognize in the dream and, more generally, in the Unconscious, that we ought to think, to begin with, as such and for itself without reducing it in advance to something else, without wanting at any price to eliminate, by crushing its specificity, the interminable question it poses for us both in itself as well as through its “coexistence” with “reality” and diurnal *noein-einai*. Now, it is this specificity that is crushed, pulverized, if we make of the dream something that is “*inside*” in the sense (near or far) “that the internal double of the external sensible is *inside*.” For, inasmuch as it is precisely an “inside” without an “outside,” the specificity of the dream is that it is neither “inside” nor “outside”; it abolishes, in and through its mode of being, the “inside” and the “outside” that can be reintroduced here only inasmuch, as a matter of fact, as one remains prisoner of a philosophy *of* consciousness, which has as its apparently paradoxical, but in truth obvious, consequence the misrecognition of “consciousness” itself.

Everything happens, in effect, as if one had to maintain at any price a privilege for the “sensible,” and as if one were hoping thus to contaminate the dream with a little bit of borrowed reality—which, furthermore, would absolutely have to be denied to “‘consciousness’ and its image-making folly.” Folly, however, has never prevented anyone from existing. Would one therefore have finally

discovered a *nichtiges Nichts* in the person of consciousness and its image-making folly? Would one have finally become capable of putting one's hands on the unique thing that, all the while being there and being capable of being an object of discourse, would be Absolute Nothingness and would be seen to be refused entry onto the "grand register"? If, however, a single person just once was able to think of the expression square circle, to take herself for what she is not, or to treat someone as a pig—that has strictly the same ontological weight as the totality of the visible universe. In the name of what would the "transcendence" granted to the phantasm (191-92; see also: 145-46) be denied, for example, to banal diurnal reverie or to any other form of "representation" in the flattest sense of the term? Would it be perhaps the mystical value, the *sacred* aureola of the phantasm *qua* unconscious that would fix here a fallacious hierarchy of being, which is impossible to swallow from a psychoanalytic perspective?

~

Nevertheless, in this domain too, Merleau-Ponty succeeds in seeing what is to be seen: "In general: Freud's *verbal* analyses appear incredible because they are realized in a Thinker. But they must not be *realized* in this way. Everything takes place in non-conventional thought" (March 1960, 241). Or: "The Freudian idea of the unconscious and the past as 'indestructible,' as 'intemporal' = elimination of the common idea of time as a 'series of *Erlebnisse*'... —Restore this life without *Erlebnisse*, without interiority...which is, in reality, the 'monumental' life, *Stiftung* [institution], initiation" (April 1960, 243). And even more:

The soul always thinks: this is in it a property of its state, it cannot not think because a *field* has been opened in which *something* or the *absence* of something is always inscribed. This is not an *activity* of the soul, nor a production in thoughts in the plural, and I am not even the author of that hollow that forms within me by the passage from the present to the retention, it is not I who makes myself think any more than it is I who makes my heart beat. From there leave the philosophy of *Erlebnisse* and pass to the philosophy of our *Urstiftung* [originary institution]. (November 1959, 221)

It is not a question here, obviously, of reflective thinking but of what we call representing—a representing that is not an “activity” of a conscious (or, more generally, assignable) Ego, and that nevertheless is quite singularizable, since it occurs [*se fait*] “in me.” As to the “*something*” that is always inscribed in this field, let us follow the oscillation to its other end: “Our waking relations with objects and especially with others have an oneiric character as a matter of principle: others are present to us in the way that dreams are, the way myths are, and this is enough to question the cleavage between the real and the imaginary,” Merleau-Ponty wrote in one of the *Themes from the Lectures*.¹⁵ If this is the case, the visible and *its* invisible no longer have any privilege, nor does the experience of “touching oneself touching” have an archetypal value. If the thing and the other share—even to a minimum degree—this “oneiric” character, it is then also only in a quasi-“oneiric” evidential experience that I feel

¹⁵*Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952-1960*, tr. John O'Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 48.

myself being regarded by things, or I recognize in “my green” the green of others.

One of the undoubtedly most important ideas, at least in our view, formulated in the *Working Notes* and, to our knowledge, barely noticed at all to this day, is the denial [*négation*] of “ontological difference” (even though this expression is once or twice affirmed). This denial is all the more remarkable since the attraction for Heidegger is manifest from the beginning to the end of the work. It is not only that Merleau-Ponty writes explicitly: “*One cannot make a direct ontology. My ‘indirect’ method (being in the beings [l’être dans les étants]) alone conforms with¹⁶ being [l’être]—‘negative philosophy’ like ‘negative theology’*” (February 1959, 179), and specifies again, in November 1960: “No *absolute* difference, therefore, between philosophy or the transcendental and the empirical (it is better to say: the ontological and the ontic)” (266). It is, in effect, that the method he calls “indirect” or “negative”—in fact, it cannot be called negative, for there exists no “positive” to which it might be opposed—the aiming at being in the beings, is here (as, moreover, in his previous writings) constantly practiced. Each time—and throughout his thinking life—it is the broaching of a “particular” type of being [*être*], such as it manifests itself in this or that “region,” the familiarity gained or sought after with another being [*étant*], that nourishes and renews his reflection on Being [*être*].

If, however, this is truly the case, how could one ever erect one ontological “region” into the primary region, seek therein an archetype or prototype or simply *the* type of being

¹⁶T/E: Lingis’s translation, slightly altered; his “is alone conformed with” for *est seule conforme à* strikes me as a stretching of English that adds nothing to the meaning of the translation.

[*étant*] *par excellence*, of which the others would be carbon copies, echoes, derivatives, or what you will? Such hierarchies can have, quite obviously, only a second-order, derived sense—to be precise: “ontic” or “empirical,” in the sole usage of these terms that is admissible. Perhaps it makes some sense, when a given tongue is examined, to consider such and such a phenomenon—say, local variations in accent—as secondary in relation to the tongue itself; there is none to saying that a tongue *is* less than *is* a galaxy—or that language *is* less than *phusis*. The practice, the frequentation of *other* types of being [*étant*] acquires its philosophical signification only to the extent that, in unveiling to us hitherto unsuspected types of being [*être*], it leads us to think *otherwise*, less unilaterally, the meaning of: to be. It loses it—and is transformed into a generally fallacious scholastic exercise—if it proceeds from the ready-made decision, whether performed consciously or not, to annex in one way or another (“ontologically” or “ontically”) every new region to the region that has already been explored, to reduce every new object to the type of being and to the determinations that are already available elsewhere. To paraphrase Cineas once again, it is not worth one’s while to explore history if one does so in order to rediscover there perception such as we are already able to have it.

Nevertheless, against one dimension of his practice *and* of this theory, this is what Merleau-Ponty ultimately practices *and* enunciates on the theoretical level: in order to see that there is “an absolute” of philosophy, he writes, one must succeed “in making of philosophy a perception, and of the history of philosophy a perception of history” (188). Still more, “one will not clear up [*résoudra*] the philosophy of history except by working out [*résolvant*] the problem of perception” (196). In spite of the theme of “reversibility,” the

idea that, assuredly, one cannot advance henceforth in the comprehension of perception except inasmuch as one advances in the “philosophy of history” (and also, for example, in the comprehension of the Unconscious)—this idea, however obvious, is not on the horizon. To be sure, perception in *The Visible and the Invisible* is no longer perception in its everyday sense, nor even that found in the *Phenomenology of Perception*; the meaning of the term has been extended immensely. But as a matter of fact, it has been extended so much so that one is obliged to ask oneself why, ultimately, it is *this* term that continues to be employed. When there is perception “of philosophy” and “of other philosophers,” when one wants to make a “theory” of “comprehension” (188) that is only a reprise, regarding a different object, of the theory of perception, then perceiving signifies no more than *vernehmen* (which yields *Vernunft*), or the archaic *noein* (which yields *nous*), that is, feeling that something is there. Then I could in effect speak of perception of the dream, perception of universal history, perception of the meaning of the theorem that “every finite body is commutative.” Then, too, perceiving signifies, “simply”: relating oneself to anything whatsoever, or, if one prefers: giving oneself anything whatsoever, and I cannot prevent the identity perception = being from also being read: being = perception.

Immediately, however, the abstract universal falls back, if one may say so, onto its feet, it acquires a particular meaning, and, unless it is an empty tautology, equality means: to be; this is perception in a sense that is already given elsewhere, already known, more “familiar” to you and to me—in short, in a sense that *has to do* with what everyone understands by perception. One cannot extend to infinity the meaning of a term without anything coming to limit it through

genuine alterity, for the place of such a term that immediately resorbs every limit, being necessarily unique, is already caught up in philosophical language, and no doubt forever. It is precisely: to be. Either perception is a redundant (and misleading) synonym for the relationship to being or else *there is*, originarily and on the same ontological level, an irreducible *other* (one or several) of perception, *others* irreducible to perception.

That such an extension could not remain without consequences is what we have tried at length to show. Let us summarize its signification: the transgression of the genuine “ontological difference,” a transgression that is always impossible and always, it seems, inevitable, is once again repeated here. A “class” of particular beings [*étants*], a given mode of being [*être*] is posited, implicitly or explicitly, as *being more* [*plus étant*] (*mallon on*) than every other and *therefore* as the being [*étant*] *par excellence*—*ens realissimum*—and *therefore* as the sole genuinely or beingly being [*étantement étant*] (*ontōs on*) and *therefore* as ontological type or model and *therefore* as sole possible explication and explicit expression [*explicitation*] of the meaning of: to be. If you want to know what being truly means, think of—or look at—what *truly* is: the *agathon*, God, Reason, matter, flesh. From then on, there is ontic resorption, the eminent being [*étant*] becoming *ens entium*, “source,” “origin,” “substrate,” “cause,” or “model” of all that does not share its intense and primary reality (or else *Inbegriff* and “grand register,” Spinoza’s substance, or Merleau-Ponty’s Being), but also, something that is weightier, ontological resorption, the meaning of: to be no longer being maintained open and maintained as the very opening of meaning, but fixed as meaning (be it infinite) of *this* being [*étant*] and starting from it.

This extension, however, undoubtedly could not be without philosophical motives. We cannot attempt to comprehend the signification of the extension of the meaning of “perceiving”—equivalent to a restriction of the meaning of being—except by considering what it overestimates [*majore*] and what it underestimates [*minore*] in the field that was that of the author, among the “objects” that offered themselves to him and whose philosophical importance he had succeeded in sorting out. What is decisive in this regard is not so much what unfolds on the explicit level of discourse, what is or is not thematized (though that remains neither indifferent nor external). Rather, it is above all the imaginary *schema* underlying the thought, the unnameable primordial figure that gives shape [*forme*], that organizes, includes in, and excludes from that which is taken into consideration, allots in the field values, volumes, lights and shadows, animates what will be coined into privileged types of logical operations and into “ultimate” ontological decisions—what might be called the *Ur-phantasie* of the philosopher *qua* philosopher, *his* imaginary, which forms and informs his “perception” of what is and decides his “visible”—and that, like the originary “personal” phantasm, cannot be intended except through its far-off consequences in a hypothetical reconstruction, undertaken at his own risks and perils.

Such a reconstruction is not our purpose here. Let us limit ourselves to noting a few evident facts: constant in Merleau-Ponty is the equal exclusion of the object “in itself” and of the idealism of “essences,” of every “automatic *logos*” as well as of every active constitution in the transparency of a reflective Cogito, which entails his refusal to think of determinacy in its classical modes; just as constant, however, is the search for an “incarnated” signification, for a form of speech that pronounces itself, mute, in the thing, for a before

of speech that would already be speech, for a mixture of activity and passivity, for a given that I do not give myself by act of will but that gives itself if I advance “gently,” and gives itself only in and through its “differences,” all that would already have put us on the path of *Life*, even if Merleau-Ponty had not named it *the flesh*. In no way do we want to diminish the originality of this idea. Beyond metaphors, however, only people, animals, and plants share with Being the qualification of “wild.”

Now, life is the extreme limit that can be attained by movement, difference, agitation [*inquiétude*] while remaining, and as long as they remain, within the boundaries of the identical, of the already given, of the ontologically certain and assured, in short: of the determinate in its richest and most moving form. *Qua* Life, Life wearies not of repeating its interminable circle from birth to the same birth in passing by way of the same death. Life, the flesh subsists, it is the subsistent *par excellence*, it accepts being annihilated in its matter so as to triumph in the conservation of its *eidōs*. It always already has given itself its form. *Anthrōpos anthrōpon gennai*. The flesh procreates of the flesh: it does not create.¹⁷

We, however, have to think creation, a time that is not cyclical, a birth that is not re-birth. We have to think an ontological genesis—an ontology of genesis.

¹⁷I have deliberately left aside here the question of “evolution.” It is, in any case, unthinkable under the heading of “the flesh.” [T/E: The Greek phrase in the previous sentence comes from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* 1070a28: “man (in the sense of humans) begets man.”]

Phusis, Creation, Autonomy*

Phusis

One of the great creative moments of Greek thought, and more specific to Greek thought than anything else, is the distinction and opposition of *phusis* and *nomos*. *Phusis*: the endogenous push, the spontaneous growth of things, that nevertheless is also generative of an order. *Nomos*: the word, usually translated as “law,” originally signified the law of sharing [*la loi du partage*], therefore institution, therefore usage (ways and customs), therefore a convention, and, at the limit, convention pure and simple. That something pertains to *nomos* and not to *phusis* signified, for the ancient Greeks, that this something depends on human conventions and not on the nature of beings. According to the evidence we have, the

*“*Phusis* et autonomie” is a lecture that was first delivered in Florence, Italy, on October 27, 1986. It was originally published in *Physis: abitare la terra*, ed. Mauro Ceruti and Ervin Laszlo (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988), pp. 42-50. Published as “*Phusis*, création, autonomie” in *FAF*, 197-207 (236-49 of the 2008 reprint). [T/E: “*Phusis*, création, autonomie” had also previously appeared in *La Magie contemporaine. L’Échec du savoir moderne*, ed. Yvon Johannisse and Gillet Boulet (Montréal: Éditions Québec/Amérique, 1994), pp. 39-50, preceded by a short introduction, “Castoriadis,” *ibid.*, p. 37. A slightly abridged translation by David Ames Curtis, from the original French typescript, appeared, prior to its publication in *FAF*, as “*Phusis*, Autonomy, and Change,” in *Common Knowledge*, 3 (Winter 1994): 91-99. Reprinted as “*Phusis* and Autonomy” in *WIF*, 331-41. The original introductory paragraph appeared in *WIF*, 331-32. For its publication in *FAF*, the introductory remarks Castoriadis addressed to his Florentine audience in the first paragraph, where he related the themes of his talk to the question the colloquium raised, “How are we to inhabit the Earth?”, were slightly altered. A translation of *FAF*’s modified paragraph appears now at the beginning of the present version, and translations of the section titles introduced in *FAF* have been included.]

opposition was not explicitly formulated until the fifth century BCE, notably by Democritus, but in fact it is immanent to the Greek tongue. This opposition persisted in Aristotle, who really would have liked to overcome it but in truth was unable to do so. It persists even into our time, since we ask about the “naturalness” (though this “naturalness” may be attributed to Reason or to God) of our knowledge, of our laws, of our norms—in brief, of our institutions—as opposed to their “conventionality.” Behind this idea of *nomos*, of law or of human rules, one must understand not, as is said today, the “rules of the game”—a ridiculously superficial expression—but the laws and rules that render us capable, from the very first and radically, of giving ourselves over, or not, to “games” or to anything else. One chooses or does not choose to play bridge or poker—one does not choose to have a language, and *this-here* language. One “chooses,” if you will, to enter or not enter into the “game” of socially instituted reality—but the price of this choice is called psychosis. *Nomos* is our creative imaginary institution by means of which we make ourselves as human beings.

It is the term *nomos* that gives full meaning to the term and project of *autonomy*. To be autonomous, for an individual or a collectivity, does not signify doing “what one likes [*désire*]” or whatever pleases one at the moment, but rather: *giving oneself one’s own laws*. At this point, two questions arise:

- What does being autonomous—giving oneself one’s own law—signify? Does this not contradict the usual idea of law?
- If we make our laws, can we (and ought we) to make just any laws whatsoever?

These two questions can be condensed into one: Is there a nature of law and a law of nature—a *phusis* of *nomos* and a *nomos* of *phusis*? (Let me recall that this formulation would sound paradoxical to the ears of an ancient Greek.) It is here that we reencounter Aristotle and his profound problematic.

For Aristotle, there are *two* essential interpretations of *phusis*. Taken in themselves, and with their full potentiality, these interpretations diverge, and their divergence can become a fruitful new point of departure for us again today.

The first interpretation Aristotle gives of *phusis* is tied to the idea of *telos*, of end or finality: *hē de phusis telos kai hou heneka*, “Nature [is] end and that in view of which [something occurs]” (*Physics* 1.1.194a28-29). This interpretation corresponds to the idea one generally has of Aristotelian philosophy as fundamentally teleological—an idea that is not false, but simply simplifying and “harmonizing.” Every thing is inserted in an immense chain of means and ends, each is always end of an inferior thing and means—condition—of a thing superior in being and in value, up to an ultimate limit I shall mention shortly.

Aristotle’s second interpretation of *phusis*, most often forgotten yet very close to the popular meaning inscribed in the Greek language, is that *phusis* “is the essence of the things that have in themselves, as such, principle of movement [*arkhēn kinēseōs*]” (*Physics* 2.1.192b21),¹ that *phusis* is the “principle of movement existing in the thing itself,” or even that “*phusis* is principle in the thing itself [*arkhē en autō*]” (*Metaphysics* 12.3.1070a8). I have translated *arkhē* in all

¹T/E: Actually, *arkhēn kinēseōs* is found a bit earlier, at 192b14; it is *arkhēs...kineisthai* that appears at 192b21, in the passage Castoriadis is quoting and citing.

these passages as “principle,” but this term equally can and should be understood as “origin.” In this interpretation, to sum up: That is *phusis* (or appertains to *phusis*) which has in itself, which contains in itself, the origin and the principle of its movement. Or, let us say: That is *phusis*, that is nature, which moves itself *of itself* [*s’auto-meut*].

The first interpretation can no longer hold for us. Quite to the contrary: that which has an end would be classed by us almost automatically among artifacts. It is machines that have finalities. To the extent that one cannot prevent oneself from taking into consideration certain finalities of the living being [*le vivant*], one ends up categorizing it as a machine—a “cybernetic” machine, to use the terminology of the last half-century.

Yet one must ask: Can one simply set aside Aristotle’s first interpretation of *phusis*? Should we not reflect more attentively before doing so? I reserved comment, above, on the ultimate *telos*, the final end toward which all *phusis*, according to Aristotle, tends. What nature intends, according to Aristotle, what moves nature, is desire [*orekton*], that is, love in the Greek sense, the Eros [*erōmenon*] of god (*Metaphysics* 12.7.1072a26 and b3)—it is in this respect that god is the “first mover.” The god of Aristotle obviously has nothing to do with the Judaic or Christian God; this god is not interested in the world, it cannot even think the world, for if it were to think the world—an object inferior to itself—it would lose its dignity as god. Aristotle’s god is pure form and pure act, it is thought itself thinking itself—*noēsis noēseōs* [T/E: *Metaphysics* 12.9.1074b34]—and what animates *phusis* is the Eros of this form. Let us leave aside the “hierarchies” and rid this thought of all the scoriae theology, notably Christian theology, has heaped upon it. Let us, as is said in topology, *open* this set, let us break it up and remove the limit

point that is the Aristotelian god. What remains for us is a *phusis* that is Eros: movement toward, push toward *form*, toward the *thinkable*, toward law, toward *eidos*. *Phusis* appears, then, as the *push-toward-giving-itself-a-form*, a push, moreover, that can never completely be accomplished, for, as Aristotle says, there is no *phusis* without matter, and matter is the limit of the thinkable, it is the indeterminate, the formless, the chaotic.

There is, therefore, an Eros of *phusis* with respect to thought—which means: there is a push of nature toward form; *phusis* tends to give itself the most perfect, or (perhaps) the most complex, form possible. *Phusis* is not a “thing” or a “set of things”; *phusis* is the irresistible push of a being [*l’étant*] that tends to give itself a form in order *to be*, a law in order to be determinate, that tends to give itself, perhaps, a “thinkability.” *Phusis* would tend to *form itself*. This thought can be made more specific, precisely by connecting it with our point of departure: the idea of end or finality. For, we have to admit that, beginning at a certain level, starting in a certain stratum of the physically existent, there are beings [*étants*], particular physical beings [*êtres physiques*], what we call living beings [*êtres vivants*], that posit *themselves*, partially, as their own ends. Let us recall that, in part two of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant stated, with the support of arguments that remain valid today, that we cannot think living beings without positing them as their own ends. And for the past few decades, biologists, in order to avoid using the term *teleology*, have spoken instead of *teleonomy*.

We can now return to the second Aristotelian interpretation of *phusis*: that is nature, or that is natural, which has in itself the principle (the origin) of its movement. What is movement? Being myself of Greek origin, and respecting the order of time, I began with Aristotle. Another homage

might be made, to Galileo, the true father of modern physics. However, the great contribution of Galileo, for which he is rightly praised and which permitted (at least with the means available in his day) the mathematization of physics, was at the same time the beginning of a great impoverishment: the reduction of all movements to *local movement*, to translation. The idea was that the only valid knowledge of nature we can have comes from the study of displacements in space and through time of entities that are—internally—absolutely stable. These entities, however, revealed themselves, one after another, to be nonstable. One next spoke of “elementary” or “basic” particles. But, as each new “elementary” entity has proved, in turn, to be composite, physicists are now in the process, quite wisely, of renouncing all such labels; they no longer speak of anything but “particle physics.”

“Movement” is in what is “elementary.” But *what* movement? Here Aristotle can still be of help to us. For Aristotle, movement (*kinēsis*) is not only local movement; movement is *change*, and local movement is only one of the species of movement, alongside the others—generation and corruption and, especially, what he calls *alloiōsis*, alteration. It is only in regeneralizing in this way the idea of movement that we can come to understand the full potential depth of the Aristotelian idea: *that is phusis which has in itself the principle or the origin of its movement* becomes: *that is phusis which has in itself the principle or the origin of its change—of its alteration.*

This idea remains difficult for, in fact inaccessible to, the Moderns—at least, the “classical” Moderns. For them, the principle of movement is outside the things moved, outside even the totality of the moved and the movable, and this principle, transcending the world of mobile things in general, is God. Or, as in the classical materialist version, this

principle of movement is in the totality of things moved—a totality that thus becomes, in some way, transcendent in relation to its parts—and each moving thing, taken in itself, has to be radically inert, that is to say, it has to remain in the state in which it finds itself unless it receives an impulse from another that receives it from another, and so on, without an ascertainable principle or origin of movement: only the total quantity of movement extant in the world—of energy-matter, one would say today—has to be conserved, has to remain constant since always and forever. (It becomes immediately evident that, from this perspective, all change of form, every appearance of a new form, necessarily has to be *reducible* to local movements.)

However, as soon as we take the term *movement* as we ought to take it, both in the Aristotelian text and in truth, as equivalent to change, to alteration, of which local movement is only one particular case, we ought to include under this heading change in form, alteration, transformation. And this last one, transformation, taken in the strongest sense, includes also the *appearance*, the *emergence*, the *creation* of form. We shall therefore say—not in a new “reading” of Aristotle, as the pretentious and pusillanimous jargon of today would have it, but by thinking on our own, starting from the immense questioning to which the Philosopher’s work opens us, and by knowingly transgressing its limits—that *that is phusis which has in itself principle and origin of form*. This amounts to saying: *that is phusis which has in itself principle and origin of creation*—since the sole creation that is of import is that of forms (of laws).

