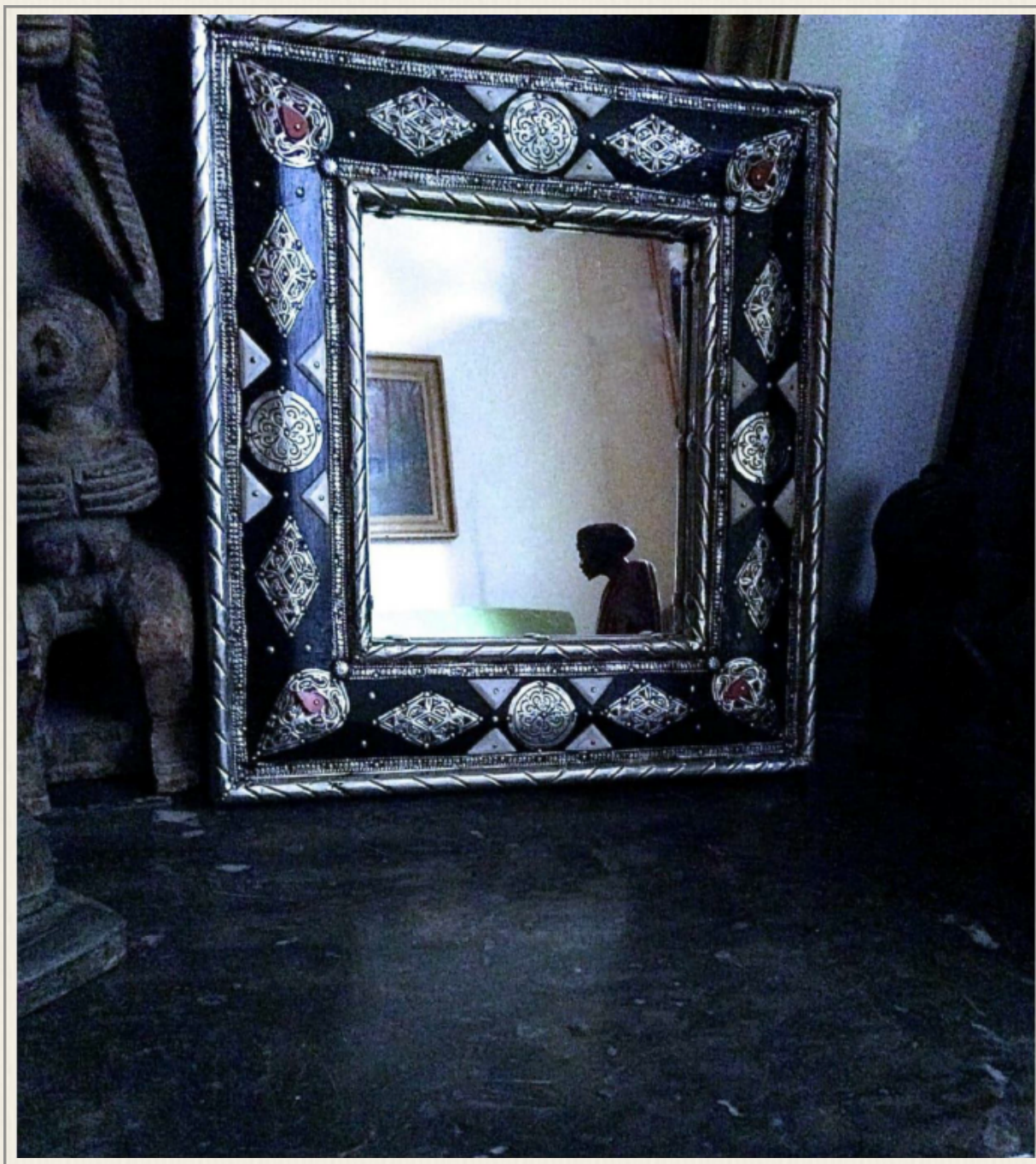




# Philosophical consultation



OSCAR BRENIFIER



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# About the author

Doctor of philosophy, trainer and philosophical consultant, he has worked for many years in France and abroad on the concept of "philosophical practice", both in terms of practice and theory. He is one of the main promoters of the « philosophy in the city » movement: cafés-philo, philosophical workshops with children and adults, seminars in business and organizations ... He has published many books in this field, including the collection "PhiloZenfants" (editions Nathan), which were published in more than thirty languages. He co-founded the « Institute of Philosophical Practices » of which he is the chairman. He is also one of the authors of the Unesco report "Philosophy, A school of freedom ". You can find more informations on his website :

[www.pratiques-philosophiques.fr](http://www.pratiques-philosophiques.fr).

# About the book

Who am I? Where am I going? What is my vision of the world? How could I think differently? All these fundamental questions that must always be ignored, because we are caught up in the daily routine and obligations. The philosophical consultation is a thinking exercise, where the philosophical practitioner invites his interlocutor to settle down momentarily, in order to examine those fundamental questions. In this book, the author mentions different facets of this practice, describing its issues, its skills and difficulties. Various theoretical elements are presented, as well as the description and analysis of a session of consultation.

*Translated from French by Marie Vilain*



# AND WHY IS THAT?

## The stranger

Since my early childhood, I have regarded lying, whether consciously or unconsciously, as a fundamental characteristic of the human being and his speech. Lying by omission, lying by commission, lying by ignorance, lying by incoherence, lying by pretension, lying by habit, lying by complacency, lying by partiality, lying by convention, etc. The point here is not so much to insist on the immoral nature of lying, although this dimension should not be ignored, but on the phenomenon itself which consists in concealing the truth, diluting it, bending it, reversing it, modifying it, drowning it, delaying it, dressing it up, and mostly in omitting what we know as true, and all this from the very moment the subject suspects any disturbance. A true art, strangely instinctive, common and natural. As lying, designed as a rupture of the speech, as a discrepancy between the author and his words, as a void of the being, bears an existential, aesthetic, metaphysical or epistemological dimension, and not just a moral one. Besides, over the years, with the help of experience and reflection, or because of the fatigue that slowly invades the body and the soul, wearing out the radical nature of the thinking, I have unscrupulously come to admit the necessity or the beauty of falsehood. Paradoxically, despite these various changes, the same desire has kept haunting me: the bring to light of any lie that presents itself, that springs up to the consciousness. Yet, we are forced to conclude that there are no words that are not deceptive; perhaps because the concept of lying itself has been so enlarged or dialecticized, as many readers will undoubtedly rush to notice. As if paradox or contradiction was the origin of all speech. Anyhow, words are suspicious a priori, and the philosophical work, the practice involved in this discipline, tends mostly to outline the untruthfulness, not

in a general or abstract way, but individually, when seen in someone who bears it, if not necessarily means it, consciously or not.

My encounter with Plato, as a teenager, was a true revelation. Here comes a character, Socrates, who endeavoured, through chasing truth, to disclose lies, to bring the hiatus to light, giving birth to it in a concrete and determined form. Obvious lie or subtle lie, meant-to-be lie or imposed lie. I had found a master and was going to enjoy it. I am not certain, retrospectively, that this discovery was particularly fortunate. It was only reinforcing many tendencies acquired through my personal history which were already causing me setbacks. As a matter of fact, having spent my young years in many countries, in many towns, having moved constantly, been exiled, I was always the stranger, wherever I was. The stranger, the one who ignores the rules, the one who infringes the established pacts, the one who says what should not be said and questions what should not be. Solely the one who has faced the offset, the uprooting of exodus can understand how much a given society, through its culture, knows how to impose taboo and silence. For the others, the chronically indigenous, this cumbersomeness is hardly perceived; incidentally its perception or awareness is scarcely desired.

Thus, Plato and Socrates, with this odd figure of the Stranger which is seen in the late dialogues, this Stranger in the form of whom may hide the god of refutation, encouraged me on an impracticable, rutted and thorny path, yet I had to engage into it. There was no question about it. At the beginning however, squirting out falsehood was the way, but truth was the outcome. The truth that could be expressed, as Plato seems to express it. The Good, the Beautiful, the True had a face, a name, some attributes. A disputable reading indeed, which I was later going to reconsider. A matter of era, I suppose. Because if places determine us, years do too. Our own years, and the ones of the society we live in. So for me the Socratic questioning had a purpose: reach a truth which content was relatively certain, already written, inscribed in the order of things. And this very truth, the one from beyond the mountains, had to oppose to another fake, illusory and deceptive one, and whose thick veil was yearning to be torn apart.

Through erosion, the one of the discoveries, the shifts and the betrayals, all these inflexions that really make one – we usually call this the course of life – I came



to love what I had first abhorred. Relativism, scepticism, cynicism which I had severely denounced as a form of primary capitulation, of the thinking and of life, were opening their arms to me. Probably they didn't have the same face anymore. But was this transformation of appearance a cause or a consequence of my own transformation? I didn't know. In a former life, I would have been interested in this question: today, the chicken or the egg somewhat demoralises me. Why did I have to worry about an intrinsic truth? Solely the aesthetic perspective now excited me. The true used to fascinate me, the good had never really inspired me. Usually incidental, only the beautiful now managed to move me, to intrigue me. One must acknowledge however that amongst those three transcendental concepts, the one picked is nothing more than a specific way to articulate the whole. Therefore, the truth, or the good of an idea or of a thought, laid entirely in its beauty, its coherence, its transparency. Beauty being simultaneously its unity, its originality, its absence of superfluous, its precision, its lightness, its elegance, as this term is used in mathematics; the content mattered to me only through the forms that it wore. But a form which is a substance, undoubtedly the only substantial content, moreover a form which is floating above the abyss, despite the high difficulty to conceive this perspective, and in particular to accept it.

Ever since, in the same way that it is impossible to judge the truth of a painting, it seemed to me impossible to speak about the truth of an idea. Nevertheless, just like for the painting, the point was not to depreciate the standard, far from that, the point was to reconsider truth. It would be hypocritical of me to claim a sort of cosmic revelation, or a perseverance of the will in some work, to explain such a mind shift. No, life took care of everything. Just like the sand and the water which slowly erode the cliff, numerous events, numerous encounters, had deeply undermined the granite on which I believed I stood. Surreptitiously, centimetre after centimetre, my base moved. Nothing glorious there. What could be more common? If not that to realise it one day, meant to recognise the fragility of the being, the fragility of the self. Something which is at first quite an odd experience, particularly in the way it is usually felt: when it happens late in one's existence.

Anyway, it came to full circle. After having been for so long and in such a complacent way the stranger to others, I had become the stranger to myself. The face

of Socrates suddenly escaped Plato, even though the filiation remained undeniable, a mere betrayal of legacy; other faces appeared in the shade, subtler, more provocative, or more awkward even. Any goal seemed to vanish from my quest, a quest that now faced itself. Can it still be called a quest, when nothing is expected anymore? Obviously, there was nothing left to say, but everything to ask. Ask others, since really what could possibly be asked to oneself? We are so predictable, so boring, so conventional. Whereas the other is always the real stranger, from whom one can really get to wonder about himself. As much as we are able to talk to our own self, what we commonly call thinking, we could never help starting off from a point in the infinite, this imperceptible line of flight that takes the form of otherness, without endlessly repeating ourselves. Therefore, to lie consisted in repeating the same thing over and over again. By omission or by commission, by abuse or by weakness, by incoherence or by habit, to lie is to repeat, or to believe to be repeating oneself.

## Philosophies

I have mixed memories of my first philosophy classes. A Polish professor, with a thick accent, who dropped some quick unexpected comments on daily life, on the snow and the cold. Another professor, more pompous, who introduces himself as a specialist of Kant, a supreme and moral authority as he claims: him and Kant, Kant and him, an inseparable guarantee of truth. The first one inspires me; the second one puts me off. It seems that I am not the only one in the class to suffer from this allergy. But the first one picks the easy option, would say the second one. Maybe I like easy options. And from then on, I would stick to that. Perhaps we make choices from life experience, traumas, ongoing fashions, and from whatever else we want, but a choice stays a choice, and we must take responsibility for it. So, against the clerics, I picked the side of the jesters. Which would not help me from falling into clericalism, periodically and in my own way. That's how life goes, looking after us: endlessly mixing the pure and the impure.

In my mind, there are two types of philosophers which both oppose each other and intersect, an opposition which fascinated me, and from which I seem to have never been able to escape. There are those who apply themselves, perfectly methodical, formalists and step-by-step followers. And there are the others, more subjective, those who do not hesitate to brush aside the most sacred principles. Obviously, they need each other, a question of gaps and desires, of mutual obsessions and denunciations, as for the Church and its heretics. Those who cut their salami carefully, cautiously, into thin slices, and those who cheerfully bite into the matter, submitting to the moment's pleasure. Two contradictory models of passion. However, one of the two teams prevails highly in the official world of philosophy. This old institution, incredibly dusty, mostly encourages precaution and meticulousness, and abhors the sensational and the rashness. Freedom is not its cup of tea, and neither is subjectivity. Best to slip out then, I had nothing to do in this sad place: it seemed to me that there was more to lose than to gain. Best again to destroy blindly than to pretend building and settle on such miserable grounds.

During the following years, the gap widens. Plato fascinates me, for one reason: the implementation of a mythical character, Socrates. There he goes, calling out to people and questioning them. I do the same. There is nothing else that I can do. Apart from the established and known truth which is high on my priorities and which keeps haunting me, I try imitating, I grope along, I question more or less skilfully, more or less violently, more or less appropriately, and the results were not long to show. It works: it sets on edge, it annoys, it exasperates, it makes people think. What more could you ask for? Still, I sometimes read some books on the subject, published by the institution. It is hard not to feel proud to have let it down and cheerfully continue to criticise it! The Platonic ideas, the Socratic maieutics, the aporetic, apodictical or protreptical dialogues. So many rigid classifications, so many impossible words, so many empty theoretical escalations, so many vain divisions, so many pointless interpretations, so-called contributions, each one being more abstract and obscure than the other, and which imprisons and categorises the thinking on the grounds of rigor and scientificity. Sometimes, in those books, a promising intuition, but soon drowned in a sea of quotes, references and quibbles,

just to demonstrate that nothing silly is being said: a question of credibility. In short, so many good reasons not to belong to the clan.

But what is our own remains our own, whether you want it or not, whether you hate it or not. One inevitably returns home. Through an encounter, maybe an individual, or a professor; a fortuitous incident we may hear, an accident but not a fatality. But that would be turning a blind eye: one only finds what he is looking for. What were you doing at that place at such a late time? What did you expect to exhume? A fascination for what is primal, a quest for the similar, even though we have denounced it, vilified it or killed it. It does not make going back home any less painful. Rage is more bearable when kept away from its object. Anyway, I take the risk, temptation is too strong: I write a doctoral thesis. Is it for the sake of proving myself, for credibility, for efficiency, for institutionalisation, for engaging into a hand-to-hand fight? I do not know and it does not matter. Perhaps just because I like a man, that bond between two beings which sometimes transcends and contradicts the confessed principles. Because it is him, because it is me, and despite our many differences, some mysterious weft is woven. My reason is harshly tested, or it reveals its true self, whilst vigorously shaking off the quibbles and dogmas which were burdening it.

However, is this about getting back in line? Even if it means losing one's soul. I start writing, not knowing where I am going. I think as I write, the pen thinks for me. Slowly, a project emerges: to produce a philosophical thesis which stays away from the history of philosophy, this scholarly disease that tends to change the past whose role is to inspire us and enable us to think, into a great big chore where everyone spies on each other, denouncing the omissions or the "faults". The dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants have turned into dwarfs flattening out under the giants' feet, so as to boast better about it. Why have the thoughts of our great predecessors become some impediments rather than some stilts?

The title of the thesis is *The Poetic Nature of the Being*. A jumble of short essays which try to establish an inner coherence. The pretension here is to demonstrate how concepts such as the being, such as any other fundamental concepts, cannot be a product of some a priori determined logical assumptions, but of an experience, singular and polymorphous, and of an attempt to think the multiplicity, the

multiform, the disparate so as to give it some shape and uniqueness, a regulating and not determining principle, would say Kant. Hence the crucial significance of paradox and ambiguity, and it is in this way that the reality is of poetic nature. No quotes, no bibliography, nothing that usually highlights or legitimates a “regular” thesis. I am not an orphan, as I mentioned, three authors inspire me: Plato, Leibniz and De Cues, but rather than quote them on and on, I prefer to show that they taught me how to think. It is a gamble; a quarrel sets itself off: I hope to create a precedent, or remind it, as this “begging the question” is by no means new.

However, I need to add an important element to this slightly libertarian narration: the role of the professor. To write a thesis is to put the thinking to the test, for long hours, over the many pages that compose such a work. To confront one’s thinking to itself, to build it and shape it in order to make it relevant to itself. A requirement which we tend to evade by indulging into an urge for compilation. Here, the professor’s demanding but yet friendly eye, demonstrating both the hard work of many years and the generosity of his experience, is precious, provided this master is able to avoid shifting into a fastidious legal officer. There are tasks that most of us would not be able to complete if we did not have this eye offered to us, this attentive ear, this voice that knows how to speak to us, being other to us and yet awakening. For this, one must learn the art of trusting.

## The city

What to do now? Enter the institution’s womb? I had experienced teaching in college for a few years. An interesting experience but which I could not pursue. There, I found a corruption to this philosophy which I revere more than anything – too much however, as I was going to find out later. The obligation for the students to attend the philosophy class, the constraint of a heavy program, stuffed with staples, where little time – if not none – is dedicated to exchanging and reflecting, appear to me to be building an unbearable falseness. The lie stood for by the contradictions of the philosophy class, as it is defined officially, is unbearable to me. The students are supposedly taught how to think, they are theoretically evalua-

ted on the grounds of this capacity, however they are required to gulp down long lessons, on and on, formal lectures where the professor rambles on endlessly and pitilessly, extending his senseless developments to his perplexed students, who take notes and notes, or not, most of the time without thinking of what is being said. How many colleagues have based their teaching on the presupposition that students have nothing to say and do not think! How many students conclude that philosophy is just another subject which does not concern them, which can only make them fail their finals! Besides, the professor treats them as if they were ignorant. A pact of banality and narrow thinking, a pact of academism and prejudice.

Concerning the university, it is actually not allowed to me. First, because of the strange history of mine, then because of the no less strange thesis that I sustained, but also because of some personal convictions: it seems to me that the place for philosophy is in the city, and not in any ivory tower, as tempting and necessary as this isolation may be, protecting us from the hums of the world. I had anticipated that philosophy puts the world to the test, however I had not envisaged the opposite: that the world puts philosophy against the wall, where it may have find it difficult to get back on track.

Resolutely, I knock on doors, city halls, cultural centres, city libraries. This is my strategy: to offer that philosophy workshops be squeezed in the usual theatre or patchwork classes. I work on the assumption that if people do not appreciate philosophy, it is only because they never had access to it: to know Plato is to love him. There I go, imagining all the cities of France and abroad with workshops, and people, a lot of people. Full stadiums, why not? Fantasies work in this way. Fortunately, reality guards us. Civil servants or elected officials look at me in a strange way; they are very worried people: “What do you want? What type of philosophy are you talking about? Are you doing this to present a list for the elections? Are you a sect? Why don’t you go to the university for this?”. As always, suspicion faces the strange and the unusual. This was just before philosophy became trendy: soon, and amongst other things due to the creation and mediatization of philosophy-café, the idea was going to become “flavour of the month”.

For some time, doors remain shut but eventually, providence helping, I find a sympathetic ear with an elected representative just back from Greece, with a

headful of Antiquitous images, and so we get to have our first official workshop, held in the municipal hall, twice a week: one afternoon for retired people and housewives, one in the evening for working people. An ambitious project, for the revolution of the thinking is at work. I can operate freely and try all sorts of activities: debate on social and metaphysical questions, exchange on classical texts or articles from newspapers, discussions on a film or play, exercise of collective writing.

So many educational experiences that will allow me to slowly develop a practice somewhat constituted. To implement Socrates: my dream comes true. Meanwhile, the project takes off. Many town halls, inspired by a concrete example which seems to work, come to have a look, and invite us to try, punctually, or engage on a regular basis in their towns. Several theatres invite us for meetings after the performance. Homes for young workers, homeless associations, old people's homes, various social clubs, schools. All can and must philosophize. Some workshops gear up, others abort quickly, but in general things go pretty well. In the process, an association is created, other facilitators are recruited, a newspaper is launched and distributed in kiosks for several years, a test competition is initiated, in short, the plunge is taken.

I learn from the press that there is a philosophy-café in Paris. I'm suspicious of Parisianism, its beautiful phrases and its spirit of living, but I end up going. The ambiance is pleasant, the atmosphere friendly. So it is possible in Paris to discuss on major issues without invective or contempt, despite the narcissistic and ideological trends that pierce here and there. Quickly, it seems interesting to reproduce such places, among others at the Sorbonne, where I am convinced that it should inspire some enthusiasm among students. Two big disappointments await me. First of all, this initiative in Paris itself is perceived as a threatening competition by the initiator of the first philosophy-café, although I am not the only one to have this idea of reproduction, because a fashion, very mediatized, was to be launched across France, swarming this type of places, unexpectedly. The idea of a copyright on philosophizing makes me bristled. Then, the students are not really interested: they like the smell of the institution, the masters, the diplomas, the perfume of the established authority. In addition, philo-café's have a catastrophic reputation among professionals of philosophy. Frightened, the guardians of the temple are re-

luctant to set foot there, pronouncing by far the anathema: only the class and the library are appropriate places to think. Socrates is betrayed. It is forbidden to philosophize at the gymnasium and in the public square.

At the same time, I must admit, a fight remains to be fought. For many non-insiders, to philosophize is mainly to discuss. Saying what you want, talking to talk, holding great speeches with no other concern than being seen, heard and admired, for others it's a new group psychotherapy. Now it seems to me that philosophizing implies a real work: the requirement to tear oneself away from opinion, one's own in particular, through the other, living citizen or disappeared author. Without falling into the opposite excess, which consists in denying subjectivity by abusing erudition, asceticism and self-work are at the heart of this activity, in order to allow the singular being to be constituted. The Poujadism, which consists of asserting "All philosophers", "No need for books" or "Everyone is right", without other preambles or considerations, assigns thought to what is hollowest. The same pitfalls as described in Plato: on the one hand, sophists who know and peddle knowledge, on the other, individuals who are content to utter sentences whose origin, nature, content and implications they do not know. How to draw a path between Charybdis and Scylla, a passage as thin as a razor blade? Between those who are waiting for class and those who just want to be right, how do you create a philosophizing that is worthy of the name? I am becoming disenchanted. It was time. Anyway, through my work, I would have been introduced to a crucial dimension of thought: conceptual pluralism. To pick the thinking where it is, to work it from its singularity, to shape it from what it offers.

## The class

It is difficult to philosophize with adults. The conclusion is obvious: the games are already made. But perhaps my expectations are too precise, too determined, too dry. Nevertheless, for the moment, I would not yet detach myself from the Socratic schema: there is no thinking without unlearning, without appeal of empti-



ness, without letting go, without *mise en abyme*, without alienation, without passing through the infinite. A thankless work of negation, essential to the dialectical perspective. My oriental readings also comfort me in this sense. One can not avoid a certain violence, however polite it may be, a condition for the emergence of the self. The inaugural gesture represented by the death of the philosopher hero, trashed by his fellow citizens, haunts me. The reactions of refusal and flight from interrogation are not an accident of history, misogyny turns out not to be an ancient Athenian specificity. We find in the workshops of philosophy these reactions identical to those that Plato puts in scene, it is irritating, funny, or comforting.

I'm going on a new hypothesis. For many adults, it is almost too late to philosophize. Not that the access to philosophizing should be denied to them, but simply because much heaviness and rigidities have settled, which confine to the immediate, which undermine the mental energy. Without abandoning the work in the city, which has its interest and must continue, let us try to return to teaching, to consider what is possible to undertake with the youngest, while there is still time. I had not forgotten the class, I continued periodically to intervene here and there, to introduce the concept of philosophy workshop, from primary to high school. But now, some in-depth experiments are being set up, which make it possible to adapt and formalize the practices initiated with adults. A necessary work because it is now a question of providing some tools to teachers who should be able to reuse them. During a year, I spend one afternoon a week working in kindergarten, a crucial experience, which enlightens me on the dynamics presiding the genesis of philosophical thinking.

What are the most general principles of these workshops, which of course must be adapted to the concerned public? First, risk thinking, articulating thought, an articulation that is the very substance of thinking. Secondly, to identify the content of this thought, its implications, its consequences, then to conceptualize it, to specify the crucial elements. This is produced on the one hand because we stop for a moment on a given hypothesis, because we settle down before leaving elsewhere,

in order not to fall into the trap of rambling from one topic to another, or in the stagnation of associative processes of thought, on the other hand because these particular hypotheses are subjected to examination, through questions and objections. A Socratic principle that allows to untie thought, to bring it to birth. More than saying and affirming, participants must learn to engender thought in the other, a fundamental condition of dialogue and reflection, through a productive and necessary process of decentering. Thirdly, the point is to problematize, that is to say, to consider the purely possible dimension of any particular idea, which could be replaced by another, starting from different presuppositions which are necessary to identify. An analysis that allows us to grasp the stakes between various schemas, to make paradigm shifts, to reassess the ethical, psychological or epistemological schemas, which leads us into a more dialectical and less fixed perspective, since it is no longer a question of taking rigid options on this or that vision of the world.

Taking up the idea of Leibniz, we will see that what is at stake here is the concept of "substantial link". This link, which consists of always working on the relationship: the relationship between ideas, the relationship between the schemas they convey, the genesis of the idea and the relationship with its author, the relationship between beings, the principle of opposites, the general issues of form and content, no longer the opinions in themselves, skinny and deprived of substance. A work that is far from natural, easy and immediate. It demands to interrupt oneself, to meditate, to restrain oneself, to take distance from oneself, to listen to others and oneself, to let go of one's desires, to see and accept the limited nature of all singular thinking, the reductionism of all understanding, which is not always pleasant; an awareness that happens very incidentally in a "usual" discussion, steeped in conviction and sincerity.

Thus the task of the philosopher - making others think - as a condition for philosophizing, consists first and foremost of setting up the framework in which such an activity can take place. Since it is no longer a question of providing content, it

is in the form that the work is done. Not a form that consists of determining a priori what is right and what is not, by a determining a principle established a priori, but by a regulating principle, which operates by induction, by extracting, from the remarks made, principles with a universal claim which need to be articulated, verified and modified. Starting from particular cases to generality, and vice versa. Qualifying the words. Establishing meaning and nonsense through arguments whose primary purpose is to deepen thought. But oddly enough, this clarification can only be achieved through asceticism: by stepping out of grandiloquence into breviloquence, by selecting, sifting through the jumble of ideas. Even if the content of the thinking can be considered in a second step.

All this is terribly artificial, and like for any artifice, an artist is needed, a craftsman. Not to oppose the artist to the non-artist as, if the artistic faculty is given, given to all, art is also experience and technique, which is something that do not have, or less, those who never had the opportunity or never bothered to practice this art. This to prevent the romantic temptation of "All philosophers!" which, under the guise of an egalitarian discourse, obscures the requirement of philosophizing and the self-surrender it represents, to extol spontaneity and deify our little selves. In this, philosophical populism intertwines with the guardians of the temple, who also want to protect their dear assets, their revered speeches, defend this little person who is so dear to them, hiding behind a science or a reason that makes them allegedly untouchable. A false debate, no doubt indispensable: it simultaneously protects us from dogmatists of all kinds, from those who want to burn books and from those who adore them.

Circumstances make primary school very much in demand for this type of exercise, if only because there is a certain suspicion about knowledge as an end in itself. Gradually these practices become official, an unexpected phenomenon, the institution opens us its doors, in order to intervene in class and to train the teachers to the dialogue as a pedagogical modality. With some colleagues, we managed to publish a collection of books on this subject at a major publisher. Other

types of problems arose: if teachers are enthusiastic about such practices, they are very reluctant to try them, let alone continue them. It scares them: they have too much to lose, probably for good reasons. Loss of authority over students, loss of control over content, fear of nothingness, of error and of the unexpected. What would I do, they say, if all is not planned? The idea of forming a research community where you risk being caught off-guard is frightening. It is not a question of knowledge, but of a know-how, which is learned along the way, groping, stumbling, scratching. Certainly the philosophical culture is an asset, but that is not essential, even if some expedite the utility a little quickly by offering simple educational recipes. The important thing is to show what is below knowledge, its genesis, its draft, even for a small time each week. Knowing to love this eternal attempt, not letting itself be obsessed by a philosophical beyond, pretended nirvana of the true thought. But the letting go, the risk, the adventure, even at the level of a thinking experiment, is worrying and problematic. Like everything that challenges and engages the being. It does not matter! In spite of resistance, or within it, under the light of lies, we are at the heart of the philosophizing.

The philosophy workshop is theoretically the place of truths fabrication: individual and collective truths, truths of reason, effective truths, revealing truths of being, etc. The terms and conditions are varied to allow and favour such a requirement, and the recipes will vary according to location and circumstances. How can this work in a school context? In the absolute, no matter the nature of the questions or the media (book, film, object ...), the layout of the class, the role of the teacher, the duration or other practical considerations, the teacher is free to make these choices, according to his competence and sensitivity, as well as those of the class. The philosophical requirement is a pedagogical requirement, which we try to define through some characteristics that should guide the work of the teacher and the class. First, establish a frame and a rhythm for the discussion, in order to take the time to think. It is not so much about producing many ideas but more about slowly examining their content. This temporization of the speech makes it possible to evaluate and analyse, rather than to react or to rebound. Second, to establish links, to build thought. Any idea or speech should determine the nature of

its role in the discussion, establish its relationship with what has already been stated: is it there to explain, justify, question, contradict, exemplify, analyse, etc.? Third, problematize ideas, through various questions, objections and interpretations. This makes it possible to remove the ideas from their status of obviousness, bringing to light the ignored presuppositions. Fourth, conceptualize, in order to clarify thought operators. Identify and produce terms that serve as keywords, cornerstones, to raise awareness in the thinking. Fifth, deepen, defining the stakes, obstacles and achievements. Such analyses force to distinguish the essential from the secondary, to sort out ideas, to universalize the specificity of the statements made. Thus the workshop fits more naturally in the class activity - among others the philosophy course – than in the plain discussion, more free and informal, with less explicit didactical stakes. Thus, throughout his practice, the teacher will try to work these various functions and dysfunctions, by inventing game rules, asking students to do the same. This experimental approach seems to us to be more productive and in keeping with the philosophical reality than the transmission of established rules, although nothing stops the beginner teacher from picking here and there functions described by other practitioners.

## The philosophy workshop

Little by little, the concept of a philosophical workshop developed. What is a philosophy workshop? Two ideas are inseparable from the workshop concept: exercise or practice, and production. A third, which is not mandatory, also has its importance: the collective. In this, the philosophical workshop is distinguished from two other types of philosophical activities. On the one hand the course or the conference, in which a master gives his knowledge to listeners or students, and the philosophical discussion, such as the citizen debate or the philosophy café, where participants and facilitators take turns to speak. As with any attempt at schematization, such categories serve only as points of reference, because according to places and individuals, the appellations and the functioning will vary according to a who-

le range of possibilities proceeding from continuity rather than discretion. There are indeed courses or philosophy cafés that look like workshops, and vice versa. There are also facilitators who look like teachers and teachers who look like facilitators. However, let us risk ourselves to develop somewhat this theoretical specificity of the workshop.

As in a painting workshop, in the philosophical workshop any participant must work, or at least is strongly encouraged to engage. The principle of observer or listener is hardly appropriate. In this, it differs from the course and from the discussion, where for different reasons no one is bound to an active participation. For example, if the number of people allows it, we go around the table on a given problem. Or any participant may challenge another or question him without the latter rebelling, although he may admit his inability or difficulty to answer, which is – an important - part of the exercise. It is in this sense that this activity is defined as a practice or an exercise. Everyone comes to the field to play or do their part of the work, not to watch others. Of course, the facilitator, who is responsible for this effective commitment, will have to act in a sufficiently subtle way not to scare those who are still reluctant to approach the ball.

As in the painting workshop, it is about producing. To produce, in the sense that one confronts a materiality, for the purpose of a result. But the materiality of the philosophical activity is not the colour or the texture. It is the individual thinking, through its oral or written representation. Everyone first confronts their own representations of the world, then that of the other, and finally the idea of unity or coherence. From this confrontation, new representations, whether conceptual or analogic, arise. These emergent representations must be articulated, underlined, understood by all, worked and reworked. In this, again, the workshop stands out from the course and from the discussion. Because in the course, concepts are prepared in advance: they are often codified, stamped with reference to authors and to the history of philosophy. And in the usual discussion, the movement of thought slips, does not insist, does not constantly seek to come back on itself, unless it happens arbitrarily. On this last distinction undoubtedly lies the stronger, or even the more restrictive, role of the facilitator when moderating a workshop.

We now understand that the philosophical workshop tends to have operating rules more specific and formalized than those of the discussion. These rules must be clarified, since they concern the functioning of a group, and not that of a single individual, as at a conference. The rules of the game can be innumerable, and are in fact very varied. So there is no typical example, especially since in the field of philosophy, very theoretical, everyone always finds fault in his neighbour's work. But as an example, let us briefly describe some of the setting used as *modus operandi* in a philosophical workshop.

1- Mutual questioning. A general question is asked. A first hypothesis of response, which is relatively short, is offered by a participant. Then, before moving on to another, his colleagues are invited to question him, in order to clarify the unclear and resolve the contradictions. But the interventions are supervised by the whole group, who must determine whether the questions are really questions, or more or less disguised statements; any question declared "false" by the majority of the group will be refused. Because any new concept must emanate from the one who made the hypothesis and not from the questioners. Each participant is thus forced to enter the neighbour's pattern, leaving aside, temporarily, his own opinions. A principle which allows to develop in common the initial hypothesis, of which the initiator is the guarantor. It is he who, pressed by the questions received, will develop his hypothesis, reformulate it, or even abandon it if, as the discussion unfolds, it seems to him to be unsustainable. Then a new hypothesis is proposed by another participant, and the process starts again. All will also be invited to compare the various hypotheses, their content and their form, their assumptions and their stakes. The end result is to problematize the initial question, through these various readings, what could be called a collective essay.

2- Narrative exercise. A general question is asked. But instead of treating it with abstract considerations, participants are invited to present a short story, fictional or real, invented or drawn from any work, which could serve as a textbook case to study the question asked. Several stories are proposed, which are compared by

the participants, arguing their respective interest to treat the subject. A vote of the group chooses one of these stories, according to a criterion of relevance, which will be analysed more deeply. The narrator is then questioned by his colleagues. First, on the factual data of the narration, in order to work the objectivity of the content. Then on the conceptual analysis he makes of it, which statement should allow to treat the initial question. The other participants can then submit a new reading of this narration, specifying the comparative philosophical issues of their own reading. The end product of this exercise is again a problematization of the original question, thanks to a number of concepts that emerged over the course of the discussion.

3- Work on text. A text is distributed to participants, a short excerpt from a work of a philosophical, literary or other nature. A reading out loud is done by a volunteer. All are then invited to present an analysis of the text, which should conclude with a short sentence intended to capture the main intention of the author. The first interpretation will be discussed by all participants before moving on to another. Questions will be asked about both the meaning of this interpretation and its agreement with the text. Specific quotes may be required to legitimize the articulation. New interpretations will be developed, which will undergo such a treatment. In a second step, criticisms of the text can also be formulated. The philosophical stakes of these different readings will have to be specified, in order to analyse the presuppositions of each of them, allowing to better grasp the conceptual differences, often important. The final product is the problematization of an initial text, through the different interpretations offered and worked. Note that similar work can be done around a text written by one of the participants.

## The philosophy studio

A studio is a secluded room where one carries out discrete activities, of private nature, in opposition to the living room or the dining room which are places of entertainment, of social life. The philosophy studio is therefore intended for the parti-



cular interview, as opposed to a workshop, a debate, a course or a conference. As a result, singular questions will be dealt with rather than general questions, that is, centered on a particular individual, which in no way restricts the universality of the remarks made. For it is, first of all, a question of distinguishing the private philosophical interview - or philosophical consultation - from a consultation of a psychological type, to which it will be associated too easily. This distinction already allows us to define somewhat the specificity of the activity.

As in any philosophical activity, the private interview will avoid confining itself to the narration of lived events, to the enumeration of impressions and personal feelings, as well as to associations of ideas. Not that these types of exchanges are in themselves devoid of interest, but simply because philosophy, like any activity, has its own requirements. It requires above all the analysis, the deliberation and the construction of a thought. To do this, three components seem indispensable to us, at various and varying degrees. Identification, which consists of becoming aware of one's own ideas and the presuppositions they implicitly contain. Criticizing, which consists of considering any objections that could be formulated against the original proposals. Conceptualization, which consists of emitting new ideas capable of handling the problems that may have emerged during this analytical process. Of course, this presupposes an indispensable capacity for distancing oneself from oneself, identical in reality to that required during any discussion worthy of the name. A more laborious requirement than is often thought. But it is clear that the practice of philosophy implies being able to act on the level of the conscious and to be able to reason on oneself, which is not given immediately to all, in particular when recurring pathological processes parasitize the functioning of the individual spirit.