I spoke of transgression. Indeed, my formulation would be unacceptable to the Stagirite. Caught in an ontology of time that is an ontology of eternity (of Platonic origin), Aristotle cannot think a creation of forms as such. Forms are

given once and for all; the form that each time appears is already determined by the essence of the thing under consideration (it *is* this essence). The thing comes about [*advient*], passes from potentiality to actuality, by acquiring the form to which it was “naturally” (*phusei*) destined. This is why Aristotle also calls the essence of the thing, its *ousia*, “the what it was to be” (*to ti ēn einai*), a marvelous Greek expression he himself invented. This could be called the imperfect tense of ontological eternity, and it is used in everyday language: “It was certain that he would break the vase.” Certain since when? Yesterday? The day before yesterday? No, it was certain in general—it was certain for all time. Aristotle says: The essence of a thing is what it was to be, what it had to be, what it was destined to be, what it was predetermined to be. Since when, since what date? Since always and forever; the forms are determined in advance, and this is why the *natura naturans* of the Moderns will never be, in truth, anything but the capacity of particular beings to assume the form for which they are predestined. Thus, Aristotle’s two interpretations of *phusis* are finally, *for him*, absolutely convergent: nature is end, and nature is principle of alteration, or of acquisition of forms—but these forms are the ends preassigned to natural beings.

This convergence leaves, even in Aristotle’s thought, an enormous residue, which is, quite simply, humanity. Man is not only, like every other being, something that has in itself principle of movement—man is *arkhē tōn esomenōn*, principle and origin of what will be (*De Interpretatione* 9.19a7-8). This nonpredetermination of man appears in Aristotle’s hesitations over and aporias concerning the *polis* and right, as well as, in another way, in the ambiguities of his conception of *technē*, but this is not the place to speak about

them.² Let me say only that it is as a matter of fact in the human domain, society and history, that we are able to grasp immediately and clearly the capacity of a class of beings to create alterity, to posit new forms, to make themselves exist in and through new laws. Nevertheless, this particularly strong piece of evidence ought not to narrow the import of the general idea to which we have been led: beings [*les étants*] have in themselves principle and origin of creation of forms, Being [*l'être*] itself is defined by *alloiōsis* in the strong sense of the word—self-alteration, self-creation.

Creation and Autonomy

What is the relationship of all this to the question of autonomy? Let us recall my first question: What, for a being, does being autonomous signify? Autonomy consists in this, that one gives oneself one's own law. What is law? Law is form, it is the universal that governs the particulars, which are relatively indifferent to it. And form is determined/determining, it is in itself something universal. We have just seen, moreover, that the beings of *phusis* have in themselves principle of creation of form.

Here, however, a question of linguistic usage becomes apparent. On the one hand, the term *autonomy* has for a very long time been reserved for the human domain; to this extent, this term is highly charged with signification, and notably with normative connotations: to be autonomous is opposed to being heteronomous. It seems to me practically impossible,

²On the question of politics, I have treated the aporias to which Aristotle's thought leads in my text "Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Us" (1975); on the question of *technē*, see my essay "Technique" (1973). Both now appear in [CL1](#).

and hardly desirable, to alter this usage. On the other hand, I belong to the growing number of persons who think that there is a *self-creation of the living being* (what is most often called, with a certain chasteness, “emergence of forms proper to the living being”). Thus my friend Francisco Varela has been led to speak of “biological autonomy.” I understand what he means, but I fear that this usage, for the reasons already stated, might create confusion, and I propose that one speak instead of the living being’s *self-constitution*—or, again, as formerly in philosophy, of the living being as *being-for-itself*.

We are speaking, of course, of the self-constitution of the living being *qua living being*—not of its matter. We are not saying that the living being gives rise to molecules out of nothing—or even that only the living being can synthesize certain materials (as was held to be so until the synthesis of urea by Friedrich Wöhler in 1828). The living being creates something other and much more important: the level of being we call life, as well as the infinity of modes of being and of laws that bear on life. I take the most striking example: the living being (certain living beings) *creates color*. In nonliving nature, there are no colors—there are only wavelengths. This is forgotten because one remains, still today, under the sway of the “critique of secondary qualities,” and it is thought that, by speaking of wavelengths, color has been “reduced” or “explained,” which is an absurdity. A wavelength “explains” nothing about color; one can at best establish correlations between the two (which themselves are, moreover, problematic, but this is not our problem here). No correlation, however, can account for the quality of blue and of red as such (of the fact *blue* and of the fact *red*) or “explain” why short wavelengths “correspond” to what we see as blue and long wavelengths to what we see as red—rather than the

reverse, or to other “colors” no one has ever seen. The level of being of which I am speaking here is precisely this “subjective” sensation of color—just as, in the human domain, the most “subjective” affects (love, hate, pain, jealousy) show that the human being creates a proper ontological level, its own.

The living being self-constitutes itself [*s’auto-constitue*]; it is for itself; it creates *its* world. It is its own end, whether as individual, as species, as ecosystem matters little (here there are nestings and encasings, which we cannot at present discuss). It creates, each time, a *proper world*. The visual universe of the bee, or of the sea tortoise, is not the same as ours. There is, each time, presentation, representation of something “outside” the living being by the living being and for the living being, after its own fashion—and there is, each time, a bringing into relation of what is thus represented. There is obviously an infinity of things “outside” the living being, but they are *for* the living being only inasmuch as the latter has sampled, formed, and transformed them. In particular, outside the living being *there is no* “information.” Nature is not, for the living being, a garden in which flourishes “information” that it would have but to gather: the living being creates what is, *for it*, information, by giving to an “X” a form and by investing this form with relevancy, weight, value, “signification.” (Here we have an absolutely general principle, good for all forms of the *for-itself*.) The living being *sets into images* and *brings into relation*—it constitutes for itself, in other words, an aesthetic dimension and a logical dimension (both terms taken here in their originary sense)—an aesthetics and a logic, images and relations, that always are intricately involved with one another.

The living being is for itself, it posits itself as self-

finality. And that always implies a minimal *intention*, at least the intention of self-preservation; therefore, also, an *evaluation*, positive or negative, of what the living being presents (represents) to itself; minimally, therefore, also an *affection* of the living being, a mode of being-affected, and the affectation³ of a value to that which is (re)presented—therefore an affect.

Each time we deal with the living being—or, more generally, with the self-constituted for-itself—we invariably find the following three dimensions: those of representation (which is indissociably aesthetic and logical), intention, and affect. And we do indeed find these three dimensions in the four types of self-constituted beings with which we are familiar: the living being, the human psychism, the socially fabricated individual, and particular societies (each one instituted, each time, as distinct from the other ones). We notice at all these levels a relative self-finality, as well as the creation of a proper world. There is, therefore, in effect a cognitive closure (to borrow Varela's term) of the for-itself, and this is why the effort to know it—whether in the case of the living being, the psyche, the individual, or society—requires that one attempt to think it “from within,” that is, from the point of view of its self-constitution. How that can be done is another question, which I cannot enter into here.⁴ Allow me simply to recall a flash of wit from Ernest Rutherford who, responding to someone who had asked him

³T/E: To keep the sense of the original French, the word *affectation* is used here in its obsolete (in English) sense of attribution or assignment, a meaning still in use in the French *affectation*.

⁴T/E: See, for the details in the social-historical field, “The Social-Historical: Modes of Being, Problems of Knowledge” (1987), now in [CL6](#).

how he had been able to guess the laws of alpha radiation, replied, "I asked myself what I myself would have done, had I been an alpha particle."

I now come to the properly human domain. Humanity self-creates itself as society and as history—there is, in humanity's self-creation, creation of the form *society*, society being irreducible to any "elements" whatsoever (to individuals, who themselves are obviously social fabrications, or to the human psychism, which is, as such, incapable of producing institutions and social imaginary significations). This creation takes place "once and for all"—the human animal socializes itself—and also in an ongoing way: there is an indefinite plurality of human societies, each with its institutions and its significations, therefore each also with its *proper world*. This creation occurs—almost everywhere, almost always—within the confines of a very strong closure. In almost all societies known to us, it is impossible to call into question the proper world of the tribe. That is so, not because there are violence and repression but because such questioning is psychically and mentally inconceivable for the individuals fabricated by the society in question. In a traditional society that is highly religious (as all such societies are), to say, for example, "God is unjust" is inconceivable, since justice is one of the attributes (and even, as among the Hebrews, one of the *names*) of God: in such a society, "God is unjust" is as absurd as, in the society of *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, "Big Brother is ungood" would be unpronounceable at the point when Newspeak would have reached the phase of ultimate perfection.

Now, this closure itself undergoes a rupture twice in history—in ancient Greece, in Western Europe beginning in the thirteenth century—and this rupture signifies once again the appearance of a new *form*, unprecedented in the history of

being. Both the democratic movement and philosophical interrogation call back into question society's existing institutions—whether they be laws in the proper sense or the constitution of human representations. We have here a being—the society of the Greek *polis*, certain European societies—that *explicitly* calls back into question and challenges the laws of its own existence, no longer simply a “blind” self-constitution but the elements of an *autonomy*, in the true and strong sense of the term. I say “elements,” for quite evidently we are far from living in autonomous societies and because the project of autonomy—the democratic movement—still has a long road ahead to travel. Nevertheless, we are, from the standpoint of philosophy, confronted here with a type of being that attempts to alter itself explicitly *qua* form—or that attempts to break the closure within which it has hitherto existed. I know of no other definition of philosophical thought, and of thought *tout court*, than the incessant effort to break the closure within which, at the outset, one finds oneself—and which tends, always, to reconstitute itself.

We arrive, therefore, at an idea of autonomy that differs radically from simple self-constitution. We conceive autonomy as the capacity, of a society or of an individual, to act deliberately and explicitly in order to modify its law—that is to say, its form. *Nomos* becomes the explicit self-creation of form, which thus makes it appear both as, still, the opposite of *phusis*—and as one of the latter's points of culmination.

Conclusion

A few words, to finish, on the second question I raised at the outset: If we ourselves, explicitly, make our laws, what laws ought we to make? This is, of course, the entire basis for

the genuine political question, but I cannot discuss it here.⁵ I will limit myself to a few remarks on one objection to democracy its adversaries have not tired, over the millennia, of repeating: How will a society obey its laws if it knows that they are its own [*propre*] work, that they have no extrasocial foundation (“If God does not exist, everything is permitted”—Dostoyevsky)?⁶ The objection is certainly pure demagoguery, for we know well all the horrors to which societies founded on “Revelation” have surrendered themselves (and surrender themselves still). Nevertheless, this objection does refer, in spite of itself, to the genuine question of democracy and autonomy.

If to be autonomous, for the individual as well as for society, is to give oneself one’s own law, this signifies that the project of autonomy opens a search concerning what law I ought (we ought) to adopt. This search always carries with it the possibility of error—but one does not protect oneself against this possibility by the instauration of some external authority, a move that is doubly subject to error and that simply leads one back to heteronomy. The sole genuine limitation democracy can bear is self-limitation, which in the last analysis can only be the task and the work of individuals (of citizens) educated through and for democracy. Such an

⁵T/E: For Castoriadis, “the true object of politics” is “to create the institutions that, by being internalized by individuals, most facilitate their accession to their individual autonomy and their effective participation in all forms of explicit power existing in society” (“Power, Politics, Autonomy” [1988], now in [CL3](#)).

⁶T/E: On controversies surrounding the attribution and translation of this phrase, see Andrei I. Volkov, “Dostoevsky Did Say It: A Response to David E. Cortesi” <https://infidels.org/library/modern/andrei-volkov-dostoevsky/>

education is impossible without acceptance of the fact that the institutions we give ourselves are neither absolutely necessary in their content nor totally contingent. This signifies that no meaning is given to us as a gift, any more than there is any guarantor or guarantee of meaning; it signifies that there is no other meaning than the one we create in and through history. And this amounts to saying that democracy, like philosophy, necessarily sets aside the sacred. In still other terms, democracy requires that human beings accept in their real behavior what until now they almost never have truly wanted to accept (and what, in our utmost depths, we practically never accept), namely, that they are mortal. It is only starting from this unsurpassable—and almost impossible—conviction of the mortality of each one of us and of all that we do, that people can live as autonomous beings, see in others autonomous beings, and render possible an autonomous society.

Complexity, Magmas, History The Example of the Medieval Town^{*}

Perplexities of Complexity

Current discussions about complexity often produce perplexity. This is the case when one encounters definitions of complexity (or “explanations” of its provenance) that appeal to a “very large number of elementary processes” giving rise to complex phenomena. But, as such, a “very large number” certainly does not suffice to take us out of the frames of ensemblistic-identitary logic. This logic, on the contrary, finds therein a highly fertile breeding ground. Neither the set [ensemble] of natural integers \mathbb{N} , a countable infinity, nor the set of real numbers \mathbb{R} , an uncountable infinity, nor the set of the applications of \mathbb{R} in \mathbb{R} , $\mathcal{F}(\mathbb{R}, \mathbb{R})$, of a still higher cardinality, nor the truly monstrous set of applications of vector spaces upon \mathbb{R} of infinite dimension within themselves $\mathcal{F}(\mathbb{R}^{\mathbb{N}}, \mathbb{R}^{\mathbb{N}})$ creates in principle any problems for mathematicians. It is something else if “foundational questions,” which David Hilbert hoped “to exile from the world once and for all,”¹ remain ever open; or if the work (of

^{*}“Complexité, magmas, histoire. L'exemple de la ville médiévale” was first published in a commemorative volume for Yves Barel, *Système et paradoxe. Autour de la pensée d'Yves Barel*, ed. Michel Amiot, Isabelle Billiard, and Lucien Brams (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), pp. 55-73. Reprinted in *FAF*, 209-25 (250-69 of the 2008 reprint). [T/E: The present translation first appeared in [RTI\(TBS\)](#).]

¹T/E: David Hilbert, “The Foundations of Mathematics” (1927), reprinted in *The Emergence of Logical Empiricism: From 1900 to the Vienna Circle*, ed. Sahotra Sarkar (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), p. 228. Translation altered to reflect Castoriadis’s translation from the original German. This time, however, we use “exile” for Castoriadis’s

Kurt Gödel-Paul Cohen) on Georg Cantor's continuum hypothesis has shown that the usual axiomatic systems of set theory (which lie at the basis of all mathematics) are incomplete, thereby opening, *de jure*, the way to an infinity of such "non-Euclidean" (that is to say, non-Cantorian) systems; or if, finally, the quite venerable continuum paradoxes (of Zeno) are, in spite of what is commonly believed, still with us—along with many others. All that, and many other things in mathematics, can and should still (or more than ever) arouse our *thaumazein*, our wonderment/admiration/dread and thereby lead us back to a philosophical reflection that is more indispensable than ever but that introduces no problematic of "complexity." Nothing changes, obviously, if one speaks of *interactions* rather than of *elements*. Rigorously speaking, the very distinction between "elements" and "interactions" is meaningless:² interactions are only elements of sets of a higher type, functional spaces; and mathematicians play around, morning, noon, and night, with functional spaces of infinite dimension.

Now, every collection of *effectively actual* objects necessarily has a *finite* cardinal, and this is independent of the finite or infinite "ultimate reality" of the Universe. For, the part of the Universe accessible to observation will always be finite, and finite, too, will be all the observable or *even*

French, *exiler*; previously—see the fourth note to "Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation" (1973), now in [CLI](#), and [IIS](#), 381, n. 8—he had *eliminer*, "eliminate."

²Just as meaningless are the distinctions, in their usual acceptation, between substance and process, concept and function, which are to be taken up again in a critical way at another level by a philosophical reflection that would take account both of Heraclitus and of contemporary mathematics and physics.

conceivable interactions upon an observable universe. These interactions will never be, in effect, but a combinatory among the sets of parts of *finite* sets. It is not *because* the central nervous system includes 10^9 or more neurons and because the possible connections among these neurons correspond to numbers it would be pointless to try to write down that this central nervous system is different from a group of billiard balls. Let it be said in passing that this is also the reason why the ill-named theories of “chaos” do not, philosophically speaking, offer anything new; they are *intrinsically* deterministic—as is shown by the fact that the processes called, absurdly, *chaotic* can be calculated by, and shown on the screen of, that deterministic machine that is a computer.³

In all these cases, the difficulties are not ones of principle but rather are *de facto*.

Some have also tried to define complexity by the entanglement [*enchevêtrement*] of hierarchical levels. However, this jumble [*enchevêtrement*] creates no unusual problem when the levels are of identical “nature.” The gravitational interactions of a few molecules, a planet, a star cluster, and a galaxy are infinitely complicated—they are not “complex”: the molecules act upon the galaxy, which acts upon the molecules. For a new question to arise, these levels must quite obviously be *irreducible*, or essentially *other*. But whence come these other levels? Let us formulate the question in a way that might be sufficiently irritating for our contemporaries: Can the Same produce the Other?

Often this question is answered by a word: *emergence*. The combination of elements of a given level would be able, under certain conditions, to make an emergent level appear. And one does not seem to worry overmuch about the question

³T/E: See “False and True Chaos” (1993), now in [CL6](#).

of the interactions between this emergent level and the “prior” (or “inferior”) levels.

Nevertheless, the aporias surge forth right away.

If the logic that presides over this emergence is ensemblistic-identitary (for brevity’s sake, *ensidic*) logic, one can understand neither how nor why there would be emergence—namely, something *new*. (By ensidic logic, I am intending the logic that knows only the relationships of belonging, inclusion, implication among propositions, and the logic of first-order predicates.)

Let us take a simple and abusive example. Consider the set of three elements (*e*, *n*, *s*) and the fourfold permutations, with repetition, of these elements, four at a time. There are 81 of them—and, *qua* words in French, none exists or makes sense, save one: *sens* (*meaning* or *sense* in English), as a matter of fact. The example is abusive, for it does not pay heed to the intermediate levels. But it would be easy, though long drawn out, to render this example rigorous. What I want to illustrate here is that *sens*, in its full *sense*, as *word* (at once signifier, signified, and referent), makes be (appertains to) *another ontological* level.

In the second place, let us suppose that a second level emerges. Why would there be *interaction* and therefore also new modes of (inter)*action*? If *A* is a set, U_c an operator (or a family of operators) operating upon *A*, and *B* the set “resulting” from these operations, $B = U_c(A)$ and then U_c (and *A*) “act” upon *B*, and never the reverse. There ought then to be action uniquely from “bottom” to “top,” and never from “top” to “bottom.” Here we have, as one knows, the essence of reductionism. But obviously, there is action from “top” to “bottom”: you insult me and I slap you; an idea comes to me and I write it down.

The “top,” the “emergent” level, the new form (*eidos*)

is seat, origin, and cause or condition of processes that are not even describable in terms of the prior levels—or whose description in these terms has no meaning or interest (for example, the description of a war or of a revolution in terms of the circulation of electrical charges along the participants' neurons, in terms of biological metabolisms, or in terms of quantum interactions). In this sense, the new form is, in turn, *substance*, because origin of processes. Life, for example, is substance, and the quarrel between vitalism and antivitalism is a false dispute: there certainly is not any physically noticeable vital "fluid" or any physicochemical effects of life that would escape the laws of physics and chemistry. There are, however, processes and interactions that exist, that make sense, only in and through life (for example, homeostasis or reproduction). Likewise, the psyche is substance, and so is the social-historical.

To speak of *emergence* serves only to mask the fundamental ontological datum: that there is *creation* in being, or, more exactly, that being is creation, *vis formandi*: not creation of "matter-energy," but creation of forms. For this creation, there are each time some necessary but not sufficient conditions. As for its form, its *eidos*, creation is *ex nihilo*, but it is not *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*.

Why adopt this historically charged term? On the one hand, in order to have done with the subterfuges and sophisms concerning the question of the *new*: either there is creation or else the history of being (therefore also of humanity) is interminable repetition (or eternal return). On the other hand, we choose this term *creation* in order to bring to light the "intrinsically circular" character of the new form's apparition, and therefore the impossibility of "producing" it or "deducing" it from already given elements—for, the "elements" presuppose the form, which presupposes the

“elements.” The now classic example of the DNA-protein “circle” illustrates this fact: the cell’s “program” presupposes the products of its operation—which are such as they are only because there is the “program.”⁴ In social-historical creation, the situation is just as clear. In the eighth century BCE, probably, a new social-historical form, the *polis*, appeared in Greece. But the *polis*—the city—is impossible without *politai*—citizens—who, however, can be fabricated only in and through the *polis*; they are inconceivable outside it. The same thing—although in a much more complex sense—happened in the West around the year 1000, with the creation of new cities (or a change in character of those that already existed): the free borough or market town [*le bourg libre*] is inconceivable without the protobourgeois, who are inconceivable outside the borough or market town.

The idea of creation is certainly opposed to the postulate of a *full* and *exhaustive* determinism. In no way—quite the contrary—does it signify that there would not be any local or sectoral forms of determinism. In a more general sense, local determinism is implied by the idea of creation—since this creation is not creation of just anything whatsoever but rather, each time, creation of a form, of a determinate *eidos*, that has to persist in existence as such, which requires a determinate relationship (though, each time, determinate in its own way) among the successive “states” of this form, and, also, since each form is a multiplicity with determinate relationships (determinate, each time, in their own way) among its components. In other words, the determinate relationship, an eminent form of the ensidic, is, like the

⁴Here I am passing over the abusive use of this term since the early Sixties, as well as passing over the questions that have been raised for some time as to the absolute validity of the “central dogma” of molecular biology.

ensidic itself, everywhere dense in being.

It may seem irritating, or amusing, still to have to discuss with the “positive” scientists of today the postulate of a full determinism—at the moment when these same scientists, or their brethren, are solemnly affirming that the whole universe surged forth from a “quantum fluctuation of the void.” It is worthwhile noting, however, one more point. In his recent work on the self-organization of elementary automata, Henri Atlan takes up again, with new and quite pertinent arguments, the thesis of the underdetermination of theories by the “facts,” that is to say, by available observations (Duhem-Quine). What this thesis—and Atlan’s arguments—also shows, however, is *just as much*, and for the same reasons, the underdetermination of the “facts” (of the “real states”) by the underlying “structures”—in other terms, the underdetermination of “real phenomena” by the *hupokeimenon*, the substrate (or *a* substrate: by definition, no one knows how many of them there are, save in the case of artifacts and within the limited field under consideration in these cases). Now, this obviously contradicts full determinism not only on the epistemological plane but also on the ontological one. Indeed, the argument for the underdetermination of theories by the observed facts boils down to this: each theory assumes a structure subjacent to the observed facts and attempts to reconstitute that structure. One can show, however, by simple arguments and upon simple models, that the number of observable states is much smaller than the number of structures that may have produced them (in other words, a whole class of subjacent structures corresponds to the same observable state). Nevertheless, in the one-to-one [*terme-à-terme*] relationships full determinism postulates, it can be only *one single* structure that, “in reality,” has produced the observed fact—let us say, the structure S_i .

Why is this the structure S_i and not the structure S_j ? If one introduces hidden (or provisionally unknown) parameters that determine this selection of the efficient structure, one only pushes the question back a notch, increasing at the same time the order of magnitude of the gap between what is observed and the substrate (whose characteristics then become more numerous). Thus, the one-to-one relationship postulated by determinism is shattered in the things themselves, and not only in our knowledge of them (a term obviously being capable of being a set, as complicated a one as you please, of terms).