The philosophical consultation can take place in various settings: private studio, company, institution. In all cases, it will be a question of addressing specific problems, particularly of the existential or moral type, directly related to the subject, who engages in the consultation process, and who will generally choose the topic of the discussion. The *modi operandi* of the various practitioners will vary mainly on two essential parameters. First, on the proximity or distance between the philosophical and the psychological. Some practices remain close to the singu-

lar case, without much attempt to conceptualize or universalize it, or at least do not push the subject so much in this direction, unlike others, more formally philosophical, more demanding in the field of abstraction. Second, on the conceptual contribution of the consultant. Does he leave it to pure questioning, or does he elaborate schemes of analysis or interpretation, or even propose codified references - classical authors, spiritual masters or others - in order to clarify or to explain the questions of the subject?

The pitfall of "pure" questioning is to abandon the subject to himself, a situation whose harshness can be considered too painful for a relatively fragile individual. On the other hand, the pitfall of the interpretations proposed by the consultant, is on the one hand to impose indirectly and unconsciously a scheme that is not suitable to the subject, on the other hand to ignore a real questioning, as it is so easy and tempting to sit on ready-made answers. However, some author readings can constitute a real and constructive testing for the subject. It is not forbidden for the consultant to have his privileged philosophical schemes, it would be illusory to believe that he is devoid of any, but it all depends on his way of using them, the awareness of his presuppositions and their limits, and the listening ability he deploys. This is a real challenge for the philosopher, because the philosophical institution and education hardly encourages such an attitude.

Compared to group work, the individual consultation poses specific problems. The main one is undoubtedly the increased pressure implied by the face-to-face intimacy. While in a group, the word goes from one to the other and everyone can, without problem, at will, take refuge in the silence and in an unacknowledged incomprehension, it is not the same thing when you end up facing a single individual for about an hour. Faced with oneself, no one is there to relay us in our role, whether consultant or subject. The slowness and silences that necessarily punctuate such conversations amplify the incoherence, the ruptures, the obscurities, the barely conscious lies that compose our thinking and our being. Especially since the subject is invited to analyse his remarks and to make judgments on their validity. For this reason, the philosophical consultation requires a minimum of psychological stability and rationality, a threshold below which it will be difficult to operate. This is also why the consultant must modulate his interventions. If the ideal of

practice boils down to pure questioning - like the individual in soliloquy with himself - this is hardly possible in the majority of cases: a certain number of clues, of explanatory elements and avenues must be provided, forcing the practitioner to a certain generosity which would be good, in the absolute, that he refrained from.

The second problem, a cousin of the first, touches the intellectual difficulties of the subject, especially those related to abstraction or logic. Because when it comes to universalizing the singular experience, to conceptualizing the concrete, in a collective framework there will always be someone to help do it, unlike in a consultation, where everything rests on a single person, moreover, deprived of self-distance. This competence, which pertains quite specifically to the philosophical education, is not innate. And even if one can understand a given abstraction, it is still another thing to formulate it. Yet, the point is precisely to be forced to admit defeat, or partly at least. Abstraction is often decried, "too abstract", we will hear, more rarely do we hear "too concrete". But the capacity for abstraction is needed here, to decode one's own words, to grasp the essential, to reverse the meaning in order to examine other possibilities of existential reading.

The consultant is therefore too often obliged to perform this decoding task himself, with an additional risk: the refusal of the proposed interpretation, and even the refusal of the reformulation heard, our third obstacle. Indeed, the subject caught in the trap of the singular, clinging to the exclusive of his own words, can not hear what he says otherwise than through what he says, his own voice, his own words. No echo is possible, which would illuminate his word and his being in a different light than his; it would require to accept to consider the nothingness of the self, the facticity of the particular existence. Now philosophy is precisely this ability to think differently, to think of the unthinkable. But those who do not succeed in doing this exercise for themselves and by themselves may also refuse this power to an interlocutor. He has too much to lose, he believes, and he refuses to deliberate: he prefers to close in on himself, like an oyster, on his own speech, a sad example if any.

The philosophical consultation is a new practice, particularly in France where still few practitioners operate, a practice that is still very much in search of itself. The approach it involves is demanding, both for the consultant and the subject.

Oddly enough, through the arbitrariness of history, philosophy and subjectivity are a rather poor match. Faced to existential difficulties, we either postpone the deadline and wait for the urgency that requires the doctor and his range of ointments and drugs. Or we unwind at the therapist's, a situation which, in spite of its interest, tends by its excess to be relatively infantilizing and reductive. Or still, we prefer the guru and his ready-made wisdom, as wise as it may be. Because it is more difficult to stand up and deliberate, knowing that no one but us can make us exist. Now it is the explicit task of the philosopher to remind us of it.



# THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

The concept of practice is generally unfamiliar to the philosopher of today, almost exclusively a theoretician. The word itself sometimes upsets him. As a professor, his teaching relies mainly on a number of written texts, the knowledge and comprehension of which he must convey to his students. His main focus will be the history of ideas. A small minority of professors may engage moreover in philosophical speculation, producing a more or less original theoretical work. In this context, quite recently, somewhat as a rupture with tradition, new practices have emerged, which are called philosophical practices, philosophical consultations, philosophy for children or else, and are practices which are ignored or vigorously contested by the philosophical institution. This situation poses the following two questions which we will answer consecutively. Is philosophy just a speech or can it have a distinct practice? What then constitutes a philosophical approach?

## Materiality as alterity

A practice can be defined as an activity which confronts a given theory to a materiality, that is to say to an alterity. The physician or the chemist thus checks his theories on the matter through specific experiments. Let us assume that the matter is generally what offers a resistance to our desires and to our actions. So the most obvious materiality of the philosophising is first and foremost the totality of the

world, including human existence, through the many intuitions and representations that we have of it. A world which we know through the myth (mythos), the narration of daily events, the local news, some practical schemes, or through the scattered cultural, scientific and technical explanations (logos), some abstract schemes. Secondly, materiality is “an other” for each one of us, a fellow creature with whom we may enter into dialogue and confrontation, an “us”, or “widened self”. Thirdly, materiality is the coherence, the consistence, the presupposed unity of our speech or our thinking, their breaches and incompleteness forcing us to confront ourselves to some higher and more complete orders of mental architecture, a sort of primal unity, which can be named transcendence.

With these principles in mind, inspired by Plato, it becomes possible to conceive a practice that consists of exercises that put individual thinking into practice, in group or singular situations, just anywhere. The basic functioning, through a dialogical dynamism, consists first of all in identifying the presuppositions from which our own thinking works, then in carrying out a critical analysis of them, then in formulating concepts in order to express the global idea thus enriched by the tension of the opposites, and in being able to modify endlessly their initial paradigms. In this process, everyone seeks to become aware of his own apprehension of the world and of himself, to deliberate on the possibilities of other patterns of thought, and to embark on an anagogical path where he will go beyond his own opinion. A transgression which is at the heart of the philosophizing, as work on oneself. In this practice, knowledge of classical authors is useful, but is not an absolute prerequisite. Whatever the tools used, the main challenge remains the constitutive activity of the singular mind. So, totality, singularity and transcendence constitute the “matter” of the philosophical practice, and are various facets of the confrontation to the being.

## *Alterity as mythos and logos*

How to check given ideas on all the small mythos of everyday life, on the more or less scattered bits of logos which constitute our thinking? The problem with philosophy, compared to other types of speculations, is that the thinking subject does not assess his own efficiency through true alterity, but through himself. Although

one could object that the physician, the chemist, or even the mathematician, are simply inclined to conceal their subjectivity, disguised as an objective observation. But let us admit that this problem of subjectivity gets worse in the philosophical practice, since the specific idea that the subject needs to put to the test by confronting it to his personal *mythos* and *logos*, is precisely fed by these personal *mythos* and *logos*, or generated by them. Moreover, just like for the “hard” sciences which are able to change the reality, either by acting upon it through innovative and efficient hypothesis, or simply by transforming the perception, the “new” specific idea of the philosopher is able to alter the *mythos* or the *logos* that inhabit his mind. The problem with these two processes is that the human spirit has a natural tendency to distort itself so as to reconcile a specific idea with the general context in which it occurs, either by minimising this specific idea, or by minimising the whole of the established *mythos* and *logos*, or again by creating a boundary between them to avoid conflict. The latter being the most common option because it seemingly allows to escape the effort of confrontation; a phenomenon which explains the “ill-joined marquetry” side of the human mind, as expressed by Montaigne. So many phenomena which evade the tension constitutive of the singular mind.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, the pain caused by the lack of coherence or harmony of the mind – similar to the pain caused by an illness expressing the body’s dissonances – forces us to work on this dissension, or to wear armour to protect ourselves, to forget the problem so as to minimize or conceal the inconvenience. To forget is as efficient as a painkiller, yet also as inconvenient as a drug. Illness remains and strengthens since it is not treated. One must therefore reconcile with the idea of problem; a real problem is there is one.

## Alterity as “the other”

Let us move on to the second type of alterity: “the other” in the form of an other singular mind. In dialogue, it has a first advantage over us: it is the spectator of our thinking, rather than the actor that we are; the ruptures and discrepancies

of our own system do not cause it any pain a priori. Unlike us, it does not suffer from our incoherencies, anyway not in a direct way, except through a sort of empathy. For this reason, it is better placed than us to spot the conflicts and contradictions that undermine us. It is not a pure spirit though: its answers and analysis will be affected by its own bugs and viruses, by its own failures, its own subjectivity. Despite this, being less involved than us in our case, it will be able to look at our mental process in a more distant way, a definite advantage to examine us critically and non-defensively. However, we should not award any omnipotence to this situation; every specific perspective does necessarily suffer from some kind of weakness and blindness. It may be for lack of understanding the thought of the other that we are, or for fear of that other, or also because of the complacency induced by the lack of interest in the other, and even empathy turns out to be dangerous here, as it threatens to engulf two beings one inside the other. Anyhow, we can only benefit from its strangeness.

## *Alterity as unity*

The third form of alterity is the unity of speech, the unity of reasoning, its transparency, its truth, its concordance to itself. Here we speculate the presence of an “anhypothetic”, according to Plato, the assertion of a hypothesis that is as much inescapable as it is unspeakable. It is an interior transcendental unity, the nature of which we do not know, although the effects of its presence are perceived through our senses and our understanding. The intimate truth of the speech. Unity does not appear to us as such, as an obvious entity, but through a simple intuition, yearning for coherence and logic. A vanishing point nestled within a multiplicity of appearances, which however guides our thinking and remains a permanent source of crucial experiences, for our minds and that of others, saving our spirits from the dark and chaotic abyss, from the undefined multiplicity and from the hurly-burly, which are a painful chaos that much too often characterises the processes of the mind, ours and those of our fellows’. Opinions, associations of thoughts, simple impressions and feelings are all ruling over their own little immediate world, and are forgotten as soon as they cross the narrow frontiers of space and time which attach them to a microscopic territory. Some poor and pathetic eph-



merides which, as real as they may be, try to maintain themselves, weak and helpless, through the babel of disconnected mental processes, yearning to be heard, while the echo remains silent and desperately speechless. Unless it can resonate against the backdrop of this mysterious, generous and substantial unity, any particular idea will be condemned to a sudden and premature end, disclosing to all consciousness the emptiness of their existence. The only problem here is precisely that this consciousness is tragically absent, silent, because its presence, which is tied to the unity in question, would have already drastically transformed the scenario. The unity of our speech is therefore this inner wall, both a rampart and a support, the essential nature of which we are still ignorant of. It is the other in us, this other who is somehow within us more than ourselves: the transcendental subject, the bad conscience of the empirical subject that we are in everyday life.

## What is to philosophize?

In summary, the activity of philosophical practice implies confronting theory with alterity, one vision to another, multiplicity with unity. It implies thinking in a duplicated form, in the form of dialogue, with our own self, with others, with the world, with truth. We have defined here three forms of duplication: the representations that we have of the world, in narrative or conceptual form, “the other” as the one I can enter into dialogue with, the unity of thought, as logic, dialectics or coherence of speech. So, what is philosophy when, cruelly or arbitrarily, we remove from it its pompous, trivial and ornamental costume? What does remain once we have taken off its authoritarian, swollen and too serious self? In other words, beyond the specific cultural content that constitutes its generous and misleading appearance – could we really do without? – what is left to philosophy?

As a reply, we will propose the following formulation, defined quite abruptly and which will seem like a sad impoverished paraphrase of Hegel, with the objective to focus only on the operativity of philosophy as a producer of concepts, rather than its complexity. We will define philosophical activity as a constitutive activity of the self and determined by three operations: identification, criticism and

conceptualization. If we accept these three terms, at least temporarily, to test their solidity, let us see what this philosophical process means and how it implies and requires alterity to become a practice.

## Identify

How can my own self become conscious of itself, unless it is confronted to the other? Me and the other, mine and yours, each one defining the other. I need to know the pear in order to know the apple, this pear defining itself as a non-apple, this pear thus defining the apple. Hence the usefulness of naming, in order to distinguish. A proper noun is singularizing; a common noun is universalizing. To identify, one must suppose and know the difference, suppose and distinguish the community. A dialectic of the same and of the other: everything is both the same as and different from something else. Nothing can be thought of or exists without a connection to something else. To identify is therefore to establish, to analyze, to interpret, to distinguish, to justify, to deepen.

## Criticize

Any object of thought, necessarily curled into choices and bias, is by right subjected to a critical activity. In the form of suspicion, negation, interrogation or comparison, various forms of problematic work. But to submit my idea to such an activity, I must become other than myself. This alienation or contortion of the thinking subject shows the initial difficulty, which, in a second time, can also become a new nature. To identify, I think the other; to criticize, I think through the other, I think like the other; whether this other be the neighbor, the world or the unit. It is not simply the object that changes, it is also the subject. The duplication is even more radical, it becomes reflexive. This however does not imply to “fall” in the other. It is necessary to maintain the tension of this duality, for example through the formulation of an issue, a tension. And while trying to think the unthinkable, I must bear in mind my primal inability to truly evade myself.

## Conceptualize

If to identify means to think of the other from my own self, if to criticize means to think of myself from the other, to conceptualize means to think simultaneously of myself and of the other. However, this highly dialectical perspective should be wary of itself because, as almighty as it wants to be, it is also necessarily constrained to some specific premises and definitions. Concept all contain presuppositions. A concept must therefore self contain the enunciation of a problematic, which becomes both the tool and the manifestation. It deals with a given problem from a new perspective. In this sense, it is what makes it possible to interrogate, criticize and distinguish, which is what enables to enlighten and construct the thought. And if the concept appears here as the final step of the problematization process, it should open the speech rather than end it. So, the concept of “consciousness” answers the question “Can knowledge be known by itself?”, and from this “naming”, it starts bearing the possibility of a new speech, a new intuition. For example, the idea that consciousness necessarily evades itself, what people usually name the unconscious.

## All philosophers?

To identify what is ours. To be capable of a critical analysis of this identity. To bring out new concepts to support the contradictory tension that emerges from criticism. In a rather abrupt way, which remains to be developed in other places, let us say that these three tools will enable us to confront the alterity which constitutes the philosophical matter, a matter without which it would not be possible to speak of philosophical practice. A practice consisting in entering into dialogue with all that is, with all that appears. From this womb, there are no categories of human beings who cannot attempt to philosophize to some degree, to engage in philosophical practice.

As an echo to our thesis, we will summon Kant for whom the speculative understanding, which is the ability to judge that allows us to examine the conditions for the possibilities of reflecting reason, does obey some rules proceeding from the theoretic common sense. The three maxims regulating it are, on one hand thin-

king for oneself, on the other hand thinking in the place of others, for example from the antinomies which structure the oppositions of the thinking, and finally being in agreement with oneself. This is how we tie up our judgment to the entire human reasoning, thus evading the illusion resulting from subjective and specific conditions, easily regarded as objective, an illusion that could bias our judgment. From this perspective, one can see a direct transposition to our conception of philosophical practice.



# THE PHILOSOPHICAL

## Principles

Still little known in France, the philosophical practice or philosophical consultation is an activity that is slowly taking off in Europe and America. The methods vary enormously according to the practitioners who conceive and apply them. In this chapter, we discuss the conceptions and methods used in the work we have been carrying out for several years in this field.

### **Philosophical Naturalism**

In recent years, a new wind seems to be blowing over philosophy. In its various forms, it has a constant claim to be able to extricate philosophy from its purely academic and scholastic framework, where the historical perspective remains the main vector. Diversely received and appreciated, this tendency embodies for some a necessary and vital oxygenation, for others a vulgar and banal betrayal, in keeping with a mediocre era. Among these few philosophical "novelties", the idea emerges that philosophy is not limited to erudition and speech, but that it is also a practice. Of course this perspective is not really innovative, in that it represents a return to the original preoccupations, to the quest for wisdom that articulated the very term "philosophy"; although this dimension has been relatively obscured for several centuries by the "learned" facet of philosophy.

However, in spite of the "déjà vu" side of the matter, the profound cultural, psychological, sociological etc. changes that separate our times from, for example,

Classical Greece, radically alter the data of the problem. The philosophia perennis has to be accountable to history, since its immortality can hardly be spared the finiteness of the societies that formulate its problems and issues. Thus philosophical practice - like philosophical doctrines - must elaborate the articulations corresponding to its place and its time, according to the circumstances that generate this momentary matrix, even if in the end it seems hardly possible to avoid or exceed the limited number of major issues that, since dawn of time, have constituted the matrix of all philosophical-type thoughts, regardless of the external form that the articulations take.

The philosophical naturalism that we are discussing here is at the centre of the debate, in that it criticizes the specificity of philosophy in historical and geographical terms. It presupposes that the emergence of philosophy is not a particular event, but that its living substance nestles in the heart of man and lines his soul, even if, like any science or knowledge, certain times and places seem more decisive, more explicit, more favourable, more crucial than others. As human beings we share a common world, a common nature, despite the infinity of representations that puts this unity under a heavy strain, despite the cultural and individual relativism that prevails, as postmodernism obliges, we should be able to rediscover, at least in an embryonic way, a certain number of intellectual archetypes constituting the framework of the history of thought. After all, since the strength of an idea rests on its operativeness and universality, any central idea should be found in each of us. Isn't this, stated in other words and viewed from another angle, the very idea of Platonic reminiscence? Philosophical practice then becomes that activity that awakens each one of us to the world of ideas that inhabits us, just as artistic practice awakens each one of us to the world of forms that inhabits us, each one of us according to our possibilities, without all of us being Kant or Rembrandt.

### **Dual requirement**

Two specific and common prejudices must be set aside in order to better understand the approach we are dealing with here. The first prejudice is the belief that philosophy, and therefore philosophical discussion, is reserved for a learned elite; the same would apply to philosophical consultation. The second prejudice - a consequence of the first and its natural complement - consists in thinking that since

philosophy is indeed reserved for a learned elite, philosophical consultation cannot be philosophical since it is open to all. If there is a discussion with the ordinary person, it cannot be philosophical, since none of the conditions or requirements of the philosophizing will be present. Although strangely enough, most of those who maintain such a prejudice have difficulty in determining what philosophizing is. Nevertheless, these two prejudices express a single fracture. It remains for us to demonstrate simultaneously that philosophical practice is open to all and that it implies a certain requirement that distinguishes it from mere discussion. Moreover, we will have to differentiate our activity from the psychological or psychoanalytical practice with which it will be inevitably amalgamated.

### **First steps**

"Why are you here? ». This inaugural question imposes itself as the first and most natural one, the one we must ask continuously to anyone if not ourselves, whatever the place, whatever the meaning of such a question. It is moreover regrettable that teachers in charge of an introductory philosophy course never begin their school year with this kind of naive question. Through this simple exercise, the student, who has been used to the school routine for years, would immediately grasp what is at stake in this strange discipline that questions even the most obvious evidences; the difficulty to really answer such a question as well as the wide range of possible answers would quickly make the apparent banality of the question disappear. Of course, this means not being content with one of those sketchy answers that one drops reluctantly in order to avoid thinking.

Many first responses in the consultations are like: "Because I don't know much about philosophy"; "Because I'm interested in philosophy and would like to know more"; or "Because I would like to know what the philosopher - or philosophy - says about...". Sometimes there is a more direct issue: "Because I have a problem with..."; "Because I'm wondering if..." and so on. The questioning must continue without delay, in order to reveal the unacknowledged presuppositions of these attempted answers, not to say non-answers. This process will not fail to bring out certain ideas of the subject, this individual engaged in the process of philosophical

questioning, about philosophy or any other topic, involving him in a position necessary for this practice, i.e. in a conceptual determination. Not because it is necessary to look for a kind of traumatic "background" of one's thought, contrary to psychoanalysis, but because the idea is to take a risk on a hypothesis in order to work on it, without attributing any intangible or fundamental value to it.

Both commitment and distancing are needed here. This distancing is important, for two reasons, both of which are relevant to the foundations of our work. The first is that truth does not necessarily proceed through sincerity or subjective conviction, and can even be radically opposed to it; an opposition based on the principle that desire or fear, the driving forces of existence, often impede reason. From this point of view, it does not matter whether or not the subject subscribes to the idea he is proposing. "I'm not quite sure what I'm saying"; "I may be wrong, but..." we often hear. But just what would one want to be sure of? Isn't this uncertainty precisely what will allow us to test our idea, whereas certainty would inhibit such a process? The second reason, which is close to the first, is that distance is necessary for a thoughtful and well-considered work, an indispensable condition for the conceptualization that we want to induce. Two conditions that should in no way prevent the subject from venturing on precise ideas; on the contrary, he will do so more freely. The scientist will more easily discuss ideas on which he does not inextricably engage his ego, yet allowing that one idea pleases him or suits him more than others.

"Why are you here?" is also asking, "What is the issue that's driving you?" "What's your burning issue?" In other words, it means stating what necessarily motivates the meeting, even if this motivation is not clear or unconscious at first. It is therefore a question of identification. Once the hypothesis has been expressed and somewhat developed, directly or through questions, the questioner will propose a reformulation of what he has heard. Periodically, the subject will express a certain initial rejection - or reserved approval - of the proposed reformulation: "That's not what I said", or "That's not what I meant". He will therefore be asked to analyse what he does not like about the reformulation or to rectify his own discourse. However, before doing so, he will have to specify whether the reformulation has betrayed the discourse by changing the nature of its content - which must be decla-



red possible, since the questioner is not perfect - or whether what he hears displeases him, which often means that the speech has betrayed him by disclosing in the open what he did not dare to see and admit in his own thoughts. Here we can see the enormous philosophical stakes involved in a dialogue with the other: to the extent that we accept the difficult exercise of "weighing" words, the listener becomes a merciless mirror that sends us back to ourselves. The emergence of the echo is always a risk of which the scope is unknown to us. The objectification of our inner self, guaranteed by our words, is a painful strain upon our being.

When what was initially expressed does not seem reformulable, out of confusion or lack of clarity, the philosopher may without hesitation ask the subject to repeat what he has already said or try to express it differently. If the explanation is too long, or becomes a pretext for an uncontrolled, associative type of speech, the questioner will have no hesitation in interrupting: "I do not understand what you are saying", "I do not understand the meaning of the words you are saying", or he will ask "Do you think that what you are saying is clear". He can then propose the following exercise: "Tell me in one sentence what you feel is essential to your point."; "If you only had one sentence to say to me about it, what would it be? ». The subject will not fail to express his difficulty with the exercise, all the more so as he has just shown his disability to formulate a clear and concise speech. But it is precisely in the observation of this difficulty that the awareness linked to philosophizing begins.

### **Anagogy and discrimination**

Once the initial hypothesis has been somewhat clarified, on the nature of the problem that brings the subject to the discussion, or on another topic that preoccupies him, it is now a matter of launching the process of anagogical ascent described in the works of Plato. The essential elements are what we will call on the one hand "origin" and on the other hand "discrimination". Plato also calls this "purification" of thought. We will begin by asking the subject to account for his hypothesis by prescribing him to justify his choice. Either by means of origin: "Why such a formulation?" or "What is the point of such an idea? ». Or by means of discrimination through the concept: "What is the most important term of all those used?"

"or: "What is the key word in your sentence? ». This part of the interview is carried out by a combination of these two means.

The subject will often try to escape this stage of the discussion by taking refuge in circumstantial relativism or undifferentiated multiplicity. "It depends... There are many reasons... All words or ideas are important... ». The fact of choosing, of forcing the "vectorization" of thought, first of all enables to identify the anchorings, the "choruses", the conceptual anchors, the constants, the presuppositions, and then to put them to the test. For after several stages of going back to the unit, identifying the origin through discrimination, a sort of pattern appears, making visible the foundations and central articulations of a thought. At the same time, through the hierarchization assumed by the subject, a dramatization of terms and concepts takes place, which takes the words out of their undifferentiated totality, out of the "mass" effect that erases singularities. By separating ideas from each other, the subject becomes aware of the conceptual operators by which he discriminates. But the point here is to resist all the classic alibis of confusion, such as "complexity", "nuance", and other justifications of infinite and indeterminate discourse.

Of course, the philosopher has an essential role here, which consists in forcing the choice, as well as underlining what has just been said, so that these choices and their implications do not go unnoticed. He may even insist by asking the subject whether he fully assumes the choices he has just expressed, whether he recognizes himself in these determinations. However, he should avoid commenting on these choices in the first instance, even if he may ask some additional questions if he sees problems or inconsistencies in what has just been articulated. The whole point is to lead the subject to freely evaluate, by himself, the implications of his own positions, to grasp what his thought conceals and thus to work on the thought itself. This process slowly removes the illusion of feelings of obviousness and false neutrality, which is necessary to develop a critical perspective, that of opinion in general and of one's own.

### **Thinking the unthinkable**

Once a particular anchor, problem or concept has been identified, the time has come to counter it. This is the exercise we will call "thinking the unthinkable". Re-

ardless of the particular anchor or theme that the subject has identified as central to his reflection, we will ask him to formulate and develop the opposite hypothesis: "If you had a criticism to make against your hypothesis, what would it be? ", "What is the most consistent objection that you know or can imagine to the thesis that is dear to your heart? ", "What are the limits of your idea? ", "What criticism could be leveled against such an idea? ». Be it love, freedom, happiness, the body, death, or any other concept that constitutes the foundation or the privileged reference of the subject, in most cases he will feel unable at first to make such an intellectual turnaround. Thinking such an "impossibility" will have the effect of plunging him into the abyss. Sometimes it will be the cry of the heart: "But I don't want to! "or "It is impossible! ». For he will have the impression or the conviction that he has uttered a kind of invariant, an inescapable, which will sometimes be expressed in the form of "But everyone thinks like that".

This moment of tension though provoked, serves above all to raise awareness of the subject's psychological and conceptual conditioning. By inviting him to think the unthinkable, we invite him to analyze, compare and above all to deliberate, rather than taking for granted and irrefutable this or that hypothesis of intellectual and existential functioning. He then realizes the rigidities that shape his thinking unknowingly. "But then we can no longer believe in anything!" he exclaims. No, we can, but at least during an exercise, for a very short hour, we will wonder if the opposite hypothesis, if the opposite "belief" does not hold just as well. Strangely enough, to the great surprise of the subject, once he has ventured into this reverse hypothesis, he will find that it makes much more sense than he thought a priori and that, in any case, it sheds interesting light on his initial hypothesis, the nature and limits of which he manages to better understand. This experience makes us see and touch the liberating dimension of thought, insofar as it allows us to question the ideas that we unconsciously cling to, to distance ourselves from ourselves, to analyse our thought patterns, both in form and substance, and to conceptualise our own existential issues.

### **Switch to 'First Floor'**

By way of conclusion, the subject will be asked to summarize the important parts of the discussion in order to review and summarize the highlights or the significant ones. This will be done in the form of a feedback on the whole exercise. "What happened here?" This last part of the interview is also called 'moving to the first floor': a

conceptual analysis in opposition to the experience of the ‘ground floor’. From this elevated perspective, the challenge is to act, to analyze the course of the exercise, to assess the stakes, to emerge from the hubbub of action and the thread of the narrative, to capture the essential elements of the consultation, the points of inflection of the dialogue. The subject engages in a metadiscourse about the groping of his thought. This moment is crucial because it is the locus of the sudden awareness of this double functioning (inside/outside) of the human spirit, intrinsically linked to the philosophical practice. It allows for the emergence of the infinite perspective which gives the subject access to a dialectical vision of his own being, to the autonomy of his thought.

### **Is it philosophical?**

What are we trying to accomplish through these exercises? How are they philosophical? How is philosophical consultation different from psychoanalytic consultation? As has already been mentioned, three specific criteria specify the practice in question: identification, criticism and conceptualization. (Let us mention another important criterion: distancing, which, however, we shall not retain as the fourth element because it is implicitly contained in the other three.) In a way, this triple requirement captures quite well what is required in the writing of a ‘dissertation’. In the latter, on the basis of an imposed subject, the student must express some ideas, test them and formulate one or more general problems, with or without the help of the authors. The only important difference concerns the choice of the theme to be treated: here the subject chooses his own object of study – in fact he is the subject and the object of the study – which increases the existential outreach of the reflection, perhaps making the philosophical treatment of this subject even more delicate.

The objection to the ‘psychologizing’ side of the exercise is not to be dismissed too quickly. On the one hand, because the tendency is great in the subject – when faced with a single interlocutor who is dedicated to his listening – to unburden himself without any restraint on his feelings, especially if he has already taken part in interviews of psychological type. He will also feel frustrated at being interrupted, having to make critical judgments about his own ideas, having to discriminate between his various propositions, and so on. So many obligations that are part of the ‘game’, its requirements and its tests. On the other hand, since, for various reasons, philosophy tends to ignore individual subjectivity, to devote itself especially to the abstract universal, to disembodied notions. A sort of extreme modesty, even puritanism, causes the professional of philosophy to fear public opinion to the point of wanting to ignore it, rather than to see in this opinion the inevitable starting point of philosophizing on everything; whether this opinion is that of the

ordinary mortal or that of the specialist, the latter being no less a victim of this ‘sickly’ and fatal opinion.

Thus, our exercise consists firstly in identifying in the subject, through his opinions, the unacknowledged presuppositions from which he operates. This allows to define and to dig the starting point(s). Secondly, to take the opposite side of these presuppositions, in order to transform indisputable postulates into simple hypotheses. Thirdly, to articulate the problems thus generated through identified and formulated concepts. In this last step – or earlier if utility is felt earlier – the interrogator may use ‘classical’ problems, attributable to an author, in order to enhance or to better identify issues that arise during the course of the interview.

It is doubtful, of course, whether a single individual could recreate the whole history of philosophy by himself, just like that of mathematics or language. In addition, why should we ignore the past? We will always be dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. But should we not risk the gymnastics, just watching and admiring the athletes, on the pretext that we are short on legs, or even disabled? Should we just go to the Louvre and never put our hands into clay, on the pretext that our mental functions do not have the agility of those inspired beings? Would it be a matter of disrespect to the ‘great ones’ if we were to imitate them? Would it not be honoring them, at least as much as by admiring and quoting them? In the end, have they not for the most part enjoined us to think for ourselves?

## Difficulties

Our methodology is mainly inspired by the Socratic maieutic, where the philosopher questions his interlocutor, invites him to identify the stakes of his discourse, to conceptualize it by distinguishing key terms in order to implement them, to problematize them through a critical perspective, to universalize their implications. For the sake of comparison, this practice has the specificity of inviting the subject to move away from a mere sensation in order to allow him a rational analysis of his speech and of himself, a *sine qua non* condition for deliberating on the cognitive and existential stakes which must be made explicit at first. The removal from

oneself that this unnatural activity presupposes, for which it requires the assistance of a specialist, poses a certain number of difficulties which we shall here attempt to analyze.

## **Frustrations**

Beyond the general interest in the exercise of thought that prompts a person to come and consult a philosopher, a negative feeling in the subject regularly prevails, at least momentarily, which is most frequently voiced, during philosophical consultations as well as during group reflection workshops, as an expression of frustration. Firstly, the frustration of the interruption: since the philosophical interview is not the place for unwinding or conviviality, a misunderstood and long speech, irrelevant or too offbeat, or one that ignores the interlocutor, must be interrupted. If it does not feed directly into the dialogue and ignores the questions, it is not used for the interview and has no place in the context of such an exercise. Second, the frustration of harshness: it is more a matter of analysing the words than of pronouncing them, and anything we say can be used "against us". Thirdly, the frustration of slowness: it is no longer a question of provoking accumulations and jostling of words, we must not fear silence, nor stop on a given word, in order to fully apprehend the substance of the speech, in the double meaning of the word apprehend: capture and fear. Fourthly, the frustration of betrayal, again in the double meaning of the term: betrayal of our own word that reveals what we did not want to say or know, and betrayal of our word that does not say what we wanted to say. Fifthly, the frustration of being: not being what we want to be, not being what we think we are, seeing ourselves dispossessed of the illusory truths that we have been maintaining, consciously or not, sometimes for a very long time, phantasmizing about ourselves, our existence and our intellect.

This multiple, sometimes painful frustration is not always clearly expressed by the subject. If he is somewhat emotional, susceptible or disinclined to analysis, he will not be able to bear to be framed at all: he will not fail to denounce censorship or oppression. "You're preventing me from speaking", "I'm not finished... ", he will protest, while long, unused silences, unoccupied by speech, periodically punctuate

the dialogue, symptomatic of a speech that is struggling to find itself. Or again: "You want me to say what you want", although for each question the subject can answer what suits him, simply at the risk of generating new questions. Embarrassing questions, especially if the answer is not consistent with the question. Certainly, a certain number of questions are closed, determined, in order to force the interlocutor to commit, to clarify, a requirement which will be perceived by a worried mind as an attempt at manipulation.

Initially, frustration is often expressed as a pure emotion, as a reproach, as resentment, however, by becoming verbalized, it allows the subject who expresses it to become an object for itself; it allows the subject who expresses it to become aware of himself as an external figure. From this observation, he becomes able to reflect, to analyze his being by putting it to the test, to better understand his intellectual functioning, and he can then intervene on himself, as much on his being as on his thinking. Of course, the passage through certain moments with a psychological tone is difficult to avoid, without however dwelling on it, because the idea is to pass quickly to the subsequent cognitive stage, by means of the critical perspective, by trying to define a problem and the stakes.

Our working hypothesis consists precisely in identifying certain elements of subjectivity, bits and pieces that could be called opinions, intellectual opinions and emotional opinions, in order to counterbalance them and experience an "alternate" thought. Without this, how can one learn to voluntarily and consciously break free from conditioning and predetermination? How to emerge from pathology and pure feeling? Moreover, it may happen that the subject does not have the capacity to do this work or even the possibility of considering it, due to a lack of distancing, a lack of autonomy, insecurity or because of strong anxiety of any kind, in which case we may not be able to work with him. Just as the practice of a sport requires minimal physical abilities, the practice of philosophy, with its difficulties and demands, requires minimal psychological abilities, below which we cannot work.

The exercise must be practiced under minimum conditions of serenity, with the various preconditions necessary for this serenity. Too much fragility or susceptibility would prevent the process from taking place. In the way our work is defined, the

causality of a lack in this area is not our responsibility, but that of a psychologist or psychiatrist. If we confine ourselves to our function, we cannot get to the root of the problem, we can only observe and draw consequences. If the subject does not seem to us capable of practicing the exercise even though he feels the need to reflect on himself, we will encourage him to go rather towards consultations of psychological type, or even other types of philosophical practices, more "flowing". To conclude, as far as we are concerned, as long as it remains limited, the psychological passage has no reason to be avoided, since subjectivity should not play the role of a scarecrow, even if a certain philosophical, more academic approach considers this individual reality as an obstruction to philosophizing. The formal and timid philosopher fears that by messing with it, the distance necessary for philosophical activity will be lost, while we take the option of making it emerge. For this subjectivity speaks just as much, the being reveals itself in it, even if in a less conscious and reasonable way.

### **Speech as a pretext**

One of the aspects of our practice that is problematic in this regard is the relationship to speech that we're trying to install. Indeed, on the one hand, we are asking it to make the word sacred, since we allow ourselves to carefully weigh, together, the slightest term used, since we allow ourselves to dig from within, together, the expressions used and the arguments put forward, to the point of sometimes making them unrecognizable to their author, which will occasionally lead him to cry out in scandal at seeing his word so manipulated. On the other hand, we ask him to desacralize the word, since the whole exercise is made up of words, no matter how sincere or true what is said: the point is simply to play with ideas, without necessarily adhering to what is said. We are only interested in coherence, in the echoes that the words send back to each other, in the mental silhouette that slowly and imperceptibly emerges. We simultaneously ask the subject to play a simple game, which implies a distancing from what is conceived as real, and at the same time we ask him to play with words with the greatest seriousness, with the greatest application, with more effort than he usually puts into constructing his discourse and analyzing it.



Here the truth advances in a masked way. It is no longer the truth of intention, it is no longer sincerity and conviction, it is the requirement of thought. This requirement which forces the subject to make choices, to assume the contradictions brought to light by working on the messy nature of speech, to observe what is happening, even if it means making radical shifts, even if it means moving brutally, even if it means refusing to see and to decide, even if it means remaining silent in the face of the many cracks which suggest the most serious abysses, the fractures of the self, the gulfs of being. No other quality is necessary here for the questioner and, little by little, for the subject, other than that of a policeman, a detective who tracks down the slightest failings in speech and behaviour, who demands an account of every act, every place and every moment.