Heterogeneity and Creation

So far, I have attempted to say why certain current attempts at specifying the meaning of “complexity” do not to me seem to be satisfying. I now must state what seems to me to be the reason for this state of affairs. It is to be found, I think, in this, that the phenomena (or objects) considered as “complex” are such because they stem from a more deep-seated and more general characteristic of every object, and of being in general: their *magmatic* character. We shall say that an object is magmatic when it is not exhaustively and systematically *ensidizable*—in other words, reducible to elements and relationships that pertain exclusively and in homogeneous fashion to ensidic (ensemblistic-identitary) logic.

It is easy to convince oneself that every effectively actual object (whether it is a galaxy, a town, or a dream) has this character, with only two apparent exceptions: (1) artifacts considered in their instrumental, and not ontological, aspect alone (a car’s motor) and (2) the various branches of mathematics *cut off* from their axioms, rules for deduction, and so on. (If axioms were ensidizable, they would be

deducible, therefore they would no longer be axioms; if rules for deduction were deducible, there would be an infinite regression, etc.)

Why is it so? Why does not being exhaust itself in the ensidic; why does it always have a poietic dimension, an *imaginary* dimension in the strong sense of the term? Why cannot one calculate by how much *Saint Matthew's Passion* is superior to *La Traviata*? This is not the place to discuss this question—which, moreover, is not liable to an answer but only to an elucidation. But let us take into account a first consideration that can guide us in this elucidation.

I said a moment ago that even mathematics is ensidic only when cut off from its axioms, rules of deduction, and so forth. Let us consider mathematics as a whole (including these axioms, etc.). Mathematics includes a multiplicity of branches (Nicolas Bourbaki distinguishes, for example, algebraic structures, topological structures, and ordered structures). These branches are in a sense heterogeneous (one can go quite far in algebra without having need of topology)—which does not mean that they would not be “combinable.” But also, within each of these branches one can make progress only by positing new axioms, and these, by definition, are not deducible from those that “preceded” them. Whence do these axioms come? Leaving aside here some very profound questions (notably that of the existence “in itself” of a mathematical domain we would be recreating piecewise [*par morceaux*]), we can say that these axioms are, under certain constraints (consistency, independence, possibly completeness), *freely posited* by mathematicians (at least, that is the way things happen in the history of mathematics). In short, the history of mathematics is the history of the creative imagination of mathematicians. And it is this history that appears to us as the proximate cause for the heterogeneity of

mathematical axioms.

Now, when we attempt to reflect upon an effectively actual object, one of the aspects, and one of the most important, of its irreducibility to an ensidic analysis is the *heterogeneity of axioms* at which such an analysis arrives. And the latter refers to a *historical creation*, and in particular to a temporal difference in the surging forth, or the constitution, of the object's strata. It is because there is history in the strong sense—temporality within which sequencing and rupture coexist, where there is creation in the strong sense of something new that does not “digest,” nor can fully be “digested” by, what was already there—that the effectively actual object is magmatic. It is because heterogeneous axioms, principles of alterity, coexist in “the same” that ensidic reduction loses its rights.

History is temporality, and true temporality is the surging forth of other principles. Otherwise, temporality would be mere difference, namely spatiality provided with a supplementary dimension.

Effectively actual objects are magmatic, because they are historical. Being is magmatic, because it is creation and temporality. Was it so at the outset? There is no outset. Being is time (and not “within the horizon” of time).

Heritage, Heterogeneity, and Creation in European History

An initial example is furnished by evolved living organisms. It is more than likely that, as we know them in man, the immune, endocrine, and nervous systems date back to different times in the biological evolution of multicellular organisms. Of course, they now coexist and are coupled with one another in multiple ways. This coexistence leads to what

very well seems to be a tangled hierarchy: but this coupling—a source of genuine complexity—is *also*, in man in any case, a source of *disorder*. Thus, a psychical event (therefore in principle, at least, one whose seat is in the central nervous system) can upset the endocrine (or immune) system, or the reverse. This also shows, let it be said parenthetically, that the psychism can be “cause”—in other terms, this shows its “substantiality.”

A second example is furnished by the psychism as such. There is, with the appearance of humans, creation of a biologically monstrous neoformation: the radical imagination of the singular individual. This radical imagination is essentially defunctionalized. It totally disrupts its simply biological “basis,” cohabiting uneasily with the latter. And it is at the center of the singular human being’s entire history. If, however, this being is to survive, the radical imagination has to be coupled, somehow or other, with what socialization imposes upon it—“logic,” “reality,” and so on—without this socialization ever arriving at fully resorbing the core of the singular psyche’s radical imagination. Throughout the history of the individual (and in psychoanalysis), we are constantly rediscovering the magmatic character of this existent thing [*existant*]. Thus, somehow or other coupled together and culminating in a “normal” or “pathological” sort of behavior, the psychical monad and the enveloping strata its socialization has imposed upon it—or the oral, anal, and genital dimensions; or libido and destructive drive—coexist and remain forever inextricably intricated.

Yet, undoubtedly nowhere else can we notice so strikingly the magmatic character of effectively actual objects than in the social-historical domain. The examples I shall offer are drawn from *strongly* historical societies—both because, in these cases, our ignorance is lesser and because

the phenomenon in question is much more clearly apparent there. (It is not an accident that “Structuralism,” an illegitimate attempt to reduce the social to trivial ensidic relationships, tackled almost exclusively savage societies—which, on account of both our ignorance of their history and the ultraslow rhythm of their historicity, give Structuralism, at first sight, a certain amount of plausibility.)

Let us consider the modern “European” world. “Analysis” of the imaginary institution of this world detects therein several diverse and basically heterogeneous principles of historical origin, which survive therein and are, somehow or other, “coupled” with one another. It is practically impossible, and in any case futile, to place them in “chronological” or “logical” order. This world was born with the collapse of the Roman Empire and the establishment of the “barbarian” Germanic kingdoms. The small Germanic tribes contributed to this world their own “principles,”⁵ in particular the social imaginary significations of the “corporation” and of the tie between “subjective right” and “obligation.” But these principles came to be introduced into a world at once Romanized and Christianized. Obviously, neither Rome nor Christianity is “simple.” In Christianity, one

⁵As is known, Otto von Gierke insisted upon this contribution in his monumental work, *Das deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht*, published in four volumes from 1868 to 1913—which was a main source of inspiration and material for Ernst Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies*. A part of the third volume of Gierke’s work, *Die publicistischen Lehren des Mittelalters*, translated into English by the great historian of law F. W. Maitland and published in 1900, also appeared in French in 1914, with a long introduction by Maitland, in a translation by Jean de Pange (*Les Théories politiques du Moyen Age* [Paris: Sirey]). [T/E: See now, in English: *Political Theories of the Middle Age*, tr. and intro. Frederic William Maitland (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).]

can distinguish at least four sources: the Hebraic source, the proper creation of “Jesus” and of Paul, Greek philosophy of the decadent period (Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, Neoplatonism), which itself has its roots in the great era of Greek creation, and Roman institutions, administration, and law, upon which the Church very early on modeled its own administrative and juridical organization, as well as its imperial imaginary (the papacy, whether or not the latter would have had pretensions to temporal power). It is rather clear, I think, that these four principles (and the multiplicity of underlying principles to which they refer) are totally heterogeneous, each from the others—which happily provided theologians with employment for eighteen centuries. “Rome” is certainly not simple, either; when Christianity arose within the Empire, the latter had behind it several centuries of history of the *Urbs*, within which there were the Roman people’s own creations and an already heavily reinterpreted and in fact “Romanized” Greek heritage.⁶ Finally, when the European world truly began to get moving (starting, to get a fix on the ideas, in the eleventh century, although already the tenth and

⁶These proper creations of the Roman people include, of course, in the first place, public and private law, whose “resurrection” starting in the eleventh century was to play a decisive role in the formation of modern Europe. But this sort of law includes *both* the idea that the law is applicable to all *and*, as product of the Empire, the *lex regia*, through which the “Roman people” (and its Senate) irrevocably transmit its powers to the emperor and of which abundant and contradictory use was to be made throughout the Middle Ages, since it implies both that the source of its powers is the “Roman people” *and* that these powers are inalienably held by the emperor (or the king), who thus becomes, according to the very expression of the *Pandectes*, *lex animata*: the law is *quod placuit Caesari* (or *regi*). It is doubtful whether the modern political imaginary (and contemporary constitutional law as it is effectively practiced) has truly exited from this contradiction.

perhaps even in certain cases the ninth centuries offer new elements in relation to the *true* Middle Ages), it in turn went on to create new principles, ones that were, for a very long time to come, going to be presented as, and covered back over by, continuous “reinterpretations” of Christian “dogma,” of Roman law (preceding and, for a long time and perhaps still today, carrying much more weight than what was inherited from the Greeks, in any case on the political level), and, finally, of Hellenic culture.⁷

Central among these creations of the European world is no doubt the creation of the “medieval” town, which is certainly not an “absolute historical novelty” from the outward point of view, but which, through its modes of institution as well as through the social imaginary significations it bears and conveys, constitutes a new historical form. Before coming to the “medieval” town, however, let us say a few words about the provisional culmination of this European history.

As it freed itself from its properly medieval heritage—both through its own creations and by means of the continuous “reinterpretations” of its heritage that are a function of the former—the European world gave rise to two social imaginary significations and ultimately came to be organized under the form we know it today as a function of two principles. These two principles *seem* to stem from the same root—the calling into question of established institutions, in other words, their revolutionary character—and, sociologically speaking, they do indeed stem from the same root, the protobourgeoisie, but they are not only

⁷Yet it must be remarked that the same Greek “heritage”—the German component excepted—culminated in something entirely else in the Orthodox East, from Byzantium to Russia.

heterogeneous but profoundly antinomical and yet mutually contaminating throughout this history.

On the one hand, the project of social and individual autonomy, which had first seen the light of day in ancient Greece and at a very early hour, arose again in Western Europe. Even leaving aside the innumerable revolts of the “little people” that blaze the history of the new towns, as well as the peasant movements (insofar as in them could be seen mere “struggles against exploitation,” and so as to avoid a discussion thereupon), already communal movements and the aspirations of the protobourgeoisie to self-government express a political social imaginary that is radically new in relation to those of the Empire, of kingship, or of feudalism: the demand that a collectivity might govern itself, that it might designate its magistrates, that it might decide what rules govern its life. (In this regard, the “provenance” of the social components of this bourgeoisie and in particular the feudal elements, upon which Yves Barel insists, are of minor importance; the basic thing is that those elements were no longer behaving as feudal landowners do as regards their power and as regards their activities.) At the same time, an essential difference appeared relative to the ancient Greek democratic imaginary: almost as soon as they were born, the new towns evolved toward oligarchic forms (the power of the “patriciate,” as Barel calls it), in any case toward forms of irrevocable delegation of power, or of “representation”—and never, to my knowledge (leaving aside, once again, the uprisings of the “little people” and, for example, the Ciompi in Florence toward the end of the fourteenth century), toward forms of *direct democracy*. In order to find such forms, one must descend all the way to the Parliamentary army in seventeenth-century England—or toward the American and French Revolutions, then toward the workers’ movement. The

fact that this happens in towns of a few thousand, at the most a few tens of thousands of inhabitants, shows how fallacious is the argument that direct democracy would be impossible in the modern world and yet would have been possible in the Greek world *because* of the size of the collectivities involved. From the outset, the Western world grounds its political structures upon representation—and one had to wait centuries in order for, in the course of some always very brief episodes, some forms of direct democracy to be created. Now, whether one deplores this or is pleased about it, political representation is a social imaginary signification that is *creation* of the European world. It certainly finds its origin in the existence of nonrevocable political magistrates, which as such was known in the ancient world (Rome, Sparta, and so on), was reproduced in and through the medieval cities, was connected almost immediately in several cases with an idea of representation in the strict sense—representation/embassy/delegation *to...*, and obviously to another power that is posited straight off as eminent or superior, that of the king (English Parliament, Estates-General in France, and so forth), so as to end up as “absolute” representation and as representation in the absolute since the time of the American and French Revolutions—“representation of the people” *to no one*, which, from that moment on, tends to become “representation to itself,” namely, anew, the in fact autonomized and practically uncontrollable power of the “representatives” as we know it today in Western “democracies.”

On the other hand, a radically new social imaginary signification is created in Western Europe: that of the unlimited expansion of rational mastery. Karl Marx and Max Weber notwithstanding, its history remains to be written. Clearly and visibly embodied in the initial forms of “capitalism,” programmatically expressed in the rationalist

philosophies of the seventeenth century (Descartes, Leibniz, etc.), it undoubtedly finds its roots not simply in the rage for acquisition felt by certain elements of the protobourgeoisie (such a rage has also existed elsewhere) but also in the fact that this rage was turned very rapidly toward the *transformation of the very conditions of its satisfaction*, technical conditions in the broad sense (navigation, commerce, banks, etc.) as well as social ones (organization of the immediate producers, expansion of intercity economic relationships, etc.). At the end of a few centuries, this yielded industrial capitalism properly speaking, then the invasion of “rationalization” into all domains of social activity, and finally the mad race of autonomized technoscience we know today.

These two core imaginary significations—project of autonomy, project of universal rational mastery—have been contaminating each other starting, at least, from the Age of Enlightenment and the revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century. (Their confluence is already manifest in the instituting work of the French Revolution, for example, as well as in a host of aspects of the work of the “utopian” socialists and, obviously, of Marx himself.) And it is impossible to understand the Western capitalist society of the past two centuries without recognizing therein the coexistence and the—at once parallel and intertwined—labor of these two heterogeneous and, in all rigor, incompatible principles: the unlimited expansion of “rational mastery” cannot but do away with autonomy, which, in turn, *qua* self-limitation, could not coexist with unlimited expansion of anything, be it of an alleged rationality.

Those are the core and original components of the magma of social imaginary significations that has constituted the modern world—with the addition, certainly, of other

significations more or less inherited from the past, notably those of the Nation-State and of religion. It is not pointless to note that, in the evolution of the Western capitalist world over the past few decades, the project of social and individual autonomy seems to be constantly receding, whereas the expansion of (pseudo)rational (pseudo)mastery is becoming the dominant factor. Here is not the place to examine the question of the long-term or even medium-term stability of the resulting situation. Nor is it pointless to observe that the totalitarian imaginary represented, under its Russian/Communist form, a magma whose principal components can be spotted: the emancipatory principle, which therein undergoes a monstrous reversal; the “rationalist”-capitalist principle, pushed to the limit where it becomes delirious; the religious principle under its orthodox/theocratic form, religious dogma being replaced therein by “ideology” while the mode of adherence remains the same. That does not signify, of course, that Russian/Communist totalitarianism consisted in a mere “addition” or “combination” of those principles; the modifications (reaching the point of a total reversal: Freedom is slavery, etc.) this form of totalitarianism imposed upon those principles while bringing about a fusion thereof, as well as the “style” and the unique and utterly recognizable “spirit” (*sit venia verbo*) it brought into being, suffice to show that there was a historical creation—a monstrous one, certainly (like so many others), but a creation nonetheless.

La Ville médiévale

The reflections summarily presented above sum up developments from numerous texts I have published since

1964.⁸ It appears that, in writing *La Ville médiévale* (The medieval town; published in 1977),⁹ Yves Barel was not familiar with these texts. I do not know to what extent knowledge of them would have aided him in extricating himself more quickly from Marxist residues, and from the anachronistic struggle with these residues, which are visible at several places in *La Ville médiévale*. In any case, when we met for the first time in June 1981 (at the Cerisy Colloquium on “Self-Organization”), we immediately felt a mutual sympathy on a personal level, and we noticed at the same time a kinship in the problematics we were pursuing.¹⁰

I would like to note here briefly, apropos of *La Ville*

⁸“Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire,” *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 36-40 (April 1964-June 1965), now available as “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” in [IIS](#) (see also the second half of this 1975 book, *passim*); General Introduction (1973), now in [PSW1](#); the texts first published in *L’Inconscient* (1968), *L’Arc* (1971), *Encyclopaedia universalis*, vols. 15 and 17 (1973), *Textures* (1975), and *Topique* (1977) and now available in [CL1](#).

⁹T/E: Yves Barel, *La Ville médiévale: système social, système urbain* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1977).

¹⁰This kinship is also to be found in relation to our respective attitudes toward the Greek city. I began devoting my École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) seminars to this topic in 1982 (see the teaching report summaries in the EHESS *Annuaire*s). Barel cites my text, “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy” (1983; now in [CL2](#)), in *La Quête du sens. Comment l’esprit vient à la cité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), a book devoted to the birth of democracy in the Greek city. [T/E: Regarding the Cerisy Colloquium on “Self-Organization,” see now the acts of this conference: *L’Auto-organisation. De la physique au politique*, ed. Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983). Castoriadis’s paper on “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983), now in [CL2](#), originally appeared in that volume.]

médiévale, what seem to me to be the most significant points of kinship and convergence, terminology left aside.

First, there are a kinship and convergence in our interrogations. Underlying and upholding the work in this book, which is teeming with a wealth of details, are two major questions: What holds a society together, and what makes of it *one* society? And how and why is there emergence of the new in history?¹¹

The responses Barel offers in the case he examines seem to me to be in the main true. The rise [*surgissement*] of the medieval town is recognized to be a “major discontinuity” (74 and 165ff.), wherein is discerned the “emergence of new elements” (169). This discontinuity is woven together with a “continuity” (*ibid.*, 505, and 574), since it contains (necessarily, it might be added) inherited elements whose origin can (though not always) be retraced. These different elements do not maintain simple relationships with one another, neither from the standpoint of “causality”—since here “causality” is “circular” (p. 76; an expression that is “nearly a contradiction in terms,” he rightly writes, 164; the chicken and the egg, 165) and since this circularity is at the same time a “genesis” (77)—nor from the standpoint of signification—since there is an “undecidability” (*passim*; I’d add: undecidability from the ensidic standpoint—the reason for this being the magmatic character of significations). There is a “coengendering” (304 and 322).

In other words—and this is not a truism—temporality is here *historical* in the proper and strong sense; creation has always taken place *within* the already-there and *through*, too, the means the latter offers. That does not stop it from being creation *qua* form, and *qua this-here* form; this is what Barel

¹¹See [IIS](#), 170.

calls (employing a word that, to me, seems improper in this field, but which for him is key) “system” (143ff.). The irreducibility of this form and the vacuousness of every “analysis” that would believe itself capable of separating, decomposing, and offering to us on a platter the atoms whose com-position would have “produced” the medieval town are illustrated by a passage (187 and n.) taken from the English-language translators’ preface for Weber’s text on the city:

One may find anything and everything in the city texts except the informing principle that creates the city itself. ...Everything is present except the one precise essential that gives life to the whole. When all is said and done the question remains, What is the city?¹²

Why does the analysis fail? Because the medieval town is a social-historical form that can be understood on the basis (also) of itself—not “explained” on the basis of something else. It is creation—which is intelligible, with difficulty, downstream, not producible or deducible upstream. It is positing of a new social imaginary signification—the “medieval town,” as we call it, which is neither Babylon nor Thebes nor Tyre nor Sidon nor Athens nor Rome—and of a magma of significations that goes along with it. This may be seen, too, in the “circular causality”—which, for my part, I prefer to call the *circle of creation*; see above—that confers another content upon the elements already there, another content by means of which they can be “elements” of

¹²T/E: This quotation, cited by Barel, comes from Don Martindale’s “Prefatory Remarks: The Theory of the City,” in *The City*, tr. and ed. Don Martindale and Gertrud Neuwirth (New York: Free Press, 1958; first paperback edition, 1966), p. 11.

what exists only thanks to them and thanks to which they exist. A “new logic,” like the one Barel rightly detects in the “patriciate,” can be “logical” only in and through a *total new form*; otherwise, it is absurdity pure and simple (switch around the “logics” of Wall Street and the court of Darius and you tell me what the results will be). On one point, I find that Barel remains on the near side of his own intuition. That is, when he seems to be saying that in the town money lies at the base of power (no doubt there is a whiff of Marxism here) and does not see that a new type of power has been instituted in creating for itself precisely a new “base,” money, which promptly takes on an entirely other character than the one it was able to possess in the ninth century, for example.

Qua social-historical form, the town is evidently constrained by a minimum of preservation, namely, its reproduction (49), which is self-reproduction (145ff.). This reproduction—we are, once again, in the social-historical—is never identical reproduction. There is no “immortality of the structure” (51). “Regulations” and “feedback” (171) reproduce the town while altering it. The devices for achieving this self-reproduction (which is “production of the unexpected,” 49), including and above all the “logics” and the “strategies” of the actors, whether individual or collective, always have a “twofold and ambiguous character” (75); every removal of one indetermination is positing of another indetermination (71-72).

This self-reproduction (70-71) is in fact self-production—and it is clear that what he is talking about is a self-creation: “The system creates itself because it exists and exists because it creates itself” (77). Here and elsewhere, the term *production* serves (still today) only to mask a heavy ontological question beneath a fallaciously transparent vocabulary (one of Marxian provenance, but in fact it is of

Kantian origin and Heideggerian outcome): one produces cars in factories, so where's the mystery?

Is there something behind this self-creation? What Barel says about "nonintentional," "nonconscious" activities (56-59 and elsewhere) and about "quasi-intentionality" (102 and elsewhere) leads him very close to the idea of the instituting radical imaginary, of the anonymous collective as ultimate source of social-historical creation. He speaks of an "urban imaginary" (182). He goes no further. It would be pointless to ask why, but a few of the obstacles along this path are discernible: Marxist and Athusserian residues, the catchall use of the term "symbolic" (throughout the "anticonclusion," 583-92), which, released from its strict meaning, refers to anything and everything, perhaps ultimately a traditional idea of the imagination (he cites, on page 584, Gilbert Durand, who sees in the imagination "a dynamic potential that deforms copies furnished by perception"—as if perception could ever furnish "copies"; as if the primary labor of the psyche's radical imagination were not precisely to make be a world of forms, whether connected or not to an "external" *X*).

What really matters does not lie there. With *La Ville médiévale*, Barel has furnished us with a pioneering work, a model of social-historical research that, staying quite close to the "empirical material," confronts some of the most difficult and most decisive questions there are: the being-thus and the being-this of social-historical forms, their "genesis" and their "disintegration"—their creation and their destruction—thus bursting apart the inherited conceptual frameworks and advancing audaciously (though not recklessly) upon a terrain that is no longer just that of the sociologist or of the historian but that of the philosopher of society and of history. That a book as important as this one should have remained, in its time, without much of a response, that it should have been for

a long time out of print speaks volumes about the sad state of the intellectual life of France since the mid-Seventies, absorbed as France has been in its imbecilic danse around the former Structuralists and the New non-Philosophers.

Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection*

Radical imagination, social instituting imaginary. These significations are central for reflection. It is starting from them that the whole of philosophy can and should be reconstructed. It is astonishing that the radical imagination of the singular human being, that is, the psyche or soul, though discovered and discussed twenty-three centuries ago by Aristotle, never won its proper place, which is central in the philosophy of the subject. Still more astonishing is that the social imaginary, the radical instituting imaginary, has been totally ignored throughout the whole history of philosophical,

*The ideas in this text have, in part, served as material for a lecture presented to a colloquium on "The Unconscious and Science," which was held on March 5 and 6, 1988 and organized by UNESCO at the University of Paris-X (Nanterre), with the participation of René Thom, Henri Atlan, and André Green. The written version of the lecture was published in *L'Inconscient et la science*, ed. Roger Dorey (Paris: Dunod, 1991), pp. 9-36, and in a translation by David Ames Curtis, as "Logic, Imagination, Reflection," which originally appeared in *American Imago*, 49 (Spring 1992): 3-33, and was later reprinted in *Psychoanalysis in Contexts: Paths Between Theory and Modern Culture*, ed. Anthony Elliott and Stephen Frosh (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 16-35. Another part of these ideas was presented during a colloquium on "Reason and Imagination in Modern Culture" that was organized by *Thesis Eleven* and held August 4-8, 1991 in Melbourne. The acts of this colloquium were published in *Rethinking Imagination: Culture and Creativity*, ed. Gillian Robinson and John Rundell (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). My talk, "Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary," is to be found on pp. 136-54. Here, I have woven together these two texts in order to eliminate certain overlaps, and I have profited from the occasion to insert a few new developments. [T/E: "Logic, Imagination, Reflection" was reprinted in [WIF](#), 246-72; "Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary" was reprinted in [CR](#), 319-37. Both of these texts have been used to generate, in English, the current mashup, based on the definitive French version that appeared in *FAF*, 227-81 (270-336 of the 2008 reprint).]

sociological, and political thought—and remains so.¹ The reasons for this occultation are deeply rooted in nothing less than the heteronomy of human societies from which inherited thought has not succeeded, in this field, in freeing itself. I have touched upon this last point on several occasions since 1975² and I return to it briefly below.

Before going further, a short commentary of the use of the terms *imagination*, *imaginary*, and *radical* may be helpful.

Resumption of the term *imagination* is necessary due to the two connotations of the word: the connection with *image* in the most general sense (not just simply “visual”) of the term, that is to say, with *form* (*Bild-*, *Einbildung*, etc.), and its connection with the idea of invention or, better and properly speaking, of *creation*.

The term *radical* I use, first, to oppose what I am talking about to the “second” imagination, the sole kind that is usually talked about, the simply reproductive and/or combinatory imagination, and, second, to emphasize the idea that this imagination is *before* the distinction between the “real” and the “imaginary” or “fictitious.” To put it bluntly: It is because there are radical imagination and instituting imaginary that there are for us “reality” *tout court*, and this or that reality.

¹This observation becomes still clearer since, for now going on a decade and a half, the scattershot use of the term *imaginary* as a substantive, in contexts that, at best, refer to the produced, second-order, instituted imaginary, and, most often, typically appertain to just any old characteristic of the era we are going through. This is quite particularly the case of certain “university centers” that invoke the imaginary in their name only to allow their promoters to pursue their vulgarly “real” careers. [T/E: See, on these academic misuses of the term, Castoriadis’s comments in his December 1985 Preface to [CL2](#).]

²In [IIS](#), 172-75, 195-206, 212-15, 274-94, 329-38.

Both considerations apply to the radical social instituting imaginary. It is radical because it creates *ex nihilo* (not *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*). It does not create “images” in the usual³ sense (though it creates them as well: totem poles, flags, emblems, etc.). It creates, rather, forms that can be images in the general sense (we thus speak of the “acoustic image” of a word), but in the main are significations and institutions (each of those being impossible without the other). The term *imaginary* is here a substantive and refers straight out to a substance; it is not an adjective denoting a quality.⁴

So, to put it briefly, in both cases we talk about an *a-causal vis formandi*. *A-causal* does not mean “unconditioned” or “absolute,” *ab-solutus*, separated, detached, without relations. All actual and factual relationships are *not* causal.⁵ The seat of this *vis formandi* in the singular human being is the radical imagination, more specifically the determining dimension of its soul. The seat of this *vis* as instituting social imaginary is the anonymous collective and, more generally, the social-historical field.

The following pages for the most part treat the radical imagination of the singular subject. As I have treated the

³T/E: In “Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary,” Castoriadis had “visual,” but in the final French version this is *habituel* (usual), either a conscious change or a misreading/accidental mistranslation of the English.

⁴As in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre or Gilbert Durand.

⁵T/E: Unless we are mistaken about how broadly the import of his statement should be taken, logically speaking, this sentence, written by Castoriadis in English, might have been better expressed as “*Not* all actual and factual relationships are causal.” Also of note, the phrase “actual and factual” is condensed in his French translation into a single, plural word: *effectives*.

instituting social imaginary in [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#), I will devote to it here only some limited space bearing mainly upon the inescapable dimensions of the institution and the constraints that weigh upon its creation.

The Imagination of the Subject—Philosophy

The history of the psyche's imagination remains to be written. Here is not the place to undertake it. It really begins with Aristotle, the treatise *De Anima*, his discovery of two imaginations and his vacillations.⁶ It continues with the Stoics and Damascius and undergoes a long development in Britain going from Hobbes to Coleridge. It culminates with the rediscovery of imagination by Kant in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the drastic reduction of its role in the second edition, its considerable restoration by Fichte, its—incredible—reduction to a variant of memory by the mature Hegel, the rediscovery of the Kantian discovery and retreat by Heidegger in the 1929 *Kantbuch*,⁷ the subsequent total silence of Heidegger on the subject, the hesitations of Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible* as to what is “real” and what is “imaginary,”⁸ not to mention Freud—I will return to him at length below—who talks throughout his work about what is in fact imagination, and without ever uttering

⁶See my text “The Discovery of the Imagination” (1978), now in [CL2](#).

⁷T/E: Using the correct publication date. “Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary” had “1928,” the later French version “1927.” The full title, in English, of Heidegger’s 1929 book is: *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*.

⁸See the text “Merleau-Ponty and the Weight of the Ontological Tradition” (1986; drafted in 1976-1977), now above in the present volume.

the term once.

Aristotle

We start with the philosophical path, and, with honor to whom honor is due, with Aristotle. It has not been noticed, as far as I am aware, that the Aristotelian *phantasia*, in the treatise *De Anima*, covers two completely different ideas. Most of the treatment corresponds to what I have called the *second* (secondary) imagination, the imitative, reproductive, or combinatory imagination, and it has provided the substance of what, for centuries and up to now, passes for imagination. But in the middle of book 3, Aristotle introduces, suddenly and without warning, a totally different *phantasia*, without which there can be no thought and which possibly precedes any thought. This I have called *prime* imagination; it corresponds, roughly, to my radical imagination. Yet this appearance was neither followed up upon nor elaborated. It is, at the same time, characteristic that Aristotle does not establish any relation whatsoever between *phantasia* and *poiēsis*. For him, *poiēsis* is *technē*, and *technē* “imitates” nature, even in the loftiest case, the case of *technē poiētikē*.⁹

Motives for Occultation

How is one to explain this vacillation, and this retreat, of the philosopher before such a major opening? It is because everything in philosophical thought, as it was in the process of being constituted, went against a recognition of the role of the imagination. First of all and above all, as I have shown elsewhere,¹⁰ philosophy has in the main remained in the grip

⁹See my text “Technique” (1973), in [CLL](#).

¹⁰See [IIS](#).

of the ontological privilege granted by the social institution to the *thing*, even when that thing is “immaterial.” Next, thought has been thought from the start as a search for the truth (*alētheia*) as opposed to mere opinion (*doxa*), the latter being posited, starting with Parmenides, as engendering error. Truth was immediately linked with *logos*, *nous*, *ratio*, Reason, *Verstand*, or *Vernunft*. Correlatively, *doxa* was linked with sense impressions, to products of the imagination, or both. It was quickly left to the “Sophists,” later to the Skeptics. Truth was sought about the world and about being, and this search had to be a matter of *logos*, of *nous*. It seemed ruled out that it might have anything to do with *phantasia*—a term derived directly from *phainomai*, I appear, I seem. But how and why do a world and being end up being for a human subject? Granted, they appear—*phainetai*—to that subject. But how is one to discern among all that appears, *phainetai*, what simply *phainetai* and what is truly—the *ontōs on*?

Such discernment is or ought to be the work of *logos*. *Logos* is what says and what is said, but it is also what allows the singular human being as well as the community of speaking beings to say something, and *legein*, in Greek, signifies both saying and choosing; choosing presupposes discerning. In Aristotle, *logos* is a multiply polysemic term, but in his dictum, *anthrōpos esti zōon logon echon*—humans are living beings possessing *logos*—*logos*, I believe, refers centrally to language; the translation *animal rationale* is Seneca’s in the first century CE. But how do humans come to be endowed with language? Where does language come from? As one knows, the dispute about the “natural” or “conventional/instituted” (*nomōi*) character of language was already very heated in Greece at least since the fifth century BCE. Democritus’ arguments for the “conventional/instituted” (*nomōi*) character of language have not been

surpassed since, and could not be. Plato's *Cratylus* is inconclusive, though it obviously makes fun of the idea of a "natural" character of words. Aristotle defines the word as *phōnē sēmantikē kata sunthēken* [T/E: *De Interpretatione* 3.16b26], a "voice" (or "sound") signifying according to a convention, but he does not push his reflection further. The Greeks had discovered the *phusis/nomos* (nature/institution) distinction and, still more, had put it into practice by explicitly *changing* their institutions. Yet their most important philosophers, apart from Democritus, abstained from working it out [*élaborer*], obviously—at least in the case of Plato—out of fear of opening the way to "arbitrariness" and freedom. This also allows us to understand why the social origin—that is, social creation—of language and of all institutions, clear both to Herodotus and to the authors of the Hippocratic writings, and demonstrated in the practice of the cities, particularly the democratic ones, remained without consequences for philosophy.

Two considerations allow one to elucidate this strange abstention, and their validity goes far beyond the Greek period. When tradition and/or religion stopped supplying an indisputable source and categorical formulation for the law and for the meaning of the world, philosophy came in to take their place. This operation required the positing of a *fundamentum inconcussum*, an unshakeable foundation, which was to be Reason. And according to the basic ontological categories that began to emerge very early on, this Reason could reside in Things, in Ideas, or in Subjects—that is, Substantive Individuals, things capable of ideas, *res cogitans*—but certainly not in the anonymous social collective, which could only be seen only as a mere collection of such Individuals entering into commerce because of their needs, their fears, or their "rational calculations."

Also, from the beginning (and already in Parmenides) philosophy affirmed the axiom *ex nihilo nihil*, a constitutive axiom of ensemblistic-identitary logic. But the radical imagination of the singular human subject and the social instituting imaginary *create*, and they create *ex nihilo*. Therefore, what they create must be a nonbeing, at best fictions and illusions. Of course, this is a nonsolution, since fictions and illusions *are* (and, for example, they may have tremendous “real” consequences). But this difficulty was covered up, when it was covered up, by the idea of “degrees of being”—or of “intensity of existence”—linked very rapidly with the criteria of *duration*, so that permanence, eternity, and, finally, atemporality became fundamental characteristics of “true being,” identified with *immutability*—so that everything belonging to the Heraclitean flux became disqualified—and with *universality*—opposing what must be for everybody to what just happens to be for somebody. Of course, too, as soon as philosophy became theological, creation could be thought only as a divine privilege, by definition inaccessible to a “finite being”—this may again be seen clearly in Kant, and his arguments against the possibility of an “intellectual intuition.” *Mutatis mutandis*, all this remains true today, despite condemnations of “metaphysics” and “ontotheology” and commercial talk about imagination and creativity, both of which have been transformed into advertising slogans.

Kant

Let us return to the historical considerations and open Kant. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (§24, B151), a proper definition is given: “Imagination is the power [*Vermögen*] to represent in the intuition an object even without its

presence.”¹¹ One may note that Parmenides was already saying as much, if not more: “Consider how the absent (beings) are present to/by/for *nous*.”¹² Curiously, in Plato Socrates was going much further when he asserted that imagination is the power to represent (to oneself) [(*se*) *représenter*] that which *is not*. Kant goes on to add: “As all our intuitions are sensuous, imagination therefore belongs to sensibility.” I shall try to show below that just the reverse is true: sensibility belongs to the imagination. The imagination about which Kant speaks here is the *second* imagination.

As is known, Kant elsewhere intends much more than what is entailed by the above definition: the conception of “transcendental imagination,” the paragraphs on the Schematism, and even the substance of the chapters on space and time go far beyond this schoolbook-psychology definition. We shall return to this. This definition is cited here in order to oppose to it what I consider to be the proper definition: Imagination is the power (the capacity, the faculty)

¹¹T/E: We retain Castoriadis’s English translation, supplied in the original English-language text, of Kant’s German. In his note for his French translation of his text, he provides the Jules Barni French translation, which may be rendered into English as follows: “faculty of representing to oneself in the intuition an object in its very absence.”

¹²T/E: Castoriadis omits here the phrase “with certainty” that appeared in his English-language translation of this sentence for “Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary.” He also provided there the dative form, *noo*—though he offers there a second omicron instead of an omega and omits the iota subscript—which he correctly calls “thought.” The spelling, *noōi*, appears when Castoriadis discusses this Parmenides sentence in “Notes on a Few Poetic Means” ([CL6](#)), translating it as “thought, mind,” and includes “with total certainty” as part of the translation.

to make appear representations,¹³ whether with or without an external incitement. In other words: Imagination is the power to make be that which *realiter* is not. *Realiter* here means: according to the reality of physical science.

We take first the case of an external incitement (or excitation!). Fichte, who in the first version of the *Wissenschaftslehre* gives much greater weight to the imagination than Kant, speaks of *Anstoß* (shock). In this he is correct. But Kant speaks about the senses, opposing the “receptivity of impressions” to the “spontaneity of concepts.” Imagination obviously should go with spontaneity, but curiously it is left out of this opposition. And, if it is taken to belong to “sensibility,” it should be passive—an idea difficult to make sense of. But what about this “receptivity of the impressions”? What about *Sinnlichkeit*—sensibility or sensoriality?

In truth, there is no “receptivity” or passivity of the “impressions.” To begin with, there are no such things as “impressions.” “Impressions” are a philosophical or psychological artifact. There are, in *some* cases, *perceptions*—that is, representations of “external” and more or less “independent” objects. (*Some* cases only: there is an exorbitant privilege of perception in the whole of inherited philosophy, further exacerbated by Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty.)¹⁴ These perceptions possess, certainly, a “sensorial” component. But this component is itself a creation of the imagination. The “senses” make emerge, out of an *X*,

¹³T/E: For the English-speaking public, Castoriadis had added here, parenthetically: “(‘ideas’ is the old English term, e.g. in Locke).”

¹⁴See [IIS](#), 329-36, and, above in the present volume, “Merleau-Ponty and the Weight of the Ontological Tradition,” *passim*.

something that “physically” or “really” does not *exist*—if one equates “reality” with the “reality” of physics: they make emerge colors, sounds, smells, and so on. In “physical” nature, there are no colors, sounds, or smells: there are only electromagnetic waves, airwaves, kinds of molecules, and so on. The sensible *quale* (the famous “secondary qualities”) is a pure *creation* of the “senses,” that is, of imagination in its most elementary manifestation, giving a form and a specific form to something that, “in itself,” has no relation with *that* form.

These are, of course, Arthur Eddington’s “two tables.”¹⁵ *This* table—the one I touch, I see, I lean on—contains an indefinite plurality of “elements” created by the singular imagination *and* the social imaginary. The other “table”—in fact, no “table” at all but, rather, a void studded at planetary distances with protons and electrons and/or electromagnetic vibrations—is a scientific construct, *such as* science makes it today. (And this does not make it any less imaginary in the sense of the word I am intending.)

Digression on Phenomenology

As the validity or the pertinence of this distinction has again recently been disputed, from phenomenological quarters advocating the “first-person stance,”¹⁶ a digression seems useful.

¹⁵The famous example he gives in *The Nature of the Physical World*. [T/E: Castoriadis provides the date of “1927,” as these are the written record of Eddington’s 1926-1927 Gifford Lectures. The book was published the following year.]

¹⁶See, e.g., Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 162ff. Richard Rorty has also, from another point of view, attacked this distinction.

There is, of course, no distinction, *in the object*, between “primary” and “secondary” qualities—number, figure, size as opposed to color, sound, smell, taste, touch. Granted, the former ones pertain to the “categorical” or the “logical”—they present themselves as universal forms, whereas the characteristic of the latter ones is their each-time-singular concreteness. Yet all these “qualities” are creations of the living body, of the *animated* body, that is, of the embodied psyche in humans, creations more or less permanent or transient, more or less generic or singular. These creations are often *conditioned* by an “external” *X*—not “caused” by it. Light waves are not colored, and they do not cause the color *qua* color. They induce, *under certain conditions*, the subject to create an “image” which, in many cases—and, so to speak, by definition in all the cases *we can speak about*—is generically *and* socially *shared*.

This does not mean (the “idealistic” or “Cartesian” fallacy) that these images are “confused” images “in the mind.” They are not “confused” or “more or less confused,” nor are they “in the mind.” They are just what they are: images, not in the sense of “ikons” or “imitations,” but *Vorstellungen*, representations, or, better, *presentations*: presentations of something about which nothing can be said except by means of another presentation, about which the discourse will be eternally open, but which is certainly neither “identical” nor even “isomorphic” to them. (Analysis, for example, familiar to neurophysiologists, of the “constancy of color” shows this clearly.) They are original ways of “reacting” (and this only in *some* cases: a composer for whom a musical idea “comes” to him is not “reacting” to anything, at any rate *not at this* level and certainly nothing “external”). This “reaction” is not an “idea in the mind”: it is a total state of the subject (“body” and “soul”).

But neither does this mean (the phenomenological fallacy) that the “first-person” or “intentional” stance presents to, or for, me “the things as they are.” This is the curious realistic delusion of phenomenology, paradoxically coexisting with fatal solipsistic consequences: How can I know that something exists for the next person, or, indeed, that a next person exists at all if I am confined to my “first-person stance”? From the strict phenomenological point of view, I have *no access* to the experience of “other persons”; they and their “experiences” exist just as *phenomena for me*. The simple *naming* of the problem in Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* (or in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*) does not suffice to exorcize it.

The “first-person stance” is bluntly contradictory, even if we leave aside the “other person.” It tells me, for example, that to move an object, or to move myself, I need *force*. But if I am in a car and the driver brakes abruptly, I am projected through the windshield without deploying any force. That, too, is a “first-person experience.” The “privilege” or “authenticity” of the “first-person stance” looks philosophically very funny if this stance leads, as lead it must, to contradictions or incoherencies in the very “experience” it claims to shed light on. Husserl’s “The Earth, as *Ur-archē*, does not move”¹⁷ forces me, for instance, to dismiss as absurd or illusory phenomena of equally compelling immediacy (e.g., Foucault’s pendulum, or the yearly parallax of the fixed stars).

¹⁷T/E: In a note written on the envelope holding his manuscript for “Grundlegende Untersuchungen zum phänomenologischen Ursprung der Räumlichkeit der Natur [Foundational investigations of the phenomenological origin of the spatiality of nature]” (1934), Husserl wrote: “*Die Ur-Arche Erde bewegt sich nicht*” (see the publication note on p. 307 of *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl*, ed. Marvin Farber [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940]).

Neither does the escape of the later Husserl toward the “life-world” (*Lebenswelt*) redeem phenomenology. Certainly, the “first-person stance” presents things as they “appear” in the life-world. But this only means that it presents them as they have been shaped by the generic biological (species) imagination *and* the social imaginary I am sharing with my fellow human *socii*. Now, philosophy starts when we begin trying to *break the closure* of this life-world in both its biological and social-historical dimensions. Of course, we can never break it to such a degree as to be able to fly outside any closure, to have a “view from nowhere.” But break it we do, and there is no point in pretending that we do not know that there is no “red” except for, in, and through a living body—or, for that matter, that there are no nymphs in the springs and gods in the rivers, which formed a key part of the life-world of the ancient Greeks.

Red, or the red object, is not a “confused idea in my mind,” and neither is it a reality “down there” (Sartre). My, and our, creation of a world entails *also* the creation of an “exterior” *where* object, color, and so on present themselves as different and distant from me—me being always and irrevocably *here*—as it entails *also* the creation of a double temporal horizon (“backward” and “forward”) in the middle of which I am the permanently moving *now*.

To be sure, all this presupposes that I, somehow or other, “know” firsthand what it is like to see red—but also, that I know firsthand what it is like to live in a society where the most important things are social imaginary significations—for example, nymphs or banknotes. It is true that nobody and nothing can make us “stop living ‘in’ or ‘through’ the experience, to treat it itself as an object, or, what is the same thing, as an experience which could as well have been

someone else's."¹⁸ And, equally true, to continue quoting Taylor, I cannot "*experience* my toothache as a mere idea in the mind, caused by decay in the tooth, sending signals up the nerves to the brain." But neither am I obliged to stick with this "experience" and ignore other ways of access to the phenomenal fact of toothache, such as they lead me, for example, to take an aspirin or rush to my dentist.

Behind the phenomenological, or "first-person," stance stands the attempt to present "my own" experience as the only authentic or, at any rate, privileged one—the only one giving access to "the thing itself," *der Sache selbst*. But in fact this experience is not just "my own" but shares in a biological and social genericity, otherwise we could never even talk, however "inadequately," about it; it is not an "experience," but an imaginary creation; it does not give access to the "thing itself," but only *encounters* an *X*, and this only in some cases and only partly. It has no absolute philosophical privilege. It is only an eternally recurring starting and (provisionally) ending point. "Home is where we start from," wrote, I think, T. S. Eliot.¹⁹ Our "personal" experience is our personal home—and this home would not be a home, but a solitary cave, if it was not in a village or a town. For, it is the collectivity that teaches us how to build homes and how to live in them. We cannot live without a home but neither can we remain hermetically enclosed in "our" home.

And when one moves, as the last Husserl and the first Heidegger, from the strictly phenomenological, that is to say,

¹⁸Taylor on Descartes, *Sources of the Self*, p. 162.

¹⁹T/E: "Home is where one starts from" begins the last stanza of "East Coker," the second poem of Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

egological, point of view (the *je meiniges, je eigenes* of *Sein und Zeit*) to the “life-world,” one has just exchanged the egocentric for an ethno- or sociocentric point of view: solipsism on a larger scale. For, to know, as we must, that our *Lebenswelt*, our “life-world,” is but one among an indefinite number of others is to recognize that there is a multiplicity of “first-person” collective “experiences” among which there is, at first glance, no privileged one; at second glance, the only “privileged” one—philosophically and, I would add, politically—is the one that made itself capable of *recognizing* and *accepting* this very multiplicity of human worlds, thereby breaking as far as possible the closure of its own world.

Return to Kant

1. As already stated, we never deal with “impressions.” We deal with perceptions, that is, a class of representations (*Vorstellungen*). And it is impossible to compose a perceptual representation (or any representation) by sheer juxtaposition of “sense data.” A representation, however vague or bizarre, possesses a *sui generis* unity and a formidable organization; it is never a sheer amorphous multiplicity, a pure *Mannigfaltigkeit*. There is therefore a tremendous amount of “logical” work contained in the representation, entailing some of Kant’s categories, some of his (wrongly named and placed) *Reflexionsbegriffe* and some others, notably topological schemata (e.g., neighborhood/separation, continuity/discreteness) upon which I cannot dwell here.

These last considerations are certainly true of any living being—any being-for-itself—but in this case the “logical” functions are, in general, simpler and, at any rate, unadulterated by the other functions of imagination in humans. Categories are intrinsic, immanent to the perception.