Of course we can be wrong in the direction the discussion is taking, which remains the prerogative of the questioner, the undeniable power that he holds and must assume, including his undeniable lack of total neutrality despite his efforts to do so. Of course, the subject can also "make a mistake" in the analysis and ideas he puts forward, influenced by the questions he is asked, blindly moved by the convictions he wishes to defend, guided by biases he has already opted for and on which he might well be incapable of deliberating: "over-interpretations", "misinterpretations" or "under-interpretations" flourish. These errors, apparent errors, or purported errors do not matter. What matters for the subject is to remain alert, to observe, to analyze and to become conscious; his response mode, his treatment of the problem, his way of reacting, his ideas that emerge, his relationship to himself and to the exercise, everything here must become a pretext for analysis and conceptualization. In other words, making a mistake here no longer makes much sense. It is above all a question of playing the game, practicing gymnastics, implementing thought. The only things that count are seeing and not seeing, consciousness and unconsciousness. There are no more good and bad answers, but there is "seeing the answers", and if there is deception, it is only in the lack of fidelity of the word to itself, not in the relation to some distant and pre-inscribed truth on a starry sky background or in some subconscious depths. Nevertheless, this fidelity is a truth that is undoubtedly more terrible and implacable than the other: diso-

bedience is no longer possible, with all the legitimacy of such disobedience. There can only be blindness.

### **Pain and epidural**

The subject quickly becomes aware of the issues at stakes here. A sort of panic can thus set in. For this reason, it is important to install various types of 'epidural' for the ongoing delivery. First, the most important, the most difficult and the most delicate, remains the indispensable dexterity of the interrogator, who must be able to determine when it is appropriate to press an interrogation and when it is time to pass on, when it is time to say or to propose rather than to question, when it is time to alternate between the rough and the generous. It is not an easy judgment, because we easily allow ourselves to be carried away in the heat of action, by our own desires, those wanting to come to terms, to get to a certain place, those linked to fatigue, to despair, and many other personal inclinations.

Secondly, humour, laughter, linked to the playful dimension of the exercise. They induce a kind of "letting go" that allows the individual to free himself, to escape from his existential drama and to painlessly observe the derisory nature of certain positions to which he sometimes clings with a touch of ridicule, if not in the most flagrant contradiction with himself. Laughter releases tensions that would otherwise completely inhibit the subject in this very corrosive practice.

Thirdly, duplication, which allows the subject to come out of himself, to consider himself as a third person. When the analysis of one's own discourse goes through a perilous moment, when judgment comes up against issues that are too heavy to bear, it is useful and interesting to transpose the case studied to a third person, by inviting the subject to view a film, to imagine a fiction, to hear his story in the form of a fable. "Suppose you read a story that tells that...", "Suppose you meet someone, and all you know about them is that... ». This simple narrative effect allows the subject to forget or relativize his intentions, desires, wills, illusions and disillusion, and to deal only with the word as it arises in the course of the discussion, letting it make its own revelations without permanently erasing it with heavy suspicions or patent accusations of inadequacy and betrayal.

Fourth, conceptualization, abstraction. By universalizing what tends to be perceived exclusively as a dilemma or a purely personal issue, by problematizing it, by dialecticizing it, the pain is alleviated progressively as intellectual activity gets underway. Philosophical activity itself is a sophrology, a "consolation", as envisioned by Ancients such as Boethius, Seneca, Epicurus, Montaigne, or more recently Sartre, Foucault and Wittgenstein, a balm that allows us to better consider the suffering intrinsically linked to human existence, ours in particular.

## Exercises

### **Establishing connections**

Some additional exercises are very useful in the reflection process. For example the link exercise. It allows the discourse to come out of its "flow of consciousness" side, which functions purely by free associations, abandoning to the darkness of the unconscious the articulations and joints of thought. The link is a concept which is all the more fundamental in that it has a profound relationship with the being, since it connects its different facets, its different registers. "Substantial link", Leibniz tells us. "What is the link between what you say here and what you say there? ». Apart from the contradictions that will be highlighted by this questioning, so will the breaks and jumps which indicate knots, blind spots, whose conscious articulation enables us, through discourse, to work closely with the mind of the subject. This exercise is one of the forms of the "anagogical" approach, allowing us to go back to unity, to identify the roots, to update the point of emergence of the subject's thought, even if it means subsequently criticizing this unity, even if it means modifying these roots. It allows us to establish a kind of conceptual map defining a pattern of thought

### **Real Speech**

Another exercise is that of "real speech". It is practiced when a contradiction has been detected, insofar as the subject accepts to attribute the qualifier "contradictory" to his thought, which is not always the case: some subjects refuse to consi-

der it and deny on principle the mere possibility of a contradiction in their speech. By asking which is the real speech - even if it was pronounced with equal sincerity at staggered moments - the subject is invited to justify two different positions of his own, to evaluate their respective value, to compare their relative merits, to deliberate in order to finally decide in favour of the primacy of one of the two perspectives, a decision that will lead him to become aware of his own functioning, of the fracture that animates him. It is not absolutely essential to make a decision, but it is advisable to encourage the subject to take the risk, because it is very rare if not almost impossible to encounter a real absence of preference between two distinct visions, with the epistemological consequences that derive from this. The notions of "complementarity" or "simple difference" frequently used in everyday language, although they have their share of truth, often serve to erase the real issues, somewhat conflicting and tragic, of any singular thought. The subject may also try to explain why the discourse is not the "real thing". Often it will correspond to moral or intellectual expectations that he believes to see in society, or to a desire of his own that he considers illegitimate; a discourse in this sense very revealing of a perception of the world and a relationship to authority or reason.

### **Singular**

Another exercise, that of 'singular'. When the subject is asked to give reasons, explanations, or examples of any of his words, he will be requested to assume the order in which he enumerated them. Especially the first item in the list, which will be related to the subsequent items. Using the idea that the first element is the most obvious, the clearest, the surest and therefore the most important in his mind, he will be asked to assume this choice, usually unconscious. Often the subject will rebel to this exercise, refusing to assume the choice in question, denying this progeny born against his will. In accepting to assume this exercise, he will have to account for the presuppositions contained in such and such a choice - whether he adheres to it explicitly, implicitly or not at all. At worst, as with most consultation exercises, this will accustom him to decode any proposal put forward, in order to grasp its epistemological content and glimpse the concepts conveyed, even if he would dissociate himself from the idea.

The subject may also be asked to first come up with an indeterminate list of ideas, examples or interpretations, a kind of brainstorming, and then to choose only one of these entities, to commit to a single, preferable, more significant or more appropriate hypothesis. This requires the subject to differentiate, classify, prioritize and so on. For we observe how, in thinking, "lists" or multiplicities are used to cover all angles in order to protect oneself, strangely mixing various registers or categories, a confusion through which the subject allows himself not to think and not to know himself. Hence the importance of asking him to establish an axiology.

### **Universal and singular**

Globally, what do we ask of the subject who wishes to question himself, to philosophize from and about his existence and thought? He has to learn to read himself, that is to say, to learn to transpose his thoughts and learn to transpose himself through himself; a duplication and alienation that require the loss of self through a passage to infinity, through a leap into pure possibility. Rubbing the singularity of one's personal discourse against the universality of one's own reason. The challenge of such an exercise is that it will always be a matter of erasing something, of forgetting, of momentarily blinding the body or the mind, the reason or will, desire or morals, pride or inertia. In order to do so, the accessory discourse, the discourse of circumstance, or of appearance must be silenced: either the word assumes its responsibility, its implications or its content, or it must learn to keep silent. A word that is not prepared to assume its own essence, in all its fullness, a word that is not willing to become conscious of itself, no longer has any reason to come to light, in this game where only the conscious has the right to be heard, theoretically and tentatively at least. Obviously, some will not wish to play the game, considered too painful, the word being here too burdened with stakes.

By forcing the subject to select his speech, by sending back to him through the tool of reformulation the image he deploys, we will be installing a procedure where the speech becomes as revealing as possible; this is what happens through the process of universalization of the particular idea. Of course it is possible and sometimes useful to follow paths already mapped out, for example by quoting authors, but it is then the rule to bear the content as if it were exclusively our own.

Sometimes authors can be used to legitimize a fearful position or to banalize a painful one. In fact, what we are trying to do is to find in each singular discourse, however clumsy it may be, the major issues, stamped and codified by illustrious predecessors. How they are articulated by each one, in turn, absolute and relative, monism and dualism, body and soul, analytical and poetic, finite and infinite, etc.?<sup>2</sup> At the cost of the feeling of betrayal, because we can hardly bear to see our word treated in this way, even by ourselves. A feeling of pain and dispossession, like the one who would see his body being operated on even though all physical pain would have been annihilated. Sometimes, sensing the consequences of an interrogation, the subject will try by all means to avoid answering. If the interrogator perseveres through the back door, a sort of answer will probably emerge, but only when the issue has disappeared behind the horizon, so much so that the subject, reassured by this disappearance, will no longer be able to establish a link with the initial issue. If the questioner recapitulates the steps in order to re-establish the line of reasoning of the discussion, the subject will then be able to accept or not accept to see, as the case may be. A crucial moment, although the refusal to see may sometimes be only verbal: the path inevitably leaves some imprint in the subject's mind. Through a mechanism of pure defense, the latter will sometimes try to verbally undermine any work of clarification or explanation. But he will not be less affected in his later reflections.

### **Accepting the pathology**

As a conclusion on the difficulties of philosophical consultation, let us say that the main difficulty lies in the acceptance of the idea of pathology, taken in the philosophical sense, and even to establish a cognitive and emotional diagnosis, to examine the functioning and obstacles of rationality. In fact, any singular existential posture, a choice that is made more or less consciously over the years, for many reasons ignores a certain number of patterns and ideas. To affirm, to assert oneself, is to deny something, since all existence is a kind of negation of the being, whole sections of the possible are thus engulfed in the blind spots of thought.

In their extreme generality, these pathologies are not infinite in number, the categories are quite defined, although their specific articulations vary enormously. But for those who suffer from them, it is difficult to conceive that the ideas on

which they focus their existence are reduced to the simple, almost predictable consequences of a chronic weakness or absence in their capacity for reflection and deliberation. However, isn't the "thinking for oneself" advocated by many philosophers an art that can be worked on and acquired, rather than an innate, given talent that would no longer have to be examined again? It is simply a question of accepting that human existence is in itself a problem, burdened by dysfunctions that are nevertheless its substance and dynamics.



# TO PHILOSOPHIZE IS TO CEASE LIVING

"Those who devote themselves to philosophy in an appropriate way do no more than prepare for death and the state of death. » Plato

"The Tao Te Ching is so mysterious that one is willing to die as soon as one hears it." Confucius

"Change my idea? Biologically, I can not! » Carmen

If to philosophize means to learn to die, to learn how to die, it can not be done other than by exercising oneself to die. Thus, our proposition is that to philosophize means to actually die, in order to acquire a true experience of death. We will try to show in this text that philosophizing is ceasing to live, or in other words, how philosophy opposes life.

## Two philosophies

"Philosophy is life," is an expression we commonly hear among followers of a philosophy rooted in everyday life. But it seems to us that in fact, it is exactly the opposite. This is also how commonplaces usually proceed: they tend to turn the



reality upside down. Probably because of their intention, their reason for being, they hide reality so that their author feels better, more comfortable, less troubled. And thinking about it, this could be one of the reasons for the relative popularity of mainstream philosophy these days: a desire for good conscience, a spiritual enrichment, the hope that the mind feels comfortable and relaxed. It is the common conception of this philosophy: it makes you calm, placid and light. Orientalism in fashion is a good example here. It seems useful to us, as always, to disagree with this principle, to reverse the reversed, if only to better examine the effect produced by doing so. And in this case, as for many others, it works quite well, since it seems to us that the expression "to philosophize is to cease living" is a rather sensible and interesting formula. Admittedly, philosophy finds here another meaning, opposed to the previous one, but philosophy however implies that received ideas are reversed and confusion induced, at the risk of generating concern and bad conscience, which are a kind of psychological pain linked to a symbolic death. We are aware that we have here opposed and radicalized two "classical" contrary conceptions of philosophy. We could name the first "common" and the other "elitist". Without trying to establish a hierarchy between them, because "common" could become "popular", "educational" or "operative", and "elitist" could become "absconded" or "useless". But in the defense of a "hard" philosophy, let us say that if philosophy were life, it would fill football stadiums, stock up supermarkets, we would find it in opinion polls, it would appear on prime-time television, and probably established philosophers would seem less dusty and would speak to everyone. Although a little of all this has already happened in recent years. And for different reasons!

Let us examine the different ways in which philosophy would oppose to life. First, by starting up again with the classic refrain that "philosophizing is learning to die". Plato, Cicero, Montaigne and many others have affirmed, written and rewritten, that the preparation for death would indeed constitute the heart of philosophical activity, the primal philosophical experience. Obviously, here we could oppose some philosophers, such as Spinoza with his concept of *conatus*: every living being tends to persevere in existence. Or his famous quote: "the free man thinks of nothing less than death". Or Nietzsche who claims that life itself is the core of true

thinking, when he writes that the body is the great reason and the spirit only the small reason. Or Sartre, who, in the footsteps of Epicureans, asserts that death is external to life, since it is absence or cessation of life. In any case, as a matter of principle, in this field or on these subjects, as no simple proposal was able to obtain the unanimous agreement of the philosophers, we will not bother with such a consensus. We will only examine the viability of some proposals. And we will probably reconcile with some philosophers of "opposition" during our peregrination. Also because, among these different philosophers, the concept of finitude is important, and it is precisely on this path that we wish to invite the reader, and it could serve as a definition to the philosophizing: to examine the different issues of thinking in order to undergo and experience finitude, of existential, epistemological, psychological, ontological or other nature.

## The wise man has no desires

One of the most common obstacles to the philosophizing is desire, although desire itself is found at the heart of philosophical dynamics, as in Plato, who claims that celestial eros is the engine of the philosophizing. For him, the perversion of philosophy happens precisely in the process of inversion of the erotic; when desire gives up its most legitimate object for the soul, truth or beauty, in order to seek more immediate, earthly satisfactions, such as the pleasure of the senses, the pursuit of power and glory, the accumulation of possessions or knowledge, covetousness, etc. It is not so much that the soul then ceases all intellectual activity, but these "earthly" goals are not part of its natural vocation, since the "celestial" nature of its activity is perverted by considerations of inferior nature. When, through this perversion, the philosopher has turned into a sophist, and he wins the agreement of the majority or becomes popular among his fellow citizens, it is only because the common man does not know what a "true" philosopher looks like. The layman is impressed by the shimmering appearances of the sophist, by the simulacrum of thought, he is amazed by the somersaults made by the one who, according to Plato, is nothing but a juggler, a mock philosopher.

Life has a lot to do with desire because life is made up of needs, it is dedicated to the pursuit of the many objects that will satisfy these needs, it suffers from the anguish of not obtaining the objects that would satisfy these needs, from the pain that can derive from it, and ironically from the pain that occurs even when needs are met, through the fear of lack and the suffering of loss. Even the future is worrisome, hope is always grappling with despair. It seems that life has a surprising ability to create new needs and therefore new pains, especially in humans, whose existential reach is much greater than that of other species; the human mind can even consider the infinite, an exciting vision indeed, but one that can become a nightmare in its capacity to produce an infinite list of unfulfilled desires. Desires that sometimes arise only for the simple reason that they are totally impossible to achieve. If most species satisfy the particular needs of their nature - the hen does not want to go underwater, the elephant does not hope to fly - the human race knows no boundaries to its claims, its wishes, its ambitions, and therefore knows no limit to its pains. One could argue that man begets and satisfies more desires than any other species and may therefore feel more satisfied, but it seems that his imagination and covetousness far outweighs his inherent abilities to be satisfied. Human existence is a problem in itself, we are preoccupied with our survival and happiness, and we have a certain phobia of the problem, while the philosophizing rejoices at these problems.

Although philosophy has, through space and time, travelled different paths, although it has proposed many and different arrangements with reality and subjectivity, there is nevertheless a certain concordance between the different ways in which philosophers have tried to solve the excessive capacity of man to make himself unhappy. We will call this middle ground "reconciliation with oneself". Whether it be with the epicurean *carpe diem*, which invites everyone to appreciate the present moment. Or with the pure and idealistic pleasure of thinking and reasoning. Or with the perspective of an extra-terrestrial world or reality that moderates, retains or annihilates common desires, which we also find in the religious scheme. Or in the commitment to humbly accept the reality, despite its roughness or thanks to it. Or in the love for transcendental concepts such as truth, goodness

or beauty, a contemplation which sublimates all pain and satisfies the soul. Or through the projection of oneself in the near or distant future. Or in the enjoyment of pure action, physical or mental, transforming oneself or the world. Or by freeing oneself from any hope for gratification. Through these multiple proposals, philosophers have tried to provide men with various recipes to know what might be called a "better life", in the sense of a certain peace of mind. Of course, one will jump at the opportunity to exclaim: "You see, philosophy is life! You said it yourself: philosophy helps us live a better life!". But this critical mind here forgets a fundamental thing. Let us ask him the following questions. Why did these philosophers have so little success? Why are these philosophies so difficult to follow? Do not philosophies make propositions that are opposed to the common conception of life? To such a point that mass religions have to realize that the messages they send, even when they are acknowledged as divine words, can hardly be obeyed and followed to the letter. This is fortunate, because the radical nature of their discourse implies that their function is that of a critical spur rather than a practical guide to existence. Mankind would not have survived the intransigent application of their precepts.

Let us examine why philosophers are not so easily followed, to say the least. As a global answer to this question, we can propose the following hypothesis. Philosophers, like the wise men, ask us to give up what is dearest to our heart, or rather to our guts. In what way do they ask? The common characterization of their demand is to invite us to abandon the obvious or the immediate, in favour of something else, another reality, comparatively more distant, more intangible, more imperceptible and more difficult to explain. Whether it is the middle ground, the middle way, the wisdom, the autonomy, the perfection, the reality, the love, the consciousness, the absolute, the otherness or the essence, all these concepts can constitute only mere words, difficult to pursue, very ethereal, in comparison to food, pleasure, dance, entertainment, work for life, reproduction, appearance, glory, drunkenness, popularity, etc. Even the command to live in the present moment, which might seem something easy to achieve, since we would not worry about anything other than the immediate, is a truly ascetic and demanding task because man

spends much of his energy regretting a wonderful past, crying over some lost paradise, or being worried about the future and its unpredictability. Thus, living the present moment will naturally last a short time, because soon, other dimensions of time, including the desire for eternity, will knock on the door insistently. It is the same with love, which seems so eternally popular. But when we look more closely at its current manifestations, we identify all sorts of sordid calculations, resentments, jealousies, desires for possession and other gross behaviours or human perversions of the archetypal concept of love, whose essence is, however, within the romantic and ideal custom.

Moreover, we get an interesting view of the problem, of this gap between life and philosophy, when we look into the life of our official philosophers: the incredible genius of Leibniz, at the burial of which nobody came, Kant living alone all his life with his servant, Wittgenstein living as a hermit, Nietzsche gone mad, Socrates killed by his fellow citizens, Bruno sentenced to the stake, though, we must admit, some have achieved fame, glory and ease, such as Hume or Aristotle.

Let us now examine other aspects of our claim that philosophizing is to cease living.

## Stop the narration

Life is a sequence, a series of facts, a series of events. When someone tells his life to his friends or when he writes a biography, he tells a story: this happened, then that, and finally something else, which then concludes the narration. In general, human beings like to tell each other "the story of their lives," their stories, as anecdotes, sometimes because important things have happened, but most often to report the most trivial and the most uninteresting details, simply for the sake of conversing with one's neighbours, so as to exist a little more, and to think a little less, as one would say, spitefully. The principle is the same in wanting to know and listen to "the stories" of others, as shown by the gossip about neighbours or celebrities, this insatiable propensity for voyeurism. Another habit where we realize that our life is an immense narrative, is the way in which we conceive our activities, of-

ten listed in an agenda, which establishes what we have to do on such a day, at such a time. For example, a list of house tasks, as well as getting up, working, running the shops, arranging various appointments, and even the indispensable television program, which often punctuates family life. Just as we worry about what we have not done, we worry of what we should do and probably will never do! So many things that must fit in any way into the infinite list of real or illusory actions which compose our existence, whose time becomes the main and ultimate parameter, and the perfect alibi. This is one of the reasons why it is so easy to feel eternal or to forget our own finiteness: our desires resist and conspire against such a limit. If I had time, what would I not do? Existence is therefore a broad list of more or less insignificant events and an even longer list of hopes, expectations, and fears, which are, hypothetical events.

How does philosophy oppose to the idea of a narrative? Here again, some contemporary philosophers will strive to defend a more phenomenological view of existence and promote narratives. Yet, one of the great revolutions of the philosophical advent, as it appeared in the ancient Greek "moment", which some consider - rightly or wrongly - as the birth of philosophy, was to move from myth, narrative, to abstract discourse, concept and explanation. Until then, everything, be it the creation of the world, the existence of man, the natural phenomena, the moral and intellectual problems, was explained in the form of stories that we, modern and "enlightened" spirits, would call myths. If we failed to take into consideration the factor of quality or originality of these texts, we could very well call them serial novels. To explain the world, these fantastic myths needed actors, all kinds of creatures were called upon, summoned and imagined to commit the actions explaining the different cosmic or unexplained phenomena. Thus the poets, as they have called themselves, these creators of the universe, as Hesiod or Homer for the Greeks, Virgil or Ovid for the Romans, or the unknown authors of the Hindu Bhagavad-Gita, have perceptively composed enticing tales that have given coherence and explanations to the world. We have invented cosmogonies, theogonies, epics, all kinds of imaginable stories to educate and instruct the population, to inculcate into it principles by suggesting that there is a meaning to the universe to which

daily events are directly linked. In order for the existential and cosmic edifice to be coherent, most of our minutes lived on a human scale must echo these great "historical" feats, for we should be able to weave our little daily myths together with the larger ones of the universe, in a kind of causal relationship. Therefore, the universe as a whole and all the elements which compose it have significance, meaning, rules and principles, all in the form of "stories". This guarantees a degree of predictability to console us for life's hardships, even if it is telling about an angry outburst or the love story of some strange god. So the little stories reflected the big stories, but they were all stories. This was not only the case in Greece and Rome, but also in Egypt, China and India, to mention some of the most famous and least ephemeral cultures, because these myths are truly founders of civilization. As we can still see today in some countries, for example in Africa, these stories fulfil a very important educational function, since models emerge from them, that some call archetypes, and which allow us to perceive the events, affecting us not only as particular occurrences, but also as manifestations or evocations of some more fundamental principles, of some universal leitmotifs.

The appearance of the logos, the abstract discourse, took place not only in Greece, where this upheaval affected deeply Western history at least, but also elsewhere, for example in China and India. This reversal consists in transforming, at least partially, a "storytelling" culture into a culture of "explanation", which some call "rationality" or "abstraction". The general principle of the logos is to add to the "narrations" reasons and rules, procedures and methods, or even to abandon the stories altogether to keep only the abstract discourse. This implies that one can move away from concrete, particular or universal situations, and replace them with ideas which have the specificity of being out of time and space; causality escapes the chronology, as mythical and eternal as it may be. These ideas can be organized and formalized to create systems, used to generate new knowledge, formulate general principles, or used to critically examine thoughts and even facts. Logic is a particular way of pushing such intellectual functioning to its limits. Mathematics and astronomy are, in many ancient and traditional cultures, the most obvious and basic forms of such efforts, as well as, sometimes, medicine and physics.

And these new "sciences" allow an understanding of the present and the past, and to predict the future. Knowledge is no longer based solely on empirical data, but also on abstractions and intellectual constructs. Laws emerge, not only descriptive, explaining what we perceive, but also prescriptive, telling us how we should act. The reason we put the words "explanation", "rationality" and "abstraction" in quotation marks is that the culture of myth was already trying to do it, in its own way. For example, contemporary Africa is agitated by a debate which tries to determine whether there is - was – or not an African philosophy, if the role of the storytellers or "griots", these traditional bards, can be considered as of philosophy or not. "Westernizing" African intellectuals claim that this activity is not philosophical, mainly because it does not include any conceptual system and critical apparatus; it does not explain its own philosophical potential. For them, the clarification, the conceptualization and the critical analysis are the constituent elements of the philosophizing.

The other side, that of the ethno-philosophers, states that these stories, since they are stories, pose questions, analyse and problematize the human existence in particular, on existential, social and moral points, producing meaning, and in this sense they are philosophical. Let us remember, for example, how Schelling, a German romantic philosopher, took the opposite course from the "primal philosophy", the metaphysics of the Aristotelian tradition, with a "secondary philosophy", which is the narration of a story, although this latter philosophy is in fact chronologically first. It is true that all societies are based on great myths, which embody the essence, the nature, the reason for being, the purpose, the specificity of a given culture. This is why literature, in the form of theatre, poetry or else, is a crucial institution, along with philosophy, to explain who we are, what the world is. And Schelling is not the only philosopher who criticizes the abandonment of the narrative as an essential form of philosophizing. More recently, criticism of the "philosophy of systems", of the principle of "method", of "transcendental" concepts, or even of any form of abstraction, has flourished among certain intellectuals.

Parallel to the great myths, on the same principle, many tales, ancient or recent, contribute to creating the identity of those who tell them and those who listen to them. Whether it be the stories that are perpetuated within families, or the



myth that everyone develops for himself. Do we not all have some stories about our little person? That we have told on many occasions, changed and embellished every time, this story that others repeat just like us, or modify, this story that our entourage is sometimes tired of hearing, but we continue to tell because it is who we are. Unless we are or become what it is? We swear that it is true, as incredible as it may be, but in a certain sense, a story can not be true, since it gives a subjective description, in a specific and biased way, of an event that, in itself, escapes any description, verbal or otherwise. A story is at best a hyper-condensed summary of a series of events for which we pick and choose the angles in which they should be told. This is how man is the only animal that makes itself up!

To clarify our idea of philosophy as a rupture with life, the latter being defined as a sequence of events, let us summarize the following points. Telling a story is easier and more natural than explaining; it is more concrete, it speaks to everyone better. Examples come more easily to mind than explanations, as Plato's dialogues show, and as we perceive on a day-to-day basis in our philosophical practice. Stories are closer to us, and they seem more true than explanations, since they seem to describe facts rather than give "subjective" interpretations and expose a necessarily "biased" analysis, because proceeding from prejudice. The stories are more rewarding because we can feel good, thanks to some simple and pleasant words that do not require any special effort of the mind. Stories give more space to the imagination than reason, the latter being much stricter. Stories are more pleasing to the ear than abstract thoughts. Even children appreciate them, since they have an aesthetic dimension that explanations and ideas, which are dry and ungenerous, often lack. Philosophy has a more arid image, it does not satisfy so easily, since it implies an effort to understand, much more than the narrative does. But these working assumptions are not indisputable, they only attempt to provide some generalities about general perceptions, which yet are not valid for many philosophers, most of them feeding on what ordinary people hardly like. In this sense the philosopher is, in the eyes of the general opinion, someone who has somehow abandoned life. He seems not to be interested in "reality": he prefers abstruse ideas. This brings us to our next point: the ascetic quality of ideas.

## The asceticism of the concept

This aridity of philosophical discourse brings us directly to another facet of the opposition between life and philosophy: the ascetic dimension of the concept. The concept is a crucial tool of thought, if not the main one, as it is generally accepted in philosophy, especially since Hegel, since the German philosopher has proposed this "tool" as attesting to the "scientificity" of our mental activity. That is why he rejects the narrative, which for him is absolutely unphilosophical, even when met with in a "licensed" philosopher such as Plato, who "indulges" in telling stories, as Hegel perceives it, whereas for Plato myth still has an important role in the foundation of thinking.

What is a concept? It is an intellectual representation, usually a word, or an expression, which captures the theme or fundamental idea in a given discourse; we might as well call it "the key word" or "the main term". In a more modern way, it can indicate an operative function rather than an "object"; it does not necessarily proceed from empirical perception, it is often a product derived from reflection. It can be included in the speech, or induced by it. It can be considered as a category, a common name that refers to a number of objects. "Apple" is a definite concept that refers abstractly to an infinity of objects of different shapes, sizes and colours, but which nevertheless have certain features in common allowing them to enter the category of "apple". The concept both gathers and defines the objects that correspond to it. It is the result of a double operation. An abstraction, since it retains certain characteristics of the objects and not others. For example, an apple can not be slender or square, but must be roughly round. Similarly, the criterion of "maturity" does not fall within the definition of the apple, although it concerns us when we want to eat an apple; an apple not yet ripe is yet an apple. And a generalization, since the characteristics taken into account apply to all objects that belong to the category. It is a mental object with a double dimension, on the one hand the comprehension - totality of the constitutive characteristics - on the other hand the extension - totality of the objects to which these characteristics can be applied. Therefore, the concept is short - usually a word, sometimes two or three, rarely

more - abstract or general - since it does not relate to an individual -, concrete and specific thing. To show the process and the degrees of abstraction, Kant establishes an interesting distinction between empirical concepts, which relate to objects we can perceive, and derived concepts, which we can not perceive, because they refer to the relationship between objects, qualifying them. "Hole" or "man" would be empirical concepts, "equality" or "difference" would be derived concepts.

In fact, it is not so much the concept that matters to us here, but the dynamics of conceptualization itself, or the production of concepts. As Hegel indicates in his realistic scheme - the one for which ideas are true - the concept should not be determined merely by its object, therefore should not be the concept of a thing, where reality would be external to the thought, but we should rather aim for a concept that is the object of the thought; a thing as a concept, where reality is generated by the thought. It is this activity of conceptualization that poses a problem to man when reasoning, this process of construction, with its requirement of coherence, more than the concept itself, which, as a virtual and passive mental object, represents no concrete threat: to arbitrarily give and use a name represents an activity that does not in itself imply any particular intellectual achievement.

What is conceptualization? It is the activity of identifying, producing, defining or using concepts, and integrating into a global thinking process. Each of the four aspects of conceptualization presents some difficulty and is the reason for our resistance to conceptualization. But in general, the problem with the conceptualization is that it acts by way of an action of reduction: it reduces, it shrinks, and because of this it conveys a dry and hard connotation. In conceptualizing, we go from the concrete to the abstract, from the multiple to the simple, from the real to the virtual, from the perceptible to the thinkable, from entities inscribed in time, matter and space, to a cosmic, immaterial and timeless entities; we enter the realm of pure ideas, the realm of the thinking about the thought. However, if quite often the idea of "reduction" carries a negative connotation, we should remind the reader that, in philosophy, it can be contrarily a positive and useful activity, as in the concept of "phenomenological reduction" or "eidetic reduction", proposed by Husserl. It is a mental process in which we are invited to put the world in brackets,

what we know about it, and to suspend judgment based on subjectivity, in order to grasp the inner reality of a phenomenon, in itself, objectively, as it appears. In this process, we must cast aside all surrounding reality, in order to contemplate the objects of our mental perception disconnected from their context. This phenomenon can occur naturally. For example, when we are astonished we only see the object of our astonishment; however, the process of phenomenological reduction generally requires us to recreate artificially such an uncommon occurrence, a very artificial and demanding task that allows us to grasp the inner essence of an object of thought, by abandoning, as much as possible, our pre-established view of the world, which subjectively places bias in our thinking, burying the thought of object in its own womb. The process of reduction can also occur by observing the apparent variations of a given object, in order to abandon the contingent characteristics and to preserve only the necessary, the essence of a thing, thus revealed.

Identifying a concept, in our speech or that of someone else, is difficult because we have to choose, among all the words pronounced, which are at the core of the model of thought expressed by the given speech. It is a difficult process, because we have to eliminate many words, in fact most of them, to keep only one, or a few. We lose the narrative perspective or the global explanation by pointing at a single word.

The production of a concept is difficult because we have to use a term that goes beyond a given reality and yet falls short of that reality. What transcends the empirical reality lacks flesh, an abstract entity, poor in predicates. In addition, we must designate by a single term the entity that unifies a plurality into a simple determination. We must divide a whole of indeterminate objects through a naming process that involves creating definite categories. We must even qualify the whole of a global reality by a specific word, which we can call "qualification", an act which, for Plato, touches the essence of things. Now, it often seems to us that our own language escapes us, that this reality is beyond our capacity to think it: we are short of words.

Similarly, the definition of a concept is difficult because we have to determine the reality that this term covers. It would be more natural to give examples, since the concrete or the particular comes more easily to the mind than the abstract and the general. To define means to touch the essence of a reality, to determine and describe its nature without taking into considerations the contingency, this is one of the most demanding mental exercises. Another simple and common way of defining is to produce synonyms; although this may be useful, the problem remains: this mental gesture does not indicate how to determine the nature of the reality in question, it only provides clues through a lexical field. Another problem is that certain concepts of a strongly transcendental nature are generally used to determine or qualify other concepts, but they seem to refer only to themselves, as self-obvious entities. This is the case for example for "good", "beautiful", "true", etc. Consequently, they seem to escape any definition, and the attempt to produce a definition will always appear reductive, fragmented and uncertain.

Using a concept is probably the easiest aspect of conceptualization because it can be done in a more intuitive and less formal way. Nevertheless, determining whether a concept has been used appropriately, which is part of the conceptualization, is the most difficult, even daunting or ungrateful part of it, since we must evaluate our own thinking. For such an analysis, we must have in mind a rather clear and conscious idea of the meaning of a concept. Intuition is also quite reliable though; after all, language is taught to us in a rather "natural" or iterative way, like a repetitive daily practice, rather than as a conscious and analysed process. The common reluctance of schoolchildren for grammar, whose teaching is abandoned in modern teaching methods, sheds light on our statement, the "artificial" nature of this formal activity. Although from our point of view, "artificial" does not conflict with necessary.

In order to synthesize why conceptualization is ascetic and unpleasant - and therefore contrary to life - here are its requirements: Having to choose and give up, while we want everything. Having to summon specific terms with a specific function, while this rigor seems formal, complicated, fussy, and while we prefer what is easy. Having to deal with abstractions that have no immediate empirical reality, while they appear useless and vain. Having to analyse our thinking and become

aware of it, while it is ascetic and frightening. One could object to our idea that conceptualization is a rupture with life by replying that what we have just described is simply intellectual work, that work is part of life, and that, while some people do not like to work, some do get something out of it. We would like to respond to this objection in two stages. First, we will deal with the work aspect, then follows the intellectual aspect.

## The work of thought

Among cultures and thinkers, there are different visions of work. We do not wish to engage in a broad study on the subject, but only provide some examples of how the opposition between "life" and "work" works. To begin with, we could mention the fact that the word "work" itself, in certain languages such as French or Spanish (*trabajo*), comes from the Latin word *tripalium*, which in Rome meant an instrument of torture, or an object to immobilize animals, whilst animals are precisely defined by their mobility. Unlike life, which is freedom of movement, work is linked to constraint and therefore to pain. *Negotium* is another Latin word that refers to work: it means the absence of rest, leisure, the absence of what is called in French "le temps de vivre" or "taking it easy"; the *negotium* (from which derived the word "negotiate"), is the negation of idleness, this privilege of the elite, this luxury of a society which can afford the superfluous, an elite that can take the time to take it easy. For this reason, Aristotle recommends not to give citizenship to the worker, since workers were unfit for judgment. In the same vein, Rousseau criticizes the agitation and torment inherent in the work, Pascal claims that we use this activity to avoid thinking about ourselves, Nietzsche considers that work is a form of mental policing used to control consciousness in order to stop the development of reason, desire, and independence. The concept of alienation is another charge against the idea of work, according to Marx and many others. The concept of "work" also has its fans. Arendt thinks that work provides pleasure and good health, Comte says it generates social cohesion, Voltaire writes that it protects us against three terrible scourges: boredom, vice and need. Let us note that the defence of work is not simply based on its practical utility, but also on the fact that it

contributes to existential development. Here we mention the authors who are "opposed" to our thesis to prove that, in no way, we take our ideas for absolute thoughts; they simply constitute working hypotheses.

One could also criticize the fact that we do not distinguish the various meanings of the term "work", or that we confuse them all, either as a social function, or as a way for making a living, as an activity, as a tool for production and survival etc. For example, we do not distinguish the pleasant and free activity of the thinker from the physical and painful activity of the builder, as they both work.

We will plead guilty on this account, because we do not want to oppose a "noble" intellectual work to a "vulgar" physical work, we find it interesting not to oppose these two conceptions, since they can easily be reversed, especially nowadays, even though this opposition may still be very true in many circumstances. Indeed, an intellectual can write a book for economic reasons and to maintain his status - for example the famous "publish or perish" of American academics - as a kind of necessity, while the mason can build a house for the sole pleasure to be building something. In the same way, we will not enter the debate about the nature of man as "homo faber" (fabricating man), who naturally tries to accomplish something in his life, against a lazy conception of man, this "sinner" who falls into the disgrace of laziness, this being who seeks as much as he can to escape his share of work for the good reason that work is simply the punishment to which we are condemned because of original sin. We only want to provide some indications to illustrate our vision of the existential resistance to work, to justify and give meaning to the thesis of the incompatibility between life and work, recalling that work is often performed under the constraint of need - "to earn one's living" - that it is an effort, and that very often, men would avoid it if they were asked to choose freely and without any constraint the course of their daily lives. This could explain why philosophy, a practice that involves quite a lot of work, in acquiring a certain amount of knowledge and skills, and in confronting oneself, without any kind of immediate necessity or easy reward - since it is not the most obvious way to earn a living or become rich - never filled any football stadiums. Of course, if philosophy is a simple discussion about life and happiness, the kind of pleasant exchange we would naturally have at the local coffee shop, then it would be a different matter. This is actually

the direction taken by some philosophers in order to make philosophy more popular, by producing a "nice" ready-to-think kit. But if philosophy is work, a struggle with oneself and others, in order to produce concepts or to exist, it will tend to be rejected by the majority as an obstacle to "good life".