A dog chases a (= one) rabbit, and usually catches it. A catch surely devoid of transcendental validity since the unity of the rabbit caught has not been established through mediations of transcendental schemata from the dog's unity of transcendental apperception. Yet the catch is essential for the continuation of the dog's life. Kant is bound to a Cartesian conception of "*animaux machines*." True, the third *Critique* sketches another view, but only "reflectively" and only as part of a heavy teleological metaphysics. Let us, incidentally, outline my status under the Kantian regime: from the constitutive (determining) point of view I am a (somatic and psychical) machine; from the reflective point of view I am a mechanistically un-understandable but teleologically understandable being; from the transcendental point of view I simply *am* not—*Ich gelte*; from the ethical point of view I *ought* to be what in fact (from the determining point of view) I could *never* be: an agent acting "outside" any psychological motives. To say, in these circumstances, that I am made out of "crooked wood" is certainly the understatement of the millennium.

To revert to our main argument: Radical imagination (as source of the perceptual *quale* and of logical forms) is what makes it possible for any being-for-itself (including humans) to *create for itself* an own or proper world (*Eigenwelt*) "within" which it also posits itself. The ultimately indescribable *X* "out there" becomes something definite and specific *for* a particular being, through the functioning of its sensory and logical imagination, which "filters," "forms," and "organizes" the external "shocks." It is clear that no being-for-itself could "organize" something out of the world, if this world were not intrinsically *organizable*—which means that it cannot be simply "chaotic." But this is another dimension of the question—the properly ontological

dimension—which cannot be discussed here.²⁰

2. But we do not have to do only with representations provoked by external “shocks.” In relative (and, often, absolute) independence from these, we do have an “inside.” Here we part company with animals, and so on—not because they do not have an “inside” but because we cannot say anything meaningful about it (“how it feels to be a bat,” “what a dog is thinking while howling at the moon”). The “inside” is a perpetual, truly Heraclitean, flux of representations *cum* affects *cum* intentions, in fact indissociable. (On this indissociability neither Kant, nor Fichte, nor for that matter most of the inherited philosophy, has much to say. At best all this would be relegated to “empirical psychology.” But it is evident that the questions it raises are of cardinal importance for the ontology of the for-itself.) I shall not insist upon this aspect. Suffice it to say that, in this flux, representations (and affects, and intentions or desires) emerge in principle in an “absolutely spontaneous” way, and even more: we have affects and intentions (desires), which are creations of this a-causal *vis formandi* in their sheer being, their mode of being, and their being-thus. And, for all we know, this stream of representations, affects, and desires is singular for each singular human being. It may be said that our sensory imagination and its logical components are, for all of us, “identical” (essentially similar would be a better term). But, to the extent that its products are decisively co-created by the “inside,” even this sensory imagination is, in the end, singular (*de gustibus et coloribus...*).

If, in its first aspect (“perceptual,” geared to the

²⁰I have discussed this at length in several texts. See “Ontological Import of the History of Science” (1986), in [CLI](#), and here, “Done and To Be Done,” above in the present volume, 8-13.

“outside”), the radical imagination creates a “generic” own world for the singular human being, a world sufficiently shared with the other members of the human species, in its second, fully psychical, aspect it creates a singular own or proper world. The importance of this could not be exaggerated. It is this “inside” that makes possible and conditions, first, a “distantiation” relative to the world considered as simply “given,” and, second, an active and acting *Einstellung*, position and disposition, toward the world. Representation, affect, and intention are at the same time principles of the formation of the own or proper world—even *materialiter spectati*—and principles of distantiation from it and action upon it.

3. A few words on Kant’s “transcendental imagination.” Without in the least minimizing the importance of Kant’s discovery, one must point to its limits. First, Kant’s imagination is subject, throughout, to the requirements of “true knowledge.” Second—and for this very reason—it is eternally “the same.” If the transcendental imagination started to *imagine* anything, Kant’s world would instantly collapse. For this very reason, Kant cannot or will not see the creative function of the imagination in the cognitive (scientific or philosophical) domain. This is why the existence of a *history* of science must remain, in the Kantian framework, a sheer cumulation of *inductions*, and, as such is clearly not the case, it becomes a riddle there.²¹

Two additional remarks are in order here. The strongest—and truest—point in Kant’s conception of the imagination is, of course, the schematism mediating between the categories and the “sensory data.” Introducing it, Kant writes: “There is an art hidden in the depth of the human

²¹See “Ontological Import of the History of Science,” in [CLI](#).

soul..., ”²² which is the source of the transcendental schemata. But, one wonders, what business have “the human soul” and its “depth” here? For Kant, the human soul belongs in the domain of “empirical psychology,” where causality reigns supreme. It has nothing to do with the “transcendental” dimension, which is supposed to ensure the possibility of *a priori* synthetic judgments.

The imagination appears also in the *Critique of Judgment* but is only mentioned, not used. The origin of the work of art is attributed there to a creative power, but this creative power is not related to the imagination and it is not called creative (Kant speaks of *schaffen*, not of *schöpfen*; the latter word appears only once and in an indifferent context). This is the power of the genius—but the genius works like nature (*als Natur*). We *enjoy*, in the work of art, “the free play of imagination in conformity with the laws of the understanding,”²³ but the *worth* of the work of art lies in that it presents in the intuition the Ideas of Reason. I confess that I am unable to see the Ideas of Reason presented in *Antigone*, *King Lear*, or *The Castle*.

4. I return to the cognitive role of the imagination. As we know, Kant distinguishes and contrasts the “receptivity of impressions” and the “spontaneity of [pure] concepts.” In fact, beyond, once again, mere excitability, spontaneity—imaging spontaneity—is already there from the start. It is responsible for the *form* of impressions and for their *being brought into*

²²T/E: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (first division, book 2, chapter 1: “Of the Schematism of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding”), tr. F. Max Müller (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1966), p. 123.

²³T/E: Retaining Castoriadis’s English translation or paraphrase, perhaps from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, §49 (318) or §51 (327).

relation; in other terms, it is responsible for the *first representation*. In the constitution of the latter—which Kant called, in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the “synthesis of apprehension in intuition”²⁴—we can recognize the work of the radical imagination of the subject, which already contains in itself the germs of logic, since every *formation* entails multiple instances of bringing into relation according to rules.

We do not need to linger over the second synthesis distinguished by Kant, the “synthesis of reproduction in imagination,” what in fact is memory. But a few remarks are necessary concerning the third synthesis, the “synthesis of recognition in concepts.” Kant writes that “without our being conscious that what we are thinking now is the same as what we thought a moment before, all reproduction in the series of representations would be vain.”²⁵ How can we be assured of this consciousness? Here Kant introduces the concept. But the concept, in its proper sense, is unnecessary. A dog probably does not have what we call the concept of a rabbit, yet it knows quite well that it is the same rabbit that it is chasing along a trajectory (which is, moreover, the solution to a differential equation, that of the curve of pursuit, which minimizes at each instant the space that remains to be covered in relation to the moving prey: immanence of mathematical logic in animal behavior). This sameness of the representation through the successive acts of the subject must lean on

²⁴*Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 100.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 103. The three syntheses were eliminated in the second edition of the *Critique*, clearly because they grant the imagination a central role. See Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929), tr. James S. Churchill, Foreword by Thomas Langan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), pp.166-93 (§31-§33).

something, and this can only be the “image” or the representation as a *generic*, namely the capacity of the subject—whoever or whatever it may be here, whether man or even animal—to see, in this changing representation within the Heraclitean flux of the given, *the same*, to neglect secondary elements (for example, already simple differences of time and space), and to preserve that which is essential, *as far as need and usage are concerned*,²⁶ as the same image.

But neither is the concept sufficient. The *consciousness* of this sameness must lean, as well (and here we enter the human domain), on something that is *there for* the image and the representation, something for something else, the *quid pro quo*. In the psyche, that something may be variable, it may sometimes be stable, for example fixation upon an image as representative of such and such a thing that “transcends” [*dépasse*] it. But for us others, as waking and speaking human beings, this is the sign—the word. Without “words,” how could I assure myself of the *sameness* of the concept? This leads us immediately to the social institution of language.

The *apperception* of sameness supported on the mere genericity of the image is the elementary degree of psychism one must postulate already existing within animals. *Consciousness* of sameness supported on signs or words is what is proper to the human psyche. The latter presupposes a decisive turning point in the history of the imagination: the capacity to see a thing in another thing that has *no relation* to what it “represents.” But it presupposes, as well, something other which neither the psyche as such nor any transcendental subject is capable of producing: language, as creation of the social-historical imaginary. Let us note, finally, that words

²⁶T/E: Castoriadis’s translation of a phrase from Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.5.1133b20.

(or, more generally, linguistic expressions), which provide a support for thought, do not generally correspond in effectively actual social-historical reality to what a philosopher would call concepts. Even as “empirical concepts,” their signifieds are vague and approximative. And above all, they are decisively codetermined by the imaginary significations instituted, each time, in each particular society.

5. I have already mentioned the “logical” organization immanent in the simplest representation, perceptual or not. That this is so should not surprise us. Everything that is must contain an ensemblistic-identitary (“logical,” in the largest sense possible) dimension; otherwise it would be absolutely indeterminate, and (at least for us) nonexistent. *A posteriori*, this is confirmed by the grasp logical categories have on whatever there is (e.g., “the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics,” to quote Wigner).²⁷ This, of course, by no means entails that “what there is” is exhaustively determined by or reducible to “logic” (not even when we consider “physical” reality).

This is the “objective” (or “in itself”) side of the question. The “subjective,” “for itself” side emerges with life. Living beings would not be there if they had not developed, as constitutive of the proper world they create for themselves, a (however rudimentary) logical apparatus fit to cope, somehow or other, with the ensemblistic-identitary dimension intrinsic to the world. There are categories obviously embedded in the behavior of dogs; they are not imposed on this behavior by the scientific observer.

Insofar as we can talk about them, these categories are

²⁷T/E: “The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences,” *Communications in Pure and Applied Mathematics*, 13:1 (February 1960).

not “conscious” in animals (though animals indubitably display a self-awareness, a taking-into-account-of-self-in-the-world),²⁸ and even less reflected upon. For such characteristics to appear, two further conditions are required, which obtain only in the human domain. The first pertains to the radical imagination of the human psyche and its “pathological” development expressed in its defunctionalization. I have dealt with this aspect somewhat extensively in other texts,²⁹ so I shall be very brief. Defunctionalization makes possible the detachment of the representation from the object of the biological “need,” therefore the cathexis of biologically irrelevant objects (Gods, kings, countries, etc.). And it allows the (biologically equally irrelevant) activities of the psyche to become in themselves “psychical objects,” and the psyche to become capable of handling the labile *quid pro quo*, which is the condition for symbolization.

The second, equally important, condition is the creation, by the radical social imaginary, of institutions and, of course, first and foremost, of language. Neither life as such nor the psyche as such can produce institutions and language. Understanding and reason are socially instituted, though, of course, this institution leans on intrinsic possibilities and

²⁸One day, we will have to forge or invent a French term corresponding to the English word “awareness,” in any case to one of its significations. A dog lying in wait is “aware” of its environment and of its position in this environment; it “is informed [*est au courant*],” it “takes them into account”; it would be abusive to say that it is conscious of them.

²⁹See “The State of the Subject Today” (1986), now in [CL3](#). [T/E: In the body of his French version, Castoriadis accidentally retains the plural, *textes*, even though he cites above in the present footnote only one text; in the original “Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary” footnote, he had also cited “Logic, Imagination, Reflection,” the other text he has now “woven together” to form the present chapter.]

tendencies of the human psyche.

A last point must be made in this respect. The (Kantian) distinction between categories, “transcendental” schemata, and “empirical” representations cannot, of course, be taken as a distinction *in re* (nor is it taken as such by Kant himself). But one can be more precise. Any representation (I am abstracting here from affects and intentions) contains *qualia* and an organization of these *qualia*. This organization, in turn, consists in generic figures and traits and in categorial schemata. In other words, genericity and categoriality are intrinsic and immanent to the representation. To become categories and schemata they have to be *named* and *reflected upon*. And this—that is, abstract thought as such—is a relatively recent historical creation, not a biological trait of the human species, though all members of this species can share in this creation once it is there. But abstract thought itself, it must be repeated, always has to lean on some figure or image, be it, minimally, the image of the words through which it is carried on.

The Imagination of the Subject—Freud

I come now to the second path toward the imagination, the psychoanalytical path.

1. Freud’s contribution to the question of the imagination is riven by a deep antinomy. In German, imagination is *Einbildung*, a quite honorable word, especially since the time of Kant, who made it into a central concept of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Now, if one checks the *Gesamtregister* of the *Gesammelte Werke*, the general index to Freud’s complete works in German, one will find that the

term *Einbildung* appears only twice³⁰ and both times in contexts of no great import, for they concern the “imaginings” of the neurotic. (“Imagination” does not appear in the Index to the *Standard Edition*.) By way of contrast, one will note that the terms *Phantasie* and *phantasieren*, which appear very early in Freud’s writings (the letters to Fliess are full of them), cover four-and-a-half pages of the *Gesamtregister*.

At the start, these terms possessed a very narrow acceptance. As Freud says in a letter to Fliess, phantasy—*Phantasie*—and phantasying—*phantasieren*—“are derived from things that have been heard but understood [only] subsequently.” And he adds, deliciously, “all their material is, of course, genuine.”³¹ There is nothing in *Phantasie*, in phantasy, that the subject has not already perceived beforehand; here phantasy is a matter of reproduction. The goal of phantasies is defensive,³² and they “arise from an unconscious combination...of things experienced and heard.” Later on will come the idea that *Phantasien* are “detached fragments of thought processes” (*Abspaltung von Denkprozessen*).³³

³⁰*Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter *GW*) 5: 296-98 [T/E: there is also an appearance of *Einbildung* on 5: 311]; 11: 381-83.

³¹Letter to Fliess, no. 61 (May 2, 1897), in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter: *SE*), 1: 247.

³²Draft L, *SE* 1: 248.

³³Draft L, *SE* 1: 248, Draft M (May 25, 1897), *SE* 1: 252; see also Draft N, *SE* 1: 255 and 258. The last of these is from the “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning” (1911), *GW* 8: 234; *SE* 12: 222. [T/E: I have translated Castoriadis’s original French translation of Freud’s (now here corrected) German paraphrase. The German in fact reads: *wurde eine Art Denktätigkeit abgespalten*, while the *Standard Edition*

Everything happens as if these “phantasies” were only the product of a *recombinative* activity, and therefore in no way originary or creative. And when Freud is confronted with the problem of “originary phantasies,” which have no “actual” real source (in life), he will seek a mythical “real” source for them, in phylogenesis. What we have here is the old conception, in psychology, of imagination as pure combinatory of elements with which the psyche has already been furnished from elsewhere, that is, by the perceptual apparatus or, as Freud says in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), by the system of Ψ neurons.

What we call imagination thus turns out in fact to be lacking in psychical status, it being referred back to a derived and secondary activity. We have here an enormous paradox. For, it could be said, on the other hand, that Freud’s entire life’s work deals with nothing but the imagination. The patriarch of the movement, one of whose mouthpieces is the review titled *Imago* (founded in 1912 by Hanns Sachs and Otto Rank), the man whose work would be incomprehensible if one did not see in the imagination a central, constitutive power of the psyche, does not want to know anything about it. There should be something surprising about this, but this sort of misrecognition, this veiling of the imagination is far from unprecedented. What we witness here is the repetition of a gesture, more than two millennia old, which had already been made by the first discoverer of the imagination, Aristotle, and which was reproduced by Kant.

In fact, a book could be written about this antinomy in Freud’s thought, as well as about the history of the battle that rages between, on the one hand, those terms that at first

reads: “thought-activity was split off.”] See also below in the present text, 342-43.

appear to him indubitable and that become increasingly problematic, namely, this sort of trinity or trinomial of reality, logic, pleasure, the psychical apparatus operating more or less logically *vis-à-vis* a reality given to it, so as to avoid displeasure—this is the first formulation of the pleasure principle, as found in the 1895 *Project*—or to maximize pleasure, and, on the other hand, the imagination, that is to say, the elaborations, perhaps even the phantasmatic and fantastic creations, of the psychical apparatus.

An assessment of this battle cannot be drawn up in a few lines, but one of its results is already certain: Freud, who from the beginning to the end of his work *in fact* spoke of nothing but the imagination, of its works and its effects, obstinately refused to *thematize* this element of the psyche. The motive for this coverup seems evident to me. To take the imagination into account seems to Freud to be incompatible with the “project for a scientific psychology” or, later, with a “scientific” psychoanalysis—as for Aristotle, perhaps, and certainly for Kant, the imagination ultimately had to be put in its place, a place subordinate to that of *Reason*. And Freud’s last arguments against (physicalist or behaviorist) scientism in matters psychological, as true as they are, could be endorsed without hesitation by a rationalist philosopher. Such a scientific psychology, he had said, would be incapable of explaining “the property of being conscious or not,”³⁴ this “fact without parallel, which defies all explanation or description—the fact of consciousness.” Quite justified sarcastic remarks rain down upon the proponents of American behaviorism, who “think it possible to construct a psychology

³⁴*The Ego and the Id* (1923), *SE* 19: 18; *GW* 13: 244.

which disregards this fundamental fact!”³⁵ Let it be noted in passing that, while psychoanalysis does accord and has to accord the “fundamental fact” of consciousness its place, psychoanalysis is far from being able to “explain” it.³⁶ It will not even be up to the task of *elucidating* this fact so long as it ignores the fact, too, that consciousness presupposes imagination.

2. Appearances to the contrary, there is for Freud a strict logic of the Unconscious. The appearances in question relate, among other things, to the celebrated statements that the Unconscious knows nothing of time and contradiction (*The Unconscious*, 1915) and that the dream-work “does not think...” (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900).³⁷

Let us consider this last point. There is the celebrated passage from *The Interpretation of Dreams* that challenges whether thought has a role in the dream-work. Let us recall that Freud is talking all the time about unconscious thought

³⁵*An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1939), *SE* 23: 157, n. 1. [T/E: The previous quotation appears in the body of the text on this same page.]

³⁶In the beginning, Freud believed it even possible to “construct” or “produce” language. But an abyss separates what he was describing from genuine language and, still more so, obviously, consciousness and theoretical reflection. On “the birth of cognition,” and so on, see the 1895 *Project*, *SE* 1: 327-35. [T/E: As regards “birth of cognition,” we merely translate Castoriadis’s French phrase here, as such a phrase has not been found in the pages cited above examining “cognition” and “thought” or when using pep-web.org’s online electronic search function for both the English and the French.]

³⁷“There are...no negation, no doubt, no degrees of certainty [in the Unconscious].” “Reference to time is bound up...with the work of the system Cs.” *GW* 10: 286; in English, *The Unconscious*, *SE* 14: 186, 187; *GW* 2/3: 511; in English, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *SE* 4: 507.

processes (*unbewußte Denkprozesse, Denkvorgänge, Denkakte*, etc.). Apropos of the dream-work, which transforms the thoughts of the dream into its (manifest) contents, he writes, however, that “It does not think, calculate or judge in any way at all; it restricts itself to giving things a new form.”³⁸ For Freud, and I believe that he is right, this work consists in displacements and condensations and culminates in such displacements and condensations, and these affect the psychical intensities of parts of dream-thoughts and the figurations of those thoughts; it is always subject [*soumis*] to the requirement of figurability and is productive of this figurability. Likewise, in *The Unconscious* (1915), Freud insists upon the fact that the essential characteristics of the primary processes are displacement and condensation. Now, the dream-work does not actually think, if by thinking we intend either thoughts handling abstractions (“concepts”) or else thoughts wholly subject to the rules of the usual logic. In the main, the dream-work images, figures, presentifies, and it does so under known constraints and with the means at its disposal.

Yet can we go so far as to say, with Freud, that it “does not think, calculate or judge in any way at all, it restricts itself to giving things a new form”? The phrase is ambiguous. In certain respects, the dream-work does not think, calculate, or judge; in other respects, it does think, calculate, and judge. For, one cannot transform without thinking, calculating, and judging. The dream-work is, it is true, indeterminable—as is also, we shall see right away, the work of the representation that gives shape to [*figurant*] a drive—but it does not transform just anything into just

³⁸*GW* 2/3: 511; in English, *SE* 4: 507. In Castoriadis’s French, the *Standard Edition*’s “giving...a new form” reads as the verb *transformer*.

anything else. Likewise, the inversion of psychical intensities, which is for Freud the main feature of displacement, bears the trace of a calculation as well as its result, as is clear in this very characterization: *inversion of intensities*. There certainly is, therefore, in the dream-work, a setting into images [*mise en images*], this being the central dimension of dreaming—*das Wesentliche am Traum*, as Freud quite rightly claims;³⁹ that is to say: the creative work of the imagination, the presentation and presentification as visible and possibly audible of that which is in itself neither visible nor audible (the ultimate *X* being, here again, the drive). But in this work, as in all work of the imagination, we again find present a certain ensemblistic-identitary logical element, both in the organization and the fibration of each image in and for itself as well as in the arrangement, the composition, and the sequencing of the group of images forming the dream. Without the support of these logical elements, the work involved in dream-interpretation quite obviously could not even begin. No more than one could, even with the greatest amount of inspiration, write or even improvise music without making calculations, neither could one displace and condense without the use of certain elementary, nonconscious, and, of course, nonexplicit logical operations, without what Hobbes considered the essential attribute of reason, that is to say, calculating, making computations, “reckoning.”

At its root, the imagination is the capacity to posit an image starting simply from a shock and even—here we part ways with Fichte and this is our most important point—starting from *nothing at all*: for, after all, the shock concerns our relations with “something” *already given*, whether

³⁹T/E: See n. 2 (added by Freud in 1925), on *SE* 4: 506 (“the essence of dreaming”).

“external” or “internal,” whereas the imagination moves autonomously. Yet one must not truly be reflecting if one says that this capacity is simply the positing of an image. An image must *hold together*, it brings together “determinate” elements, presentable elements. And these elements always are found caught up in a certain organization and in a certain order—otherwise, there would be no image, there would simply be chaos.

It is this logic, which is supposed to preside over the operations of the Unconscious in themselves, that, in the abstract, psychoanalytic theory and, concretely, psychoanalytical interpretations during therapy aim at restituting. We need only recall the tremendous deployment of reasoning and syllogistics (even arithmetic) present, like an actual midwife, each time dreams, slips, abortive acts, and so on are interpreted.

When one considers not only Freud’s (“scientific”) point of departure and horizon but also, as we shall see, certain deep-seated inherent necessities of the thing itself, there is nothing surprising about this fact. Let us recall the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*—which, I have always thought (and recent studies have shown quite clearly), provided, right to the end (even though Freud disowned it), the invisible skeletal structure for his work, and rightly so in a sense. Now, ontologically speaking, the model of the *Project* reduces the entire psychical world to the equation: psyche = (1) infrastructural network (neurons) + (2) energy + (3) “traces” (stored or actual representations) + (4) physico-*logical* laws regulating the circulation, etc., of these traces, as well as of their energy “charges.” Clearly, elements (1), (2), and (4) could not escape the empire of logic. The status of element (3) (“traces”) will be discussed below.

This reality/pleasure/logic trinomial forms what may

be called the indubitable bases for the 1895 *Project*. The model presented in that *Project* functions with a reality that is divided into the “external” and the “internal” (the network of neurons, “charges”), qualities (above all, pleasure/displeasure), and a principle of avoidance of “internal” displeasure via *discharge*, which tacitly presupposes for its operation a *yes/no*—therefore the kernel of a logic, the discrimination of two mutually exclusive terms, the affirmation of the one and the negation of the other. This logic will, for Freud, remain at work in the psychical processes he will describe later on. This is evident for conscious processes, for the Ego. But it also must be said, for lack of a more detailed discussion, that contrary to certain formulations found in the 1915 text on the Unconscious, which have not yet been adequately interpreted, there is a certain logic of unconscious processes, provided that we do not intend thereby diurnal logic.