Work often opposes life because it is an obligation, whereas life is above all a desire. Friedrich Schiller, a philosopher, poet and playwright, disliked the Kantian dualism between what he called "sensual instinct" or desire, and "formal instinct" or obligation, which he wanted to resolve through a third entity: "gaming instinct". He asserts that when the philosopher loses his listener because of the aridity of his speech, he can win him back through this "instinct of the game", because men like to play, and play with ideas for example. This, however, implies that emotions are educated by reason, that we learn to escape the "need" for the immediate, yet our desires resist such an effort. It is possible though, or how else could children, through their education, develop and grow? For the German humanist, in the "beautiful soul", duty and inclination no longer conflict with each other. Self-expression should not be linked to ordinary, primitive feelings, but can be related to more evolved emotions, especially to the love of beauty or truth. Human freedom is therefore expressed as an ability to go beyond animal instincts. But, of course, this implies real work, because such fulfilment does not come naturally. If this emotion can become natural, it is by an acquired nature, a human specificity also called knowledge, a "culture" which, in this sense, is always a work, as we see in the primal meaning of this word. To sum up, work, in its most widespread form, pertains to obligation rather than to free activity. Thus, the work of thought that philosophizing proposes is not everyone's first concern; it is too demanding, too painful, and its usefulness is too far away from the necessities and the immediacy of everyday life.

## Reason



Let us examine the "intellectual" problem of philosophy. To begin, we may remind the reader of the famous story of Thales and the maid, told by Plato. Apparently, Thales, who was a philosopher and astronomer, was looking at the stars, not watching his step, and so he fell into a well. A servant who was watching the scene started laughing out loud; how could such a weirdo, so busy with "the ethereal spheres", be able to ignore the reality that is close to him? The question which imposes itself on the philosophical mind, which according to the story is not of any concern to the servant, is whether the well, the hole in the earth, the immediate physical presence, is endowed with more reality than the distant heavens that Thales strived to contemplate. This story captures quite well the general vision of the philosopher, the perspective of the philosophical activity, although it is articulated around a kind of cliché. But after all, a cliché is a word that, originally, refers to the picture taken by a camera, showing in a fixed manner what is immediately visible; despite its reductive action, there is reality in the cliché. Thus the philosopher, by asserting that there is another reality rather than the immediate and obvious one, is concentrating on this hidden reality; and being obsessed by it he becomes haunted by its secret, and thus no longer perceives what is visible to "the other", the "non-philosopher". This brings us back to Plato and the Allegory of the Cave, where the hero, having arrived in "the other world", having initially been blinded by the "light of truth", after having gotten used to it and having seen it, is blinded again when he returns to the dark cave, and from then on can no longer participate in the common games, which for him no longer mean anything. His strange behaviour will first generate laughter among his fellow citizens, then rage which will lead them to kill him. Thus the intense activity of reason prompts us to concentrate on a reality that is not that of the common, but quite the contrary.

Another point of divergence appears between life and philosophy, whilst thinking of Thales and the maid: the question of the body. Indeed, it seems that the servant lives in her body, unlike the philosopher. We could think of him - and of many philosophers - as a pure spirit on legs, his body being only a vehicle for his head, just like in children's drawings wherein these men without bodies are called tadpoles by class teachers. The maid is made of flesh; Thales is almost an ectoplasm. Unlike her, he does not worry about what happens to his body, which is

why he falls. The immediacy of the senses has no real meaning, since in Thales, their activity is totally distended, his gaze perched in the sky, busy contemplating the stars, so much that his vision can no longer be distinguished from his mental activity. Whereas the servant seems to be endowed with what is called "strong good sense", some "common sense", this very empirical rationality, so closely linked to sensory perception. She trusts her eyes and mind - her immediate vision - for what they tell her, whereas the philosopher doubts, dissects and always tries to go beyond. She is alive, she exists, he is only a spirit. He embodies the classical intellectualist thesis: the body is a prison for the soul; a soul that continually tries to reach the unlimited, the unconditional, but which the body endlessly humiliates, reminding it of its finiteness. Thus the soul disdains this ridiculous piece of flesh called body. Life is dirty and impure. This is the reason why Lucifer can not understand why God does not prefer angels, those magnificent creatures of light, rather than those muddy and clumsy humans. Lucifer as "patron saint" of philosophers... Even when the philosopher cares about the body, it is never a concept. Besides the other body, often ignored or disdained by the philosopher is the social body. Like the physical and personal body, the social body is constraining, heavy, banal, coarse, messy, crude, immediate, and so on. What is common is bad. Opinion for example, too common, while what is good is "special", singular, extraordinary, like the action of reason for example.

A clear and established axiology. What is distant is beautiful, ugliness characterizes proximity. What is material is determined, what comes out of thinking is freedom. Once again, such an "intellectualizing" pattern can not pretend in any way to establish an absolute prism, but it works quite well as a general approximation, and this vision is useful to understand the human functioning, and the philosophical pattern, in its opposition to the banality of the regular. It is simply one of those classic dualisms that govern the existence of man. For example, it allows us to understand this highly recurring intellectualizing tendency, which incites us to believe no one but ourselves, this fundamental distrust against the opinion of others, this suspicion that invades the mind in different ways as soon as it boasts about thinking out of the box. This is quite contrary to the common mode, because it is too tiring and better to believe what is said to us.

Last but not least, the other way in which the intellect denies life is in its relation to feelings. Let us pick one, very common, which is often an excuse for not philosophizing: empathy. This is one of the reasons regularly called upon to prevent us from questioning others when we invite them to think. Empathy, as compassion, love, pity, etc., is one of those social sentiments that make us human, liveable, friendly. But the intellect, like any mental functioning, favouring its own activity, tends to ignore, diminish, deny, frustrate or suppress other types of activities that are not of the same nature. Indeed, to analyse and conceptualize, to require someone else to do the same, to demand that he seek and expose the truth, question himself, constitutes a troubling and painful command, contrary to social sentiments, which in principle is to facilitate as much as possible life for oneself and our neighbour, so as not to arouse any tense, disturbing or conflictual situations, so as to favour pleasantly living together. At this point, the fans of "the wholeness of the being", a thesis embodying another form of omnipotence rooted in the fashionable "New age" trend, or people indulging in psychologism, will say that intellect and feelings are quite complementary and combine very well. But from our own experience, we conclude that this is only a strategy of self-protection, a certain "misology", a fear of thinking, a fear of intellectual encounter. They advocate in fact a certain annihilation of reason, depriving it of the stripping power of its radicality. It seems to us that these "humanists" who claim to protect others from the harshness of thinking tend to project their own fears and prejudices on the persons - adults or children - with whom they are dealing, more than anything else expressing a lack of confidence towards their own intellectual identity. They express an apprehension of the "tragic" and hence a mistrust of anyone's intellectual identity; quite a common and human phenomenon. For them, feelings actually seem to be the fundamental principle of life, a common way of behaving, and philosophy takes on the appearance of a forced and artificial activity, endowed with a demanding, harsh and brutal connotation. We forget that philosophy, like all martial arts, can not prevent tripping, falling or bruising. This is probably how it teaches us to develop, by encouraging us to engage in a hand-to-hand combat with reality.

These specificities of the intellect can be grouped together in an existential concept that is dear to us: authenticity. Yet, despite its existential connotation, authenticity is a form of death. To be authentic means to radicalize the position, to dare to articulate it, to accomplish it without constantly checking over our shoulder, to get to the end without flinching, to bravely venture to overflow and excess; authenticity does not need to justify itself. This apparent absence of doubt offers a good reason for others to call it haughty and arrogant. This extreme singularisation is one of the main reasons for the ostracism that manifests itself against philosophers, a phenomenon which the latter easily abuses in order to glorify their position and their being. The cynics are an interesting example of this situation; they dare to express what they think, they dare to think what they think, without any consideration for customs, principles, morals and established opinions. They show irreverence for everything that is considered sacred by those around them and their fellow citizens, which naturally expose them to confrontation or isolation. They look rigid and dogmatic, when theoretically, in order to survive, one must rather be flexible and adapt to circumstances, to events and to the environment. We can therefore accuse them of sliding into pathological, suicidal behaviour, at least symbolically. Now, if they are accused of chopping down their interlocutors, we must not ignore that they act in the same way with themselves. Inevitably because of the endless state of war in which they are actually engaged, although this "war" is not their real purpose; this conflict simply arises from their inability to pretend or play social games. Similarly, because their own person is side-lined in favour of something more important, a certain transcendent concept, be it truth, nature or something else, a concept for which they are willing to sacrifice everything, including their own person. One of the reasons why these characters remain misunderstood and strange is that they will not utter the very concept that drives them, because, for the cynic, words are below truth; they are only lies and illusions. So they look like outlaws, infidels, incongruous and adamant characters who neither accept half-measures nor compromises, while showing an absurd, suspicious or even smelly radicality. It is true that when we observe the usual topics of conversation, what we call daily life, we realize that most exchanges consist of three main ingredients: small talks about weather or gossip, self-glorifying and self-justifying speeches, and various strategies for obtaining things from others. The authenticity

of the philosopher is in a total break with this conventional arrangement: small talk is boring, theoretically there is no need to boast or to justify, and a priori dialogues should only deal with fundamental concerns rather than exchanges of friendly services. Otherwise, it is best to remain silent or to silence the interlocutor, a violent position if any.

The Allegory of the cave captures two frequent and distinct attitudes that the man in the street adopts towards the philosopher: laughter and anger. Laughter because he acts in a strange way, like the maid of Thales, and anger induced by some suspicion - or certainty - that he knows something that others do not. Let us also mention envy, jealousy. This description refers to the philosopher defined as another person, but what about the philosopher inside oneself? What relationship do we have with him? Let us examine how this inner philosopher, this demon as Socrates calls him, prevents us from living. We can answer this question indirectly by arguing that, in the course of the educational process, parents generally do not encourage the kind of concern that we would call philosophical: they rarely cherish such hopes for their children. There is a simple reason for this prevention: a child with this type of behaviour will be perceived as afflicted with a kind of handicap; he would be awkward, distracted, not practically minded, embarrassing, boring, and so on. In other words, he would not seem to be preparing for the struggle of life, a common vision of existence, although it is not openly acknowledged. One has to adapt, one has to be practical, one has to scream with the wolves, we live in a culture of results. Especially nowadays, at a time when economic competition is raging, where studies are undertaken primarily because they will provide us with a decent job, that is to say, one that is profitable. Engaging in philosophical concerns does not seem to provide the most adequate preparation for life. It seems like it is at best a luxury, at worst a threat. We observe this frequently in our work with children, through various objections to philosophical practice, the most important being that learning to think takes time and there are more pressing matters to deal with. Similarly, we could add a second objection, just as important: the fear that the child is destabilized or disturbed by this kind of exercise. His life as a child would be inhibited by the practice of thinking, which could only cause anxiety,

doubt and shake his being. Some adults consider that life is hard enough, without having to think of painful things: "Let the child be a child," they exclaim. And the adult too, by the same token... So, in addition to the real difficulties in the act of thinking, as we have already examined, there is a suspicion that certain types of thought likely to arise would be threatening or destructive. Which is very likely. A path that takes us to the next contradiction between life and philosophy: the question of problematization.

## Thinking the unthinkable

One of the important skills of philosophy is the ability to problematize. Through questions and objections, one is supposed to critically examine given ideas or theses, in order to escape the trap of the obvious. This "obviousness" is constituted by a set of knowledge and beliefs that philosophers call "opinions". Unreasoned ideas, established simply by habit, rumour or tradition. So, by engaging in the philosophical process, one must examine the limits and falsity of any given opinion and consider other paths of thought, which, at first glance, for common thought, seems odd, absurd or even dangerous. One must suspend one's judgment, as Descartes invites us to do, and not rely on the usual emotions and convictions. Furthermore, by his "Method", he asks us to undergo a certain mental process which, according to him, guarantees to obtain a sort of more reliable knowledge, which he also calls "obviousness", in opposition to an "established" opinion, whether it be mundane or scholar. In order to be reliable, this "obviousness" must be able to withstand doubt - and this can only occur when haste and prejudice is prevented - and the thought must become clear and distinct. With the dialectical method, whether in Plato, Hegel, etc., the work of criticism or negativity goes further, since it is essential to be able to think the opposite of a proposition in order to understand and evaluate it. To think about an idea, it is necessary to go beyond this idea, so any possibility of "obviousness" naturally tends to disappear. But to implement such cognitive procedures, one must be in a certain mental state, adopt a specific attitude, composed of distance and critical perspective. This process is very demanding; it encounters many obstacles. Sincerity is one of the common obsta-

cles to this attitude, as well as good conscience and subjectivity that must give up their tenacious hold on the mind. More radically, the moral principles, the cognitive postulates and the psychological needs that guide us in life must be set aside, be subjected to harsh criticism, and even be rejected, which does not happen naturally since it generates pain and anxiety, a work that requires strong skills for self-distance. To split - as Hegel suggests - as a condition for true thinking, as a condition of consciousness. And in order to accomplish such a change of attitude, one must actually "die to oneself", "let go", one must give up even momentarily what is dearest to him, whether it be ideas and deep emotions. "Biologically, I can not do it! A Spanish teacher once answered when I asked him to problematize his position on a certain subject. Obviously, she had perceived the problem rather well, without really being aware of the intellectual consequences of her resistance or refusal. Our life, our being, seem based on certain established principles that we consider non-negotiable. So, if thinking involves problematizing, if the work of negativity represents an indispensable condition for a decent reflection, then it is a matter of dying in order to think. By observing how the people involved in a discussion get heated when contradicted, how they use extreme positions and strategies to defend their ideas, including the most egregious bad faith, we can conclude, indeed, that to give up one's own ideas is a kind of "little death".

One may wonder why we rigidly refuse to abandon "our" idea even for a moment, why we resist so much an exercise of problematization, even when it is short, something that we often meet when we make such a request. This is certainly the case for adults, it seems less of a problem for children, because they are much less aware of the implications and consequences of considering any counter-proposal, even through the artifice of a mere exercise. A clue we have on this subject is provided by Heidegger, who states that "language is the house of the being." For him, to speak is to make something appear in his very being, so we could extrapolate that speech engenders existence. For man, precisely a being of language, this observation is rather obvious, although this perspective is often rejected, as shown for example by the common objection: "These are only words". Without stories, without myths, without narratives, without dialogues, what would we be? Certainly not human beings! Everything we say about ourselves, whether in

the form of narrative - mythos - or in the form of ideas and explanations - logos - is indispensable and precious to us. To show the importance of speech, we only have to observe how much we feel threatened when our speech is ignored or contradicted; we suddenly pretend to be very concerned about the truth! In fact, our real concern is with our own image, with this person that we have laboriously and carefully built, an individuality eager to master his own definition, a singular being with great ambitions, for he pretends, without admitting it, to possess knowledge, experience, reason, in short to be a person of value ...

Our image is an idol to which we are willing to sacrifice everything; no gift is too generous for it. Thus, when philosophy or a specific philosopher invites us to examine the facticity, absurdity, or vanity of our own thoughts, our whole being reacts violently, instinctively, without even having to think about it, as pure reaction of survival. The Spinozian *conatus*, our desire to persevere in existence, exceeds our thirst for truth; our specific desire to be - existence - is ready to deny any form of otherness that would seem to be a threat to it, including reason itself. The person, this empirically constructed individual, feels threatened in its very existence by the transcendent being, which is faceless and with no identity. It is the opposition that Carl Jung poses between the "persona", this being of appearance, rather functional, and "the anima", the individual in the deep sense of the term, transcendental, able to distance itself and criticize the empirical being. To problematize our innermost thoughts, our fundamental principles, to temporarily give up or to freely examine the assumptions that we have often stated, that we have defended with great ardour, sometimes for many years, becomes an intolerable position. Our ideas are ourselves, we are our ideas. Should not such a *modus vivendi* be perceived as a form of pathological obstinacy? However, let us admit it, how could we situate ourselves in society and act within it if we did not feel such an attachment? How could we invest in a project of life, if we did not submit to some fundamental principles? How would we exist, without some normative ideals guiding our lives, although we remain far from achieving them? If man is a being of thought, he is a being of ideas, therefore a being of rigidity and prejudices. Although ideas are tools for thought, too often the means are taken for the end, and as a result ideas become an obstacle to thinking. To problematize means to attempt to re-establish



the primacy of thought over ideas, a task that is not easy to accomplish, since the empirical individual finds it hard to yield to transcendent being. Abandoning specific ideas, our specific ideas, is a form of death: thinking is in this sense comparable to dying.

## What to do?

In some cultures, the philosopher is given a real status: he is admired for his knowledge, for his wisdom, for his depth, because he seems to have access to a reality that is denied to ordinary mortals. In other cultural environments, on the contrary, he is perceived as a useless, suspicious, clumsy or even perverse being. To return to Thales and the maid, some societies give more prominence to the celestial perspective, others give their credit to a more down-to-earth vision. The second case manifests itself in different forms. First possibility, philosophy remains relatively absent from the cultural matrix, it is reduced to the strict minimum in terms of importance in the collective psyche. Second possibility, philosophy is perceived as an enemy, since it undermines the postulates and principles guiding this society, introducing doubt and critical thinking. Third possibility, philosophy adapts to the cultural matrix, anchors itself in the material preoccupation, in order to inhibit the momentum of the thought in its escape towards a more ethereal reality. These three aspects can easily be combined, the Anglo-American culture being a good example of this anchoring. Whether in the United States or in England, philosophy represents a rather weak cultural component. It is often seen as a threat to established political, economic and religious assumptions. The specific philosophical tradition of these countries tends to be confined to empirical and material reality, as we observe historically in currents such as empiricism, utilitarianism and pragmatism.

This third aspect, this specific form of the philosophizing, is therefore not accidental: it is a problem of axiology. What are the values of a given society? What is the hierarchy of values around which this society is organized? Let us recall the famous painting of Raphael: the school of Athens, which shows Plato stretching out

his hand to the sky and Aristotle showing the earth, while various philosophers seem interested in different problems. The history of philosophy is nothing less than a series of affirmations and refutations, accompanied by some epistemological considerations about the methods and procedures used to establish these points. Consequently, the criticism of philosophy or its rejection still operates within the framework of philosophy, because it is still a criticism or a rejection of a specific and particular form of philosophy, a criticism or rejection that also takes a particular philosophical form. Philosophy produces its own criticism and works around its own criticism. This is the reason why philosophy may claim to be the very form of antiphilosophy; whether this antiphilosophy is of a religious, scientific, psychological, political, traditional, literary or other nature, it remains philosophical. We are therefore forced to postulate, as subjectively as it may be, that man can hardly escape philosophy, just as he can not escape faith or art. The only parameters that change are the values adopted, the methods employed, the attitudes maintained and the degree of consciousness. Man creates his own reality, and this production of reality has philosophical content, even if the philosophical dimension is denied or hidden. The meaning of man's achievements may change, his desire to determine reality may change, his relation to reality may vary, the relative importance given to "meaning" may oppose to the importance given to "factual" observations, to the extent that the intention, subjective, is opposed to the fact, raw. But whatever we do, we can not escape the act of meaning, because man is a reasonable animal and he can not escape reason, a reason that is producing and expressing meaning. This means that man naturally interprets, judges, evaluates, subjectively decides what degree of reality and what nature he gives to reality; he sets the standard for what constitutes the truth. We can also declare that reality and truth are nothing but concepts, mere human constructions or inventions. Even when man decrees that reality escapes him completely, because it is materially determined, objectively defined or given by God, he makes a commitment, he engages in a definite set of values.

In other words, the maid, a practical woman, is as a valid interlocutor - in a sense, she is equally a philosopher - as Thales, although she looks a lot like our next-door neighbour. This brings us back to the question of "vulgar" philosophy

and "elitist" philosophy. Philosophy is an attempt to "deviate", to take a step beyond, but these spatial transformations are meaningless without the "below", because the "out there" is nothing without the "here and now ". The character of Thales makes sense in his relation to his maid, he needs her; strangely enough she is his "alter ego"; she is another "self"! Even if we find this idea of another "self" absurd, especially since they are so opposed. Without the dialogue and tension between these two positions, Thales loses interest, the girl becomes uninteresting. Let us establish a parallel between this tension and the Allegory of the cave. Why, in this myth of Plato, does the philosopher return inside after his successful escape? He is coming back to die. He can not stay out, contemplating the pure light, although he exclaimed at first that he would rather be the slave of a poor farmer in this bright world rather than return to darkness. But Plato can not prevent the return, he can not not propose to bring this man back into the cave, as if fatality compelled him to this forced "dialogue", this confrontation, this death. There is no philosophy without "agôn", says Nietzsche. Agôn is, in Greek tragedy, the moment of confrontation, of drama, of tension. This moment is ambiguously and paradoxically both destructive and constructive. Thought is a dialogue with oneself, writes Plato, and there can be no dialogue if there is no distance and opposition: without deviation, interval, dissonance or disagreement, there is no confrontation.

Our thesis is that, in saying that there are more important or more pressing things to do than philosophy, we are already in philosophical discussion. Even forgetting that philosophy exists, we are already in the philosophical domain. The role of the philosopher, like that of the artist, is to point out, to show, to put the focus on. Foucault wrote while the scientist makes the invisible visible, the philosopher makes the visible visible. Once someone has seen, he can accept having seen, he can deny having seen, he can forget having seen, but whatever he says or does, his eyes are no longer the same, the world is no longer the same; we can no longer claim to "return" to any virginity. Philosophy fires all wood. In dialogue, the philosopher always "wins" only because he engages in dialogue with others. It does not win in the manner of the rhetorician: do not confuse philosophy and eristics, because in the latter it is about prevailing in a debate, persuading and even convin-

cing. In dialogue, the philosopher "wins" in two ways: by getting the other to see something and by seeing for himself what the other sees. This is why dialogue is so crucial for philosophy. This is why Socrates so resolutely and implacably pursued his fellow-men in the streets of Athens, and did not consider a more fundamental interest in life than to examine the minds of his fellow-creatures by searching their souls. It was in this unique place, the soul of others, that he found the truth. How is it possible? Was he surrounded exclusively by prophets and wise men? Obviously not, if we read the dialogues where Socrates generally seems much more "intelligent" than his interlocutors. Our proposition is that Socrates found the truth in these people because they gave him the opportunity to give up his own thought, by penetrating theirs, they allowed him to die to himself, to give up his own being by penetrating theirs. By venturing into these foreign and strange souls, he could confront himself in a kind of asceticism: just as the wrestler or the warrior needs an adversary to challenge himself, to surpass himself, to become himself, to die to oneself.

If we examine the history of philosophy, we will face another reading of this case. At its origin, philosophy covered the knowledge of everything that concerned us, it treated all the fields of "abstract" knowledge: natural sciences, religion, mathematics, wisdom, ethics and even technology. There was an important connotation of omnipotence, both in terms of theory and practical knowledge. Let us remember Hippias the sophist announcing to Socrates that everything he wore, he had fabricated himself. Or Calicles, who explains that through his art of rhetoric, the strong can always supplant the weak, or Gorgias, who claims to be able to convince anyone of anything. Quite naturally, there are no limits to intellectual pretensions; "the hybris" reigns; excess characterizes the speaker. Truth does not always have a true status, neither does reason, or any other regulative and limiting principle; only the law of the jungle - or of the need - finds some benefits there. The unique reality of speech is the subject and its desire. Obviously, the scholar will criticize such words, arguing that philosophy is born from the rejection of such conceptions, that it is actually the search for truth and good; he will accuse us of deliberately mistaking the philosopher with the sophist. We will answer in the first place that sophistry is a specific school of philosophy, where Socrates gained his expe-

rience, and that the operating mode of the sophists, as described by Plato, is quite similar to our modern intellectuals, in a rawer, less sophisticated way. For example, the relativistic and amoralist - or immoralist - attitudes proclaimed by this school of thought make it the precursor of many contemporary ways of thinking. The sophist's pretence to omnipotence, which later took other forms, remained a typical feature of the philosopher, characterized by an oversized ego, which in his time Socrates was trying to confront through dialogue, using reason. In denouncing these sophists as not being philosophers, from our point of view, Plato was right in essence, but he was mistaken on the formal level. He knew it undoubtedly, since he recognized the proximity of these two "species", as indicated in his famous analogy of the dialogue on the sophists, where he states that the philosopher compares himself to the sophist as the dog does to the wolf, or the wolf to the dog.

In the course of History, philosophy has "lost" many fields of knowledge, in the natural sciences - physics, astronomy, biology, etc. - as well as in the sciences of the mind - psychology, sociology, political science, linguistics, grammar, logic, etc. Let us note that as soon as a particular field wanted to express its knowledge in a more certain way, it abandoned the philosophical denomination and established itself as what is now called a science, a constituted knowledge, endowed with an "irrefutable" objective obviousness, based on facts and numbers, and if possible using observation and experimentation. Philosophy can only claim what Kant calls the "problematic" mode: what is possible, not what is necessary. Nevertheless, philosophers, like their sophists ancestors, do not want to abandon certainties. These famous certainties which they hold on to and which they never tire of expressing, are of three kinds: those pertaining to the world vision, with their political, social, spiritual or other content, those about the historical knowledge, more academic, about ideas, schools and authors, and those about the way of thinking, that is, method and epistemology. Even Post-modernism, with its rejection of any kind of universality or transcendence, has simply managed to create a "new" type of certainty: the all-powerful figure of subjectivity, again very close to that of the sophists.

Through all this, let us try to justify how and why the principle of "agôn" is substantial with the philosophical activity, as seen in the concept derived from "agony", this painful, slow and endless death. Even though many "moments" of philosophical history have purported to provide some kind of definite answer to the eternal debate about man and the world, or about the method, there always arises a "new" objection, ready to "kill" this "definite" thesis. Hegel coined the concept of "moment" to account for the contradictory thought process that is both in the historical and our personal chronology, trying to show us how each "moment", following and refuting the previous one, is an indispensable step to reach a certain "absolute", a regulating ideal that he had obviously been able to discern. We can be surprised by his determination for the absolute, he who had criticized Schelling under the accusation of "inviting himself too quickly to the table of the divine", but this attempt is probably part of the process, the extension of thought to infinity by being a driving element. The same is true of Marx's criticism of Hegel and his followers about this hyper-idealistic dialectic: it is a reaction that is simply legitimate and necessary. The other reaction opposed to such an absolutist vision was that of American pragmatism. And if these two schools of thought have significantly influenced the future of humanity, intellectually, culturally, politically, etc. the latter is still dominant today. But if we wished to retain one criterion that is common to the two opposed avatars of "traditional" philosophy, we would choose their support of "common" reason, a reason which belongs to an immanent or collective process and not to a transcendent power. Once again, the philosopher must die: he can not claim to proceed from a power "fallen from heaven" or from the "Holy Spirit", he must answer a certain capacity that belongs to everyone, as Descartes stated it in writing that "reason is the most widely shared thing in the world". He is deprived of intimacy, since his prerogatives are shared by all. This current anti-elitism is probably, when confronted with it, one of the most humiliating and cruel historical experiences for the philosopher. And, for the same reason, probably one of the most fundamental philosophical experiences; to lose one's knowledge and the power that comes with it, to unlearn, as Socrates called it. Nietzsche's "to philosophize with a hammer" may have different meanings. This could be called: "The triumph of the maid." The servant of Thrace. Or the maid, that humble lamp that faintly illuminates the stage of the theatre when all the lan-

terns are extinguished, a light which is often invisible, which apparently is useless. But let us recall, as Hegel wrote, that "the owl of Minerva does not take flight until night falls".

## To be nobody

Ulysses is a real hero for Socrates - probably his favourite - a thesis which he defends in the dialogue of Plato Minor Hippias. The main reason for his apology is that the nickname of Ulysses is "Nobody". "I am Nobody", as he says about himself to the Cyclops Polyphemus. A complex and polymorphic character, as we see in his Odyssey, he is always somewhere and nowhere, he deals with men and with the gods, who fight among themselves above him, he is ingenious yet at the mercy of powerful forces, he is both a leader and a lonely man, he always longs to be what he is not, he is fleeting, even for himself, his life is constantly on the razor's edge. It seems to be the Mediterranean version of the Taoist vision of existence, which we can summarize as follows: whoever is most concerned about his life and is too attached to it, does not live, because this concern undermines his *joie de vivre*, but also because this concern will inhibit and corrupt his vitality, which is the true source of life. The idea that life - an endless procession of small concerns, tensions, and rigidities about "small things" - is an obstacle to vitality, offers the existential equivalent to the assertion that ideas are an obstacle to thinking. Vitality does not chain up to life; thinking does not bond with ideas. We find another echo to this principle in the figure of Christ, son of man, son of no one and of each, born to die, not having even a stone to put his head on, as he announces to the man who wishes to follow him.

Thus, the essence of philosophy is dynamic, tragic and paradoxical. Whether in the passionate Western tone or in the detached oriental version, the challenge faced by man through his life and philosophy, must be to let go without giving up. But life, as we know it, fosters a certain aversion to letting go, it promotes a tense posture for which the only alternative is to abandon everything. So life often comes down to a series of chronic bipolar cycles, which happily or unfortunately end

with death, the ultimate manic or depressive state, according to moods and circumstances.

The basic philosophical practice is a practice of alterity, the practice of a "beyond", which can only be experienced from the point of view of a "below". The gap, the abyss, the fracture of the being, the tension between the finite and the infinite, between reality and desire, between affirmation and negation, between will and acceptance, are all forms of this very practice. Even the beautiful, this perception of radical unity or harmony, is inscribed in the pain of the sublime. One could summarize the philosophizing by the eternal interaction between the singularity, the totality and the transcendence. And one could describe what leads man to think and explore just as much as he could show how he tries to obscure and deny what he is looking for. Strangely enough, the history of philosophy consists of a superposition of visions and systems in which the philosophers in fashion claim to accomplish, explain, or reject the theses of their predecessors. All the texts of the European philosophical tradition are mere annotations to Plato's text, according to the English philosopher Whitehead. And if we analyse Plato's work, it captures already the paradox of philosophy. The initial purpose of this philosopher's work is to be a tribute to the story of a man who interrogated more than he stated, a man who apparently never wrote a line. But, first "betrayal", Plato shamelessly asserted, he founded a theory and methodology on the work of this man, or inspired by him, and he wrote a lot. Immediately after, comes another disciple of this tradition, second "betrayal", Aristotle, who, in our opinion, set up the framework of the future Western philosophy, a kind of reasoned encyclopaedia of knowledge, including the whole of knowledge: natural sciences, political sciences, psychology, ethics, etc. Something solid and reliable, a repeated "betrayal" ... But like Socrates, we think that philosophy can not be read or written, because such an activity is realized with mere objects - books - while philosophy has for main purpose to approach the human soul, to treat the soul and not to treat of the soul. So why do you write books, if you are against books, someone has judiciously objected to us in the past? What to answer? But how could you unlearn if you have not learned? How could you burn books if you have not written



them? How could you die if you have not lived? And with the dialectical inversion that is so common to philosophy, then ask: How could you learn if you have not unlearned? How could you write books if you have not burned them? How could you live if you have not died?

The only problem with philosophers, as with all human beings, is that they confuse or reverse means and ends. The reason is very simple, the means are closer to us than the ends. To be a teacher, to have knowledge, to write books, to have a title, to have ideas, to be famous or important, to be brilliant, to be respected, to be recognized, are many possible consequences to the philosophizing, are many motivations to the philosophizing, but are also many obstacles to the philosophizing. Because philosophers, like all men, want to exist as philosophers. This is probably what motivates Socrates to quote Euripides in his discussion with Gorgias the sophist, when he says: "Who knows if to live is not to die, and if on the other hand to die is not to live? ".

That to philosophize is to die to the world, is a rather common idea. That to philosophize is to die to oneself, is yet rarer and strange. But if, in addition, we declare that philosophy implies the death of philosophy, we fall into the absurd, where few people will want to follow us. But we think that philosophy is precisely there, where it dies. This is probably the best definition we could give to philosophy as a practice, although that does not mean much.

Some philosophers criticize the concept of philosophical practice, and they are right when they say that philosophy is in any case nothing more than a practice. However multiple and contradictory the forms of this practice may be. But the truth of this criticism is that academic philosophers reject philosophical practice because it defies the individual and questions the person, with such little respect for it.

But let us leave this at the stage of momentary conclusion, and propose the idea that the essence of philosophical practice is to invite oneself to think what is not thought of, to think what is denied to thought, whatever we think. An unbearable regulating ideal, and therefore philosophical.





# IS GOOD SENSE COMMON?

Common reason, or common sense, is a concept that is not very flattering, especially among people who pride themselves with intellectualism, originality or specificity. When summoned, common sense seems obsolete, banal, reductive or devoid of legitimacy. It is however very useful in philosophical practice. Mainly because it requires mutual understanding; there is no room in discussion for meaning that is not shared. It is possible to disagree with some opinions and yet be able to discuss them, this difference constituting the lively substance of discussion. This is why meaning, as a common reference, must be shared, otherwise discussion would be nonexistent or absurd.

## The paradox of common sense

Voltaire raised a paradox about common sense. He noticed that to say of a man: "He does not have common sense is an insult, since he is therefore accused of madness," but at the same time, to say of a man that he has common sense " is an insult too; it means that he is not quite stupid, and that he lacks what is called spirit". He concluded about common sense that: "It only means common sense, gross reason, reason started, first notion of ordinary things, middle ground between stupidity and wit". Common sense would be a mere safeguard, the testing of a particular subjectivity, but it would lack the flash of genius, the audacity that characterizes singularity, or singular thought. Nevertheless, since human beings

more often say banalities or absurdities than brilliant words, to start with those who profess intellectualism, perhaps common sense could play a positive role as censor or regulator on the aberrations of thought, rather than a negative role that rejects originality or restricts innovation. In our practice, it seems to us that this is so, although we also admit that the established patterns, those of morality or other norms strongly anchored socially, frequently prevent people from daring to articulate aloud what that they think, and therefore daring to think what they think. For common sense is also normative, dogmatic, rejection of otherness. Whether it be rejection of the reality of the world which suddenly strikes us in its tragic dimension and which we refuse to see. The refusal of the one that thinks differently, in others or within ourselves, whom we dare not hear or reject brutally. The rejection of our very being, which challenges us in its transcendence because it suffers from the contradictions or aberrations that we maintain without daring to name them or even to look at them.

In ancient times, common sense referred to the unity of perceptions, to sensitivity. For Aristotle, it was a kind of sixth sense which was the unity of the other five, a synthesis operation of different perceptions. In animals, it is in a way the unity of being. The concept of common sensitivity was what is perceptible by several senses, for example, size, number, form, and so on. The intellectualization shift was then easy, and common sense slowly took a sense of reason, especially practical, and through this an ethical connotation. Common sense guides our actions, like prudence, because Aristotle understands this quality as an immediate practical intuition, some inspiration that guides our actions without even having to think. Bergson, great thinker of action, resumed the same idea: "Action and thought seem to me to have a common source, which is neither pure will nor pure intelligence, and this source is common sense. Is not common sense, in fact, what gives action its reasonableness, and to thought its practical character? ". For it is true that common sense is more of a practical, day to day intelligence. It is more of a common concern than an abstract and metaphysical speculation, although nothing prevents the common sense from venturing into these ethereal regions, especially in the form of logic and its abstract and formal formulations. This is about

an "economic" knowledge, taken in a non-critical sense, since it is not examined, and seems rather natural or innate. The idea of obviousness or intuition that we find in Descartes, a sort of grounding for thought, an internal perception on which we stumble and in which we can trust, would be of the same order. Common sense is nevertheless capable of criticism, this is its usefulness as a counterweight to the excesses of subjectivity or intellectualism. Like caution, it allows bordering, while admitting that this action of limitation is not in itself a self-sufficient activity, but a dependent one. Caution alone does not produce anything, it warns, it restricts, it slows down, even immobilizes, it only plays its role in case of overflow and excess. In this sense, through universal logic and accepted norms, common sense acts like morality and is used to regulate our actions and our thoughts, according to the good and the bad, the effective and the inefficient, the possible and the impossible, the useful and the useless, the true and the false, or any other transcendental concept of which it is hardly ever conscious. It is probably trying to avoid, as Goya puts it, that "The sleep of reason breeds monsters". Whether reason, according to a rationalist schema, comes from a kind of inner light that makes us know the ideas a priori, or whether, according to an empiricist schema, it comes from experience and information that are printed a posteriori on a "clean slate", starting from sensation, habit, belief or associations of ideas, its principle is that every man has access to it. And this community of reason is our humanity, our common nature. The problem remains to decide whether or not we will listen to common reason, and we will probably have to conclude that there are moments for common sense and moments for ruptures. The remaining problem is knowing how to legitimately decide when the rupture is necessary and when respect is required. Thus dialectics, through its movement, its three moments, "affirmation," "negation," and "negation of the negation," offers us a way that allows a dynamic relationship between assumption, criticism, and surpassing common sense.

In any case, common sense should always be awake and not accept to disappear in the name of intellectualism, instinct of contradiction, or alleged originality. Certainly, there are moments for the prophetic word, the word that silences the

reason and opposes common sense, but let us beware, as Hegel advised, of inviting ourselves too quickly to the table of the divine.

Kant also distinguishes the two opposite values of common sense, meaning either "common understanding", "good sense", good judgment, or "vulgar meaning", which is primary, uneducated, and which refers to the best as much as to the worst. He considers that the most general principles of understanding are identical in scientific and non-scientific domains, and this is how they are common. Nevertheless, he distinguishes this common understanding that is based on logical principles of a speculative more abstract understanding. An understanding that knows how to think about the rules, that can think them abstractly, out of their immediate concrete application. Common sense applies the rules while speculative understanding thinks about them and abstracts them. An ability that is not given to all. Moreover, some people have a practical mind, others more a speculative mind. But common understanding as well as speculative understanding both come under the ability of judging, i.e. to relate particular representations and general representations, in order to subsume the former under the latter.