[A brief explanation on the content of the term “logic” as I am using it here is required.⁴⁰ I simply intend thereby ordinary logic, what I also call “ensemblistic-identitary”—or, for brevity’s sake, “ensidic”—logic, because, once purified, this is what presides over the constitution of set theory, or in any case the so-called naive theory of sets [*ensembles*], which is at the basis of modern mathematics. These terms should not scare anyone off: this logic concerns everything that can be constructed and built up starting from the principles of identity, contradiction, the excluded third or n^{th} (n here being finite), and from the organization of anything given, by means of univocally defined elements, classes, relations, and properties. The paradoxes to which this logic can lead when

⁴⁰T/E: It is unclear why, for this *new* mashup and elaboration of two existing texts, brackets would need to appear here.

one introduces infinite sets on the one hand, and self-reference on the other, cannot detain us here.]

Introducing “psychical instances” or “psychical agencies,” each one acting on its own account as well as in conflict with the others, changes nothing. It even tends to efface the “contradictions” of the Unconscious; these contradictions become mere conflict and opposition between instances, each one aiming at “its own” ends *but* all of them obeying the same “logic.” If the psyche furnishes us with *alogical* products, it is that we almost always observe mixtures, compound products, a “compromise,” as is said in *The Unconscious*,⁴¹ dreams providing us with the most dazzling example. At the limit, and ideally, the multiple “contradictions” between the attributes of an element of a dream, or between the significations of an oneiric image or story, seem to dissolve when each atom of meaning is imputed, through a one-to-one [*terme à terme*] correspondence, to the conflicting instances that have necessarily cooperated in the production of the dream and that have concluded in its text their strange compromise. It would no longer be the Unconscious, then, that would be contradictory; now the subject, or the psyche *in toto*, would become merely the site where the battle of desires and mutually incompatible prohibitions is engaged. It is important to note in passing that this reduction, even trivialization, of necessity forms the major part of the work of interpretation (and, in the case of a mindless analyst, risks becoming

⁴¹*GW* 10: 285 [T/E: correcting “185” for Castoriadis’s in-text mention of “compromise”; in English, *SE* 14: 186]. Contradiction *between* (conscious and unconscious) psychical systems: *GW* 10: 285 [T/E: correcting “293,” where there is no mention of contradiction; the equivalent English pages to 285 (*SE* 14: 186-87) have: “exempt from mutual contradiction” and “exemption from mutual contradiction”].

nothing but that).

3. Obviously, Freud would not have been Freud if he had remained there. What lies beyond is introduced by the invasion into his schemata—and already into the *Project*—of an element, the radical imagination of the psyche or the psyche as radical imagination, which he will resist throughout his life and whose character he will never make explicit. I must limit myself here to indicating, without any logical or chronological order, a few of the breaches by means of which the imagination becomes engulfed within the reality/pleasure/logic trinomial and explodes it from the inside out. Logical expository order here would be, in any case, impossible to achieve since the elements I am now going to treat in succession are closely imbricated each within the others.

Let us begin with dreaming. A dream is a group of representations, the interpretation of which passes by way of associations between representations. The associative path is *elucidatable*—but it is not *determinable*. This fact may be expressed by the absence of a one-to-one (biunivocal) correspondence between the “signifiers” of the dream (the representations of its manifest content) and its “signifieds” (its latent representations and the desires they realize). I am leaving aside here as secondary the problem of “symbols” *stricto sensu*. The result is a multivocal (and, truly, indeterminate) correspondence between “signifier” and “signified,” one of whose sides Freud has brought out: the *overdetermination* of what represents “something,” of what is there for something else; at the same time, he leaves us in the dark as to what must be called the symbol’s *underdetermination* and even about the *oversymbolization* and *undersymbolization* that always exists in a dream. There is always a signifier for several signifieds (overdetermination), but this signifier, as well, is not the sole one possible for

these signifieds (underdetermination); a signified can be indicated by several signifiers (oversymbolization) or can be indicated only “in part” (undersymbolization).⁴²

Clearly, the *Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*, the taking into account and even the requirement of figurability, which is constitutive of dreaming, not only does not close the questions thus raised but constitutes their condition. (The situation is in fact analogous to the delegation of the drive via representation, the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz des Triebes*, which we shall encounter below.) That which cannot be made into a figure must become figurable and be made into a figure. But how? By the creative—and indeterminable, because creative—labor of the imagination as instaurator of symbolism, of the *quid pro quo*.

This creative character of the imagination may remain masked when we stay within the circle of representations and the representable. (I note, once again, that the term “representation,” *Vorstellung*, is of absolutely cardinal importance in Freud; there is, so to speak, not a single page of text written by Freud where one fails to encounter it. This should put the French psycho-Heideggerians, who have spent the past quarter-century making fun of it, in their proper place.) If one holds to the traditional view, which Freud himself seems to have adopted most of the time, these representations themselves seem to be reducible to the simple combination of elements, already furnished by the perceptual apparatus, by means of tropic processes—metaphor, metonymy, antonymy, and so on—and “symbolization” in the narrow sense. Psychical work, and notably dream-work, thus seems reducible to a combinatory—indeterminate perhaps in

⁴²See my text “Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science” (1968), in [CLI](#), 27-32.

its results, but not in its components—of *already given* representational elements, culminating in other, more complex representations and in these bizarre stories recounted in our dreams. But two questions immediately arise and unavoidably force themselves upon Freud: This combinatory operates with a view toward what? And: Starting from what—from what initial or ultimate components—is the edifice built?

We know the response to the first question: it leads to the wish (or desire) realized by the dream, a wish or desire of a sexual nature. But human beings would not be human beings if they dreamed interminably of sexual satisfaction through canonical copulation (in fact, they practically never dream about that). Next appear the jungle world of phantasies and the monsters populating this jungle, which themselves are manipulated by other, still more monstrous and totally invisible monsters, the *Ur-phantasien*, the originary phantasies whose prehistorical and phylogenetic “reality” Freud would try to reconstitute on the basis of a few scattered vertebrae. But what is truly at issue here is the psyche’s originary capacity to posit and to organize images and scenes that are a source of pleasure, independently of all “reality” and of all canonical representation corresponding to organ pleasure.

The second question leads to even sheerer riddles. Even if one were to grant that all psychical work is reducible to the insipid combinatory of a few unchanging elements, one would still be compelled to ask: Where do these elements come from, and how are they constituted? Freud encounters this question on two levels.

The first level goes well beyond the terrain of psychoanalysis. It is undoubtedly for this reason that, after a few important interrogatory notes jotted down in the 1895

Project, he came to abandon it. This level, of capital importance in every respect, concerns the capacity of the human psyche—and this it undoubtedly shares with every living being, in any case certainly with the animal psychism—to create images and to bring them into relation to each other, starting from “stimuli” having no qualitative connection with these images. In the *Project*, this capacity appears in the form of a mystery: the psychical apparatus transforms what for science are mere quantities—“masses” and “movements,” says Freud (and the kind of science to which he is referring knows only of masses and movements)—into *qualities*; bound up with this is the mystery of another quality, of a quality of these qualities, consciousness (and the “Ego”)—for which a specific class of neurons, ω neurons, will be postulated.

There is, therefore, this creation. And such creation also appears, in an apparently minor form that seems to go without saying, but which is in fact of capital importance, in that essential function of dreaming that involves taking figurability into consideration.⁴³ This at first sight innocent and anodyne expression goes infinitely further than just dreaming. It is the permanent obligation and work of the psyche to *give figurability to that which, in itself, has no figure for the psyche*—whether it is a matter of external “masses of matter and energy” of the *Project* or the “internal” drives. And that leads us to 1915.

Indeed, Freud encounters the question of the origin of the elements of the *Vorstellungen* at a second level, one much

⁴³T/E: Here Castoriadis uses the standard French translation for *Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*; his usual expression for this Freudian phrase is *exigence de figurabilité*, which we have translated as “requirement of figurability.”

more specific to the concerns of psychoanalysis. This level is unexpected, yet how enigmatic and how fecund! The metapsychological writings of 1915—especially *Instincts [sic] and their Vicissitudes*, but also *Repression* and *The Unconscious*—take up again what in 1895 was the problem of the relationship of (physical) quantity to (psychical) quality and transform it into the problem of the relation between the somatic and the psychical. A middle term, the drives, is introduced, which are “at the frontier of the somatic and the psychical”;⁴⁴ arising, so to speak, from the depths of the somatic organization and its functional operations, they must act on the psychism, though they do not possess the *quality* (precisely!) of the psychical. In order to acquire some sort of existence for the psyche, they therefore have to become *present* in the latter, to be *presented* to it; therefore they have to be represented, they have to find a representative, a delegate, an ambassador, a spokesperson—*einen Vertreter*, as one would say in German. But nothing exists for the psyche that is not representation, *Vorstellung*. What is therefore at the start a *push* that is of somatic origin, but that is also sufficiently “psychoid” to be able, so to speak, to knock at the door of the psyche, has to be transformed into something representable by and for the psyche. It must find a representation, a *Vorstellung*, in order to be represented—*vertreten*—in the psyche: this is what Freud calls the *Repräsentanz*, the ambassador, one could say, and which he could have called *Vertretung* as well.

⁴⁴T/E: In *SE* 14: 121-22, Freud’s phrase, *als ein Grenzbegriff zwischen Seelischem und Somatischem, als psychischer Repräsentant* (*GW* 10: 214), is translated as follows: “as a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic, as the psychical representative.” For antecedents, see *SE* 14: 112 in the “Editor’s Note to ‘Instincts [sic] and their Vicissitudes.’”

This situation is expressed by the limpid term *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz des Triebes*, the delegation of the drive (into or near the psyche) by means of a representation. Freud's formulations and explanations concerning *Vorstellung* as representative of the drive, concerning the "nucleus of the Unconscious" formed by *Triebrepräsenzen*, representations of drives, concerning the presentation of the drive by means of a representation⁴⁵ are as clear-cut as the reasons for the quarrels and interminable confusions that have surrounded the translation of this term in the French psychoanalytic world are mysterious. *Repräsentanz*, forged from *Repräsentant*, *repräsentieren*, belongs to the class of "Frenchoid" terms frequently found in German and especially in Viennese German: a delegation, a mission representing a government, a constituted body, and so on. The second *s* in *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* indicates a quasi-genitive that can carry out a great variety of functions (subjective, objective, possessive, attributive, or instrumental "genitive": cf. *Verpflichtungsschein*, *Verrechnungskurs*, *zurechnungsfähig*, etc.). The drive is not psychical; it has to send into the psyche ambassadors that, in order to be understood, must speak a language that is recognizable and "comprehensible" by the psychical—and they therefore must present themselves as representations.⁴⁶

An obvious aporia then arises: Why is it only for a human being that this question, that of the delegation of the drive by representation, is posed? Why is there not for human

⁴⁵*GW* 10: 275ff. and 285 (in English, *The Unconscious*, *SE* 14: 177-78, and 186); *GW* 10: 250 (in English, *Repression*, *SE* 14: 148).

⁴⁶I must leave aside here the important, complex, and difficult question of "leaning on" (*étayage* in French, *Anlehnung* in German). I have spoken about it in *IIS*, 289-90.

beings—as we must presume that there is in animals—a canonical representative that would always, in the same manner, express the drive in “psychical” terms? Why does this canonical representation, undergoing all the changes we know it undergoes, undergo them, so that, I would not say “no matter what” representations but, in any case, an indefinite number of representations can be the *placeholder* [lieu tenant], that which holds the place [*tient lieu*] of the drive for the psyche—from the female body as such to the pointed boot of the fetishist?

We can also broach the question by taking the text on *The Two Principles of Mental Functioning* (1911) as our starting point. In those functions that do not have to do with reality, the representation is formed under the aegis of the pleasure principle. Why do certain representations procure pleasure? And once again, where do they come from? And why, for example, do they not interminably reproduce scenes of “biologically canonical satisfaction” (as is now inferred to be the case in the dreams of animals)? These questions preoccupied Freud his whole life long; he returns to them regularly. He begins by thinking that there always is a “real” origin for the pleasing representation (or the traumatic one; as far as we are concerned here, the problem remains the same); the hallucination, he writes, is a repetition of agreeable perceptions.⁴⁷ He will soon be obliged to abandon the thesis of the real origin of a traumatism, the famous *neurotica*.⁴⁸ But his long and bitter struggle to unearth a supposedly “real” primitive scene will reappear in the “Wolf Man” (1918) only for him to renounce it finally in a footnote wherein he states

⁴⁷SE 1: 319.

⁴⁸Letter to Fliess, no. 69 (September 21, 1897), SE 1: 259-61.

that its “reality” was not so important after all. At the end, he will try to derive phantasies, to the extent that they cannot result from “really” lived experiences of a subject, from certain phylogenetically constituted originary phantasies. I have already spoken briefly about this option.

We thus see that Freud is wrought up by the question of the imagination throughout his entire life’s work, even if he does not name it and does not recognize it as such. To the indications already given to this effect we could add many others. For example, everything conveyed by the idea of the “magical omnipotence of thoughts,”⁴⁹ and, more generally, by the set of processes described in *The Two Principles of Mental Functioning*. The “magical omnipotence of thoughts” is, in fact, a *real* omnipotence from the point of view of reality that alone matters in this context, psychical reality.

In truth, the phrases about the activity of phantasying from “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning” mentioned in note 33 above are implicitly saying all that I am saying here about the imagination.

With the introduction of the reality principle one species of thought-activity was split off; it was kept free from reality-testing and remained subordinated to the pleasure principle alone. This activity is *phantasying*, which begins already in children’s play, and later, continued as *day-dreaming*, abandons dependence on real objects.⁵⁰

⁴⁹T/E: See the third chapter, “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts,” of *Totem and Taboo*, SE 13.

⁵⁰T/E: SE 12: 222. Where SE has “introduction” and “dependence,” Castoriadis’s French translation has *instauration* and *étayage*.

That this activity “was kept free” from reality means that it was already so previously. And, since this “split[ting] off” takes place only with the instauration of the reality principle, the implication obviously is that the initial functioning of the psyche was pure phantasying that satisfies solely the pleasure principle, that is, free imagination.

Practically equivalent is Freud’s assertion that, in the Unconscious, there is no difference between effectively actual perception and a representation strongly cathected with affect; that is, there are no “indices of reality” in the Unconscious. *The “real,” in and for the Unconscious, is purely imaginary.* Wherefrom flows the following consequence of capital importance: for humans, representational pleasure prevails over organ pleasure. And from it too flows another consequence, that representation and pleasure are defunctionalized in this case.

Also, for example, what is implied by *denial*, where, as opposed to what happens with repression or other defense mechanisms, it is *the same* psychical instance that posits something (whether an object or attribute, it matters little) both as existing and as nonexistent—which certainly goes beyond the bounds of any function intended to represent some sort of reality. For a final example, the second topography, the chaos that reigns in the Id, and the need for all this to become, in one way or another, representable.

It is only within this context that another decisive fact becomes comprehensible: projective schemata and processes take precedence over and dominate introjective ones, which should come as no surprise for any nonempiricist philosopher, and in which we just rediscover the very essence of any being for itself: creation of a proper world precedes by necessity any “lesson” events in this world might supply. This prevalence of projection—which is already manifest, for example, in the

transference onto the mother of the determination of omnipotence—should not prevent us from noting, in humans, the specific importance and strength of *introjective* processes and schemata. These are not difficult to understand. The human psyche cannot live outside a world of meaning and, when its own, initial, monadic meaning is, in the course of socialization, disrupted, as it must be, the resulting catastrophe has to be repaired by the internalization of the meaning supplied by the cathected persons of its environment. This is what is sometimes mistaken as an intrinsic disposition (*Anlage*) of the psyche toward socialization; in fact, one is thus interpreting after the fact the result of the socialization process, which is made possible only by the vital need for meaning and by the fact that society itself is nothing but the institution of meanings in the form of social imaginary significations.

All that becomes comprehensible and coherent only on the basis of the idea, corroborated moreover by a host of other considerations, namely, that, as opposed to the functional character of the animal imagination, the human imagination is unbridled, liberated from the enslavement to biological functioning and its finalities, creating forms and contents that correspond to no “need,” simply leaning on the human being’s animal dimension. We shall come back to this below.

This initial given of the imagination is modeled and tamed, though never completely, by its socialization. Socialization is the process whereby the psyche is forced to abandon (never fully) its pristine monadic meanings for the shared meanings provided by society, and to subordinate its creations and its own drives to the exigencies of social life. The key mediation in this operation is introjection. Introjection always goes much further than animal *mimesis*,

because it is always reinternalization of that which is introjected, and this reinternalization can take place only on the basis of the existing proper schemata.

4. Our subject is not the human psyche as such. Yet these considerations would remain incomplete without indicating a few things about what is to be found on the near and far side of the Freudian Unconscious. Everything obliges us to postulate, “on the near side” or “below” the latter, a psychical monad, initially closed upon itself and endeavoring, to the very end, to enclose in itself whatever is “presented” to it. *Ich bin die Brust* (I am the bosom), wrote Freud in one of his last Notes in 1938.⁵¹ But there is more than that.

Paradoxically, inevitably, and despite his intentions, Freud remains a dualist. Soul and body, psyche and soma, remain for him essentially distinct—despite his elaboration of hysterical symptoms, and so on. And there can certainly be no question of eliminating or “solving” the time-honored enigmas of the “relation between soul and body.” Let us just remember the amazing antinomies with which the most elementary evidence confronts us. The psyche is strongly dependent on the soma; even short of piercing your head with a bullet, I can make you talk nonsense with the help of some additional glasses of bourbon. The soma is strongly dependent on the psyche: even without mentioning hysterical symptoms or psychosomatic illnesses, I decided to write this text, therefore I am banging on my typewriter. The soma is strongly independent from the psyche: I have no control over the innumerable organic processes going on all the time within my body, some of which perhaps, at this very moment, are preparing my death. The psyche is strongly independent

⁵¹See ch. 6 of [IIS](#). [T/E: In *SE* 23: 299 (“Findings, Ideas, Problems”), the English translation has: “I am the breast.”]

from the soma: even under the most horrible tortures, there are people who will not give their comrades over to the police. This strange relationship definitely requires from us new modes of thinking. These should certainly start from something different from a reduction of one of the two entities to the other, or an irreversible and irreparable separation of soul and body.

Here are some indications along this line. We should posit “behind” the Freudian Unconscious or “below” it (or the Id) a Nonconscious that is the living body *qua* human animated body in continuity with the psyche. There is no frontier between this living, animated body and the originary psychical monad. The monad is neither repressed nor repressible: it is *unsayable*. Nor do we “repress” the life of the body. We vaguely “feel” it, without knowing why and how—the beats of the heart, the movements of the bowels, probably already, very long ago, our movements within the amniotic liquid. There is a presence of the living body to itself, inextricably mixed with what we normally consider as the “movements of the soul” proper. And there is the flagrant, obvious, and incomprehensible substantive homogeneity between the singular person’s psyche and soma. This is also why Aristotle rejected the Pythagoreans’ metempsychosis, pointing out that one cannot conceive the same soul in another body. Human physiology is already soul-like [*psychoïde*]; autoimmune disorders, where the body’s “defense mechanisms” turn against it, can hardly be understood as the result of an external “influence” of the soul on the body. It is also in this light that we should consider the idea of a sensory, and more generally bodily, imagination.

Reascent Toward the Living Being

What is—the totality of Being/being—is, in itself, intrinsically regulated, in *one* of its strata, the first natural stratum, by ensemblistic-identitary (ensidic) logic—and it is so, undoubtedly as well, though with lacunae and fragmentarily, in all its strata.

Quite evidently, this logic also dominates that essential constituent of the first natural stratum that is the *living being* in general—therefore also, human beings *qua* simple living beings. Cells, plants, and dogs function, first and foremost, according to a vast network of yes/no, attraction/repulsion, acceptance/rejection, and according to an interminable process of categorizing “the given” in terms of what we would call mutually exclusive attributes. Like contemporary neurophysiology, molecular biology today is a working application [*mise en œuvre*] of this logic, a logic it rediscovers, or it introduces, as you wish, into their objects of investigation. To this extent, a simple living being may be qualified as, for the most part, a sort of ensemblistic-identitary automaton. This expression is to be taken with many grains of salt: the image one thereby conjures up appears much too simple when one thinks of the truly complex functions performed by living beings, for example, the jumble contemporary scientific research is now discovering at the frontier between the central nervous system, the endocrine system, and the immune system. The idea of living beings as ensemblistic-identitary automatons must be taken as a *working idea* [*idée de travail*] that serves to organize what, in our knowledge of living beings, relates to ensidic logic and to distinguish as well as to display what resists or outstrips this logic. Let me recall, too, that the word “automaton” originally did not signify “machine.” Automaton, *autos-matos*, is that

which moves itself *of itself*—quite the contrary of what modern tongues and peoples have come to consider to be automatons.

Nevertheless, even viewed in this way the living being is also, as immunologists know, a *self*. And it is also and especially, as good philosophers have always known, a *for-itself*. As such, it must possess—otherwise it would not exist as a living being—the three essential determinations that are the intention, the affect, and representation. Obviously, there must be at least the minimal intention of conservation/reproduction, with the consequences that entails. At minimum, the affect is pleasure/displeasure (“signal” of attraction/repulsion). For our present purposes, however, what matters is *representation*.

For the living being, “representation” does not mean, and *cannot* mean, photography or carbon copy of an “outside world.” Recalling here what we said above about “qualities,” sounds and colors, and so on, we should say that it is a matter of a *presentation* by and for the living being, whereby the living being—starting from what are for it only mere *shocks*, to take up again Fichte’s term—creates its own world.

“Information” theory is now fashionable. We are told that the living being gathers informational data in nature and processes them in various ways. This sort of language should be pitilessly condemned. No one has ever seen “information” sprouting in spring fields, or in autumnal ones. The living being *creates* information *for itself*. Nothing is information, except for a *self*—which can transform, or not transform, the *X* of an outside shock into information. Radio waves offer no information to terrestrial living beings, and the Weierstrass-Stone theorem offers no information to my local baker, who would look at me askance if, upon entering her shop, I should announce to her that the space of polynomials is everywhere

dense in the space of continuous functions. This same theorem would offer no information to René Thom, who would ask, "So, what else is new?" The conditions under which a statement constitutes a piece of information for someone depend essentially on what this someone *already is*. Every piece of "information" in the usual sense presupposes a high degree of subjective structuration and depends on the latter for its being-information. But, originally, this subjective structure first has to *give form to*—to *in-form*—the *X* of the shock and render it present for itself. The self therefore has to posit this *X* as form, make it be as form, which means: it has to make of it an *image*, in the largest sense of the term. Now, there is no image without a *bringing into relation* [mise en relation]. No "atom"-like images exist. The most basic *Gestalt*, a bright point on a dark background, already contains an indefinite number of relations: it implies the unending network of relations that we call "an object in space." Now, such sensibility cannot operate without organizing, therefore without an elementary logic— an application of categories [*catégorialité*]. The first, the originary, the radical imagination, the power of presentation, is thereby power of organization. The formation, *ab ovo*, of an "image" is, *ipso facto*, the positing of "elements" and the bringing of these "elements" into relation, the two occurring straight off, "at the same moment," the one being made by the other.