But the speculative mind also has common sense, common maxims, cognitive and not moral maxims, showing the operating modalities on a content, rather than the rules. He recognizes three of them: thinking for oneself, thinking in the place of others (hence the importance of antinomies that show oppositions of paradigms) and thinking in agreement with oneself. Maxim of enlightened or free thinking, maxim of enlarged thinking, maxim of consequent thinking. Not to be under the constraint of external authority, prejudice or superstition. Not to shut oneself away under the pretext of independence, logical or speculative selfishness; avoiding thinking in opposition to others by avoiding to develop a systematically paradoxical thought; not to fall into the confusion of a sparse thought, deprived of structure. This triptych constitutes the maxims of theoretical common sense, a kind of second level for common sense, in opposition to concrete common sense. The latter is interested in materials to which the rules apply, the former is interested in the rules themselves. It is always about universality of reason. "We must understand the idea of a sense common to all, that is to say, a faculty of judging that

takes into account every man's mode of representation in order to relate, so to speak, his judgment to full human reason and to escape the illusion resulting from subjective and particular conditions that can easily be regarded as objective. This illusion would exert a detrimental influence on judgment. "

Thus Kant distinguishes determining judgment, for which rules are known a priori and which applies them, and reflective judgment, which considers the singular in order to establish general rules, and which implies that the universal is targeted or sought, not given. The second seems to be unsuitable for common sense, for lack of rules. Yet reflective speculative judgment must also respect common sense, as the ideal norm, so that the judgments it states belong to the entire human community, including in aesthetic fields. This is possible by comparing our judgment with possible judgments of others, by placing oneself rationally, ideally or fictitiously in the place of all other minds. Kant criticizes the mental alienation of the singular mind, the solipsist who loses sense, cut off from humanity. It may be impossible to coincide with others in terms of content, even if the concrete particularity remains irreducibly different, but we can agree through analogy: when reflection is about relationship between terms, about conceptual and thinking links that make sense. Thus we can have different visions of a phenomenon, but we may agree on the causality, the nature or the coherence of these various visions, that is to say on their understanding, based on rationality and common sense.

Hegel echoes this somewhat when he writes: "The mind is a self which is an us and an us which is a self.", or "The nature of humanity is to strive for agreement with others, and its existence is accomplished in the realized community of consciousness. The inhuman, the bestial, consists in sticking with feelings and in expressing oneself only through them. "

## Disagreement and misunderstanding

In fact, it is impossible for anyone to give a given subject the exact same meaning as his neighbor, as we notice when we ask people to explain what they understood about some content. We always come across differences of analysis or in-

terpretation, sometimes major, or just subtle and insubstantial nuances. But for there to be discussion, there must be a minimum agreement of meaning, even if it is not explicit, just as there must necessarily be a difference. Otherwise, in both cases, discussion unravels, stops, and becomes impossible. Momentary misunderstanding certainly feeds the discussion, insofar as this misunderstanding is conscious, which again means that the meaning is shared, even if it is the meaning of some nonsense, the perception of an absurdity. It is also on this shift that word games, irony, metaphors, all that we call “offbeat”, operate indirectly by absence or rupture.

In any case, understanding is only approximate, because it is impossible for most of us, if not for all, to precisely define each of the terms we use. And from one moment to the next, if we take the trouble, each of us will discover certain surreptitious and unanticipated shifts of meaning, certain flagrant or discrete contradictions in the ideas we put forward or hear. This brings us to the floating nature of understanding: it operates "for all intents and purposes", roughly, and not in extreme precision. This approximate dimension is valid for our own words, or especially for them, since we believe we are free to modify the meaning as we please. We will less naturally scratch, add or transform in any way the words of others, because being "other", it involves in fact a certain dimension of objectivity and irreducibility, thus imposing greater respect and integrity. Just because it does not belong to us, we take it better in consideration. On the other hand, because of the feeling of "ownership", we take liberally many liberties with our own speech, in good conscience. We act lightly with ourselves, under the pretext of "what I meant", supposed to justify a priori or a posteriori all incongruous shifts, obvious betrayals, unwanted reversals and possible and impossible non-sense. For this reason, by habit or lack of attention, or bad faith, we contradict ourselves, sometimes in a subtle way, often without shame or conscience. Because of this very customary behavior, this easy complacency, we assert that the only difference between people is not between those who contradict themselves and those who do not contradict themselves, but between those who contradict themselves and know it, and those who contradict themselves and do not know it. Self-contradiction is inevitable. Our freedom lies solely in the consciousness of this aberrant phenomenon.



This assertion will, no doubt, be considered upsetting when addressed to one of our congeners, who generally receives this accusation of inconsistency as an insult.

In most discussions, we encounter a major problem, which shows the lack of awareness that people have on these issues. For example, the usual lack of a clear distinction between "not understanding" and "not agreeing". These two expressions are often used in an undifferentiated way; we use one for the other. For example, they say they do not understand to express disagreement. Or the opposite. But how can we disagree with an idea that we do not understand? The same question can be asked about agreement and misunderstanding, but the problem is more visible and occurs less often, at least theoretically. Because in reality, people declare that they agree when they do not understand, by sympathy or inertia, as shamelessly as they say they disagree when they do not understand.

The most flagrant and common example of this aberration lies in debates where what is supposed to be a disagreement between two parties is in fact a simple switch of topic. For example – this is educational over-simplification -, one person claims that the table is square, while the other disagrees by saying that it is wooden, and both continue to argue without realizing that they are not speaking of the same thing. One deals with form while the other deals with matter, pretending to discuss one same thing since they both talk about the table. Of course, the problem remains here quite visible but in reality it can be much more subtle or confusing. At the same time, the deeper debate may lie in whether to discuss the form of the table or its matter, in which case the issues of a discussion should be clarified rather than maintained in a debate that is false because offbeat, reductive and partial.

Understanding must condition both agreement and disagreement; to adhere or to reject can not do without understanding. But the common ways of expressing themselves, here reflecting the absence of thinking implied by their ready-made nature, show the problem well. How can we say that we do not understand something, or that something is nonsense, when in reality we simply disagree? Common aberration. How can we claim a disagreement when we simply propose an al-

ternative? The famous "it is also" does not constitute an objection and yet claims to be one. These modalities of expression refer to ways of being, to cowardly habits of thinking, rather than deliberation. One rushes rather than thinks. One reacts, or one bounces, to use fashionable expressions. The necessary distance of conscience and meta-reflection is missing, prohibiting the critical gap required to the philosophizing. Thus, the particular and the general, the subjective and the objective, the conditional and the categorical, the form and the matter, are not distinguished. We get confused cheerfully. We unknowingly intuit a particular table, saturated with predicates that we hardly perceive. We apprehend the object from various presuppositions, through many false evidences, without being aware of the multiple antinomies that structure, tend and determine our thinking.

Now, it is not always easy to determine whether we think that the person is saying something absurd or whether we disagree. For example, if my neighbor declares that the earth is flat, should I say that it does not make sense, or that I do not agree? As such, his proposal is clear, and I must say that it makes sense. According to the established scientific criteria, I can say that it does not make sense. We can consider that the two comments are acceptable, the only difference lying in the presuppositions they imply and which we have to become aware of. For example, by determining whether the criteria are philosophical or scientific. We will distinguish these criteria by advancing the principle that latitude of interpretation is broader in philosophy than in scientific terms, since philosophy prides itself on problematizing, or since it is more interested in internal coherence of the subject rather than its objective validity. Whereas sciences are very often, but not exclusively, concerned with the veracity of facts. We can defend the idea that a science worthy of the name would be an epistemology, concerned with processes and methods, more than with results.

To conclude on this problem of confusion between disagreement and incomprehension or absurdity, let us dwell for a moment on the difference between two common ways of expressing one's incomprehension: "I do not understand" and "It makes no sense". The first speaks of the subject himself, which implies that the misunderstanding is perhaps my fault. The second speaks of the object: it is incom-

prehensible, i.e. in itself, universally devoid of meaning. The thinking subject does not position himself at all in the same way. The first seems more humble or more nuanced, but he does not take responsibility for or denies his ability to access common reason, or at least he doubts it, which is enough to stop him from doing what he thinks would be an act of force. As a result, he remains very focused on himself and not on the object studied, he does not take any risk. The second, more categorical, grants himself a right of access to common reason, he declares himself objective because he is centered on the object and not on himself. To him, his judgment is therefore a valid criterion, quite scientific. But in fact, he does not question himself anymore, his own judgment is not an object of reflection, his reasoning is not part of the process of analysis. He is deprived of self-awareness which constitutes dialectical thinking, since "he knows".

Nevertheless, in both cases, if we want a true dialogue based on reason, it is not a matter of whether opinions diverge or not, but of sharing the understanding of what is expressed, without at first worrying too much about differences of perspectives. It is about focusing on "reason" and the "reasons" rather than on "being right". But it is precisely the momentary abandoning of "disagreements", the letting go of personal vision, which often poses a problem for individual thought, because we generally remain attached to our "ideas", to what they affirm, to their content, rather than understanding their content. A question of image protection and identity assertion. We respond to what the other person says, to the first level of speech, rather than examine the nature of the discussion and the stakes of the speech. The act of faith generally prevails over the work of thinking, the personal over the common. Concerned about our own existence and all that pertains to it, we wish to grapple with anything that upsets our feeling or opinion, by denying or contradicting it, sometimes compulsively. Strangely, what is common, rather than representing a lesser thought, a minimal thinking, is on the contrary more demanding, since this community forces to escape opinion in order to work on understanding. What is common transcends the peculiarity. What is common is the condition of possibility of discussion. In each of these two formulations, we see that what is common is of a meta order, of a higher level.

## Status of the group

The problem remains to know to which community we have access, to determine how we have access to it, and how this modality of general thinking differs from our particular opinions. We will separate the problem in two. On the one hand, common sense that is expressed by "others", by the group, immanent. On the other hand, common sense to which each of us potentially has access by appealing to it in a singular, transcendent way.

Let us start with common sense represented and expressed by the group, very empirical. When facilitating a debate or a discussion, we use common opinion as an interlocutor; we make "him" express "his" opinion and make judgments like any other singular participant. For example by raising hands to decide whether an argument is relevant or not, or a hypothesis is acceptable or not. But there is a recurring remark from beginners to such an exercise, especially when they are at odds with the group: "But that does not mean anything! Or "It does not mean that I am wrong! ". If, moreover, it is a person with some intellectual identity or inhabited by elitist pretensions, we will also be served something like: "the mass, the group - or the common opinion - is not in any shape a guarantee of truth! ". What is funny is that they would not say that of a singular opinion, to which, even if in disagreement, we grant a minimum of credit or right to exist - except when we bark back the infamous: "That is your opinion! ". Whereas common opinion periodically finds itself under suspicion a priori, or even subject to principled criticism, being excluded a priori. This blatant injustice, which immediately discredits the common in favor of the singular, seems to us, when we think about it, a surprising and amusing phenomenon. Indeed, why should the whole of singular thoughts worthy of interest be less worthy of interest than each one of these singular thoughts? Let us make two assumptions about this. The first is that, in fact, it is not personal opinion that has value, but mine, "my personal opinion". But in order to give it a status, I must also grant a status to the other, for reflective purpose. This is the principle of right to expression, which one can claim exclusively and openly for himself only. The second reason is related to the concept of "mass", which conveys a connotation that is almost inhuman or dehumanizing. The mass is shape-

less, it is faceless, it is of great brutality, it is difficult to discuss with it. This reputation means that it can not reason, and that only rhetoricians, those who flatter it using emotions, can modify it. In other words, it is inaccessible to reason, it is impervious to philosophizing. Like any accusation, it is probably not completely false, however we would like to tone it down quite significantly. Indeed, the mass is ungrateful, heavy, thick, it is difficult to access, but at the same time, it represents precisely a privileged interlocutor. Since the risk that awaits the singular thinker, especially the intellectual, is solipsism, including collective solipsism. Intellectuals speak to intellectuals, or the faithful speak to the faithful: let's remain among peers. While the mass is always foreign, always strange. Certainly, in a sense it is predictable, but it is also unpredictable, if only by its excesses, those of its reversals or its reactions. In addition, it has a major advantage: it is reality, this "other", eternally unattainable.

The role of the choir in Greek tragedy is an interesting example of the permanent reversals of the crowd. In turn, the choir is the interlocutor who encourages the hero in his undertakings of justice, desire, flight or revenge, that tries to discourage him in his most daring gestures, that sometimes plays the voice of temperance, sometimes that of boldness; this voice oscillates between common sense and prejudices, between feelings and reason. In tragedy, the choir represents a necessary echo, because it highlights the hero, it is the sounding board for the stakes of the drama, it gives body to the play. Faced with the hero, the wicked, the gods, there is humanity, a gross and imprecise entity, steeped in its contradictions and its many internal movements, shared between heart and reason, between greatness and mediocrity. The choir is the intermediary, the third person between the hero and his adversaries, between various protagonists, the middle term oscillating between Providence and Adversity. Sometimes, its impulses are rooted in archaism, sometimes in common sense, sometimes in established morality. It is very useful to the spectator, who will often recognize himself in it, sometimes to get angry at it. It seems to us that the choir gives the play its dimension of reality, its body and its presence.

Another eloquent example - let us hope - for those who still have troubles with the legitimacy of the group, is the concept of jury of peers. In a way, in justice, it is what guarantees truth and goodness, but in order to explain its nature and posture, we must distinguish it from two "similar" entities: the democratic vote and the jury of experts. Democratic vote by direct majority represents the will of the people, without concern for truth or objectivity, without cognitive requirements. If it is indirect, it represents the choice of certain people supposed to embody the popular will or the public good. These people are chosen theoretically for their competences and / or their conformity to the popular will. Both of these criteria may come up against each other because competencies may conflict with popular will. This difference between "popular will" and "public good" - which resembles the general will of Rousseau - is roughly what constitutes the traditional difference between democracy and republic. Representing the will of the people, or deciding what is good for them, a "good" that the people may well not be aware of. From the point of view of skills, we then come to the jury of experts, which in principle has no concern for popularity, nor is driven by any subjectivity, but must only act according to its competences, since it is exclusively on this basis that it was chosen.

Let us go back to the jury of peers. Its selection is relatively arbitrary. It is not for its competence that it is recruited. Neither is it to express the general will as this would skew the process, and one must do everything to prevent the jury from being influenced by its environment. It is chosen solely to represent the common thought, i.e. common truth or common good. At first it will be informed, then it will decide, autonomously. Once it has decided, the decision will in principle be "legalized" and even serve as precedent, as a reference in terms of Justice, Truth and Good. We amplify this context to stage the "scandalous" side of the jury of peers concept. Indeed, one wonders what is the legitimacy of such a small group of people. They can not claim a particular expertise, nor claim a representativeness expressed by the majority, however they are the guarantors of good and truth. By what right are they? This is where we can find the idea of Descartes, according to which "Common sense is the most widely shared thing in the world". This quote is famous - many glosses have been written about it - but it was not thought in its

practical aspect, surely because, too often, we forget the pragmatic dimension of Cartesian thinking. There may be a reason for this; the egalitarian vision of thought is not the most widespread vision among philosophers, who rather adopt the aristocratic posture, that which runs from Plato and Aristotle to Kant, Hegel and Heidegger, all of which, in one way or another, oppose common and banal thought, opinion, to that of the philosopher. They will rush to quote another part of Descartes' text, which suits them better, when he explains difference and inequality of thought in these terms: "For it is not enough to have a good spirit, but the main thing is to apply it well. " The challenge then lies in the distinction between the possible and the actualization of this possible. Everyone can think well, but some do it better than others.

## The intellectual fracture

Thinking with common sense is not radical, lazy or smug relativism, where "all opinions are equal", but such a concept tries all the same to reduce somewhat the "intellectual" fracture. This somehow conforms to Plato's ideal, when he shows us in the Menon, a slave who discovers the square root of two. Of course, this slave follows the instructions of master Socrates. While he must answer for himself, he is guided by "expert" questions. Nevertheless, the important thing is to show that he has everything in him to make this important discovery, since he is only answering questions and he does not need any contribution of knowledge; he has in him all that is necessary to solve the problem. Descartes also shows the ambiguity of this equality of access to common sense, adding in a second time that it is not enough to possess it; he specifies that one must still know how to use it. And that is where the disparate side of the case comes to light.

If we return to our jury of peers, the bet is this: any normally constituted citizen is therefore just as capable as another of getting to Truth and Good, since he is expected to produce a legitimate judgment. The whole thing is to check that the procedure put in place makes it possible to carry out the work to be done, and this is ensured both by operating rules and by professionals who will secure this proce-

ture. Therefore, we will consider that "good judgment" is almost imposed upon common reason. However of course, work still remains to be done in people's minds. Hence the final step that will be to debate between the different members of the jury, in order to come to an agreement, but this is not always feasible, if only because of differences in sensitivity. Even so, why would we trust a jury, rather than an expert? A recurrent debate in the field of justice. To answer, let us be inspired by Plato who warns us against subjectivity, including - or especially - that of the scientist, much too inclined to knowledge and power complacency. He explains in *Politicus* that any quality necessarily entails a defect, and that the guard that protects us from this partiality of character is the plurality of defects and their characters. According to him, it is the group, the multiplicity which is the best approximation of truth, since we lack a superior and unique being who would be the guarantor. Plato considers the idea of the sage transcending this multiplicity, but this exceptional man would have to possess all qualities; no longer a man but almost a god, he explains. We are therefore at the antipodes of the scientist who can impose his knowledge and subjectivity on a group under the pretext of belonging to the intelligentsia. The latter represents almost the enemy, the sophist, the expert full of certainties, the talker who wants to convince and seize power more than anything, failing to question or problematize his own speech. And between the philosopher and the sophist, one resembles the other like the dog with the wolf, he writes in *The Sophist*, with that ambiguity of determining who is the dog and who is the wolf.

Thus the group, without representing any absolute guarantee of truth, represents on the one hand a sort of second-best, on the other hand a valid and important interlocutor, precisely because it transcends singularities. And yet it is sometimes required to breach it. Let us not forget that the lowest common denominator is a paradoxical entity with a double-edged function. It can be perceived from two angles; a maximizing angle and a minimizing angle. This is explained by the fact that there are two ways of conceiving the principle of the lowest common denominator.



The most classic among philosophers who tend to value the singular, what they themselves are, is the group as incarnation of lesser reason. The Common would be devoid of interest because deprived of reason and singularity. Just as the body, another mass entity, is conceived as the place for lesser reason. The body does not think, the mass does not think. Only the spirit, the singular, the loose, thinks. Knowledge is an "epistemological break," Bachelard tells us, and this rupture occurs through the elite, the specific, while the mass, opaque and full of prejudices, is that which resists the ruptures. Like the body, it seems only sensitive to emotion, to the impulse of the moment, to such a point that it can seem inhuman and dehumanizing. On the other hand, we find in Hegel, yet a great opponent of the Subjective, the idea that progress is accomplished by going beyond all subjectivities, even by ignoring them. This seems to be done through a sort of natural process or advent, what we call history, somehow a mass effect. In the same way, if we observe the limits of the elite, its mediocrities, we could be surprised of what is still achieved on the intellectual level. Here we find the idea of a whole that is more than all of its parts. And indeed, the group can produce mobilizing or critical effects on individuals, who otherwise would be left to their solipsistic and fragile subjectivities. It is also the idea of Marx, for whom consciousness is above all social consciousness, because the group poses the ethical requirement in a more profound and urgent way than the singular. For Nietzsche, the great reason is the body, precisely because it does not ratiocinate. It is the very consciousness; it is united. The body does not lie because it does not think: it is, and that is all.

Through our experience as a philosophy practitioner, we were surprised to notice how often the group's judgment was reliable - without wanting to glorify it. To the extent that certain constraints are implemented, as in court. One of the exceptions of this reliability is, among other things, when collective judgment is contaminated by internal quarrels, struggles between sub-groups, which precisely prevent the collective from playing its unifying and regulating role. Or when an ideological or psychological claim rises more or less explicitly. For this reason, one of the main tasks of the philosopher-facilitator is precisely to prevent the creation of such factions or to dominate such specific concerns by ironically imposing on the group

the use of common sense. Not that the group is incapable of any mistake, as that would not make sense. And in any case, according to the principle of collective construction of knowledge, we are no longer in a schema of truth a priori and transcendent. But when the singular arises, to the extent that it is operative, that is to say, relevant and comprehensible, a group is able to perceive its scope and interest, and agrees quite naturally to change mind. Much more than in the "singular against singular" case, where there are tensions, defensive reactions, due mainly to lack of distance, and where it becomes difficult to perceive the most sensible argumentation. In a group, apart from the dramatizing effect by the audience, everyone has much less to lose, and as a result, more freedom is created for the unfolding of reason. A classic phenomenon in psychology, where the self, the affirmation or protection of identity, constitutes the main obstacle to thinking.

On this subject, as a criticism of the singular, against which the group protects us, let us mention an expression, or almost a verbal tic, very revealing of the problem of subjective thought, in its opposition to reason. The expression "For me ...", serving as a preamble to many speeches. Like any expression of this kind, it is not devoid of meaning or legitimacy; after all, someone can express his or her personal vision of the world and, in this way, distinguish themselves from the common or objective vision, including in the very meaning given to words, which is something that happens often. One has the right to make one's personal lexicon. The only problem, as any automatism, lies in its unconsciousness, whereby it becomes a place of non-thinking. So it means that it inhibits, occults or paralyzes the mind. Thought is a living body where everything that has no symbiotic reason to be, everything that does not integrate or nurture the construction of content, everything that does not incorporate within a substantive relational mode, everything that does not collaborate in the development of deep dynamics, causes interferences and prevents from being.

So it goes with this expression "For me ...". If we carefully observe its use, we will see that it has two main functions. First, to minimize the replies that will be given to us, that is, to protect ourselves, preempt any dialogue, neutralize any criticism in advance. And shamelessly introduce any absurdity, since the proposal is guaranteed "objectivity-free". Since I speak only for "me" and myself, I do not

have to account for anything. These two uses also have a community of being: I do not wish to mess with common reason, I will minimize my speech, speaking only for myself, claiming a speech with no consequence. "I was just saying ! ", allows me to free myself from rational requirements and the testing of the common.

The ambient post-modernism is a position that is not less legitimate than any other, unless it is used to practice solipsism and to justify the ignorance of others. Not a disagreement with the common and the universal, but its denial. If we do not have to recognize the general or grant a status to what goes beyond the singular, nor to be in agreement with it, it is strongly advised to know it, to acknowledge it, at least on the philosophical level, that of consciousness, in order to confront oneself to it. Thus, when I wish to give a new or particular meaning to a term, I have the right to do so, but I still had better know the current meaning(s), otherwise I may find myself completely out of step with others, and fall into the aberration of dialogue of the deaf, as we described above. The singular who is not aware of his singularity status ignores both his own nature and that of others. He is already in aberration. Even if his idea made sense, it remains an opinion because he does not know how to evaluate the content; he is unable to engage in a critical reading of his perspective, he justifies his position only by minimizing it, so as not to take any risk. Humility is his only argument, an argument by default. A feigned or real humility, since humility is pride's favorite disguise; a minimization of the self that knows how to evade any test, to avoid any "humiliation". An invincible strategy for timid people who are anxious not to ruin their wonderful little selves, which could be soiled by the judgment of others.

## Logic as a principle of exclusion

Now let us come to what seems to us a strong point of common reason: logic. Logic has been, since ancient times, one of philosophy's main disciplines, with ethics and metaphysics. It deals with the study of formal principles which must regulate the speech so that it is in agreement with reason. The term *logos* means in Greek both reason and speech, which shows the original intimacy between the

word and the rules that determine it. But logic is not fashionable, it clashes with the current ideological context. The very principle of logic does not really agree with the ambient very relativistic post-modernism, because logic is rather categorical and claims universality. For the last century, philosophical and scientific thoughts have also tried to undermine the traditional canons of formal logic. It would be wrong, however, to think that concepts such as "fuzzy logic" or "complex thinking" do radically challenge standard logic. It is more about adding new concepts. For "fuzzy logic", the concept of degree makes it possible to treat specific cases that binary logic is unable to treat. For "complex thinking", it is not a question of eliminating simplicity, but of completing its failures. It is not a question for us here to determine whether logic describes reality more adequately than singular thinking, but to examine how logic is a useful tool for working with singular thinking, a condition for dialogue and communication. To hypostatize logic, to give it ontological value, to make it reign over any other knowledge processes, are all attitudes that are actually the cause of its credit loss.

These rigidities are partly responsible for the fact that the ambient culture tries to throw the baby out with the bathwater, condemning logic, ignoring it, devaluing it. Consequently, we will attempt, through an instrumental vision of logic, to bring it back through the small door: that of utility. While highlighting the fact that the criticism of logic, not its abandonment but the perception and articulation of its limits, is a permanent concern in the history of philosophy of Plato, Nicolas de Cues, Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer, to name just a few. The interest of logic in philosophical practice is mainly that it is a tool for testing singular thought through a principled community. It makes it possible to problematize thought by examining its structure, its form. It allows especially to problematize thought from itself, "internal critic" Hegel would say. How does it do it? Mainly from the three basic rules of historical logic. The identity principle: one thing is what it is, it is nothing else. The principle of non-contradiction: one thing can not be something and its opposite in the same mode. The principle of excluded middle: between two contrary propositions, there is no middle, or any judgment must be either true or false. We can add principle of sufficient reason, which states that nothing is devoid of

cause or reason, whether to account for the being or the non being. Thus nothing can claim pure autonomy, independence, or absence of conditions.

As we see in all of these rules, logic is largely used to exclude, limit, prohibit. This probably explains its scandalous reputation, at a time when the word “exclusion” is badly connoted, contrary to that of “inclusion” which seems endowed with all qualities. But what is the point of prohibition and exclusion? It is above all the experience of finitude. To philosophize is to learn how to die, tradition tells us. But finitude precisely embodies this symbolic death. Death of desire, with its claims of totality, death of aspiration to omnipotence, death of limitless opinion, death of the ultimate word and final say. We hold so many unbridled aspirations without realizing it, and logic requires us to give them up. So I can not be here and be somewhere else, physically at least. I can not simultaneously assert a proposition and deny it. I have to make choices. The temptation is great to pretend to ubiquity or totality, to take one's desires for realities. New Age-inspired theses, such as "We must put ourselves beyond the mind", encourage us by rationalizing totalitarian postures, where everything is one, nothing is opposed, everything is complementary. Each of us comes to think of himself as God. When we are children, explains Plato, we want everything at once, but as we grow up, we learn to choose. Logic teaches us precisely to choose, already because it forces us to consider the contradictory potential of our speech, then because it forces us to eliminate one of the opposite possibilities in an alternative, or even to eliminate the possibility which we would like to eliminate the least. It gets rid of the "also", the "yes but", the "anyway", and many other expressions by which we try to regain totality.

Of course, in the absolute, everything is possible, and its opposite too. But the absolute is a trap, for the good reason that it is not of this world. It is only a particular perspective, a transcendental concept, a regulatory ideal. It can certainly allow itself many transgressions that are forbidden to us and this is its main attraction. Precisely, logic constitutes a guarantee against excessiveness, against hubrism, this natural sin of man. Man, this sole creature who can conceive God, the Infinite, the Absolute, and believe in it. So we often look like the frog of the tale, who by dint of rubbing shoulders with the ox wants to be as big as him. Logic prevents us from taking our desires for realities. It is therefore a matter of obliging oneself

to choose, prioritizing judgments, for a preventive, therapeutic, curative, hygienic purpose, or simply for the sake of sobriety or clarification. Certainly, in the absolute, life and death go together, and I do not have to choose between the two; I am condemned to both; they give each other meaning. But in the present moment, at any moment, I have to choose between living and dying, until the day when I have no choice. Certainly desire and duty are both necessary for existence, and they may indeed converge, but often the problem of their opposition arises and their conflictual relationship periodically generates tensions, sometimes difficult to sustain. Thus, common sense is the guarantor of a principle of reality, a principle of sobriety that protects us from the intoxication of words, which are there, lying in wait for our frail humanity.

## Logic implemented

Let us illustrate the interest of the first three principles of logic by some examples. We will start with the principle of identity. It allows us to apprehend the content of an idea or a concept, and to distinguish it from what it is not. For example, a woman makes the following statement: "What I find interesting in people is their ideas,". She is asked if she is interested in the concrete or the abstract, and she answers "The ideas can also be concrete". By definition, ideas are abstraction, and those interested in ideas are therefore more interested in abstraction. To answer by "can be" rather than "is" is a break with logic. The "can be" problematizes, it seeks the limits, the exception, the opposite, it wants to escape the reality of the immediate. This would be useful if it were indeed to examine the limits of a proposition, to problematize it. But if it is a matter of defining the essence of an idea, of determining its content, of conceptualizing its nature, then problematization is a nonsense: "to be" is not "to may be", the former is an established fact, the latter a mere possibility. Therefore, to summon the "may be" expresses a desire for omnipotence, a refusal of finitude and limit; this woman rationalizes excessively, she wants to be right, she would do anything to "patch up" her speech. Of course, everything can be other than itself, and in a way any entity can become its own opposite, but if everything is its opposite, then we fall into what Hegel calls "the night

when all cows are black ". Nothing is different: everything is everything as well as its opposite.

This relates to radical relativism which is another form of rejection of the principle of identity. The question " What is beauty?" is answered by "It depends on people's point of view" or "It varies with cultures and times". Such a "definition" unfortunately works also for "Truth", "Good", "Food", "Marriage" and all that we want. Nothing, in such an answer, makes it possible to define the nature of the concept, in which case it would be better to simply remove it from the dictionary for lack of substance. It is clear that this is intellectual non-commitment, a gesture of comfort, which hides under a intellectual light varnish. It shows us the interest of the principle of identity as well as consequences of non-recognition of this principle. Let us add that, to define what an entity means is to refer to its usual meaning, to establish what it is for majority of people, to define it in the most general possible way, to identify its essence, rather than to take refuge in specific, subjective, malleable and personal cases. But we notice that it is more difficult to define generality than to work on a case-by-case basis, and that to focus on common sense is a requirement that is often difficult to follow. It is not forbidden to personalize a definition, nor to go through singular examples to define a concept, but this particularism should not be used to bypass the requirement of generality and confrontation with common sense.

Let us now see the principle of non-contradiction. One person says, "I'm mostly interested in people's ideas," and a little later she says, "Reality is the facts." We ask this person if she sees the contradiction between these two propositions, and she answers "There is not necessarily a contradiction". Certainly, we can always succeed in combining all the concepts with each other by adding intermediate concepts that connect and circumstantiate them; it is therefore always possible to deny a contradiction, in a simple and swift slide, by introduction of a new conceptual perspective. For example, if I say "Pierre is here" and "Pierre is not here", I can conclude that there is no necessary contradiction, explaining that "Pierre is here physically but no is not here mentally ". But when I feel compelled to explain and produce a conceptual distinction between "physical" and "mental", it shows that I

recognize the contradiction and feel the urge to solve it. It is, according to Hegel, the essence of dialectical process, a process that moves thought forward by producing concepts able to deal with or solve problems. But not taking charge of the contradiction, not noticing it, denying it or obscuring it, is freezing thought into a sequence of gratuitous and disconnected acts of faith. It is abandoning it to its status of unconsciousness, what is ordinarily called opinion.

In the given example, it is very interesting to perceive the contradictory scope between the terms "ideas" and "facts", between "interest" and "reality". For example, if we admit that "idea" is opposed to "fact", we realize that the person in question is not interested in "reality", but rather in something else, to be determined; maybe thought, imagination or any other concept. Of course, if the fact of not being interested in Reality does not please the person in question, she will do everything to try to erase the contradictory potential of the two proposals. One strategy she will try is to say, for example, "An idea is also a fact". "Also" is typically the kind of seemingly insignificant terms - adverbs are great examples - that load the dice by making imperceptible, meaningless slides of meaning, with heavy implications however. Because if "an idea is also a fact", it is not in the first place a "fact"! But let us ask the question from common sense: "For the common man, is an idea more a fact or the opposite of a fact?". The first step will be to identify the contradictory potential of a speech before rushing to claim to reconcile the proposals.

This leads us to the third principle of logic: the principle of the excluded middle. Faced with the question we have just mentioned, our interlocutor will retort periodically: "I do not like this kind of closed alternative. Why should we choose between the two? I would prefer to choose a third way!". And if we allow the person to produce this famous "third way", or this other term supposed to escape the dilemma, the person will sometimes present an intermediate term, an in-between, however, more generally, it will be a term acting on a very different register that completely bypasses the tension that has just been produced, a term that connects the two opposite poles in an external and common category. For example, the term "meaningful" in "Because both have meaningful", or the term "real" in "Because both are real". Here again, the production of a "middle" concept is not de-



void of interest, quite the contrary, but only for later, for another time where it can play an appropriate role, that of bringing together rather than oppose. For example, in this case, the fact that "idea" and "fact" both proceed from "reality" makes sense, but it would be a shame to forget that a distinction was produced, which precisely structures this reality, through the duality of the opposition between "fact" and "idea". It is easy to see that the middle ground is an interesting operating concept, or even a being, action or thought founding reality, as Aristotle understood it. But it is a question of not falling into the rut of ease; to fail to realize that the middle ground transcends differences, but also is a regulating ideal, i.e. an optimal aim, a sort of absolute that does not pretend to erase the tension of reality. It simply proposes an infinite position where this tension can fade away, after a long work, as a result of asceticism, and not as a kind of plain evidence.

In short, there is great interest in respecting what Hegel calls the "moments" of the thinking process. The moment of identity, where it is about deepening the nature of an entity or a proposition. The moment of problematization, where it is about thinking negation, thinking the opposite, with the tension that duality generates. And finally the synthetic moment, the moment when a meltdown is possible, not to eradicate tension, but to enlighten it, to propose a resolution to it, while recognizing the problematic nature of duality, or multiplicity, without which the "middle" moment would lose its value. And in these three moments, whether logical or dialectical, whether they articulate opposites or solve them, we follow common thinking, we respect and rely on it, instead of claiming a false autonomy, the fake freedom of singular and empty thought.

We have the right to be out of step with common sense, but as for any act of force, the point is to be aware of the shift, articulate it, apprehend the stages of its construction. Certainly we can aspire to the status of Zarathustra and claim to be enlightened, see directly through formal oppositions and speak as a prophet, but again, provided we know what we are doing. Let us recall Nietzsche's criticism of Socrates, which he describes as a hard-working, laborious thinker; a poor sod who seeks only to flatten down what is great, beautiful or noble. Why not, if one is ready to take on the status of aristocrat thinker, whose righteous generosity despises the narrow-mindedness of common thought! But, when we are confronted to op-

position, it is too easy to erase it by claiming a false "complementarity". This would be erasing discipline and avoiding the dramatic significance of our thought.

## The principle of causality

Let us turn to the fourth principle of logic that seems useful to us to add, although it is not canonically recognized as such: principle of causality or principle of sufficient reason. It differs from the other three because it relates to the becoming or to production, rather than to state; it is dynamic rather than static. It establishes that all that exists has a cause, therefore, all that is, is the product of a cause, i.e. an effect. Under identical conditions, same causes will produce same effects. So reason has a knowledge criterion and a prior judgment of the world and of thought, which is the very idea of logic. Leibniz formulated what he calls "Principle of sufficient reason", which enables to justify or organize contingent truths; truths of fact which are not truths of necessity, the latter being those more generally treated by logic. From the point of view of philosophical practice, in its most buoyant aspect, the principle of causality forces us, even when we do not wish it, to grasp the *raison d'être* of our own words. We do this without being able to erase our terms or expressions, without minimizing them, without attempting to produce any accidental or reductive alibi. For proof, let us mention all the adverbs that we often use without even noticing, and which expose the fragility of our own thoughts sometimes more than we would like. For example, "also" and "anyway", which we claim to use as simple "and", but which outline a very marked hierarchy of thought. They imply a structure between primary and secondary that we are not always ready to see. For various reasons, especially our minds' claims to omnipotence, we reject the idea that there is such an axiology in us, a pre-established structure that would undermine our ability to summon any concept. This would disclose how biased our being is.

The principle of sufficient reason obliges us therefore to a sort of archeology of thought, it forces us to explore our own consciousness, in order to examine for

what reason we state this or that, according to this criterion and not another, why we deny or forget this or that, mention this before that, select this rather than that. It forces us to require from our singular reason to become accountable to general reason, which is very instructive but can obviously upset us. Only because of the hiatus between what we are and what we would like to be, between what we say and what we want or should say, following conscious or unconscious canons that are our thoughts' theoretical regulators.

In this perspective, all that we affirm in particular, even without intending to do so, is only the reflection of more general ideas, the product of a genesis that is more substantial and significant than the final product of the process, which is these meager words that we end up saying. To adhere to the principle of sufficient reason transforms the nature of speech, as we do not just listen to what it says, but we listen to what it does not say. To say something is to deny something else, Spinoza tells us. The point is to become aware of the act of force of speech, of the dubious and daring options we choose, in order to simply know what we are saying. Our position on this subject, that of philosophical practice, is to postulate that we can take all the options we want, but we must simply become aware of them. This is how Spinoza defines freedom. Be conscious of our determinations, in order to deliberate legitimately, and not be dependent on heavy assumptions that we convey unknowingly.