The living being therefore possesses an "elementary" imagination that contains an "elementary" logic. By means of this imagination and this logic, it creates, each time, *its* world. And the property characteristic of this world is that it exists, each time, in *closure*. *Nothing* can enter into it—save to destroy it—except in accordance with the forms and laws of the "subjective" structure, of the *self* in each case, and in order to be transformed in accordance with these forms and

these laws. In the case of simple living beings, however, this imagination and this logic are, on the one hand, fixed and, on the other, enslaved to its functioning. And here we have the line of cleavage separating them from human imagination and logic.

The Human Imagination

We must postulate that a break in the psychical evolution of the animal world occurs when human beings appear. The biological foundation for this break cannot detain us here; undoubtedly, it has to do with the overdevelopment of the central nervous system, but above all with a different organization of this system. The main thing is that, by means of a monstrous development of the imagination, this psychical neoformation, the human psychical world becomes *a-functional*. Man is an animal radically unfit for life. “Whence”—not as “cause,” but as condition of what is—the creation of society.

This afunctionality manifests itself in the inadequacy and, properly speaking, in the *breakdown* of the “instinctual regulations”—whatever meaning one might give to this term—that dominate animal behavior. It is founded upon two characteristic features of the human psychism:

1. The autonomization of the imagination, which is no longer enslaved to functionality. There is unlimited, unmasterable representational flux, representational spontaneity without any assignable end, disconnection between “image” and “shock = X ” or, in the sequencing of images, disconnection between the representational flux and what would be a “canonical representative” of biological satisfaction.

2. The domination, in man, of representational pleasure over organ pleasure. The disconnection of sexuality from reproduction is one of its clearest consequences—the most banal of consequences as well as the most weighty of consequences, as we know from psychoanalysis. (Cases of masturbation and occasional homosexuality among certain higher mammals remain exceptions and, in any case, never challenge the reproductive functions of sexuality.)⁵²

There is, therefore, a bursting of the animal psychism in man under pressure from the inordinate swelling of the imagination. This certainly allows large elements of the animal psychobiological organization to remain intact—for example, key elements of the “sensorial imagination” (generally speaking, we will never depart from a certain biological canonicity in the formation of elementary images of the “external world” that are shared by the entire species and no doubt shared too, though in an imprecise sense, with those of higher mammals)—but also a considerable amount of debris from the ensidic logic regulating the psychism as an animal psychism. These elements would be completely inadequate for the purpose of keeping this strange biped alive, but they will serve as support for society’s fabrication of the social individual, namely, humans such as we know them. This fabrication presupposes, in effect, that the sensorial imagination remains more or less identical across the various singular specimens of the human species and that the imposition of a social logic, of the ensidic logic recreated, each time, by society and reinstituted by the latter, finds points of support in the psychism of singular human beings.

⁵²Author’s addition: See n. 12 in “Psychoanalysis and Philosophy,” above.

But also, and above all, the social fabrication of individuals on the basis of this raw material that is the psyche of the newborn already presupposes in this newborn the domination of representational pleasure over organ pleasure. Without such domination, no sublimation, and therefore no social life, would be possible. As has been said since Antiquity, man is a being of language. To speak presupposes that the pleasure of speaking, of communicating and of thinking (which could not be done without words) has become much stronger than that of sucking a breast or a thumb. In the act of speaking, we already have the essential feature of sublimation, that is to say, the replacement of organ pleasure by a pleasure that has to do only with representation.

Through this social fabrication of the individual, the institution subjugates the singular imagination of the subject and, as a general rule, lets it manifest itself only in and through dreaming, phantasying, transgression, illness. In particular, everything occurs as if the institution had succeeded in cutting off communication between the subject's radical imagination and its "thought." Whatever it might imagine (whether it knows it or not), the subject *will think* and will make/do only what it is socially obligated to think and to make/do. We see here the social-historical side of the same process that, psychoanalytically speaking, is called *repression*.

Society, in turn, is placed, for the near-totality of its history, in closure. Closure of its logic, closure of its imaginary significations. Society fabricates individuals by imposing both of these forms of closure on them; it therefore fabricates, first and foremost—and exclusively, in the overwhelming majority of societies—closed individuals, individuals who think as they have been taught to think, who evaluate likewise, who give meaning to that which society has

taught them has meaning, and for whom these manners of thinking, of evaluating, of imposing norms, and of signifying are by *the very construction of the psyche* unquestionable.

The Instituting Social Imaginary

The idea of the instituting social imaginary seems hard to accept, and this is understandable. The same situation comes up each time one has to speak of a “potentiality,” a “faculty,” a “power.” For, we are never familiar with anything but some manifestations, effects, products—not *that of which* they are manifestations. Whence the criticisms of conceptions of “faculties of the soul”—though, aside from vocabulary, it is unclear what one gains in speaking of “functions.”

This is obviously the case with the imagination. One cannot take it in hand or put it under a microscope. Nevertheless, everyone agrees that this is what one is talking about. Why? Because one could point to its substrate? And could this substrate be placed under a microscope? No, but everyone has the illusion of understanding, because each person believes he has a “soul” and thinks that he “knows” its activities.

Let us say that the imagination is a “function” of this soul (and even of the “brain,” here this is not a nuisance). In what does this function consist? Among other things, we have seen, it consists in transforming “masses and energies” into qualities—more generally, in bringing forth a flood of representations and, within this flood, in striding [*enjamber*] over ravines, ruptures, discontinuities, in leaping from one subject to another and in missing the point. We group these determinations of the representational flux (more generally, of the subjective flux, whether conscious or not) into a power,

a *dunamis*, Aristotle would have said,⁵³ a power-to-make-be always backed up by a reserve, a provision, one more possibility. One's immediate familiarity with this flux suspends one's astonishment at one's very existence and at one's strange capacity to create discontinuities at the same time as one ignores them while striding over them.

Likewise is it understandable that it would be precisely through this last aspect, the leap, the unexpected, the discontinuous that the creative power of the imagination, which remains ungraspable for Aristotle as well as for Kant (as for Fichte, for Heidegger, and for Merleau-Ponty), is minted. And it is exactly this same aspect—the leaps, the ruptures, the discontinuities—that people have, for millennia, imputed to the intervention of a spirit or of a god, which is still clearly the tendency of Homeric man, and which determines Plato's reflections on poetry, when he attributes it to a "divine madness."

When it comes to the instituting social imaginary, the degree of difficulty is something else entirely. One shrugs one's shoulders at the idea of a field of social-historical creation. Yet one will pretend to accept—although or because one understands not a drop of it—the physicists' "explanation" of light as propagation of an electromagnetic vibration in a vacuum, a vibration of nothing that vibrates, a propagation of no-thing in the non-thing. The idea that there would exist "seats" of creation in every human collective, more exactly that every human collective would be such a

⁵³For example, *De Anima* 3.9.424a25. *Dunamis* signifies, first of all, power in the sense of a capacity to make/do. It is Aristotle who was to double this signification with the idea of possibility, creating the opposition between *dunamei*, in potentiality, and *ergō*, in actuality, potentially or virtually and effectively or actually.

seat, which would be plunged into an encompassing field of creation, including the contacts and interactions between particular fields but not reducible to them—this idea seems unacceptable, if not absurd.

Two factors, especially, are at play in this unreflective rejection. On the one hand, the limitation of the inherited ontology to three types of being: things, persons, and ideas. One then becomes blind to the impossibility of reducing the social-historical to a collection or combination of these three types of being. On the other hand, the idea of creation. The latter—which nevertheless is part of the experience of each and everyone, if only one is willing to pay attention to the flux of representations—seems beyond belief. And, indeed, how much more believable are the explanations of universal history by the Economy of Salvation, of the birth of Greek democracy by the country's geography, or of the music of Wagner by the state of bourgeois society ca. 1850! As I have spoken at length about these absurdities elsewhere, I will not resume their refutation here.⁵⁴

I have already devoted a book and several texts to the question of the instituting social imaginary.⁵⁵ I recall, to begin with, why one cannot avoid taking the social-historical into account both as regards philosophy and as regards psychoanalysis.

Along the philosophical path, the discussion need not be long. I begin with an apparently specific aspect, language. Philosophy itself, and thought in general, cannot exist without language or, at least, without strong links with language. But any individual or “contractual” primordial production of

⁵⁴See, for example, the first part (1964-1965) of [*IIS*](#).

⁵⁵[*IIS*](#).

language is historically and logically an absurdity. Language can only be a spontaneous creation of a human collective. And the same is true of all primordial institutions, without which there is no social life, therefore also no human beings.

Yet there is much more than the fact that thought presupposes language and that language is impossible outside of society. Thought is essentially historical, each manifestation of thought is a moment in a historical series and it is also, though not exclusively, the expression thereof. Likewise, thought is essentially social, each of its manifestations is a moment of the social setting. Thought proceeds therefrom; it acts thereon in return; and it expresses this fact without being reducible thereto.

What obliges us therefore to take the social-historical into account is that it constitutes the essential condition for the existence of thought and reflection. This condition is in no way “external”; it does not belong to the infinity of necessary but not sufficient conditions that underlie the existence of humanity. It is an “intrinsic” condition, a condition that contributes actively to the existence of what it conditions. This condition is for thought on the same order as the existence of the singular psyche. The psyche does not suffice for there to be thought and reflection, but the psyche is an integral part of thought and reflection—whereas gravitation, for example, conditions human existence in a thousand and one ways but is not an integral part thereof. In other terms, what I have just called *intrinsic condition* appertains to what is also *expressed* by what is conditioned.

The search for reflection’s engenderment in and through the social-historical may therefore be required by philosophy. It is exigible under the same heading as the search for thought’s engenderment in the singular human being.

As for psychoanalysis, the individual it encounters is

always a socialized individual (just as is, obviously, the individual who practices psychoanalysis). We never encounter singular psychosomatic individuals in the “pure” state; we encounter only socialized individuals. The psychical nucleus manifests itself only rarely, and even then indirectly. In itself, it forms the perpetually unattainable limit of psychoanalytic work. Ego, Super-Ego, Ego-ideal are unthinkable except as products (at most, coproducts) of the socialization process. Socialized individuals are walking and talking fragments of a given society, and they are *total* fragments: that is, they embody, in part actually, in part potentially, the essential core of the institutions and the significations of their society. There is no opposition between individual and society: the individual is a social creation, both as such and in its each-time-given social-historical form. The true polarity is between society and the psyche (the psyche-soma, in the sense indicated above). These are both irreducible to each other and effectively inseparable. The society as such cannot produce souls, the idea is meaningless. And an assembly of nonsocialized souls would not produce a society, but a Boschian nightmare. An assembly of *individuals* can, by contrast, produce a society (e.g., the *Mayflower* pilgrims), because these individuals are *already socialized* (otherwise they would not exist, even biologically).

Socialization is not a mere addition of elements external to a psychical nucleus that they would leave unaltered. Its effects are inextricably woven into the psyche such as it exists in effectively actual reality. That makes contemporary psychoanalysts’ willful ignorance of the social dimension of human existence incomprehensible.



The question of society (and, indissolubly, of history) is, of course, an abyssal subject, and I shall not try to summarize inadequately here what I have written at length elsewhere.⁵⁶ I shall limit myself to a few points either directly pertinent to the subject being discussed here, the instituting social imaginary, or related to the constraints to which the imaginary institution of society is subjected, which I have till now not had the occasion to treat.

I. Society is creation, and creation of itself: self-creation. It is the emergence of a new ontological form—a new *eidos*—and of a new mode and level of being. It is a quasi-totality held together by institutions (language, norms, family forms, tools and production modes, etc.) and by the significations these institutions embody (totems, taboos, gods, God, *polis*, commodities, wealth, fatherland, etc.). Both of these—institutions and significations—represent ontological creations. We do not encounter anywhere else institutions as a mode of relation holding together the components of a totality; and we can “explain”—causally produce or rationally deduce—neither the form institution as such, nor the fact of the institution, nor the particular primary institutions of a given society. And we do not encounter anywhere else signification, that is, the mode of being of an effective and “acting” ideality, the immanent imperceivable; nor can we “explain” the emergence of primary significations (e.g., the

⁵⁶[IIS](#); “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain” (1984) and “Institution of Society and Religion” (1982), both now in [CL2](#); “Individual, Society, Rationality, History” (1988) and “Power, Politics, Autonomy” (1988), both now in [CL3](#); “Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics” (1990) and “Freud, Society, History” (1996), both now in [CL4](#).

Hebrew God, the Greek *polis*, etc.).

I talk about self-creation, *not* “self-organization.” In the case of society we do not have an assembly of already existing elements, the combination of which could possibly produce new or additional qualities of the whole; the quasi- (or pseudo-) “elements” of society are created by society itself. Athens cannot exist without Athenians (*not* humans in general!)—but Athenians are created only in and by Athens. Thus society is always self-institution—but for almost the whole of human history this fact of the self-institution has been veiled by the very institution of society.

Society as such is self-creation. And each particular society is a specific creation, the emergence of another *eidos* within the generic *eidos* of society.

II. Society is always historical in the broad, but proper sense of the word: it is always undergoing a process of self-alteration; it is a process of self-alteration. This process can be, and almost always has been, so slow as to be imperceptible; in our small social-historical province it happens to have been, over the last 4,000 years, rather rapid and violent. The question of the diachronic identity of a society, the question: “When does a self-altering society stop being ‘the same’ and become another?” is a concrete historical question for which standard logic has no answer (are the Romes of the early Republic, of Marius and Sulla, of the Antonins, etc., “the same”?).

III. Since they are neither causally producible nor rationally deducible, the institutions and social imaginary significations of each society are free creations of the anonymous collective concerned. They are creations *ex nihilo*—but not *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*. This means, in particular, that they are creations *under constraints*. To mention the most important among these constraints:

A. There are “external” constraints—especially those imposed by the first natural stratum (roughly, the stratum of the living being and of what is accessible to it), including the biological constitution of the human being. These constraints are essentially trivial (which does not mean unimportant): the society is, each time, conditioned by its “natural” habitat, for example, but it is not “caused” by it. Insofar as the first natural stratum contains, to a decisive degree, an ensemblistic-identitary dimension—two stones and two stones make four stones, a bull and a cow will always produce calves and not chickens, etc.—the social institution has to recreate this dimension in its “representation” of the world, and of itself, that is, in its own world, its *Eigenwelt*. In other words, the institution of society reconstitutes, necessarily and always, a logic that corresponds sufficiently to this ensidic logic—which allows it to survive as society—under the aegis of the social imaginary significations each time instituted—which allows it to create a world endowed with *meaning* (each time different). This ensidic “social” logic as well as the social imaginary significations each time instituted are *imposed* upon the psyche throughout the long and painful process of the fabrication of the social individual.⁵⁷ This ensidic dimension is also, of course, present in language; it corresponds to language as *code*, that is, as a quasi-univocal instrument of elementary making/doing, reckoning, and reasoning. The code aspect of language (the cat is a cat) is opposed to but also inextricably entangled with its poietic aspect carrying the imaginary significations proper (God is one person in three, etc.). To these “external” constraints responds the *functionality* of institutions, especially relative to the production of material life and to sexual reproduction.

⁵⁷See ch. 6 of [IIS](#).

B. There are “internal” constraints that flow from the “raw material” out of which society creates itself, that is, the psyche. The psyche has to be socialized and for this it has to abandon more or less its own world, its objects of investment, what is for it meaning, and to cathect socially created and valued objects, orientations, actions, roles and so on. It has to abandon its own time and insert itself into a public time and a public world (“natural” as well as “human”). When we consider the unbelievable variety of types of society we know (and which are, undoubtedly, but a tiny part of the societies that could be and might be), we are almost led to think that the social institution can make out of the psyche whatever it pleases—make it polygamous, polyandrous, monogamous, fetishistic, pagan, monotheistic, pacific, bellicose, and so on. On closer inspection we see that this is indeed true, provided one condition is fulfilled: that the institution supplies the psyche with *meaning*—meaning for its life and meaning for its death. This is accomplished by the social imaginary significations, almost always religious ones, which tie together the meaning of the individual’s life and death, the meaning of the existence and of the ways of doing of the particular society, and the meaning of the world as a whole.

C. There are “historical” constraints. We cannot fathom the “origin” of societies, but no societies we can speak of emerge *in vacuo*. There are always, even if in pieces, a past and a tradition. But the relation to this past is itself, in its modalities and in its content, a part of the institution of society. Thus, archaic or traditional societies attempt to reproduce and repeat the past almost literally. In the other cases, the “reception” of past and tradition is, partly at least, highly conscious—but this “reception” is, in fact, re-creation (present-day parlance would call it “reinterpretation”). Athenian tragedy “receives” Greek mythology, and it re-

creates it. The history of Christianity is but the history of continuous “re-interpretations” of the same sacred texts, with, each time, violently differing outcomes. Classical Greeks are the object of an incessant “re-interpretation” in the West since at least the thirteenth century. This re-creation is, of course, always done according to the imaginary significations of the *present*—but, of course also, what is “reinterpreted” is a given, not an indeterminate, material. Still, it is instructive to compare what the Byzantines, the Arabs, and the Western Europeans have done with the same Greek heritage. The Byzantines just kept the manuscripts, adding some scholia here and there. The Arabs used only the scientific and philosophical texts, ignoring the rest. (See the beautiful short story by Borges on Averroes and Aristotle’s *Poetics*.)⁵⁸ The Western Europeans have been struggling with the remnants of this heritage for eight centuries now, and they do not seem to be through with it.

D. Finally, there are “intrinsic” constraints—the most interesting of all. I can only deal with two of them:

1. Institutions and social imaginary significations have to be *coherent*. Coherence has to be assessed immanently, that is, relative to the main characters and “drives”⁵⁹ of the given

⁵⁸T/E: Jorge Luis Borges, “Averroes’ Search,” in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962).

⁵⁹T/E: Here and in point 4 below, Castoriadis’s French translation of his originally English-language text has *poussées* for drives, which he had placed within quotation marks (point 1) or in italics (point 4). Elsewhere in English texts he composed, he does use “pushes,” which seems almost synonymous or convergent with drives—“*push and drive*” he writes in “Power, Politics, Autonomy” (1988), “drives (pushes)” in “Time and Creation” (1990), both now in [CL3](#)—but may indicate, without an explicit and consciously consistent formulation on his part, more the *social* avatar

society, taking into account the conformal behavior of the socialized individuals, and so on. Pyramid building with starving peasants is coherent when referred to the whole organization and social imaginary significations of pharaonic Egypt or Mayan Mesoamerica.

Coherence in no way precludes internal divisions, oppositions, and strife. Slave-owning or feudal societies are, of course, quite coherent. Things change with capitalist society, especially latter-day capitalist society, but in this case this is a historical novation that belongs to another discussion. Coherence is not, generally, endangered by “contradictions” between the strictly imaginary and the ensemblistic-identitary dimensions of the institution, for, as a rule, the former prevail over the latter. Arithmetic and commerce have not been hampered in Christian societies by the fundamental equation, much more important than arithmetic, $1 = 3$ implicit in the dogma of the Holy Trinity.

Here belongs also the imaginary reciprocal entailment of the “parts” of the institution and of the social imaginary significations. We are dealing not only with their pseudo-“functional” dependency but especially with the enigmatic and substantive unity and kinship between artifacts, political regimes, artistic works, and, of course, human types belonging to the same society and the same historical period. Needless to say, any idea of a “causal” or “logical” explanation of this unity is meaningless.

2. On the other hand, institutions and social imaginary significations have to be *complete*. This is clearly and absolutely so in *heteronomous* societies, determined by the

of what he calls, following Freud, the psychical “drive” (*pulsion* in French, *Trieb* in German, questionably translated in the *Standard Edition* as “instinct”).

closure of meaning. The term *closure* has to be taken here in its strict, mathematical sense. Mathematicians say that an algebraic field is *closed* if, for every equation written with elements of the field, the solutions are also elements of the field. Every interrogation that is meaningful within a closed field brings one back, for its answer, into this field. Likewise, in any closed society, any “question” that can be formulated at all in the language of this society must find its answer within the magma of the social imaginary significations of the society. This entails, in particular, that questions concerning the *validity* of the social institutions and significations quite simply cannot be posed. The exclusion of such questions is ensured by the positing of a *transcendent*, extrasocial source of the institutions and significations, that is, of a religion.

IV. Some additional comments on the term social imaginary *significations* may help to prevent misunderstandings. I have chosen the term *significations* because it seems to me the least inappropriate to convey what I have in mind. But it should absolutely not be taken in a “mentalistic” sense. Social imaginary significations create a proper world for the society considered—in fact, they *are* this world, and they shape the psyche of individuals. They create thus a “representation” of the world, including of the society itself and of its place in this world, but this is far from being an intellectual construct. It goes together with the creation of a *drive* for the society considered (so to speak, a global intention) and of a specific *Stimmung* or mood—of an affect, or a cluster of affects, permeating the whole of the social life. For example, Christian *faith* is a wholly specific historical creation entailing particular “aims” (to be loved by God, saved, etc.) and most particular and peculiar *affects*, which would have been totally ununderstandable (and nonsensical—*mōria*, very rightly, says Saint Paul) for any classical Greek or

Roman (and, for that matter, any Chinese or Japanese). And this is understandable, if one realizes that society is a being for itself.

Sublimation, Thought, Reflection

Sublimation—a notion that received little elaboration from Freud, who said that “we will have to return to it”⁶⁰—is the process by means of which the psyche is led to replace its own or private objects of cathexis, including its own image for itself, with objects that exist and have value in and through their social institution, and to make them for itself “causes,” “means,” or “supports” of pleasure.

We meet up here again with the massive conversion that characterizes the emergence of humanity, that is to say, the substitution of representational pleasure for organ pleasure and the appearance, through the works of the social imaginary, of the institution, therefore the creation of what are, properly speaking, *invisible objects* (in their social capacity, objects are invisible; one may see vegetables and cars, one never sees the commodity “vegetable” or “car”; the commodity is a social imaginary signification), or, better, *imperceptible* ones. And we encounter a primordial fact: disconnected from its drive, the singular imagination becomes capable of offering the psyche public objects as objects of cathexis.

⁶⁰T/E: This is probably a paraphrase of Freud’s statement, already partially quoted in [CLI](#) (“Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science”): “If one were to yield to a first impression, one would say that sublimation is a vicissitude which has been forced upon the instincts [*sic*] entirely by civilization. But it would be wiser to reflect upon this a little longer” (*SE* 21: 97).

As we know, the term *thought* was utilized by Freud to designate groups of representations (or even the representation itself) as well as the processes through which these representations are connected: thus does he speak of “dream-thoughts.” For my part, I prefer to speak of *representations* and their connection, whether such connection be near-obligatory or almost random. It is preferable to reserve the term *thought*, depending upon usage, for more or less conscious activities.

If, however, we take the term *thought* in the sense of simple conscious functioning—and then, for Freud, it is basically a matter of a function of the Ego—it is clear that this thinking, this functioning, is carried out first and foremost in a twofold *closure*. Like all operations [*fonctionnements*] of the Ego in the psychoanalytic sense, this one, too, is subordinated to “Ego-interest,” enslaved to the countertractions of the pleasure principle and the reality principle. In other terms, such thought is placed in the service of drives under the (not always respected) constraint of taking reality into consideration. Already, this severely circumscribes the circle of its activity. Yet, for the socialized individual this reality is essentially social reality (to learn that fire burns is not a big deal). Taking social reality into consideration expresses the need for the *self* to exist as self in this essentially nonbiological setting that is society. Yet it would be quite superficial to understand by this solely the “prohibitions” and positive injunctions the individual learns to respect as it becomes socialized. It is a matter of the essential conditions of the thought of the individual, whose frames, categories, and content are broadly imposed on the individual through its social fabrication. Such social fabrication therefore unfolds under the sign of repetition, though this repetition cannot, in general, be qualified as

“pathological”: we need only think of archaic or simply traditional societies (or even our own!). The specific details of such “social” repetition are to be found in “individual” repetition. But such individual repetition is, so to speak, without significance for psychoanalysis.