One of the most useful aspects of logic is precisely its ability to uncover and clarify a person's axiology, to expose his hierarchy of values. Because it forces us to make choices, to exclude, not necessarily in absolute terms but at least sequentially, according to subsequent moments, as Hegel recommends. Since different values necessarily have conflicting potentials, it is necessary to determine what value will take precedence over the other when this opposition meets. It is out of the question to try to keep everything on the same footing, in a fake simultaneity, in a simulacrum of unity, this would be too easy. Our choices reveal our being, express it out loud. Every word, like every silence, is the unveiling of the person, for the word is the being's glade. And if the choices that logic forces us to make appear to us as a kind of betrayal of our good intentions, this betrayal is nothing but the discovery of our being, of being in general, which can express itself only through par-

tiality and finitude, because it can only be partial and finite. Only non-being is infinitely real, for it is pure indetermination.

## Philosophy of common sense

At the end of the eighteenth century, a philosophical school was born in Scotland, calling itself "Common Sense," around Thomas Reid, who was to inspire American pragmatism. This current tended to answer both idealism and skepticism, which could be called the intellectualism that reigned in philosophy. He advocated a kind of popular wisdom, better able to guide our daily choices than the sophisticated ranting and manipulations of the usual paradoxes of patent philosophers. Common sense is a truth elaborated collectively, rather than individually, and thus it maintains a relatively conservative position since it resists the daring innovations of people. It is this idea that will be found in Peirce, founder of pragmatism, for whom a broad consensus constitutes the best approximation of objectivity. In this perspective, common sense is not fixed, it is open to permanent verification, it evolves collectively, it is subject to daily practice, which brings it closer to the scientific method. One of Reid's arguments was that even intellectuals in their daily lives use the principles of this common sense to determine their choices and actions. Obviously, this is opposed for example to the vision of Bachelard, which flatly opposes scientific experiment and common experience.

An interesting argument of this Scottish school was that in spite of all philosophical modes, materialism, idealism, stoicism or epicureanism, none of these doctrines prevailed in a lasting way, in spite of the illustrious partisans who defended them. They all exerted a certain influence but in the end, common opinion, that of the human race, has never followed these various doctrines. Common opinion will remain what it has always been, and each of these philosophical schools only illuminate a particular aspect of human functioning. But one could also conclude that these various schools have enabled man to become aware of the different facets of his thought. And even though various eras have been marked by some thinkers, one could also say that specific philosophies were generated by a place and

an era, that they were ultimately just a reflection of a moment and an ambient culture, or even a fashion. Did Descartes forge the French spirit, or is he only the particular incarnation or the amplified reflection of French common spirit? The question remains, and deserves to be meditated.

In any case, the question for us, from the point of view of philosophical practice, is not so much to choose between these two visions of the world, between general and singular, abstract and concrete, or between these two opposite cultures, because this debate largely overlaps with patterns, paradigms or codes rooted in cultural traditions. It is preferable, as in our various relations with the multiple schools of thought and the innumerable established concepts, to initiate a debate, in the group or in an individual, between these various logics, because thought is nothing other than a confrontation of perspectives, collectively or in oneself. Preferably, we would say that this is just an act of comparison, since dialogue is sometimes impossible. Nevertheless, it is through these exchanges that it will become possible to draw conclusions that are not exclusively dependent on a single school of thought. A difficult and delicate undertaking since the rigid, dogmatic or ideological side of thought is often unconscious. For example, when in France the collective is allowed to express itself and comes up against a singular idea, intellectuals often react as follows: "But what the group thinks does not mean anything!". We meet a constant suspicion towards community, under the guise that common opinion has no kind of interest. Only the singular would be reliable, whereas it is just as likely to be biased, if not more, if only by the subjectivity against which precisely idealist philosophers put us on guard. Hegel is astonished to see that great things, collective progress, are accomplished in spite of the multiplicity of individual pettiness and reductionism. Moreover, even in Descartes, the great promoter of peculiar thought, we find the idea that "It is not likely that all are wrong", although we can also attribute to this author some irony, in view of his criticism of mainstream thinking, when he denounced the academic philosophy of his time, steeped in tradition and authority. But if one takes what he says literally, reason is for him fully present in every man, at least potentially, a way of thinking which differs from the sort of radical elitism so common in many thinkers. The French ex-

pression of "lieu commun", or "common place", just as "common opinion", negatively connoted, show the elitist bias, where only the singular offers a valid guarantee of thought. Even in Marx, thinker of the collective, we find the elitist presupposition, when he asserts that common sense is "bourgeoisie's watch dog".

If reason in action, in the strict sense of the term, is not absolutely equivalent to common sense, the question remains to understand if the distance between the two is significant; or if it is more a divorce or an opposition; or if it is simply a small shift, that we can deduce easily enough from the other, even if in the end, after the initial conflict, they show conformity with each other. Are reason and common sense convergent or paradoxical? Their convergence is the very principle of maieutics, which claims that everyone, who holds a spark of divine fire, can bring out great concepts, with the help of appropriate questions. The other perspective, also present in Plato, is that authentic thought, although ignorant - or by virtue of this ignorance as Socrates shows - can put scholarly thought to the test, i.e. that of the erudite and singular elite. Nevertheless, Socrates remains the unsurpassed hero of operative thought. Finally, we find in Plato some kind of permanent dialectics between ignorance and knowledge, between the elite and the common.

## The limits of common sense

We could not finish this work on common sense without examining the limits of such "community" of sense. The limits of common sense, those of logic, are obviously the epistemological breaks, these disruptions which preside over scientific development, which engender disruptions of paradigms, transformations that take place theoretically against established and current patterns. A conversion that is perhaps done more easily in daring spirits that mark their time, but which can also be done in each one of us. A kind of mind shift, deliberate or imposed, healthy minds' basic hygiene. At different times, we all go through this singular experience of thought, this moment of reversal, of innovation. It is both free and disrespectful within its capacity for transgression and irruption. Life often invites us to make changes, sometimes harshly, and our vision of logic and common sense is regularly

antagonized. After all, why comply with rules of logic and common sense? Why should this principle be considered as a kind of absolute? Is the mind not freer and more powerful than any a priori rules? Now there are various legitimate ways in which thought rejects common rules. Let us look at some of them, which we will distinguish, although they will naturally overlap.

Burning passion, unbridled desire, blind love, the implacable plot of man will, which can be called instinctive thought, constitute the first pole of rejection of common sense. As irrational or unpredictable as these impulses of the body, these driving forces of the soul or spirit may be, they nonetheless constitute a crucial constitutive dimension of our being. In these situations, any control over thought by a priori principles, any reference to community, whether of meaning or obligation, is abandoned. At best, the collective will be used as counterweight, more or less effective, more or less useful. At worst it will be an obstacle. Directionality is imposed on the mental functioning, like a vector or modality forced by the mind, and even if moved from inside, it will leave no freedom. It does not allow to request any authorization to some external reference because the mind knows nothing else but the fire that it is driven by. It is no longer possible to reason. Therefore, it is difficult for the stranger to understand such a person, unless they share this same sacred fire, this same commitment. This is for example the case for a collective act of faith, which can be described as shared subjectivity. Even a large community can share such subjectivity, to the point where it can be established as common sense. Sometimes, understanding will only take on a formal value, just as the doctor understands the patient, without sharing his pain and illness. Useful knowledge, certainly, but totally external and artificial. In contradiction to the sense that is common, passion, feelings or man's will are rather singular, particular. Even though we share various values with others, no one can guess his neighbor's interiority. And ironically, even two people who love each other with a supposedly common love rarely share the same love: there will always be asymmetry in their relationship, however idyllic it may be.

Second pole of rejection of logic and common sense: the learning experience or the discovery of new knowledge. Because logic forces us to remain somehow ignorant - since it is a matter of following a priori established rules - and to project ourselves from what is known to us. Common sense is driven by a certain epistemological conservatism; it resists change. It is for this reason that many discoveries have taken time to settle in collective representations. Even in the scientific field where, for example, the necessity of the evolution theory did not fit in the logic of its time. Nevertheless, in spite of our habits of thought, we can not systematically resist all that arises and disturbs our small inner arrangements. So, our knowledge must sometimes silence logic, just as logic sometimes silences knowledge, for lack of proof and consistency. To learn something is to accept the evidence of new information, however superficial or deep, whether or not they are understood. But facts, whatever their type or origin, do not always make sense, they can sometimes surprise us, even when they constitute the foundation of reality for us. Quantum physics provide a good example of this, whose principles are highly counterintuitive. Whether it comes from sensory perception, personal or collective reflection, experimentation, transmission of information through others, knowledge is the material that nurtures thought and the substance from which we develop ideas. Now, what we know, we accept, more or less arbitrarily, because one must trust, one must base one's arguments on something, because one does not have the cognitive skills to judge in an autonomous way, but also because the mechanism that presides over logic and common sense does not produce knowledge itself. This is already the case for empirical knowledge, because we can not imagine the whole world just by our own means. It is also the case for theoretical knowledge, even if it comes from collective reason. Or we would have to presuppose that each of us, alone, could recreate all knowledge inherited from predecessors. But knowledge does not necessarily have to be submitted to common sense, even if it derives from it; we receive it for what it is, we accept the gift, we take it as evidence, it is endowed with a priori credit. Strangely, it is an act of faith because we trust, in a singular or collective way, what is given to us. And if it is objected that knowledge brought to us is often a sort of common opinion, whether scientific or popular, it is not always consistent with common sense or logic, because its passing on does not always implement the mind's critical faculties. We take what is given to us, without



really assessing its logic, without putting it too much to the test: we trust. Common knowledge is not submitted to common sense, but it corrodes it and slowly models it.

Third pole of rejection of logic and common sense: creativity, invention, imagination. Man's great creative resources make him periodically reject what used to be self-evident. Unpredictable and often uncontrolled, innovation is shocking, surprising, it can seduce, but it often creates resistance and rejection. This is why creativity and passion are often associated. From the inside, it opens new perspectives that disturb usual visions, it asks to review what seemed granted. Whether aesthetically, scientifically, ideologically or existentially, whether it comes from ourselves or from someone else, it challenges our personal or collective foundation and defies reason and habit; at least at the start. If, afterwards, with time or with appropriate explanations, we end up incorporating this novelty, it surprises us at first because it conflicts with our habits. When we understand it or internalize it, we reintegrate the novelty into common sense, but often we simply rationalize it, in order to fit it and not to remain in cognitive dissonance, too painful to bear. Or we ignore it. Once rationalized, the novelty is upgraded to the status of accepted knowledge - or new act of faith - even if it upsets logic and common sense. We then fall back into the previous case of common knowledge, not always in agreement with common sense. It will be noted by the way that what is unacceptable rupture for logic, is for literature a stylistic process. For example when we replace the whole by the part or when we take the singular for the universal. Poetic license is a good example of this rupture with common logical codes, which yet establishes its own common sense.

Fourth pole of rejection of logic and common sense: dialectics, a process that knows how to trick opposites, that feeds on them, that progresses by articulating contraries, recognizing them in order to eliminate them better or to make them productive. It does it rightly because exclusion, a by-product of logic, can easily become a sterile rule producing rigidities, despite its usefulness. If logic, by copying

sylllogism - aggregate of presuppositions - can indeed form a system, we must not forget that by definition we remain from then on in a given frame. In a certain way, it would be illusory to perceive any production or assimilation of new knowledge. Logic analyzes, extrapolates, but remains within given concepts, within their meanings and implications. It hardly synthesizes, in the sense of absorbing exogenous elements. Dialectics force the concept out of itself by forcing it to relate to what it is not, even to confront its origin, by which process we then generate new concepts. Dialectics force us to think the unthinkable. It is based on the type of schema which asserts for example that light blinds as much as it illuminates, a contradiction, paradox or ambiguity that does not suit logic. By forcing improbable or upsetting relations, dialectics make us produce new concepts that may enlighten or solve various problems that occurred voluntarily or accidentally. But dialectics, with its shifts, often upset the thinking subject who does not like to be driven out of his comfortable position, out of his habits and commonplaces, which characterize common sense. But then, what are we left with if opposites reconcile! Everything becomes negotiable, the door is opened to all abuses. And this is precisely against what logic and common sense try to warn us. But strangely, in a second step, the dialectical operation must become accountable to logic; after the shock, we must check if the operation is sensible, if the rupture can be reintegrated into reason's general system. Just like with music dissonances, although initial ruptures, that must be recovered within harmonic rules. And just like great truths, revealed to exceptional beings, arise generally in the form of paradoxes which, in a second step, become commonplace and normal.

There is a fifth pole of reversal of common sense, which seems to us worth mentioning, although it has a particular status: the conversions caused by life, which upset our settings. Indeed, periodically in life, often because of tragic events such as illness and death, we come to drastically change the direction of our lives and values , or at least within the consciousness that we have of them. Until then we were leading a life that seemed normal, logical, often similar to that of everyone, and then, by a kind of sudden and undergone enlightenment, it seems to us that what used to make sense does not anymore. The ordinary world suddenly

seems absurd or uninteresting to us. We are transformed. Our relatives do not recognize us anymore, we seem strange to them, unless they are just delighted with the change. Among classic patterns, we find the person obsessed with his work who suddenly decides that family life is more important; the anxious person who until then used to worry for everything, who suddenly lets things happen naturally; the hyperactive person who decides to live or to become epicurean; or the materialistic person who “finally” discovers spirituality. The paradox of this transformation is that the person thus converted to a "new philosophy" now finds himself more reasonable. Even if, in doing so, he is at odds with what he observes around him, he feels he is now touching a deeper truth, reaching a kind of wisdom. He sometimes claims to go from ordinary common sense to deeper common sense. Or, if not claiming such a progression of the soul, he just senses it; he has the feeling of being better, of being more, of becoming himself, of entering reality fully. He steps now in "true common sense", the one that is ignored by ordinary mortals. This conversion may lead him to become a kind of prophet, missionary or insider whose vocation is now to convert to "Good" a dehumanized humanity.

In these different cases, common sense is reversed, problematized, confronted, transformed, and one may find legitimate to make such break ups, according to personal convictions or to circumstances. Be that as it may, it seems to us essential to know both common sense and the logic that goes with it; to feel its weight, as much as to be able to transgress their established forms; to know the experience of singularity, the strength of originality, even if it is somehow just as banal. Let us add: they are fundamental experiences because banal. Common sense and its ruptures invite us to banality. We can also contemplate the idea that uninteresting banality would be nested mainly in the claim of not being banal, and singularity would be found in the abandonment of the idea of being singular. The illusion of being a special individual, and then to discover oneself as the plain specific element of abundant multiplicity. Therefore, to be banal would be to believe that we are special; to be special would fit precisely in the experience of banality. Moreover, in philosophy, don't we spend our time repeating what has already been said! Writing meager codicils on some great writings, adding footnotes to famous an-

cient texts. Perhaps in this common heritage, as ignored as it may be, true common sense incarnates.



# TO PHILOSOPHISE IS TO RECONCILE WITH ONE'S OWN WORDS

One of the main tasks of the philosophical practice is to invite the subject to reconcile with his own speech. As much as this assertion may seem strange to some, most people do not like what they say when they speak, they cannot even stand it. “How do you mean?!”, will protest the objectors, “most people speak, and they do it a lot!”. An undeniable observation which can easily be confirmed by sitting in a public place listening to the hubbub of the conversations. Most people do speak indeed, and we would add that they feel they must do so. A sort of urge is at work, both because they want to say something, to express themselves, and because they cannot bear silence. Silence is suspicious, it is cumbersome, it seems sad; a great trust in others is required to accept to remain silent with them, or a good reason, otherwise its meaning has more to do with lack of interest, a short break in the dialogue, or even a conflict. So people talk and in general they talk about just anything: weather, events, the risks in their little lives, some compliments are exchanged, some platitudes, and when the discussion goes further, some confessions are sometimes made, some secrets are disclosed, or sometimes a personal even shameful affliction is shared. There is however a primal suspicion that comes to mind about our so-called pleasure of talking, when observing how a discussion gets carried away on a disagreement. Spirits rebel, become heated, shut down, get irritated, become violent, words become acrimonious. If we were not so used to the virulent way things usually turn, we could feel surprised: “Hey, they finally found an idea that matters, a topic that seems of interest. And since they do not share the

same opinion, they can discuss it. So why does it look like they are taking this disagreement so badly?”. “One must avoid the matters of discord” claims a popular wisdom, which means roughly all the important matters, those we care for, with an obligation to keep to formal discussions, which are less exciting indeed, but less risky.

## To be right

What is the problem? Everyone claims to be right. However, one never really thinks about the meaning of this idea of “being right”, and why we care so much about it. One will explain that it is a matter of confrontation to one’s fellow humans, wrestling for recognition, fighting for power or anything else, and that the stake here is one’s own image, an explanation which undoubtedly is partly true. However, what is interesting here is another side of the story which relates to the previous intuitions: the hypothesis that the human being actually does not appreciate its own speech, which would explain both the difficulties of the discussion and its ability to take an unpleasant turn. As a matter of fact, if people somewhat liked their own speech, if they were confident in their own words, why would they worry so much about being recognised by their neighbour? Would they want so insistently to obtain anything from their interlocutor? For the time being, let us put aside the discussions which have a specific purpose, such as the ones which, by conviction or by practicality, require to convince the other one, as the dialogue therefore is not open: it is not its own finality, it explicitly desires an object without which the discussion has no reasons to be: The finality is here precise and clearly stated. We think though that we are always indirectly looking for something, since in general we want to get a certain form of rallying from the person we are talking to. But the point is to understand why. In this perspective, we notice the mechanism of the “Queen mother”, Snow White’s cruel stepmother. “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?”. If the queen mother appreciated her own beauty so much, why would she need to ask the mirror if she is the fairest, why would she need to compare herself, why would she worry so much about Snow White? Obviously, there is a certain connection between the fact of finding beauti-

ful and the fact of loving, whether it be others or our own self and, as Plato initiates it in *The Banquet*, it is hard to distinguish whether it is beauty or love that comes first? Do we love because we see beauty? Or do we see beauty because we love? Now going back to the words which we are calling into question, what does happen? Do I find my words ugly because I do not like myself? Or, do I dislike myself because I find my words ugly? On this subject, we will let one judge as one pleases, or let the specialists handle the theses. As for us, a philosophy practitioner, more concerned about grasping the issues of the thought itself than worrying about any subjectivity, despite the bonds between them, we will query, as we did at the beginning of this text, the possibility of reconciling the subject with its own speech. Not for the sake of making one happy or setting up a eudemonist plan, but only because if one does not reconcile with one's own words, one will be unable to think.

## Protecting the speech

Before explaining this last sentence, let us specify that for us, the fact to reconcile with one's own words does not imply finding them wonderful, far from that. To be in raptures over one's own speech is too often the narcissist expression of an aggravated subjectivity, of an ill-being, of a lack of distance, of an inability to think critically. A bit like a mother [mv1] who is keen to find her child wonderful so as to live vicariously through a happiness which she is unable to find within herself. To reconcile with one's own speech is to accept to see it as it is, to take it for what it is, to avoid awarding it virtues which scarcely manifest, nor try to protect it from the eyes of others, through "shyness" or an excessive argumentation filled with "what I meant" and with "you don't understand me". To reconcile with one's own speech is to accept to hear how our words sound in the ears of others, it is to let go of the pretended or expected meaning which visibly is absent of the formulation as it is, it is to wish to see the void, the ruptures and the treasons of the pronounced terms, it is to accept the brutal and harsh reality of the words. Should it be only because the words that we pronounce tell more about what we think and who we are than all the other words that we so want to say.

Protecting one's words is actually what mostly motivates what, through haste and as an easy way out, we commonly call shyness. As a matter of fact, many of these "shy" people actually have a very high opinion of what they must say, but they fear though that the "others", those who are listening, will not share the same admiration for their own words. So they consider that it is safer and less perilous to abstain from talking in order to maintain this appearance or pretention of genius, benefit of the doubt, as all kinds of virtues can be awarded to the sphinx, as long as it remains silent. Moreover, if they fear the critical judgement of their speech, it is because they disregard this practice for themselves, or they flee it. Just like the greatly inspired people, the "shy" people think they are right without even pronouncing any word, and quite unknowingly, they care more for the illusory "meaning" of their thoughts than for their own words. And when they do speak, these people try to dodge the critique of their own speech reaching out to what they really meant, they will not hesitate to abandon or to deny some of the words which were bluntly pronounced, and withdraw into themselves, or launch a rambling speech. They will however never accept to look at their own words as the true substance of their thoughts: this would expose them too much; they would have to confront their own image.

## Risking thinking

Let us enjoy for a moment the antinomy identified in a shy person. By opposing what was "really meant" to the ideas already expressed, we are actually opposing the infinity to the finite, because we are opposing the omnipotence of virtual reality to the finiteness of practical reality, the undetermined potential to the determination of what has already been actualised. Virtual reality can just do anything, nothing is impossible, anything can still be said, whereas practical is right there, totally present, engaged into the otherness of reality, anchored in time and space. The word said is said, it is specific, it is binding to a shaped speech, a way of being, a particular perspective. It can still be interpreted, re-interpreted, over-interpreted, it can be made to mean anything we want, if only by claiming that it is unfinished, nevertheless it already reveals something specific, and unless you turn to



complete bad faith – which is far from unusual nor excluded -, it cannot be made to say just anything or the opposite of what it has stated already. What annoys is precisely this exclusion: the fact that it makes an assertion, whatever assertion, the phrase necessarily leads to a denial, as Spinoza teaches us. Anything that asserts, on account of this very assertion, is denying. It is either denying by commission: by refusing the opposite of what it is stating. Or it is denying by omission, omitting to say some things, pushing them into the background. However, most speakers will struggle immensely to accept this negative dimension of the speech, especially the second one, easier to conceal, taking refuge in the “totality” of their thoughts, in what they could still say, a totality which is as undefined as it is infinite.

To this effect, accepting our speech or words as the expression of our thinking, or better as the true substance of the thinking (Hegel), or as the limits of the thinking (Wittgenstein), is a psychological or philosophical equivalent to accepting what we have done, what we have achieved, as the reality of what we are (Sartre). As a matter of fact, we can always find refuge in “what we could be”, “what we could have been”, “what we would like to be”, “what we were denied to be”, “what we have been”, “what we will be”, and these different dimensions of the being and of the existence do have a meaning and a reality, but they can also easily represent a sort of alibi, refuge, fortress, preventing us from seeing and taking responsibility for what we are. The past, the future, the conditional, the possible or even the impossible all constitute some folds able to conceal the present and the current. If we do not request anyone to occult or just underestimate these various dimensions, which in their own way form the treasures of the being and its freedom to conceive, we do however wish to show the pitfall that they represent, and caution against the abusive use of this multiplicity. Because, if we tend to overuse the present to the detriment of the past, the future or the conditional when it comes to the satisfaction of the desires and the quest for happiness, we also tend to occult it very often when it comes to the reality of our speech.

## Abusing the speech

Let us come to what may possibly threaten this timid speech. Two fundamental criticisms were sensibly identified by the sophists against Socrates, about his way of speaking, or rather questioning. First of all, “You are forcing me to say what I do not want to say”. The reason is that Socrates, with his expert ears, can hear what a sentence says and denies, so he requires an interruption to his interlocutor, a ruling, in order to give some feedback about the sentence, so as to raise the interlocutor’s awareness about it. For him, this feedback is almost the actual definition of the thinking, or of the philosophising, since to be reasoning is to give the reasons of something. Therefore, he invites his interlocutor to return to the genesis, if not the archaeology of his words, in order to grasp its meaning and its reality. Not a genesis of the singular, the one of the interlocutor’s intent, but the genesis of the meaning, the universality of the word, the objectivity of its content. Yet this reality, seen through the words, is very often forgotten or denied by their author, simply because one is not prepared to accept the reality beyond the specific intention that drove one to pronounce them. An intent which – unfortunately – is just a slight and limited aspect of the reality put forward into one’s words: the intention is reductive. And oddly enough, the attentive audience, for which the intention is totally unknown, will perceive better the objective reality of the speech, since that audience is not inhabited and biased by the specific desire that motivated those words. Often however, the speaker will refuse the audience’s interpretation, considering it misplaced and intrusive, if not illegitimate and alienating. He will consider himself as the sole holder of the meaning of his own words, he will intend to denigrate any interpretations claiming his sacrosanct intention. As if our speech could be reduced to the only meaning that we claim to grant it, often in a distorted and absurd way. This tearing from the self, this rupture of the being between itself and the words supposed to mirror it, is precisely the core of the Socratic practice: to probe the abym of the being, to work on the crevice which constitutes our split singularity. How not to rebel against such an abusive intervention, such a biased proposal? An unbearable perspective in the prevailing psychologism.

The second criticism, in full compliance with the first one, is “You are tearing my speech to pieces”. A very unpleasant feeling caused by this sharp dissection of a so-called harmonious ensemble, in which we have put so much effort and love, a

small part of our individual self, a gracious bit of our person, prettily composed, a blend which we present to the world as a choice piece of ourselves. And if ever our verbal staging leaves us unsatisfied, if we think that it is short of the true level of our thinking, or not fully in keeping with it, we become even more sensitive to others' possible analysis, we become more nervous about the treatment they will give it. There is however a good reason why we tend to be unsatisfied by our speech, which relates to the unconscious and common fact that we often try to "say it all" when we talk. This is either about telling the most honourable, pure or unstinting truth on what we are thinking, with all its possible nuances, or about enunciating the totality of our thought, in its entirety, exhaustively, through an infinite and generally confused listing of the causes and circumstances, going into ad nauseam details. We try to cover every angle, to anticipate any objections, to protect ourselves in advance of all the critical judgements, sheltering our speech behind any possible screen, so as to make it unanswerable. And under the pretext of precision, we produce confusion, since nothing then distinguishes the essential from the accidental.

So here is what Socrates does: he takes a little bit of our "masterpiece", a bit which he picks in an arbitrary and unseemly way, in order to examine and triturate it right, left and centre, totally ignoring what we were asserting just a moment ago. He ignores the extent, the complexity or the "beauty" of our speech and wants to question us on one specific aspect of what we said, extracting it from its context, as if we had never said anything else, asking us to answer in a short and precise way, if not a basic 'yes and no', reducing the magnitude of our thought to a simple judgment: the one of an assent or refusal to a particular and reduced idea, or asking us to commit to a single word. A particular idea which obviously inserts itself in a vicious trap taking us back to the previous criticism: the interlocutor forces us to say what we did not say and did not want to say. He decontextualizes our words and then requires our position on the radicality of their meaning. Furthermore, inexplicably, this perverse mind seems to find within this disintegration, in this close combat with "hardly anything", a sudden burst of truth. Some "almost nothing" or "less than nothing" within which the truth of the being, if not the being itself, can be met.

## The worry of speech

One may believe that being subjected to an interpretation abuse is what troubles the speaker, worried that one makes his words say what he did not wish them to say, or something else than what he wished to say, but it seems to us that the matter here is deeper or more “serious” than that. Actually, it is easy to destabilise one’s interlocutor, and anyone can experience this, by asking him to repeat what he just said, in an acute way: “Can you repeat what you just said?”, and we will see him look startled and already begin to defend himself, without having criticised him in any way. Very often, he will not repeat what he had said, first of all because he has not really paid attention to his own words himself, which is significant enough. Or because he will feel threatened and therefore will want to justify himself rather than return to the words he had already pronounced, or he will transform his initial words by starting his sentence by “What I meant” ... He is overwhelmed with a form of anxiety or even panic although, objectively, nothing indicated any kind of criticism. However, we could here call upon a sort of social trauma in mitigation or as an explanation. Human beings care so little about the words of others, either they ignore them because they do not feel concerned, or they argue them because their ideas differ from the others’, or in an even more reductive way, they refuse them just because those suspicious words are being pronounced by others. This is certainly how the social dynamics work, a vector of the trauma previously mentioned: since everyone lacks respect for others’ speech, any speaker is more or less knowingly convinced that his audience will be looking for any opportunity to criticise his. We would like to bring another insight on this matter: the cultural dimension. As a matter of fact, some cultures are quicker to criticise than others, but those for which criticism is considered a failing to politeness and to social conventions will express some reservations, some disdain or some disinterest either through a polite gratitude, or through the expression of a deep interest which anyone knows to be superficial, fleeting, if not false. But we have come to realise that the politest societies are not necessarily the ones where the least insecurity about the status of the individual speech is met. Let us say that

each human group has its own ways of authorising, justifying or even encouraging the discredit of others.

## Evading speech

There are various ways not to see or to know what we say. One of them could be called “the intricate conceptual system”, a favourite for those who want to intellectualise, knowingly or not. They summon words, clearly or confusedly, producing countless details to lose sight of the essential, to defend themselves, to avoid being caught out. Sometimes they put forward an obscure complexity which prevents them from a direct contact, some bushy words, so as not to expose themselves to others. They withdraw into their solipsism and do not risk any translation, any transposition: they would be risking being understood. They refuse any interpretation of their speech, which is usually considered as below the genius of their message. This elitist, or autistic, scheme is popular: just like the octopus which throws its blinding ink to the face of its enemies, one uses details and exhaustiveness to create confusion, a confusion of which one itself becomes the victim. They love the nuances which entitle them to shift meanings. They develop, they explain, they prefer prolixity rather than clarity. An illusion of depth and creativity, an ambition for precision, a pretence to rigor. It is here a form of impotence. They are fascinated by their speech, an image producer. They are obsessed with power, the power of their own words, which shows a fear of the words themselves, an obsession which as always expresses their dread of others.

Through the words, one “philotricks”. Lying settles in, by omission or commission. Through the absence of a clear subject matter, which does not admit itself, by getting lost in meanders, codicils and precisions. The dialectical process is even called upon, to prevent any thought from transpiring, to drown the particular idea and remain elusive. Evading the others, dreading their eyes. This display of an excessive desire to be understood actually conceals the fear to be understood: the nothingness of our speech is lying in wait for us. An anti-socratism par excellence. The “*mètis*”, this power of the philosophical ruse, the wisely lie, is perverted. The

job here will be to find the precise place for the confusion, where the will and the thoughts interweave and contradict themselves, this point of emergence for the obscurity, precisely where enlightenment could occur. However, transparency is highly denied. The mind intuitively feels the danger. And just the possibility of transparency is dreaded.

This is why authors are useful to the scholars. When the scholars say something that they do not mean, they pretend that they do not know, they say that it is not them, it is the others. However, this phrase is constitutive of their thinking structure, even if conviction is not active. Their choice of concepts defines their affinities, their enemies, or even, by omission, what distinguishes them, and in that respect who they are, what they are. In any case, wanting to define one's own thinking through one's convictions solely would make no sense, although this is very commonly found. What we say, what we think shows what lives in us, what we do not think, how we think, how we are unable to think, it does not matter if we agree or not or who the author is. We think what we think, even though we say "I don't think", even though we want to criticise it. This thought is well within us. There are here grounds for effectuating an epistemological break.

The subject may well conceal such thought or such desire, what is in him will end up emerging, will exist outside of him in the shape of signs. Truth is powerful, it may not be concealed. After all, man is nothing more than a series of his own acts, which includes his words. This includes the assertion and the negation, or the denial of one's assertions. It can even be stated, as we have observed in our practice, that the efforts which are made to deny or disown are one of the most constitutive elements of the specific being. For this very reason, it seems to us that it is illusory to exclude the words from the acts, as it is commonly agreed. Speech is actually one of the many acts in which man engages easily, perhaps the one which manifests and reveals him the most.

"I could have said it differently", he asserts firmly, "But this is what you said, what you chose to say", we will reply. Is this possibility purely a problem of form, arbitrary and deprived of substance? "I could have done that work, remained silent or helped that person, but I did not". Could this be considered an accident? What have we got to lose to think that this pertains to the essence. A principle of

sufficient reason or pre-established harmony. But anyway, even unintentionally, for a few seconds, we did judge the man, as he had judged himself.

We must take responsibility for our choices, they are what tells the “being”, what reports it: they are the being and they constitute it. We are being because of our choices, not just because of their consequences, but because they make the organ of our thinking crystallize, just as the runner or the dancer form their organs through the exercise of their art. This way they become what they do, they are what they induce. Some of the words that we pronounce do not leave us unhurt, precisely because of that substantial moment, of that constitutive circumstance that occurred when we heard ourselves pronounce those words. After those words, we are not the same anymore. We did pronounce them, we did hear ourselves, we were indeed a witness to ourselves, whilst we actually attempt to deny them, or their reality. There can be no mistake here: what is said is said. Sometimes, by force of repetition, our words end up leaving marks on us, but here again some people will deny their own paternity or the meaning which constitutes it.

Other times, the speaker tries to get away by using a specific purpose as an excuse: “I said that because I wanted...” and then you pick: “to wake you up”, “to please you”, “to play games with you”, “to be silly”, “to provoke”, “to say the contrary of what I think” ... but this hardly changes anything. Not that the mysteries, the genesis, the intention or the mechanism of a specific thought are not interesting, but this is a different exercise: the one which analyses the wanting rather than the being. The being does not pertain to the “wanting”, but to the “wanting to want”. And the shape of the speech is the matter for this “wanting to want”. Of course, some connections are possible, if not useful, but it is extremely important to dread of the duplicity of the being. The basic “wanting” is too meandering: it never ceases to evade itself; we prefer to bypass it...

They all treasure that precious little self which escapes determination, as they believe, a free hypothesis. The soul, the self, the subject, this unfathomable depth therefore becomes the place for complacency. Deep down... “Deep down” can just explain anything. This indetermination really exists, it is indeed a freedom, through its multifaceted and elusive nature, but from this shapeless plasticity, from this abym, we prepare the ground for our illusions, we sow the seeds of our omni-

potence: the desire to be what we want, what we pretend. As if we could know what we want to be... The being engages into the world with what it has, with what it is, with what it says. And it is possibly by seeing and admitting this empirical given that he will be able to envisage any self-surpassing. Accept the finite to access the infinite.

## Thinking through others

Let us go back to Socrates. Oddly, he is immensely interested in the words of others. We would like to add that he could not think without others. Otherwise, why would this grotesque faced man spend his time looking for the company of his fellow men in order to practice philosophical questioning? This shrewd and agile minded man, didn't he have anything better to do? Why waste his time with anybody doing something that is almost insignificant? Some of the characters described by Plato are far from brilliant, nevertheless for Socrates the quest for truth has very few limits or established presuppositions. Anything is right when it comes to disclosing the good, the true or the beautiful, and if there are any obstacles, they become the melting pot for the being and for the one. Does Socrates want to do some charitable work? Is he fighting for a better humanity? Is he lonely and bored in a philosophical solitude, just like the mythical philosopher in his great cave? Does he want to convince? All things considered, even the truth is for him just an excuse. He is urged to look for something he does not know, to probe the human soul, and unlike many philosophers who probe their own, he feels pressed by his "demon" to explore all the ones that pass by, which are all so promising, so disappointing and so rich. No need to see here any teleology: Socrates is not in search of anything, he is simply searching, he is searching to search.

However, this quest gets him into many troubles. For a start, because without wanting it or without knowing it, or even without wanting to know it, he breaks the established codes. Too busy with his desire, blind with his passion, he knows nothing and sees nothing, he does not exist anymore: he searches. Like a hound dog that chases its prey to its hole, a torpedo fish that paralyses whatever gets in the



way, a gadfly that stings and harasses whoever comes close: there is a wide range of striking metaphors which can explain or justify his execution. Isn't Socrates' death, this inaugural gesture of western philosophy, totally inevitable? But why did questioning others make his presence so unbearable to his Athenian fellows, who in the Socratic myth represented nothing more than the human being in its generality? Now, such a character could indeed turn out to be tiresome in the long run, especially for his relatives, but why did he arouse so much hatred? A hatred which he would have kept from arousing if only he had just showed disagreement to his fellow men, if he had settled for cursing only, just like the cynics. But questioning is – can you believe it – highly more corrosive than asserting or any other forms of provocation. He is far too interested in the words of others and others, unlike what they usually claim, do not wish for anybody to have such an interest in their words. Only because the access between their words and their thoughts is far too direct; the connection between their thoughts and their being is far too implicit. Besides, when one makes every effort since early childhood to forget one's finiteness, one's imperfection, one's infirmity and one's immorality, it is very hard to accept that a kind of pervert comes by and, in a disrespectful, intrusive and brutal way, points out and asks the name of this disability or this mole which has been so ardently concealed, especially when relatives and neighbours, more empathetic and concerned about the established rituals, look away discreetly and automatically when a tiny bit arises slightly... Mankind is an odd species which, whilst looking for recognition, spends so much energy trying to hide its individual nature, a shameful reality, a specific nature which ends up being considered no more and no less as a doubtful disease whose existence and cause must be concealed. This is probably why man ignores his true nature, being a human.

## Bad manners

As a consequence of the Socratic reality and of the conflicts that are generated, a final – or initial – indictment settlement results[mv3] : “You must be mad at me”, or “Your intentions must be wrong”. Indeed, it is not natural to have such an interest in the words and thoughts of others, it is not normal to be questioning like

that, rather than be saying or asserting, it is not considered appropriate to be dissecting in such an abusive manner the slightest word that we hear. A rupture in the traditions which puts the usual ways in question. Because if such a behaviour was not considered as pervert, therefore we could only admire such a man, a wise man, capable of such an asceticism, such a destitution, driven by such a faith in others, that he endlessly believes that he can find the truth in his congeners, whoever they are. This is what ultimately motivates Socrates. But unfortunately, the human fragility, its insecurity, perceives this confident and flattering approach as an aggression. To question someone is to go to war with him, it is to wish to humiliate him, it is to annihilate him, in short it is to force him to think and in particular to think of himself by himself. This is the reason why Nicias explains the Socratic approach to Lysimachus so as to reassure him, in Plato's dialog *Lachès*: "when replying to Socrates' questions, whatever the subject of the discussion is, after a few minutes, you inevitably end up talking about yourself!". Know thyself! And you will know the universe and the gods. Indeed, what would the known object mean, if we ignored the instrument of the thinking, the mind itself, as Hegel raises. Yet what frightens us is precisely to get to know our minds, when the thinking subject becomes the object of his thinking. As it is one thing to be seduced by some philosophers who explain well about the breach of the human soul taken in its generality, to feel good when we get to understand or perceive the blindness or the banality in which our fellow citizens live, but it is a violent disillusion when we come to realise that the speech is actually addressed to us personally. This is not done!

## Accepting finiteness

Nevertheless, how else to reconcile with one's words and therefore with oneself, if not by accepting to contemplate the breaches and flaws that affect our speech, if not by contemplating the rigidities which constitute its elaboration, if not by perceiving the boundaries which mark out its extent. To reconcile with one's words is to accept the finiteness, the imperfection, at the risk of feeling deeply ridiculed. Do we not love our families and our children despite their failures or their odd habits? Must we become blind in order to love the people around us? If this is the case, we

might be harshly disillusioned, when our eyes open through the wear of time or as a result of some fortuitous and generally dramatic event. The same applies to the relationship that we have with our own self. Of course we can try, knowingly or not, to maintain an illusion of transparency, of well-being, of contentment, of a form of self-satisfaction, at the risk of a short-lived or fragmented complacency, and of a definite disappointment. This is when Socrates, or his equivalent, the stranger of the late dialogues, can be considered a true friend. The one who tries to speak to us in all honesty, the one who dares to point at the elsewhere. That elsewhere is precisely what “forces” us to be blinkered, because like the standard horse towing a cart, there are some lateral realities which we cannot bear: they make us nervous. We look straight ahead of us, and carry on walking ignoring the numerous questions which would make us pause, doubt, or even freeze.

Socrates questions us: “hey mate, can you see what is going on here?” “what do you think of this, or that?” Then he listens to our reply, with that characteristic false naivety. However man is smart, just like dogs or big cats, he can feel the wind. Instinctively, it sees the prey approach. And this is where the crucial experience stands, the moment of decision, the one that separates humans from humans[mv4] . Does he want to react “biologically” and flee or attack whoever threatens his existential “integrity”? Or will he perceive in that odd looking and speaking man the true friend he had never met before? The friend who has no friend. A lover without a beloved one. Just driven by an objectless passion. Perhaps he is himself the object whilst not knowing who the subject is, what the subject is. Of course, he is an odd friend with a strange humour: what is this irony which can only be a lie? How can we trust him? Where do we stand? Instead of a discussion, he questions us. Even worse, he imposes a poor choice on us – is it really one? – between a “yes” and a “no”, between a “this” or a “that”. Because it is obvious that many of his questions are tricky. But still, since we got ourselves into this impossible perspective, let us see how this man who is far from human, can still be wishing us well. Well there you go, he does not wish us any good. This is why he is so interesting. He only cares for his own good, or better a good that is deprived of ownership. He looks for it, he needs us, he says it; it is only a quarter of an irony

when he asks anyone to become his master, the master he has always been looking for.

The reality is that the company of such a being can only become unbearable. However, does he ever ask anyone to live side-by-side with him? He has many interlocutors; he appears to move on to new ones over the dialogues, and this is rarely an accident. The ones he says he loves change over the dialogues. Plato, who made his pittance of this being, before he went his own direction, had known him for a very short while. This may explain why he was driven by such a passion. In the long run, the corrosive effect of questioning can only induce turning away from it.

## A friend who does not wish us well

However, what makes Socrates bearable, as we said, what makes him a true friend, is precisely that he is not wishing us well. He is not looking to convince us, nor point us in the right direction. He simply questions us, and invites us to see what we do not see, what we do not want to see, what is intolerable. This way, he invites us to die. If to philosophise is to learn to die, it is not here a question of an ulterior and final death, but a death of every moment. The one that is watching us, like the sword of Damocles, above our heads, our stunned by the daily swirl heads. A Pascalian entertainment. Our ideas are constituted of these many opinions which enable us to play or foil the game. The society game, the family game, the game of personal desires and ambitions, a quest for happiness, great or humble. The perseverance of the being, the Spinozian *conatus*, is far too often conceived as a heteronomy, as the product of an exteriority, a series of obligations. To live usually means to have multiple constraints, internal or external, which need to be satisfied in the best possible way. Yet the being is not one, for both Socrates and Spinoza, although this unicity does not exclude any multiplicity, far from that. Fragment is indeed its living substance, as the point here is not to be flying to a beyond of the beyond where supposedly reality would be nesting. Reduction is the melting pot of the being. As the Myth of the Great Cave says it quite well, the phi-

philosopher in us would not be able to live outside the cave: it is his hangout. He is the inner friend who makes us feel guilty, the one whom we let speak from time to time just for a good laugh, and whom we then silence as we get angry. Since we are not always – and not often – in the right mood for an interruption to our routine, for a scramble into the unstable balance which we more or less manage to create. Now, to philosophise is to think the unthinkable, an unthinkable which is by no means permitted by the existence. Existence binds us to the obvious, to the certain, to the expected. It prefers the certain, it likes the probable, but it balks at the possible since it is only just a possible, and it fears impossibility. From time to time, through aimlessness, through fatigue, or through the resurgence of the being, it enables the rising of the extraordinary, the unpredicted, the incredible. In small doses, or for a limited time, and often in a perverse way. Love, joking, mystical vision, drunkenness, are all means by which life amuses itself, for fun and by oblivion. Philosophy demands this rupture in a conscious, deliberate and continuous way. Of course, everyone has experienced a philosophical moment, this precise moment when the meaning flips over to a new one or to no meaning. To live such a moment may generate, although rarely fulfilled, a desire for the elsewhere, an elsewhere to inhabit, or even an elsewhere to life. Although some - and here again the mind is a shrewd old devil - might attempt to establish a life outside life, a life beyond life.

To reconcile with one's own words, just like to reconcile with one's relatives, implies to stop having any expectations, and therefore to stop being frustrated or disappointed, moreover, to stop being able to be disappointed or frustrated. This does not imply having to abandon critical thinking, nor to establish a sort of passivity, far from that. As, very often, what prevents us from engaging in a corrosive and deep analysis of some comments and beings, is the fear of losing, through fear of clashes, fear of hurting, or simply the one of an outraged sensitivity. From the moment there are no desires left to preserve a connection other than the one associated with the communal search for truth, generated by itself, what is there left to fear? Very naturally, if not restrained in its run-up, if it has not gotten used to preventing itself from thinking, the mind thinks: it grasps what it perceives through an intimate and dynamic connection to the thinking matrix which it has built for

itself over the years. Obviously, this matrix is more or less elaborated, more or less subtle and more or less fluid, but it constitutes however for each thinking subject the yardstick of every new thought, the active reference, the primal place where all thoughts come from, where they all go back to. This is precisely the way in which words are an access to the being, the object of the thinking is not an object anymore, but it is the subject himself. The thinking subject then becomes the direct object of the thought; the mediation becomes the ground for the immediate, a conscious and reflective immediate. To reconcile with our own words simply becomes a commitment to presence, an acknowledgement of our own words.



# THE STATUS OF SPEECH

One of the difficulties encountered in philosophy workshops is the status of speech. Why do we speak? In order to identify the obstacle in question in a succinct manner, let us propose the following difference. There is a gap between a speech that seeks above all to express itself and a speech that is meant to produce thought. Obviously, some readers will object that this distinction makes no sense, that both cases are the same. So we will try to show how these two conceptions are indeed distinct, both in their purpose and in their function, and therefore in their nature.

## No discussion

One of the most classic criticisms against Socrates is that he does not talk, or not really, with his interlocutor. Because the latter, in the dialogues as reported by Plato, is often content with simple "yes" or "no", or even "of course" or "certainly". The critic will therefore comment - rightly - that the "poor" interlocutor does not express himself, that he does not have the opportunity to express himself, or even that his sole function is to be reduced to the status of -valid for this rogue Socrates, this manipulator, who moreover made the clever pretending to know nothing. All this is undoubtedly true, it is undeniable that this reading of the dialogues makes sense, otherwise it would not be so common. It is necessary to think that what is common can not be deprived of truth, whatever intellectuals who think hard believe in the singularity of their genius, a genius that maintains a privileged relationship, even exclusive to the truth, for whom the common reason can

only be devoid of any legitimacy. Thus, we think that the Philèbe, Glaucon, Théétète and other Menon do not really have the opportunity to express themselves, and that Socrates has no intention of letting them do that. Nor, moreover, that in general he does not wish to express himself. "Express" is a very interesting term: literally, it means "get out by pressing". This leads us to say that we express the juice of the lemon by tightening it strongly, and by this gesture, will be expelled indistinctly all that the fruit contains: juice, pulp, pips, skins, peel, etc. The verb express therefore has a purgative connotation, and the one who wishes to express himself wants to exteriorize, to manifest his interiority, that is to say to "free" all that he "encloses". Whoever wants to express himself wants to bring out his subjectivity. Moreover, Expressionism, the aesthetic current that emerged in the early twentieth century, wanted to leave room for the moods of the artist, rather than claiming any objectivity, as did the "classical" painting a subjection to the exteriority that even Impressionism still practiced too much for his taste. It is clear in a claim of this type that it is a question of abandoning as much as possible any constraint, in particular that of the external reality, to give free rein to the uncontrolled flow of subjectivity: "the other" takes the lead. the wing. It is understandable that in our age, characterized by relativism and post-modernism, "the right to express oneself" appears as a fundamental and indisputable claim. Such a vision very naturally leads to a radical individuality, to an isolation or autarky of the subject, even if schemes such as intersubjectivity attempt to reconcile the individual with the requirement of collective or otherness, or even with a constraint or a kind of objectivity. But the requirement of such a concept, as for many concepts in vogue, remains quite minimal. For it is mainly a question of recognizing that the other exists, that he is a person distinct from himself, because each one is animated by different intentions, representations and desires. This concept, rather of psychological order, rather useful for the child who discovers the subject and the singularization, does not produce a deep reversal in the adult; he even uses it to proclaim the irreducibility of his being and to justify his self-esteem, since everything is subjective. The other, in such a scheme, represents only a vague

a supplier of exoticism, somewhat embarrassing, whose presence we only accept when it suits us, by choosing what suits us best, even by accommodating it, re-



jecting the "rest" that bothers us. And nothing prevents us from qualifying this as an ethical phenomenon, since this attitude claims to "regulate" relations between beings.

## Empirical subject and Transcendental subject

The claim of a being thus described, who wishes above all to express himself, is that of an empirical individual, of an immediate subject, who takes himself as he is, who grants himself unrestricted credit. It consists of a sum of opinions, desires, wills, fears, knowledge, experiences, etc. He reacts to the solicitations of the present moment and defines himself without even realizing it through the immediacy of this reaction, an unreflected or unreflected instance. Passive in nature, its behavior is mainly characterized as a set of reactions to various demands, both internal and external. If he feels threatened - a frequent occurrence - he will immediately seek out where he can find the elements that enable him to "defend himself". Because he is above all a person, a status, a function, an image, and the representation that he produces of himself is an idol for which he is ready to realize all the sacrifices, in particular that of the truth, requirement he does not hesitate to sell at any moment. The property is in an elsewhere, more comfortable. His idea of integrity is to protect himself at all costs, because the being in its generality is limited to its immediate being. Obviously, it operates in a liberal or Darwinian scheme, where everyone, autonomous, free to think and do what he wants, is driven by his own desires tries to survive; he is a consumer who wants to find his account in the order of the world, he embodies a singularity for which the other is in general a competitor, more or less threatening, or a supplier. His own person is sparse, the bursting of his being does not cause him any problem. The fear of no longer being, and its mirror image, the desire, would be the best approximation of its coherence.

The transcendental subject is rather the unity of the person: it is not a sum or a totality, it is its coherence, indivisible. Integrity here falls under the constitutive uni-

ty of being. But the concept which is undoubtedly the most adequate to express this coherence, the invariant - relative - of this subject, is its consciousness. Paradoxically, the unity of the transcendent subject is therefore a repetition, a duplicity. Consciousness is both the object and the subject, this consciousness being above all self-consciousness, a consciousness of self which overhangs the consciousness of any other element or attribute of the subject, of any external object. Access to oneself is consciousness, considered as unity of the subject, a function that brings together in one entity the innumerable aspects of this subject. At the same time, this consciousness is conscious that it is not its own subject, since it is a function: the subject that is at the origin of this consciousness, in a way its substratum, escapes it. Nevertheless, this subject can be considered as a pure concept, a product of consciousness, because the existence, the manifestation of the subject, advances and is expressed in the form of a totality: the various immediate of the to be empirical. This consciousness both arises and escapes; it is its own otherness and constraint. It is at the same time consciousness of the world, consciousness of others and self-consciousness, it is articulated through this triple requirement, centrifugal and centripetal tension which separates the subject and makes him be. Consciousness is at once unity and multiplicity, nature and function, subject and object, absence and presence, continuity and discontinuity, and other antinomies. This is what can be called the paradoxical nature of the transcendental subject.

Thus, to challenge the transcendental subject is not to push him to express himself, it is not to leave the field open to a flow of words. It is an attempt to grasp beyond the immediacy of here and now the substance of being. Substantial Vinculum, Leibniz would say, the substantial connection. Because in the Platonic tradition, the unity of all being, its substance, its first or essential reality, is its unity: it is at once the form and the relation, the primordial reality which makes it possible to name the thing in question through a unique concept and not through a plurality of terms. Some may call this "soul", although this term poses a certain problem in terms of the burden of its connotation, attractive or repulsive, depending on the experiences. Certainly, this transcendence escapes us in its absolute and radical unity, because it is an anhypothetic: a necessary statement, the very condition of

thought, the condition of any hypothesis, nevertheless elusive and inexhaustible. Often the anhypothetic is simply a concept that is problematic, because it resists the statement, it is a kind of vanishing point of thought. Blind and necessary point: it alone allows a perspective of the totality, which otherwise would be a chaotic and inchoative set. The unity of the subject involves the reduction of a phenomenon, the bringing together of a set of phenomena, grasping it involves pruning an indefinite multiplicity to find the common core. Return to the origin, archeology of the thought, genesis of the being, as many conceptual or poetic intuitions which tend towards the same requirement, that of a surrender of the immediate.

And yet, in our practice, paradoxically, it is in the immediate future that we find the said unity, if we accept to perceive it, to glimpse it, to accept it. For it can not avoid being entirely there, totally present at every moment, investing every place where the being manifests itself. Contrary to the image of Epinal, the transcendent being does not reserve for a sort of well-hidden back-world, which is reached by some esoteric path: it is there at all times, manifests itself crudely, especially if we do not give time to the "little reason" to ratiocinate, to perform its petty profitability calculations that serve to hide the being. Too often, reason, which drives and produces speech, serves to hide more than to say. It is by accident that the truth emerges, fortuitous product of an interstice that has not been seen, a happy escape that we forgot to seal.

We are not animated by some cynical vision in stating such an accusation, although this cynicism, in the classical sense of the word, seems to us to be a very appropriate position. Because we think that reason is capable of transcendence, that it wishes in various degrees to let itself be worked by the truth, but at the same time, the biological and perishable being that we are, the one who constantly fears not to survive physically. and especially morally, the one who feels threatened - probably for good reason - tends instinctively to believe that to persevere in being is to hide, to protect oneself from danger. The totality of the being is posited in the slightest gesture, but the subject refuses such a seizure: he claims to be more complex, deeper, more real, and can thus escape the danger represented by the gaze of others, and his own.

## Dialectical method and demonstrative method

The observation of such a self-defense operation is valid not only for the common operation, but also for the intellectual functioning. To clarify this point and specify our approach, it seems useful at this point to distinguish two different paths of thought. The dialectical method and the demonstrative method, a distinction which refers us to a fundamental opposition, epistemological and historical, which opposes from the "origin" Aristotle to Plato, or even more to Socrates. The dialectical method can be described as anagogical because it seeks to go back from multiplicity to unity, a sort of return to the original. As a result, any particular statement is never anything but a conjuncture, a hypothesis, that one examines, that one questions, that one puts to the test: simple trace, simple sign of an absence unconditioned. Both questioning and objection are the critical activity - etymologically: sifting through, passing through the sieve - which captures the breadth and depth of this statement; hence it becomes a simple step to try to identify a "superior" hypothesis that can account for what comes from it. According to the Platonic metaphor, what we think is only the image of the true, a real inaccessible that it is nevertheless a matter of searching and digging relentlessly, without ever believing that it has arrived there. In this hypothesis remains a hypothesis, it will never have any other status than that of ephemeral and fragile instrument of thought, a simple imperfect mirror of the hypothesis. The hypothesis is an icon, which reflects what transcends it, rather than an idol, which is revered and adored. And when the mind ends up on limit concepts, such as truth, beauty, unity, or good, it becomes incapable of determining its precise nature, which escapes it. He can only work on these concepts and let himself be worked by them: they are the determinants and the limits of his thought and of his being; any particular representation that the singular spirit could enunciate would be necessarily partial and partial, biased and reduced. Thought preoccupied with the truth is therefore condemned to a kind of perpetual movement, to the uncertainty of the soul and to its confusion, a terrible position, except that it could, like a kind of Ulysses living in its place. wandering, vaguely reconciled, find happiness in the no man's land of this endless quest.

The demonstrative or hypothetico-deductive method, on the contrary, tends to transform the initial status of the hypothesis into a postulate, from the moment when the consequences examined, although arbitrarily chosen, or in a way that will always include a part of arbitrary, tend to confirm the stated hypothesis. Here we mean arbitrary in this double sense of what is not grounded in reason, as it is based on a partial reason, truncated and necessarily oriented. Thus, both mathematical reason and experimental reason naturally project towards a termination, towards an end which satisfactorily concludes, pleasing to the subject's mind, by providing "the right answer". The latter confirms, reassures, certifies, and thus the happy hypothesis soon becomes practically indelible, custodian of comfort and certainty. It is its utility that therefore interests, no longer its truth, and for all intents and purposes the hypothesis now becomes a postulate. Certainly science, particularly in its technical dimension, is concerned above all with operability and efficiency, criteria that can not be underestimated, because these parameters represent an important facet of the criterion of truth. They can therefore constitute the legitimacy and substance of a practice. At the same time, however, the practical nature of this form of thinking can not be elevated to any absolute, as Popper, Wittgenstein, and others have attempted to point out. That a set of propositions are mutually supportive and mutually supportive, producing a coherent whole, constitutes a very interesting instance of thought, which certainly has its share of truth, but from the moment that this construction is erected into absolute, losing thus its problematic status, the door is left open to all rigidities and dogmatisms. The principle of falsification of Popper, by which this philosopher distinguishes religious thought and scientific thought, seems to us an example of this historical attempt of philosophy to question the concept of evidence. While Socrates warns us against this concept and what it represents, Aristotle, founder of a science concerned with operativity, begins his demonstrations with a kind of "It is obvious that ..." which makes it possible to found a system quite recommendable not to say totally reliable. We are no longer in the "If this, then that", but in the "This, so that". So do not be surprised if the "this" comes to reinforce the "this". The mere occultation of the "if ..." makes all the difference. We are no longer in the conditional but in the categorical. We can also think here of the concept of "conjecture" advanced by Nicolas de Cues, for whom all thought is only a momentary thought, a moment of thought,

fragmentary and ephemeral. Conjectures represent for him only the successive and necessarily imperfect efforts of human thought to measure the reality of things, a necessarily unfinished work to reach truth or unity. Another articulation of this problematic is the Platonic hierarchy between mathematics and dialectics. Each of these two sciences, these two arts, has its own characteristics, but the dialectic is superior because it tries to grasp the absolute as absolute without relying on presuppositions that would vitiate its approach, while mathematics They do not care to question their assumptions, busy solving problems or even finding them.

On another level, the issue in this debate is the oscillation between dialectics as an art of discussion and dialectics as a tool for accessing truth. For Plato, dialogue becomes the means par excellence to access truth. Aristotle, on the contrary, will make the dialectic regress at the simplistic stage of the simple art of the correct discussion, useful when one does not know the true essence of the object under discussion, a sort of discursive exchange on the probable or the possible, in opposition to a "science of the certain". From this Aristotelian point of view, the scientific approach remains much more reliable and useful. The latter attempts to determine the identity of an entity by progressively clearing out what prevents access to a determination of the individual, while the dialectic places the individual in a broader context that modifies the situation forever and problematizes nature. The dialectic opens the identity to what exceeds it, it invites to the alienation of this identity, through a constituent otherness of this being itself. It brings to light the genesis of the entity, which links it to its foundation, as unfathomable as the latter. This is a criticism of the hypothetico-deductive approach, because despite the recognition of its usefulness, as we see for example in mathematics or physics, we realize that necessarily the critical perspective is somewhat abandoned, at least in its radicality. The basic statements once confirmed in some of their conclusions, are never again or less naturally questioned. Not that this relativisation or questioning is formally prohibited in such a context, although this prohibition is often observed in the history of science, but simply because the attitude towards statements is relatively complacent: without it to confess, the mind is above all in search of certainties.

Later, Hegel will come to establish that dialectics is the contradictory path of thought, which consists in sublimating any idea encountered, through a simulta-

neous process of negation and affirmation, of alienation and conservation of ideas. Thought never comes to an end, all that it produces is only a mediation, in a quest for the absolute. On this last point, those for whom this absolute is accessible, determinable, and those for whom such a determination of the absolute represents a contradiction of principle will be distinguished.

## The illusion of certainty

The dialectical perspective obviously changes the status of speech. On the one hand, as we have just substantiated, it is not a question of arriving at any certainty, no matter how well founded, by reason of any reasoning, nor by observations or experiences. A fortiori, in the same way, the speech is also not the expression of our convictions, this other type of certainties, these being rather founded on the feeling of a simple subjectivity, on sincerity, this feeling illusory if there is one. But then, what is this dialectical word? What is its nature? What is its function? Let us propose the idea that this is a question of interrogation and examination, which is why questioning plays such an important role. But here again it is a question of examining the intention which characterizes the question, which influences the nature of the question as well as the attitude of the questioner. A question is a request, something is expected. But what are we waiting for? As bizarre as this phenomenon is, most of the common questions, when they are not in fact simple disguised queries, are rhetorical questions: the questioner already knows the answer. He wants to be reassured. He questions to get a confirmation of what he already knows. These are the different forms of what can be called "teacher questions". He questions to verify what his interlocutor knows, unless he wants to show that his interlocutor is ignorant, unlike him. Otherwise, when he really does not know, the questioner will really trust his interlocutor, and he will take for granted what the latter - wise or wise - will say: we expect from him who knows unquestionable truths. In these different cases, certainty is decisive. Whether it is a certainty vis-à-vis oneself or vis-à-vis others, whether a priori or a posteriori, it prevails in trade. It is also what we call knowledge, which implicitly contains in its current use the connotation of certainty. So much so that very often, saying "I'm not sure" means

"I do not know", as if doubting was crippling knowledge. Attitude which of course excludes from the outset the principle of a knowledge conceived as a conjectural set.

The dialectical word belongs to a completely different state of mind than that of "knowledge". One could say that knowledge is replaced by thought, the result by implementation, the process. Already, the dialectic is comparable to a game. Even if it is not excluded to win something, if only an ephemeral victory, the important thing is to test oneself. Moreover, what we have mainly won, a bit of truth, an intuition, a new perspective, can be questioned at any moment. One can even say: "is" questioned at any moment. For without the production or the emergence of new interstices, reversals, problems, the dialogue gets bogged down, it becomes boring: the speaker pontificates, or frustrated, he gets angry. This is how Plato distinguishes eristics and dialectics, philosophical dialogue. The first is a struggle in which one seeks above all victory, the established position, while the second is a tireless quest for truth. He adds, however, that the sophist who practices this erism resembles the philosopher as the wolf looks like the dog, without which we really know in this resemblance who is who.

Thus the friction with reality, that is to say with what is other - not only with others - being, phenomenon, idea or object, is a necessity. It is not simply the condition, as in the request for information, it is not merely the goal, as in teaching, it is both at the same time. Everything happens in the meeting. This is also claimed by the concept of "sharing", fashionable these days, except that the latter does not imply any conceptual added value, but denotes only a psychological or relational dimension. While the dialectical speech both speaks - even expresses itself - and is necessarily constructed in the relation, because it is critical, even if it is a critical relation to itself. It challenges, it is constantly in motion, but nevertheless runs the risk of posing itself: it affirms bluntly and without backwardness, without this characteristic feverishness of the worried word that constantly fears to be mistaken. The latter does not assume, she eludes, she prefers the chaos and vagueness that protect her from having to answer for herself: she does not want to feel obliged to be accountable. She takes refuge permanently behind a "will to say", beyond words, which would be, it seems, the substratum of the truth. She thus wishes to



leave no decision to the contradictor, only granting him scraps. The dialectical word, on the contrary, assumes its finitude and enunciates definite propositions which do not retract into the allusive and the ambiguous. Moreover, every bit of the dialectical speech is not in itself dialectical, it is only a moment, that of an affirmation or a negation, a question. Nevertheless she speaks, she screams what she has to say, without hiding behind an allegedly justifying incompleteness. She assumes everything she says, and as a result, she hammers out, as Nietzsche puts it, by striking concepts like striking a bell, to see the sound she makes. And if the latter criticizes the dialectic for its laborious side and its attempt to escape life or the world, it is neither to freeze the thought, nor to escape in the dilutions, but to better weigh the burden of the simple and paradoxical proposition, as its aphorisms judiciously show. In this, he joins the Socratic attempt. Because it seems to us that too often we do not perceive in the Socratic dialogue the drama that is taking place right now, under our eyes, in the minute detail, in the infinity of the stake, in the interstice of the in-between, to be bored with the object of the quest, in the background without any real interest, as shown by the dialogues that end in fish-tail, or do not hesitate to deal with insignificant things. The transcendental, these concepts which limit the being and delimit our thought, more than a reality to be grasped, operate like a revealer of the speaker, the real subject: by trying to define the terms at stake, the subject defines himself . The subject becomes the real subject: the object. In and of itself, Hegel would say. The one who thinks becomes the one who is thought. Consciousness is at the rendezvous. If not, why whoever has escaped from the cavern to perceive the good-true as it is, after a moment of hesitation, would he come back to his family, at risk, if not with the certainty of finding death there? ? Not for moral or even ethical reasons, but because it is not possible not to play the game. And if in confrontation the truth emerges, it is above all the truth of the subject, of the the emergence of "Know Thyself", which explains why Socrates' academic interlocutors get angry, finding this way of discussion absolutely inadmissible.

In the dialectical perspective, speech has an intention. As in any speech. But there is a fundamental difference: in the consciousness of this intention. The word

that seeks to express itself is totally spontaneous: it does not know why it is stated. She speaks. Quest of attention or recognition, seduction, desire to be reassured, everything mixes and this word tends more than any other to deny or hide his own intentions as soon as they are announced by chance. Kind of instinctive modesty of subjectivity that wants to advance veiled, if only because it does not wish to show the banality of its own nakedness. Either she wants to be naive, devoid of any ulterior motive: "I said it just like that". Either she wants to be deep and complex: "No, it's something else, it's more complicated than that". On the contrary, the asking word claims to know what it wants, since it asks. But if it is asked to give further account, for example by providing the reason for its question, by explaining what animates its request, it will offer an end of inadmissibility. For example, "Why do you ask this question? She will often answer "Because I would like to know" or "Because I am curious". The question asked must therefore be taken as a kind of obviousness, just like the desire to know of the one who qualifies as a curious person. And sometimes even when the explanation deepens somewhat, it is always fixed on the object sought, for example its usefulness. As for the learned word, the scientific discourse, it wants above all to establish its hold on the world, to ensure an unshakable status.

## Confronting each other

The art of philosophical discussion, the dialectic, is based on the principle that one thinks through the other: the other is the very condition of thought, the path to the truth. Not because he holds the truth, but because he is capable of truth, potential of truth. It is potential truth and not truth in act, to use Aristotle. But through confrontation, truth becomes action, the living substance of thought. The subject can see himself act, he accesses himself, if he likes. But very often the speaker is repugnant to this effect mirror, fear or modesty. As in any exercise, physical or otherwise, the individual discovers his clumsiness, he experiences his fragility, he feels easily ridiculous; the temptation is strong to condemn the bearer of bad news, to blame him. By association of ideas, this mirror of being becomes the cause of pain, the origin of this suffering which would be new if it was not precisely that it

echoed a fracture originally originated many times. Surreptitiously, a light infiltrates, reminding us that this is the Achilles heel that we have been putting so much effort for so long to protect or even forget. How could we endure a meeting where we directly touch this neuralgic point, without leniency or concessions, only because the presupposition of such a discussion is the love of truth? The other is quickly accused of blaming us by doing so: it breaks the established social codes, it transgresses the rules of a basic moral hygiene that prohibits to go further, the one that makes the guests stay in the room to eat and do not enter the kitchen. We blame him for such aggressive behavior, for such violence. Without realizing that the violence is entirely in the frightened and angry glance that one carries at this precise moment, or in the resistance, abrupt and instinctive.

This moment of violence, or perceived violence, of perceived aggression, is hardly avoidable. It can not in fact be avoided: it is the sign or the manifestation of a truth in action, of an operative truth. How could we endure to see ourselves as we are? It would take a greatness or a force of soul unheard to attend such a spectacle without blinking: the spectacle of self, set in abyss, a grotesque vision of finitude when taken in an infinite perspective. Even when it comes to others, we can not help feeling pity, compassion, disappointment, hatred, fear. So what about ourselves! See yourself! While we are condemned to ourselves, without hope of redemption or divorce. Worse still when there is hope, because it is the whole present that becomes unbearable to us. Better still hope nothing.

To get by, not without reason, social codes have been erected, according to a more or less variable scheme, but one still finds some constants. They revolve around the obligation of the unsaid, the lie by omission, an indirect constraint of speech to the point of being off topic, an ethical rule which is called respect, or an equivalent term. Quickly, without being generally aware of it, this concept of respect makes taboo the true word. Everything is done to avoid others. That it does not speak to him, by finding wonderful all that it states, by using formulas done by way of protocol - for example the "dear colleague" so precious in the academic world - by the search for various complicities or through this terribly current term of "conviviality". By these rules and conveniences, if we flirt with the transgression, we risk at any moment the accusation of "ad hominem". What is implied is a

kind of injunction: "Speak to my speech, but especially not to me! ". No question to convene the subject! No question of summoning the being! The empirical subject is sacred: it has had too much trouble to be constituted, it will not be dissolved, pierce or even disturb without saying anything. He clings and does not let go, although he knows well, deep down, not so far, that all this is very illusory. Otherwise he would not have confidence anymore, he would not be destabilized so easily. Nevertheless, let us remember here the sentence of Hegel, on what is at stake in the dialogue. "The struggle of gratitude is to life and death; each of the two self-consciences endangers the life of the other and accepts this condition for himself, but only puts himself in peril; indeed, each one also has in view the preservation of his life as the being of his freedom. "

## Speech as an interpellation

When the word asks, when it questions, it does not really pose any problem. What is forbidden, or taboo, is to question someone, to challenge others, even to question oneself. In fact one can question or question about the world, but not question or question about oneself. And when it is done, it is only on narrative elements, aspects of being that are not fundamentally important. Any opportunity is good to tell his little personal myths, worked and reworked over time, to concoct pretty stories, smooth and full of twists. The listener feels comfortable, he is supposed to be rocked, laugh or shudder at the right moments, and applaud at the end. Even the immodest disclosure of his intimacy is still acceptable, depending on the milieu. But if it is a question of truth, of what really engages the subject, it refers to its finiteness, it is a matter of questioning, not just as someone loudly hails someone in the street, or when we speak to his interlocutor virulently, but also as the policeman, stopping the one who seems to us to commit an offense, as commonly done Socrates, at the risk of hurting good souls, humanists and democrats.

What are we asked to live in good society? Not much. Simply to accept the speech ready-made, ready to consume and complacent, the rituals of conversations, supposed to break the ice, fill the silence or lighten the atmosphere. And if

we ever accidentally impose on ourselves questions that touch in a nerve center, in a place where the rub, we make these explanations that give us a good conscience, a story or a speech where we do not go out too badly, where the image is saved. One of the most common strategies is the rejection of the crucial question, expelled as not the right question, impertinent of its irrelevance to established codes. "I would not say things like that" or "I would prefer other words" or "The problem is not that one". There are all kinds of stratagems to avoid answering the "right question", dodging with the greatest sincerity in the world.

In this vein, it has been for some time, especially among educators and psychologists, to distinguish the person and his speech. When a person feels hurt by criticism, he is kindly told, as a consolation: "This is not personal. It's not you who are criticized, but what you say, or what you do. Certainly, such protection of the empirical subject may have some interest, especially if it suffers from a certain fragility. This may at first mitigate his susceptibility. But three criticisms can be made for such a positioning. The first is that anyway the person whose speech is criticized, despite a temporary acceptance of the lenient speech that is offered to him, feels good or understands that the sound and echoes of his own word reflect on it. Because it is good to be these words, and in the end, it will always be asked to account for what she has stated: it is from his own words that it will be sanctioned in one direction or the other. It will notice it especially when the words will involve a more consequent stake, implications reprehensible by decency, by morality or by the law, and that it will not come at the moment to the idea of nobody to say to him that this it is not her but her words, which will feel the general reprobation. The second criticism concerns the attempt to clear the thought implied by such a position. For if we admit the word as a privileged or constitutive place of being, we can not accept such a trivialization of the utterance, thus granting it an almost accidental or fortuitous status. This would justify the phrase "I spoke just like that" so often used to avoid looking critically at what was said. It is not so much the attempt to desacralize the thought that concerns us here, but that of a lazy thought that protects itself by saving itself from archeology, which no longer apprehends the quest for its own genesis. The principle that all speech is always the reflection of an architecture, that it conveys unspoken and presupposed ones that provide

meaning and richness to the utterance or its absurdity, seems to us indispensable if we pretend to maintain a dialogue worthy of the name. Our third criticism is the absence of body-to-body contact, which, however, should involve the utterance of a speech and listening to oneself. A word without a subject, a speech devoid of being, a word that hardly engages and no longer links is a hollow word. For if the word has breath, it is because it is carried by a subject, but if the latter thinks only of withdrawing, the speech will necessarily be felt. It is a question of the speech as of a physical gesture: it carries if it is supported, if commitment there is. Thus, because of the lack of credibility of the psychological argument, the justification of a lazy thought, or a disengagement of the subject, everything conspires to a cutesy and at the same time pretentious word. Because basically, what is common between two so-called opposites, the "talk just like that" and the "word that knows", is a refusal of the shaking of the subject, a desire for anchoring irremovable and untouchable certainties. Vulgar opinion and learned opinion do not invite anyone to a substantial meeting, that is to say, to a trial. Everyone wants to stay on his own, no one is allowed to invite himself to others. This is how politeness is established as the principle par excellence that governs social relations. No transgression can be accepted: even the truth - if not above all else - is subject to this social pact.

## The fragility of being

Why are we talking? Instinctively, we know that we speak to exist, to exist simply, or to exist a little more, to overexpose. Without the word, we would miss something important, fundamental, essential, which also means that without words we do not exist. This implies that our existence is at stake in this word, and in this sense the relationship we have with it is a good continuation of the worries that our animality causes. For every living being desires to survive, to persevere in being, with the consequence that every living being is haunted by death, by its own destruction, be it total or partial. We are threatened or beset by finitude in all its forms: suffering, lack, fear, threat, insecurity, etc. And what is mainly in physical form in animals is transposed very naturally in moral form in humans. As Sartre

distinguishes it, "being-in-itself" becomes a "being-for-itself", with various consequences: consciousness, by amplifying - or inventing - the perception of danger, makes all the difference. The human being is in a sense more fragile, because he is not only threatened in the integrity of his physical being, but in the image he projects, in this virtual being that he fabricates from scratch : morality, thought, spirit, kind of hologram that he must protect. So many terms that refer us to the artifice of culture, to that nature beyond nature that often forgets or despises nature without noticing at the same time that it is only the projection.

Thus, we are surprised by these birds, which, at the slightest sound, at the slightest movement they perceive, fled by wing. But what about those humans in whom all speech, or almost, is nothing but an attempt at justification, totally instinctive: at the slightest threat, the interlocutor intervenes, cuts the floor. He reacts vigorously or "bounces," to use the buzzword, in short, he vigorously protests against these innumerable words which seem to him unbearable or unacceptable. And even when he speaks calmly, what is he looking for? To be right, to pretend to hold the truth, to appear to be learned or intelligent, to see yourself as a good person. So many reasons to be who undoubtedly have their legitimacy, which undeniably constitute existential motors for each of us. But so many obsessions that make us talk mechanically, without us suspecting it at all, especially for ourselves. Especially as filled with uncertainties about our ability to live up to our own expectations, we constantly seek to reassure ourselves in the eyes of others. Then we approach the neighbor, we talk to him, waiting for this little something in his eyes, in his voice, which will show us that we are worthy of interest. We tell our little stories, we explain what we have done, we justify our decisions and our actions, we share our desires and our wishes, we reveal even the worst aspects of our personality, even to coat them in order to be acceptable, as long as we are in the center of things, as long as we value ourselves in the shadow of the consciousness of others. All is good to obtain this presence, and from these arise the innumerable procedures, gears and automatisms more or less ritualized that preside over life in society, whether they operate in a formal setting, such as institutions, or a natural setting, such as the family. But whatever the modality or the context, we seek the company

of our fellows, because already, in itself, being with others represents a form of confirmation of our legitimacy, a declared acceptance of our being.