An additional explanation of the term *closure* is here required. Closure, we have seen, means that what is thought cannot be called into question in its essential features. Now, starting from the moment when there is language, it becomes possible in every human society to pose questions. Nevertheless, what is characteristic of the immense majority of societies is that these questions always remain limited in import, and cannot go beyond [*dépasser*], or even attain, or intend, that which for society, for the tribe, are what we might metaphorically call the axioms of its social institution, its rules of inference, and its criteria for making deductions. It is inconceivable that one would be unable to ask, in any language whatsoever: Was it *X* or *Y* who did this? Was there really a lion yesterday on the outskirts of the village? The other person will respond yes or no, and he can lie or be mistaken. But all this takes place within closure. No one can ask: Does the earth really lie on the back of a great tortoise? That must remain unquestionable. No one, in an archaic society, can call into question the injunctions of the ancestors. No one, in a Christian society, can contest the contents or revealed origin of the Scriptures, or, in an Islamic society, the sacred character of the Koran. These are the ultimate axioms that are neither questioned nor capable of being questioned.

We are no more intelligent than our ancestors, still less so than primitive men. We could even say that we are much less intelligent than the latter, for who among our scientists today is capable of inventing weaving, for example, or calculating the length of the year if he does not know it

already. Yet this intelligence, this thought moves within an instituted closure. And—otherwise there would be no history—in an extremely slow fashion, over thousands of years, something percolates up, either from the creativity of the singular psyche or from the collective, in the form of changes in stone-tool work, then in the form of the neolithic revolution, and then the rest.

Taken in this way, thought is strictly functional at two levels, the level of satisfaction, somehow or other, of the individual's drives—which essentially means the level at which equilibrium is attained, in Freudian terms, between reality—which is never anything but social reality, as Freud says in *Totem and Taboo* (1912)⁶¹—and the individual's drives, and, on the other hand, the equilibrium—much more, the convergence—between the indefinite multitude of individuals' actions and aims and the functioning of the overall social edifice. This equilibrium has been attained in a thousand and one ways, through monogamy, polygamy, the patriarchal family, the patrilineal or matrilineal system, with Yahweh, the Egyptian gods, the Greek gods, the human sacrifices of the Aztecs, the adoration of Jesus Christ, the endless pursuit of profit, and so on. In relation to such an equilibrium, there is always the possibility of transgression but the latter is, in the main, codified. There is explicit transgression of social norms, which is foreseen and punished [*sanctionnée*] (if the imposition of sanctions weakens or becomes random, the norms cease to be norms in the sociological sense). There is illness, but it is not uninteresting to note that this is always considered a *sign* of something else, and it is codified and treated in a corresponding fashion

⁶¹T/E: In "Epigomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science," Castoriadis provides the reference: *SE* 13:74.

(shamans, sorcerers, and so on). And, of course, there are dreams, which are equally subjected to codified interpretation. And that is about all.

A parenthetical point must be made here about Freud's "drive for knowledge" (*Wißtrieb*). As I have treated this elsewhere at length,⁶² I limit myself here to what is of direct concern to the present discussion. This strangely named "drive" (at least in light of Freud's subsequent determination of the drive as the "frontier between the somatic and the psychical") is, in truth, the form of the singular human being's search for meaning from as early as the breakup of its original "autistic" or monadic state. We need not worry here about the "objects" upon which it places privileged concern ("Where do children come from?" equals *What is my origin, who am I?*), nor about the imaginary (phantasmatic) constructions that satisfy it at the start (infantile sexual theories). What is striking is that this *Wißtrieb* almost always is *saturated* by its absorption of social sexual theory and of social cosmic theory. (The retention in the Unconscious of phantasies connected with infantile sexual theories does not concern us here.) In general, the search for meaning is gratified by the meaning offered/imposed by society—that is, by social imaginary significations. This saturation goes hand in hand with a halt to interrogation: for every question there are canonical responses or social "functionaries" (magi, priests, mandarins, theoreticians, General Secretaries, scientists) who possess them. The psychoanalytic outlook in itself and by itself is totally incapable of accounting for the fact that there is a *Wißtrieb* that stops and a *Wißtrieb* that does not stop—any more than for the difference between Scythian sublimation and Greek sublimation. Oedipus and his quest are not, far

⁶²See "Passion and Knowledge," above in the present volume.

from it, present in all cultures.

Thought does not mean *reflection*. Reflection appears when thought turns back upon itself and interrogates itself not only about its particular contents but also about its presuppositions and its foundations. Based on everything that has just been said, however, it may be affirmed that these presuppositions and these foundations do not appertain to reflection; they have been furnished to it by the social institution—for example, among other things, by language. Genuine reflection is therefore, *ipso facto*, the challenging of the given institution of society, the calling into question of socially instituted representations, of what Bacon called the *idola tribus*, an expression to which we must attribute a much broader sense than the one he gave to it.⁶³ This calling into question of the representations of the tribe occurs, for example, when Thales and others begin saying that what the Greeks tell are nice stories, but what *truly is* is...; or when Heraclitus accuses the (mythological) poets of not knowing what they are saying. And this is what Freud himself was saying when, upon arriving in the United States, he said: They don't know that we're bringing them the plague.⁶⁴ The psychoanalytic plague involves the calling into question of all instituted representations concerning the marvelous innocence of the child, the sexual life of man, his altruism and his goodness, his unalloyed and clearly-defined belonging to one or the other sex, and so on. And representations concerning sexuality are obviously a cornerstone of the edifice of the

⁶³T/E: See, e.g., Aphorism 41 from his *Novum Organum*. "Idols of the Tribe" is the usual translation for this Latin expression.

⁶⁴T/E: Quip reportedly made by Freud in 1909 to Carl Jung as they were arriving in New York harbor.

social institution.

Since appearance of reflection implies the simultaneous and reciprocally conditioned emergence of a society in which no sacred (revealed) truths exist any longer and of individuals for whom it has become psychically possible to call into question both the foundation of the social order (possibly to reaffirm it, should that be one's response) and their own thought—*that is to say, their own identity*—this appearance of reflection can take place, therefore, only when accompanied by an upheaval in, and a fundamental reshaping of, the entire social-historical field. It is thereby clear that reflection presupposes and materializes thought's break with functionality.

On the side of the subject, reflection implies much more than what Kant calls "transcendental apperception," that is to say, "this pure, original, and unchangeable consciousness" of the unity of consciousness, the "consciousness of a...necessary unity of the synthesis of all phenomena according to concepts, that is to say, according to rules."⁶⁵ It implies the labor of the subject's radical imagination.

Indeed, for there to be reflection, first of all there must be something that the radical imagination alone can provide: one must be able to represent *oneself* not as an object but as *representational activity*, as a non-object object. It is a matter of seeing double and seeing *oneself* double, and of acting as acting activity. Reflection is the transformation of thought into an object of itself, the counterpoint underlying the

⁶⁵*Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 105. [T/E: Where the Barni French translation Castoriadis is quoting, here and below, has the verb *relie* and the noun *liaison* (link, connection), the Müller translation has "synthesis," which we retain.]

thinking of the object by a return of thought upon itself. Next, the subject must be able to detach itself from the certitude of its own consciousness. This implies the capacity to place in suspension the ultimate axioms, criteria, and rules that ground thought as simply conscious activity, with the supposition that other ones (other axioms, criteria, and rules), not yet certain, perhaps not yet known, might replace them.

It is a matter, then, of seeing *oneself* and positing *oneself* as this purely imaginary being, in all senses of the term: an activity that, while having possible contents, has no determined and certain content. At the moment true interrogation takes place, I have already called into question what had, by others and by myself, hitherto been taken for granted, and this concerns not trivial objects but matters essential to my thought; I glimpse—or do not glimpse—other possibilities, and during this phase I tend to be a pure activity suspended between the refusal of something, of that which I am henceforth led to reject, and the expectation, the possibility of another thing that in no way is certain. I tend to be pure activity, open like interrogation, or rather I posit myself as such. Of course, it always is also *I* that I posit as subject of this activity—and I posit *myself* as *object qua* this interrogative activity, and I thereby posit myself as “consciousness of a...necessary unity,” as well; but at this level, this unity is not that of a synthesis between “all phenomena according to concepts” or rules; it is the unity of the *intended aim* of a synthesis that is *to be made to be*, of syntheses and rules that *remain to be found* at the end of a process that places in suspense the very rules of its own unfolding. Of course, all the contents and rules can never be called into question simultaneously, but all of them can be posited as, each in its turn, provisionally suspended.

All these elements constitute intrinsic conditions, in

the sense defined above, for reflection or reflective thought. They all pertain to the radical imagination of the singular subject and/or the instituting social imaginary. It remains to recall the fundamental role of the imagination, which its contribution to the *content* of reflection and of theory constitutes. This contribution consists in the creation of *figures* (or of *models*) of the thinkable. All theoretical work, all philosophical reflection, the entire history of science shows that there is creative imagination, source of figures/models, which in no way could be considered as empirically inferred but which are, on the contrary, conditions for the organization of empirical knowledge or, more generally, for thought. It is impossible in a few pages to do justice to this immense subject, which would require—and does require, simply put—the resumption of the entire history of philosophy and of the entire history of science from this perspective: of the creation of new imaginary schemata that each time bolster the thinkable.⁶⁶ I must limit myself to making a few brief notations.

The history of philosophy is not a history of any “rational development,” either immanent or forced by how positive knowledge has evolved, and neither is it a history of the humors and whims of philosophers. It is a history of the creation of new schemata (and not “concepts”) attempting to render thinkable, that is, to elucidate, the totality of human experience (including the development of knowledge), under the constraint of internal coherence and of encounter with the content and forms of this experience. *Mutatis mutandis*, that

⁶⁶I have provided a few indicative examples elsewhere. See, for example, the Preface to [CL1](#), xxixff.; “Ontological Import of the History of Science,” [CL2](#), 462–64; “Merleau-Ponty and the Weight of the Ontological Tradition,” above in the present volume.

is equally true for the history of the sciences, with addition of specific considerations about the object, the way to proceed, and result aimed at: explanation for the natural sciences, understanding for the social and historical sciences.

A few concrete examples may be of use. The role of the creative imagination may be seen most clearly and most strikingly in the development of mathematics. The mathematical imagination (which Kant wanted to confine to the “ordinary” intuition of space and time) is an incredible accumulation of nonintuitable entities—spaces of n -dimensions, or of infinite or fractional dimension, not to speak of other, still more “unrepresentable,” and yet imaginable creations. The connection with “words,” that is to say, with mathematical symbols, is evident and irrecusable, but combinations of “words” do not mathematical thought create; mathematical thought must, on the contrary, construct step by step the various symbolisms that bear and convey it.

In physics, too, each time there is a major advance, there is positing of figures of some sort, figurations of an idea or vaguely intuitable models of a theory in the process of being made explicit as such. Because it is beautiful, I will mention just the story of the discovery of the formula for benzene by the great organic chemist of the last century, August Kekulé, who had a dream in which were represented six snakes in a circle, each biting the tail of the previous one. The next day, he found what he had been searching for, in vain, for some time, the hexagonal stereochemical formula for the benzene molecule.

I will end here with two examples taken from Freud himself. In rereading the 1895 *Project*, we are led to ask: What is this *Project*, then, if not an imaginary *constructum* of Freud's, one by which he renders the psychical realm thinkable? There are diagrams—but there are not just

diagrams; there are also the circulation of “charges,” barriers, the proximity or distance of neurons, and so on. Freud fabricates a mental image for himself, a figure, a model; he fabricates it for himself because he is engaged in the process of reflection, but it is also starting from this image that he reflects and he could not reflect without it.⁶⁷

A second example I wish to take from Freud is the celebrated passage from *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*. At the end of his tether, he bursts out with the following declaration: “We must call the Witch to our help after all!—the Witch Metapsychology,” and affirms that, “without metapsychological speculation and theorizing—I had almost said ‘phantasying’—we shall not get another step forward.” As Serge Viderman has noted, Freud’s first French translators suppressed this sentence, no doubt due to a filial sense of propriety.⁶⁸ Let it pass that metapsychology, an old witch cooking up God-knows-what magic philters, might be called upon for help. But to confess that theorization turns out to be a “phantasying,” that is to say, the imagination, the mad woman in the house, would ruin forever the theoretical respectability of psychoanalysis. One has to, in effect, “phantasy” something about the psychical apparatus—as about all else—in order to be able to think something about it.

⁶⁷This is such a powerful image, moreover, that some of its key elements can still be found in the famous article by McCulloch and Pitts fifty years later. [T/E: Warren S. McCulloch and Walter Pitts, “A Logical Calculus of the Ideas Immanent in Nervous Activity,” *Bulletin of Mathematical Biology*, 52: 1/2 (1943): 115-33.]

⁶⁸GW 16: 69; in English, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, SE 23: 225 [T/E: As n. 2 on this page of the *Standard Edition* explains, the quotation comes from Goethe’s *Faust*, part 1, scene 6]. See Serge Viderman, *La Construction de l’espace analytique* (Paris: Denoël, 1970), pp. 323-24.

That does not mean that this “phantasying,” that is to say, the activity of the imagination, is out of control. Here is not the place to enter into a discussion with Popper and the Popperians. Let us note, simply, that there would be nothing to “falsify” if something were not already *posited*—and that Popper and the Popperians are strangely mute about *the origin of what has been posited*, as well as about the origin of what, after “falsification,” will come to replace it. There would quite simply be no science if one had each time limited oneself to “falsifying” one of the existing theories. And the history of science shows that not “falsifications” but the creation of a new theory each time is what allows one to “validate” the existing “falsifications,” which till then remained mere aporias, riddles, or difficulties (see also the appearance of the theory of relativity as well as quantum theory). Let us note, too, that what we are able to imagine and, on that basis, to theorize about the psychical apparatus for example is certainly not refutable, “falsifiable” in Popper’s sense. But stating this point is a far cry from abolishing the distinction between truth and falsehood. An infinity of stupid statements can be made about the apparatus of the psyche (or about Athenian society, or about the birth of capitalism), and these inanities can be shown to be inanities. The theoretical constructions that can hold up are, however, quite limited and very rare. And without any possible doubt, something distinguishes, and would distinguish even for the most obtuse Popperian, someone—Freud, for example—who produces a plausible model of the psychical apparatus and someone who would say, “All that happens because redcurrant jelly travels along the neuronal pathways.” Demonstrable inanities exist as such, and they are infinite in number, but there are very few ideas that already hold up at a first glance and can even withstand critical examination.

More generally, we may say that an important new theory—that of Newton, Einstein, Darwin, or Freud himself, not to mention those of philosophers—is never a simple “induction,” any more than it is the mere product, “by subtraction,” of the “falsification” of previously existing theories. It is, *under constraint of the data* (this is what in fact empirical knowledge as well as “falsification” amount to), the positing of a new imaginary figure/model of intelligibility.



Reflection is therefore definable as the effort to *break closure* wherever we are each time necessarily caught up as subjects, whether such closure comes from our personal history or from the social-historical institution that has formed and raised, that is, humanized, us. In this effort, the imagination plays a central role, since the calling into question of “established truths” does not occur, and can never occur, within a void but always is paired with the positing of new forms/figures of the thinkable, which are created by the radical imagination and are subject to the control of reflection, all of this under the aegis of a new “object” of psychical investment, a nonobject object, an invisible object, the truth. I speak of “truth” here not as the adequation of thought to the thing but as the very movement that tends to open breaches in our closure wherever thought tends to shut itself up again.

Let us note in passing that such reflection not only is what renders psychoanalysis possible, since psychoanalysis is ultimately the return of the subject upon itself and upon the conditions for its functioning, but it also can serve as an element in the definition of the *end* of the analysis (in the two senses of the word “end”). To go beyond repetition is to allow

the subject to get out of the framework its settled organization has fixed it in once and for all and to open it to a genuine history of which it will be able to be the coauthor.

The same goes for the analyst. Her work will remain vital and fruitful only to the extent that, beyond the patient's defenses, resistances, and armoring (and her own), she succeeds in glimpsing something of the singular radical imagination of this singular human being in front of her. And this reflects back on the analyst herself, if she is ready to let her own frameworks budge, to hear something else, to think something new, and to let the patient, via interpretation, find himself again in this something new, understanding that he had always been there and that he does not have to remain there.



We may state once again that, unless one remains engaged in empty interrogation, all successful thinking certainly establishes, in turn, a new closure. The history of thought is also the history of successive closures—and this is what rules out eliminating a critical attitude toward past philosophers. Yet it is also true that, among the forms thus created, some possess a mysterious and marvelous permanency. And the truth of thought is this very movement in and through which that which has already been created as permanent finds itself placed otherwise and illuminated in another light by new creations, of which it has need so as not to sink into the silence of the merely ideal.

Appendix: Potential Errata

N.B.: Despite having in their possession, for a period of four months, a list of potential *errata* for the first volume in the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series, the Castoriadis Estate, which has a moral obligation to cooperate, and the Association Cornelius Castoriadis, which has a legal obligation, according to its statutes, to cooperate, have not responded to the request to correct and/or to amend this first list and have shown no indication that they will cooperate in examining and confirming or revising *errata* lists for the other five volumes in the series. This, despite the fact that it is standard professional operating procedure, in the case of a translation, to work from such corrected versions of the originals, a process in which the owners of the originals have a clear responsibility. Without the establishment of definitive versions of the French originals, we are unfortunately unable to ensure that the present translations are indeed the best renditions possible.

In order to be fully transparent to the reader, the potential *errata* listed below reference the page numbers of the April 2008 reprint of *Fait et à faire*, the (uncorrected) French source for the present [CL5](#) translation.

- 11 quel est...ou le vivant. = quel est...ou le vivant ?
- 15 *erkenntnistheoretisch* = *erkenntnistheoretische*
- 25 *bios théorétikos* = *bios theôrétikos*
- 27(deux fois), 35, 235 *Anthropos anthropon genna...genna.*
= *Anthrôpos anthrôpon gennai...gennai.*
- 28 *eu zén* = *eu zèn* {Voir : [DH](#), 320} {deux fois}
- 29 405-20). = 405-20 ; 1988a, 84-85). {deuxième
référence oubliée ou rayée exprès ?}
- 38 (1988b, p. 122-123) = (1988a, p. 122-123 = p 149-50
de la réédition)
- 43 page 7. {???
- 47 siècles = *siècles* {Voir *Autonomie et auto-
transformation*, p. 482}
- 51 ré-imaginer = *ré-imaginer* {Voir *Autonomie et auto-
transformation*, p. 485}
- 53 du fait, et = du fait, *et* {Voir *Autonomie et auto-
transformation*, p. 486}

- 55 *biotos* = *biôtos* {voir p. 151}
- 67 habitus de délibération = *habitus* de délibération
{italiques deux autres fois sur la page}
- 72 de *wir Menschen*, = de *uns Menschen*,
- 72 (*faktisch*) = (*faktischen*)
- 74,76,79,80,81,82,83 *ecclesia* = *ecclèsia* {Dans [DH](#), c'est *ecclèsia*}
- 74 K, 10, = K, 9,
- 80,86,91 F. Feher = F. Fehér
- 86 souligné = souligné dans
- 92 Restaurer la ligne à la fin : *Mai-Novembre 1989*
- 101 Pollack = Polack
- 102 Les guillemets autour de “création imaginaire du social historique” (*Chimères*, 97) ne sont plus là.
- 106 librement avec les autres = “librement” avec les autres
{2e fois, on manque les guillemets}
- 151n4 61-63..., rééd....33-80 {??}
- 153 de...*wir Menschen*, = de...*uns Menschen*,
- 158 *Tribschicksäle* = *Tribschicksale*
- 170n2 152. = 151.
- 190 vingt = vingt cinq {voir le tapuscrit}
- 191 *theoria* = *theôria*
- 197 contexte = conteste
- 198n2 Dans le tapuscrit, la phrase se terminait, après : la notion d'observable
et de corps.
- 201 emerge une réflexion...et un sujet = emergent une réflexion...et un sujet
- 207 *Inbegriff aller Seienden* = *Inbegriff alles Seienden*
- 217 conflagration = conflation
- 233, 274 *ontos on* = *ontōs on*
- 238 Voir la note que j'ai ajouté pour 192b 21 :
Actually, *arkhēn kinēseōs* is found a bit earlier, at 192b14; it is *arkhēs...kineisthai* that appears at 192b21, in the passage Castoriadis is quoting and citing.
- 239 *noēsis noésēos* = *noēsis noéseōs*

- 260n3 *Das Deutsche* = *Das deutsche*
- 271 sens habituel {dans la V.O. anglaise, c'est: "visual" et non pas : "usual"...}
- 273 1927 = 1929
- 274n7 Voir les textes cités {*sic*, au pluriel ?} note 2. {il n'y a que *IIS* dans la note 2, parce que la mention, dans la V.O. anglaise, de « Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary » est périmée (ce texte fait partie, maintenant, du texte présente) ; voir : 290}
- 275 *nomô* = *nomôi*
- 277 Il y un : "(I)" sans un : "(II)" dans cette section
- 282 à...*die Sache selbst* = à...*der Sache selbst*
- 284 *Reflexionsbegriffen* = *Reflexionsbegriffe*
- 290 "d'autres textes {*sic*, au pluriel ?} de cet aspect, {dans "Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary", il a cité également "Logic, Imagination, Reflection", mais maintenant ces deux textes ne font qu'un : "Imagination, imaginaire, réflexion" ; voir : 274n7.}
- 292n20 296-98 ; = 296-98, 311 ; {CC parle, dans le corps du text, de « **deux** fois »}
- 292n21 1987 = 1897
- 294n24 18, 234. = 18 ; *G.W.*, XIII, p. 244.
- 295n27 *G.W.*, II/III, p. 521 ; *S.E.*, 5, 107. = *G.W.*, II/III, p. 511 ; *S.E.*, 4, 507.
- 295n28 *G.W.*, II/III, p. 521 ; *S.E.*, 5, 107. = *G.W.*, II/III, p. 511 ; *S.E.*, 4, 507.
- 298 {Pourquoi des crochets : [] ici? Il s'agit d'un *nouveau texte*, sur la base de deux autres.}
- 299n29 *G.W.*, X, p.185. = *G.W.*, X, p. 285.
- 299n29 *ibid.*, 293 {?? pas de mention de la contradiction sur cette page du tome X de *G.W.* Voir ma note :}
GW 10: 285 [T/E: correcting "185" for Castoriadis's in-text mention of "compromise"; in English, *SE* 14: 186]. Contradiction

between (conscious and unconscious) psychical systems: *GW*10: 285 [T/E: correcting “293,” where there is no mention of contradiction; the equivalent English pages to 285 (*SE* 14: 186-87) have: “exempt from mutual contradiction” and “exemption from mutual contradiction”].

300 *Rücksicht an* = *Rücksicht auf*

303 *ein Vertreter*, = *einen Vertreter*,

305 (1908) = (1918)

305 ; Lettre à Fliess, no 69, 21 septembre 1897, *S.E.*, 1, p.259-61. = .

305 Créer une nouvelle note après: “*neurotica*” :

34. Lettre à Fliess, no 69, 21 septembre 1897, *S.E.*, 1, p.259-61.

326 d’*objets à* = d’*objets à*