Nothing is worse than ostracism, this exclusion from others, where we find ourselves facing ourselves, facing the most implacable of all. Unless you fear so much the look of others, to find it so unsatisfactory or disappointing, that it is even better to be alone. This is the case for those who dread judgment on their own words: they prefer to be silent. They will avoid any disappointment. They will be able to maintain undisturbed the inner fantasy of their omnipotence or their perfection, ingenuous or perverse vestals. Since no one can doubt the fullness of their being, no one is able to perceive its depth or perfection. And one will be surprised, the day when accidentally, or forced, this word will burst forth: behind the facade of shyness we will perceive the hidden megalomaniac. Without a shadow of a doubt, this Mr. Hyde or Janus Bifrons will reveal to himself the most surprising claims, the most unprecedented claims. This phenomenon is quite common, for the human soul contains within it the most extraordinary hopes, the most fantastical or the most excessive, which, as we have already said, give a reason to act and to be in existence, but even more so that they serve as a balm and palliative to the harshness of everyday life. Moreover, very often, as we continue to meet him in a way always surprising in our work as a philosopher practitioner, the human being tends strongly to take his desires for realities. By thinking about what he would like to be, he ends up believing in his dreams and taking them for granted, much like those video game maniacs who expect characters in the material world to react like those in the virtuality, with their repeated lives. Thus this sincere word, that which thinks itself or pretends to be true or objective, intensely embellished with good feelings, in general testifies to the importance of the dream more than of any realism. Therefore, it can legitimately be assimilated to a function of exorcism. Perhaps after all, by uttering the right words, with great faith, the phenomenon invoked will take place. Kind of return - or relationship never abandoned - to a magic word, where the words have in themselves a power, of evocation, of invocation, of convocation. It will be remarked that very often, for lack of argument or superstition, as a discourse the convinced speaker will content himself with insistently repeating his initial intention in order to make him accept, or to convince him-



self. Or, as Blaise Pascal had noticed, the argumentation will easily be replaced by a simple additional emotional charge. Many are the argumentative forms that are not, such as the addition of adverbs (really, absolutely, honestly), the attestations of sincerity, the "promises" of truth, the recourse to number (everyone knows it), the call to complicity (you know it as well as me) or other justifications of the same kind.

## The illusion of "Why? "

Nevertheless, beyond the fallacious arguments, let us examine for a moment this insistence to convince those who listen to them, manifested by many speakers. Admittedly, many speeches are content to remain in the assertoric mode, but as soon as it is a question of going beyond this simple enunciation of opinions, one generally passes to the argumentative dimension. So much so that many philosophical practitioners, so pleased with this "qualitative leap" of speech or thought, are content with this competence to justify a philosophical practice. Sometimes openly and explicitly, but more often by the reality of their work, as can be seen. This phenomenon has another predictable reason: the "why" question is the simplest to ask. So, very naturally, children who are invited to ask questions, frequently ask the same two: "Why do you say that? And what does it mean? ". In fact, the two come back to the same thing: they are questions of explicitation, one asking the reason for the speech, the other asking for the meaning and therefore indirectly the intention of the terms used. You can ask them anytime, anytime, without even having to listen to or understand what is being said. Moreover, the why is also the prerogative of people worried, animated by a concern for control, who thus question any gesture, any word of others, especially their relatives. It must be believed that they suspect any interlocutor of hidden intentions, mysterious, even nauseating.

The child of four or five years has understood this principle of "Why? ", His power, who pursues one of his parents by asking him " Why this? Or why? ". In general, when answered, he makes a new question by adding the word "Why" to the last proposition. He grasped the principle of transforming an affirmation into a question, using it and abusing it. At the same time because it discovers the intellec-

tual power of the question, which causes interesting effects on the adult, beginning with the embarrassment of not being able to answer - this embarrassment being able even to become source of nervousness - but also the psychological power, that of easily attracting the adult's attention to his little person. This is not to minimize the cognitive importance of the discovery of the "Why", but on the contrary to amplify the issues by showing the dialogical dimension of the requirement that this term implies. In this perspective, discovery is crucial. Words have power; the child already knew it intuitively on the psychological level, he discovers it on a cognitive level. It forces the other to confront himself, to confront his own ignorance. When a child of this age discovers that the adult is no longer all-powerful and that he himself can participate in the implementation of this "desacralization", he takes part in a fundamental experience, both existential and in a certain metaphysical way: the discovery of the principle of finitude, the limit, constitutive entity of being. It is therefore normal that he tries to reiterate more thirsty this experience "unheard". Although it is not forbidden to simply play the game in the repetition of this inaugural gesture, we nevertheless propose that the parent transform this essay to invite the child to go further in his psychic evolution. This for two reasons. The first is to prevent the child from becoming a kind of caricature of himself, a little jester, using the "Why" only as a means of attracting attention. The second is that in this schema, the child remains in a state of minority, or consumer, where it depends on the adult to know what to think. Thought, in its dimension of autonomy, is often overshadowed by knowledge, from a rather external source, more specifically from an established authority: parental, teacher, media or book. It is therefore a transmission of information and not an invitation to produce ideas. But to discover the thought or be reconciled with it, it is a question of the child having also - or discovers - a power of emission: the right and the capacity to produce ideas. Not to mention that dullness over time in its operability a discovery whose use is only repeated mechanically: for the parent, who is annoyed or no longer wishes to respond to this infinite list of "Why" for the child, who will eventually become bored and no longer benefit from this fundamental discovery. The "Why" may then reappear only as an aggressive term used in conflict situations. This is noticeable when one observes to what extent this interrogative term indicates a reproach. So, if the ten-year-old child is asked, "Why are you doing this? Or he interrupts this

gesture, or he tries to justify himself rather than answer the question in itself. It is the very status of the principle of the question that becomes suspect: every question is in fact an accusation.

To avoid this phenomenon of thought corruption, we suggest two strategies. The first is to invite the child to answer first of all the question he has just asked. He may answer that he does not know, although often, like his parents or teachers, he asks rhetorical questions of which he already knows the answer. To reassure yourself or to start the conversation, or even to check what your interlocutors know, the "guessing" principle. Many times he will answer "I do not know". And this is precisely where the parent should be aware of the distinction between knowledge and thought. Because even if the child asks "Why is she moving the car? And that he knows absolutely nothing in mechanics, one can still ask him to produce a hypothesis, by "forcing" the resistance of this admission of non-knowledge, even if this hypothesis would be of a magical nature, whimsical or phantasmatic. This does not prevent the adult, in a second time, to question the child's response in order to verify the logic or the merits, or to provide him with a "scientific" explanation, a more established hypothesis or coherent, but the establishment of this first moment reserved for him allows the child to learn to risk himself to the thought, without worrying too much about the weight of the knowledge, the established authority and thus the suspicion of 'fault. He learns to interpret the world, to give it meaning, by trusting its own means. Means that the parent will have to appreciate not by rigid criteria of an "official" thought, a knowledge, but in relation to the coherence of the uttered words, their relevance or their operability, that is to say examined at from inside the speech. Childhood hypothesis that he can in turn question by a request for explanation to deepen the elements and the whole, or that he can problematize through counterexamples, thus introducing the child to the process critical. Of course, the main obstacle to this exercise is the patience, both of the child who is struggling to produce ideas, and of the parent who has "something else to do" and who would rather "get right to the point", in only concerned with the "real answer". Thought, which is constructed by hesitating or

stumbling, is certainly always more laborious than knowledge, which is either absent or already there.

A second technique, easier than the previous one, because it is faster, consists of accepting to answer the child, providing an answer to his initial question, but if he rests a second "Why", then it is about him ask to repeat or to repeat in his own words the answer to the first question, as a condition of a response to the second. The main function of this technique is to short-circuit what we have called "corruption" of questioning, reduced to being a simple instrument to draw attention to oneself. Too often we have observed in class the consequences of this corruption. For example, when we are invited as an author in a class of children of ten or twelve, who have "carefully" prepared questions for the passing author - a great event - we see them waiting for the time to ask their question, without really listening to the answer, without listening to the questions and answers of others. The question is reduced to providing a kind of momentary stooge, to give oneself a little moment of glory. Also, in this dialogue with the child who asks why, making sure that he listens to the answers and understands them, he is led to practice a real discussion and not simply to solicit attention, although, in the absolute, this last request is not without legitimacy. But here again the adult must be patient, especially at the beginning, because he will realize that the child will sometimes have difficulty to understand it, to consider what is asked of him. Between speaking without worrying about being understood and talking while making sure you have been understood, the difference is great, from many points of view: cognitive, psychological, existential, etc. We often try to have fun, to please, and we give in to ease. It is for this reason that adults often finish children's sentences "What you mean is ...", and they just have to say "Yes, that's it". In one case, the most common, speech is only a way to get closer emotionally to others or to share a moment, in the other, speech is a real intellectual encounter, a body to body between two minds, an experience to be it through the exigency and the radicality of otherness. The status of speech is not the same at all.

## Argumentation and deepening

Let's go back to our criticism of the argumentation. We would like to contrast the concept of argumentation with the concept of deepening, a distinction that we have already described in other texts. Here we come back to the status of speech. This for two reasons. The first is that the argumentation is very often a simple reaction of self-defense, instinctive and unthinking, a self-justification; the second is the lack of consciousness implied by such functioning. Even when the work of argumentation is more sophisticated or more elaborate, we can still observe a compulsive dimension: that of justifying oneself, of proving that one is right. Here again, we will be able to oppose "scientific" thinking and "dialectical" thinking, although we think that true scientific thought, worthy of the name, is indeed dialectical. Because in one case it is a matter of defending a thesis, in the other it is a matter of using a thesis to confront the being, the truth, the very thought, in that it has more intimate, more universal and more essential. The first conception sanctifies the thesis as well as the singular being which enunciates it, the second instrumentalizes the thesis, plays with it, challenges the singular subject to put it in abyss and to make him glimpse a below, a beyond, a interiority, an exteriority, as many dimensions which a priori escape us, transcend us, a reality to which we aspire if we dare. Certainly the argumentation is likely to be rhetorical, having the function of proving that one is right. As it can be philosophical, deepening, since it investigates the reasons for the statement. Thus, the mere fact of staying on the same register of speech is problematic. Already because the deepening is done also by the shelling and the putting in pieces of what has been stated, which is called analysis. By bringing together distant or even disparate elements that makes the thesis more visible: synthesis. By producing examples that concretize the thesis and make it palpable. By identifying the implicit or hidden assumptions of the thesis. By the interpretation of what is said beyond the immediate meaning, which expands the meaning of the thesis. So many actions of thought that provide a better understanding of the thesis and its issues. At another time, the passage through critical examination, through various questions and objections, called problematization, allows a richer input. Then the production of concepts to treat the problems that have emerged, also illuminates and makes the thesis more fluid and clear.

These various constitutive processes of dialectic distance both the subject treated, the stated thesis, but also the subject that states, by introducing a dimension of internal dialogue, or even internal conflict, which for Plato characterizes the thought. It is therefore a question of inserting a corner in the speaker's report with himself, which does not happen naturally, on the contrary. We would even add that if it is not already an acquired habit, rather rare, as much for the common opinion as for the learned opinion, or sometimes even more for the latter, the subject will resist violently any attempt to bring it out of rails of a so-called argumentation which is in fact a compulsive justification, until it becomes snarling when it is pushed into its limits. And whether we like it or not, putting forward the argument leads in any case to the law of the strongest, even though we call it "democracy": the one who handles the verb with more agility has won. beforehand. He is not the wisest, the most perceptive or the deepest, he is the smartest.

## Paradoxes of constrained speech

In philosophical practice, speech is more rigorous, harsher, more demanding. It carries an increased sense, more extensive and multiform. Certainly it is more artificial and less natural, but at the same time it is more truthful and less superficial. It is more weighed, heavier. It is violent - it is violent - because it is constrained and compressed, because the immediacy of the envy is violated, but strangely, in a second time, with the learning and the new habit, this word will be sharper and more free. The paradox characterizes besides this upheaval of status. For example, by agreeing to produce simple and less complicated, clearer and more visible proposals, by ceasing to claim the status of a complexity that is in fact confusion, by ceasing to drown in nuances and doubt, risking a sharp word drawn with a line, it acquires thickness and consistency. Being less spontaneous and more directed, being more worked, being less sincere, it acquires authenticity. Because it weighs and weighs, because it pays attention and chooses its terms carefully, the consciousness is at the rendezvous, and in time, slowly, elaborates an educated intuition, enriched by its own experience. Just like the carpenter, who in his apprenticeship carefully calculates every gesture before acting, age and progressing expe-

rience will leave to his own gestures the autonomy of an acquired accuracy. Which would never have been possible if he had not at first agreed to alienate his patience and desire for immediate. Trust is only acquired by learning to be wary of oneself.

In the same way, a similar paradox, the speaker learns to respect others by learning not to respect him, or at least by learning not to respect what is often the term of respect. For in the context of philosophical practice, the presence of the other is no longer the same, it is no longer of the same nature. It is no longer a matter of exchanging to suit the empirical being that faces us - we do not act to make it feel good - but rather to address its capacity for truth, the transcendent power of his being. Challenge to accept this meeting with the other who asks us to ignore our "desires" and our "needs", to put aside this "worry of self" which is not one: it does not is not a concern for oneself but a concern for the image, this idol that we have made over time. The main function of philosophical dialogue is to shake off these rigidities that are supposed to protect us from nothing by providing us with a "raison d'être". Logic is in this area a powerful tool. For if there is no question of constraining thought to a reductive logical formalism, it is interesting and revealing to evaluate its processes by the yardstick of this logic. In this perspective, logic is not a mold where one must insert thought, it is a rod with which one titillates the ribs of the beast to see how it reacts. It is the stick used by wrestlers to confront their respective agility. It thus makes it possible to detect the faults, to reveal the weaknesses and to reveal the interstices. Discourse is no longer a way of showing itself by fabricating an artificial identity, it is what allows a direct access to the other, thus allowing a more genuine relationship to oneself. Contrary to current opinion, it is not by protecting oneself from the thought of others but by introducing "the other" into one's own thought, which allows oneself to think about oneself, since it becomes "other", it alienates itself, as a condition of a real deliberation. Logic is also the other par excellence, since it is nobody, does not belong to anyone, it is common sense. It appropriately embodies the reality principle, an effective approximation of radical objectivity, since it is supposed to embody not a particular opinion but the condition of possibility of an exchange and an understanding of ideas. It is no longer a question of "respecting" these preambles, orato-

rical precautions, apologetic and justifying remarks, or other phatic words that produce a soft thought and in fact isolate us from others and from ourselves, to enter plainly. foot in living matter, to risk the friction of souls. It is thus, as often reported by those who enter these places for the first time, that the thought goes where it does not usually go, to dare to say out loud what it usually dares not even not to think, to widen his field of vision, at this moment when the mind suddenly takes into account its own narrowness, experience as painful as liberating and necessary. Thought must pay attention to everything to learn to pay attention to nothing, it must pay attention to nothing to pay attention to everything.

To enter into a philosophical dialogue, the subject must become a non-subject, as far as possible. He must die to himself, and not fear to invite his fellow man to do the same. He must no longer pretend to protect others in order to protect himself. Through the rhythm and the scansion of the discourse, he distanced himself from his being to better examine the lineaments and erasures. He dares to exist, he dares to exist. He is no longer in consumption and complacency, but in the autonomy of being in the face of the subject, because he refuses any subjection, any obligation to be, any convenience, so many formalisms which would bring him back to a status of object, product, a set of conditioned reflexes. But how could this be done without going through the caudine forks of an external requirement, whatever its nature? The thought becomes Ulysses the adventurous, she becomes Penelope tenacious, she becomes the industrious Daedalus, she becomes Icarus the reckless, she becomes the inconsistent prodigal son, more furiously she becomes her jealous brother or more wisely she becomes his father. It is by passing through these great archetypes that the mind finally moves.

Without the acceptance of alienation, there is no loss of subject, no thought is possible. And contrary to the common reflex, that of argumentation, instinct of defense and survival, to think it is to engage. Certainly the process of instinctive argumentation is a form of commitment, but a commitment in the empirical, an engagement in the given, a deadly commitment in the already played. The commitment we are talking about is that of the trip to Kythera, which Baudelaire evokes: "I have only found a symbolic gibet where my image hangs", or the return to Hölderlin origin, in short, the passage through infinity. In practical terms, it is a matter



of getting involved by working the word as the baker kneads the dough: turning and turning it, kneading it and flattening it, folding it and folding it, digging it and by lengthening it, so many gestures whose function is to ventilate matter and to soften it. It seems to us that it is also a question of airing and relaxing the thought so that it thinks adequately, so that it finds its fluidity, so that it allows itself to think. The status of being is no longer the same. Here again we find the gap between a word that seeks above all to express itself and a word whose purpose is to produce thought, to create and to generate. We could name this work: "Heal Thinking", and we will treat this point in a future text.



# PHILOSOPHICAL CONSOLATION

The human being is suffering. Nothing extraordinary or new there. It is suffering, more than animals, because it experiences bodily pain, as do other species, but also because it experiences moral pain, a sub-product of freedom and reason. They are human characteristics which consequences can hardly be escaped. If physical suffering is not permanently present, moral pain hardly disappears, or fleetingly. Whether it be through frustration, impatience, unsatisfied desires, disenchanting expectations, or any other concerns, suffering is there, more or less significant, more or less present, more or less bearable. The range of means by which it expresses or manifests itself is wide, showing the diversity and the persistence of the pain. In the same way, there are many ways to reduce the pain, which can be called consolation, a consolation which we pursue endlessly.

Words themselves articulate the problem and offer some solutions, some panaceas, some painkillers, because words nest at the heart of man: they constitute his being. They capture his pain, generate it, treat it, heal it. In any language, through many forms, one can find words that are painful, words that hurt, even words that kill! Admittedly, before the words, through his organic nature, man has experienced pain. The one from the tearing of his body, from some brutal clashes, from illness. Through lacking, hunger, thirst or fatigue, the pain arisen out of a body deprived of its fullness, from a need robbed of its satisfaction, the one of a disturbed harmony, or just anxiety. Obviously, animals also know the fear that leads them to seek protection, to escape, to fight. Sometimes they are even prepared to sacrifice themselves to protect their own. The ghost of death, a vague feeling of destruction

or disappearance of the being, whether individually or collectively, seems to affect a certain amount of animal species. This is perhaps an anthropological vision, but could we speak of a will to live, apparently deeply rooted in the animal function, without speaking of a will to die? Especially concerning animals that kill, or those that run away from their predators, minimally those that recognize the difference. Not to mention the fear of losing close ones, dear or attached, whether it be through simple biological identification, like some societies of insects, or through a sort of emotional attachment, like family connections amongst mammals. Desire is at the core of the existence, under multiple forms. An infinite desire, an impossible desire, which goes way beyond our ability to reason or our understanding, because it depends more on the imagination, an endless power of representation. So desire is tragic, precisely because it is endless, without boundaries, without determination, in such a way that the overweening avidity of some people turns shapeless. Dissatisfaction is chronic, anticipation and frustration become unbearable. Nevertheless, expectations, which we have in our bones, move us: they drive, motivate and structure our lives. But this process is far too shapeless to suffice, the “yes to life”, joyful and complete, dear to certain philosophers, is a construction that is too intellectual, too fleshless to satisfy us. We need to say “yes” to certain things and “no” to others, to be more determined, because are not able not to make a choice, it would be impossible for us to be devoid of inclinations and subjectivity. Life in itself cannot fulfil us, we need to exist and not just be alive. We cannot fail to hope, want and desire. Therefore, we just couldn’t fail to experience lack and pain.

Consequently, for man, as we mentioned, pain is the object of a speech, which therefore turns the speech into the holder or the preserver of the pain, for oneself or for others. Speech is “pharmakon”, both poison and cure. In the same way that the speech encompasses illness, by its inherent power, it necessarily encompasses healing, and vice-versa. Now here comes what is interesting: the word that heals, the word that consoles. To start with, since we are not doctors, or psychologists, we will not endeavor to examine words as producing some somatic effects, of an unconscious nature, since the philosopher that we are cares mostly for the psychological, conscious or reasoned dimension of man. Moreover, for the same reason, coherent to our philosophical posture, the human subject is not here conceived as

a disabled entity, unable to fulfil by himself his own psychological needs, but as an autonomous being, able to take responsibility for his own existence and to determine his own judgment criteria. However, the boundary that we are trying to outline is not as clear as we pretend it to be, although it seems to us beneficial to try to mark it out, as impressionistically as it may be. If only through the abuse made nowadays of a “psychological” type language, that turns a healthy adult into a person that is ill and unaware of it, in an era where all kinds of witch doctors proliferate. An era that preaches childish ideologies inciting people to be mollycoddled and spoon-fed, to confide their slightest indispositions, under the pretext of an illusory quest for happiness, often at low cost. Admittedly, the good health of our bodies and our minds may have been far too ignored, but the idea is not to go to the opposite extreme of some unhealthy narcissism. And then perhaps the speech that confronts itself to the being, and that constitutes it, will play an unexpected role, more substantial than we would have thought or hoped. We could relate this to Spinoza’s injunction about happiness: best not to look for it to meet it.

Our hypothesis here is that man is suffering, and that his suffering incites him to search for remedies. On one side, the remedies that treat the objective dimension of his being, the same or almost for everyone, and which therefore are a scientific or magic matter, and on the other side remedies that are a matter of subjectivity, of psychological singularity, and which cannot be elaborated without the subject himself having to define the nature and the content of the problem, or at least to greatly participate to its definition, and that of the cure as well. We will call the first category: medicine, in a wide sense. Let us remember that Freud, founder of psychoanalysis, tried to give his new practice some scientific value, so we fit psychology into this category. We will call the second category: philosophy. It is up to people to understand in which framework their practice fits. But here again, we find such a blunt and marked distinction slightly bothering. We must however try it in order to get out of this rut where nothing adds up, in order to avoid the pitfall of the undifferentiated scheme, this “dark where cows are all black” as condemns Hegel. The “new age” spirit which, in reaction to an excessive scientism, extols a sort of “magical” vision of the being, is for us like jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire.

The general name we will give to this philosophical approach, for the need of our thesis, is consolation. Because, despite the risk of a certain reductionism which a few will not fail to condemn, we will assume for all intents and purposes that philosophy, or rather the philosophizing, is nothing more than man's attempt to heal his ills, his moral pains. We are reminded here of Plato who claims that philosophy is purely human, because gods don't need it and animals can't do it, or hardly need it, which is the same. Man is the only being that is a hostage caught between the finite and the infinite, and therefore that perceives and conceives an urge for such a practice. Moreover, this double nature of his is causing him additional suffering, since man is shared between the conscience of his immediate being and the hope or the illusion of what he could be. He is torn also between empirical being and transcendental being. It is at the core of this duplicity, which is specifically human, that the need to philosophize articulates itself, through some thoughts, through some words, words that constitute the thinking, words that are forced by the thinking, words that are both causes and remedies of the suffering that is affecting the mind. Yet, if the body as body proceeds from generality, the mind as mind, even though it can also proceed from generality, proceeds all the same from specificity, which is inevitable. The subject is singular and determined by its specific reasoning. The extended, or physical, matter is more common. We will be accused of being highly Cartesian or rationalist, and we will plead guilty, nevertheless as did our great predecessor, and with some mitigating circumstances, we will admit a certain continuity, a certain important link between these two aspects of man.

As a last attempt to mark out the extent of our sphere of action, a few words seem necessary regarding the problem of pathology and diagnosis. Here again, two pitfalls appear in this usual symmetry of the realities of the world, a recurrence whose frequency makes dualistic scheme quite tempting. On one side, the claim of an absence of pathology, on the other side the formalism or the rigidity of pathology definition. The first instance deals with a radical relativism that entitles anyone to full and total legitimacy of being and of thinking, all-mighty subjectivity that is legitimate just because it exists. This "teenage" scheme claims that all thoughts are of equal merit, that people can think what they want. This could

very well be a defensible thesis if only one could accept the consequences of such a world vision. For example, the fact here that neither logic, or reason, or morality, or consciousness are given a real status. Which would not be a philosophical problem in itself if this position was sustainable without any major obstacles. But unfortunately, what unknowingly the advocate of such a thesis would be professing here, is a discourse which glorifies the immediate, which certifies the sincerity of the moment, which annihilates the possibility of a critical perspective. A discourse which, at the slightest blow of reality or alterity, will not fail to generate various contradictions and cause many ills. Our work as a philosopher is not here to propose a new scheme, but just to offer an opportunity of awareness, to let the subject work deeper towards such a scheme, to become conscious of it, or let it go, as he prefers. Nonetheless, our experience enables us to recognize in such a discourse, through simple questions, not so much the pathology of the scheme, which in the absolute does not exist, but the torments of a singular being who is unable to take responsibility for his own existence, just like in teenage years, years of all dangers, of all anxieties and uncertainties.

In the opposite situation, the one of the scientific formalism, the point would be to establish a list of thinking and being modalities, a priori defined as healthy or pathological, with pathologies then requiring to be fought or healed. If many philosophers have, without necessarily making any statements, written in this way, it cannot be the same for the philosophy practitioner, whose role is not to convey a specific philosophy and teach it whilst regarding other forms of thinking as irrelevant or a “disease”. This would be teaching a wisdom or a religion, for example. The clashes between philosophers, doctrines, schools, trends, which mark and structure the history of thinking, show us the inclination of some thinkers to somehow impose a certain vision of the world, which they think is more assured, more true, vaster, more methodical, etc. Having said that, if they hadn’t had that pretention, perhaps they would not have perceived the interest in their specific contributions and they would not have been driven to keep up their writing efforts. Unlike the literary writers who generally aspire to some originality in their work and to some expression of what they care about, the philosophers are driven by an aspiration to truth, virtue, reality, in any cases to a certain form of universality, as vain and

pompous as this claim may sound. A claim which is sometimes acknowledged, sometimes not, just like for any ordinary mortal. With that extra talent that the specialists of the philosophical technics deploy to evade the issue and claim a false humility.

But here we are, based on our work of negativity, critique or deconstruction and yet still of assertion, in our turn offering an axiology, offering to define a certain amount of pathologies, which we will conceitedly define as non-doctrinal, and to assert the possibility of a diagnosis. The point is not to establish a vision of the world – as much as it would be difficult for such a perspective not to show through within our words – but to identify what allows the thinking and what stops the thinking, insisting on the latter aspect more specifically, since the point is to implement the thinking, what actually nests at the heart of the philosophising. Let us acknowledge here a “personal” thesis, a vision of things that seems crucial for the rest of our text, although it is not claiming any originality. The thinking does think, very naturally, except when it is hindered. Therefore, the philosopher’s job, his technicality, to a great deal relates to the suppression of those obstacles, which allows us to state that we do not teach how to do philosophy, but that we are addressing the reasons for the non-philosophising. A bit like engineers fighting the natural obstacles that are stopping and hindering the stream of a river, rather than digging an artificial canal.

For those who may fear to move away from the topic, the consolation, let us start with proposing the work hypothesis which is that the so-called philosophical practice consists for a great deal in re-establishing the standard process of thinking that is undermined by “pain”, a concept used here in an extended and polymorphous way. A pain of which the main effect would be the fixation of this flow on a particular point, or several, in an obsessional and non-reflexive way. This pain becoming the anchoring point of the thinking subject, is acting like an astronomical black hole, a place of a disproportionate density that attracts everything to it, even light, a reason why nothing results from it anymore. As a matter of fact, some pains manage to mobilise the totality of one’s psychological life experience, to a point that it can make the subject radically impotent, except if he/she manages to channel or sublimate this pain, transforming it into a force able to move and drive

him/her. To us and for that matter, this sublimation or this channelling form the core of the dynamics of the consolation, which we will endeavour to explain.

## History of philosophical consolation

Rather forgotten by philosophy dictionaries, the word consolation has its importance in the history of philosophy. Although this idea seems to be of Mediterranean and western specificity, we meet it in other traditions: for instance, in the *Bhagavad-Gitâ*, where the god Krishna consoles and advises the prince Arjuna afflicted with a terrible moral dilemma, or in the preaches of the Buddha, where compassion and awakening aim at breaking the chain of causality that brings suffering. In western countries, the explicit role of philosophy has shown from the Antiquity, with the Epicureans (Epicure, Lucretius) and the Stoics (Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius), especially with regards to death. This concern about man and his woes appears in Ancient Greek times, through a form of decadence of the noble and detached themes: metaphysics, gnoseology, cosmology. The human subjectivity had already been treated slightly by Plato (*The Banquet*) or Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*) but always in the perspective to reach an ideal, as the transcendence or the divine still formed the essence of reality: the good is more sought for than happiness, happiness being far more fashionable nowadays. We can find this opposition between a complacent thinking and a philosophical nobility in *The Consolation of Philosophy* from Boethius. Unfairly condemned to death, he starts his book in prison where he writes poetry to complain of his woes. Soon enough, “Lady Reason” visits him in his cell to reprimand him and incites him to contemplate the “great truths”, so as to forget the suffering related to his fragile and miserable existence.

With Saint Augustine, Christian philosophy experienced an important inflexion in the relationship between the consolation of human pains and the presence of an ideal, since from his own acknowledgement, the origin of his conversion was a personal despair linked to scepticism and an absence of truth. Besides, the relationship between the biblical message – used to the consolation principal – makes



this illustrious Latin Father an important founder of the existential philosophy. A double Christian contribution grounds this twist in philosophy: the incarnation of God in man and the historical dimension of mankind, two grounding elements of an eschatological doctrine of salvation. The Augustinian insight will then allow us to envisage the hypothesis that any metaphysical, cosmological, sociological or other scheme is nothing more than an attempt to give meaning to human existence and to soothe the moral pain associated to the conscience and feeling of finiteness. As a matter of fact, transcendence can only find its meaning through and for the human nature, without however denying any a priori revelation or truth. The mystical tradition stating that God is first and foremost subjected to a personal relationship (Teresa of Avila, Eckhart, Hildegarde de Bingen...), just like the Christian existentialism (Kierkegaard, Berdiaev, Simone Weil, Mounier...) are in their own ways the continuators of such a tradition, for whom thinking and faith inscribe themselves above all at the heart of the personal and social experience. This is how the divinity articulates itself within its comforting and redeeming mission. In parallel to the Christian tradition, let us mention the Cathar tradition, where consolation is a simple ceremony for Manicheans from Albi on the brink of death, without any constraints of punishments, that allegedly would erase lifetime sins, offering the faithful a chance to reach salvation before dying, sort of redemption that changed life.

Another route for the study of consolation: the development of psychology – which until Descartes was dominated by metaphysics – which will slowly thrive, and emancipate itself, and through Freud will separate from philosophy in an attempt at setting itself up as a science. However, despite this effort of scientificity and its medical dimension, one can still consider that modern psychology keeps deep within itself the traces of a philosophical work destined to compensate for the deficiencies and the griefs of the human soul. The point is not anymore to understand the world but to help man live, although the main traditional currents of philosophy tended to abandon this concern. Besides, the advent of psychology is one of the many cases where the principle of a practice aimed at ordinary mortals is problematic for the philosophy, because, if the classical philosophy of systems finds itself more or less outmoded at the end of the 19th century, it continues to be

a scholarly and elitist activity where the primacy of abstraction and concepts rules. Montaigne's work, his *Essays*, where he declares having no other concerns than himself throughout his writing, or Rousseau's very personal meditations, are practically excluded from the referenced philosophical publications. The fact that one engages in a work on himself seems to be contrary to the universality of the philosophical field, and to assimilate more to literature. Besides, when philosophy deals with the singular, it is dealing with nothing more than a concrete universal, and certainly not with a singular existence. This is probably why the existentialist philosophers, for whom the existence and its woes are the essential problem, did engage in novels and short stories: Sartre, Camus, Unamuno...

So the activity of philosophy can qualify as a consolation when, within it, a personal problem linked to a proper existence is enunciated, and in general when a specific solution is supplied to this problem. It remains to be seen whether this problem requires to be enunciated in an explicit, personal and confessed way for this process to be entitled consolation. Or, as says Unamuno about Spinoza, the latter establishes his philosophical system solely as "...an attempt at consolation which he built up because of his lack of faith. For some it is the hand, the foot, the heart or the head that aches, for Spinoza it was God that ached.". Which could let us consider that any philosophical work – or any other work – is only just an attempt at consolation.

The various paths of consolation could therefore be placed in several categories: expression of pain, speech of sorrow or acceptance, high demand or ethical highlight, appeal to reason, discovering of reality or truth, contemplating divinity, inscribing into some meaning, dissolving into the negligible, the nothingness or the absurd, sublimation in the work, oversight through action or entertainment, relating to others, social commitment, so many paths allowing in general to reduce or suppress the anxiety and the pain, or permitting the search for happiness.

In those recent times, referred to as postmodern, where great established schemes have theoretically lost their aura or have crumbled, we are seeing philosophy coming back as a consolation through new practices such as the philosophical consultation, the philosophical café conceived as a collective dialogue, or the publishing of philosophical books aimed at a large public so as to help them to live.

The figure of a Socrates questioning someone has become emblematic of an individual quest for truth or happiness. In this regard philosophy gets its personal and comforting dimension back which we could then oppose to pure science, or to vain knowledge.

## Gymnastics and medicine

Let us get back to our own conception of consolation. As we mentioned earlier, consolation finds its meaning solely through pain. However, pain, this necessary condition without which consolation has no reason for being, is not its sufficient condition. This is about treating the pain, not only its existence, or even its expression, although yet, by the action of expressing, we may consider that there is something else than just the pain; the Freudian innovation for instance, the ‘talking cure’, falls somehow within this aspect, but even goes beyond it.

Now, let us call upon a distinction which Plato makes and which seems favourable to enlighten any attempt at treating pain. Amongst the many “divisions” found in the dialogue *The Sophist*, often dualistic, there is one which is of specific interest. So as to heal the interior of the body, to purge it, he writes, or to correct its ailments, two techniques can be distinguished: medicine which fights illness, and gymnastics which fights ugliness. And as usual with this author, what works for material entities must apply to immaterial entities, therefore the soul. He explains that those two techniques have in common to be assigned to the care of both the body and the soul, which they both correct harshly and painfully, but he prioritises them, specifying that gymnastics is the rule, whereas medicine is the exception. He therefore establishes a hierarchy with a supremacy of gymnastics over medicine. The first reason to explain such an axiology is Plato’s concern for the quality and the status of the soul. In the *Phaedra*, Socrates declares that the soul is “what is moved by itself”, thus by moving itself, the soul is both moving and moved; it is both the being and what drives the being. We do not wish here to go into detail about Plato’s idea of the functioning of the soul, but let us examine the idea that the soul has to be powerful and autonomous. The power of being of the soul, its

autonomy, relates to what is of celestial nature, whereas its heaviness, its resistance to movement, relates to its terrestrial nature. Now, it is possible to understand how exercising the soul can make it stronger, more autonomous, just like with gymnastics, whereas medicine considers it as dependant, since this is an outer intervention. The ill person is impotent, whilst the gymnast is powerful. Now, power is an essential manifestation of the being for Plato, “power of being” as Spinoza would call it. Medicine brings back the possibility of exercising to those who are deprived of it, to the injured, the disabled, but it is initially designed for the ones that are impotent. For instance, the injured athlete must be treated before he can exercise again. And so we can start seeing two treatments for the soul: cure and exercise. For this reason, the philosophy practitioner, just like any sports coach, makes sure to check that the subject is in a condition permitting to engage into the rigorous practice, the exercising. If not in a minimal good shape or condition, the latter would be unable to complete the required task. It would then be a matter of referring him/her to a “medical” practice. Without a minimal capacity for reasoning, the philosophical practice is meaningless, so it would make sense to refer the person to a psychologist, unless the philosophical work can be adjusted to the person in question. Just like the psychologist should be able to recognise the capacities of his patient, and incite him to a more demanding work with a philosopher, when he shows some aptitudes. For it would be counterproductive to maintain a person in a psychic regression state, a childish and victimising position, when it is possible for him to step out of it. Which is unfortunately often the case, in our world of consumption and of subjective indulgence.

## Pain and consolation

For the soul, pain, a feeling of unbalance, is linked to desire and fear, a phenomenon which in its extension or moral amplitude is peculiar to man. Animals experience mainly biological needs. The human soul moves permanently, yearning to complete itself, so as to find back what is missing to it, feeling separated from a sort of primal unity, deprived of infiniteness or totality. The Platonic anthropology rests on a quest for a better life, on the release from a relentless desire. It implies a

progressive purification of the soul, by a work on desire itself, on its nature and its functioning, and through reason. The chronic pain inhabiting us relates to the infinite nature of desire, especially to that thirst for terrestrial objects, such a pleasure, possession or recognition. This desire is infinite, unquenchable. The true need – physical for example – is easily satisfied, but human desire goes way beyond, it is disproportionate, and for this reason it generates ill-being. The point is here to treat both the causes and the symptoms.

Desire cannot disappear, it always wants more, it endlessly moves from one object to the other, each satisfaction generating a new desire. Just like a child, desire relies on the sparkling things out there, and on those which are imagined to be sparkling. It bears the evidence of a lack of unity, of an heteronomy, and of a chronic dissatisfaction. It is aware of its own thirst but it ignores that the nature of the objects sought for are unable to quench it. In order to show this, Plato uses the myth of the Danaides' leaky barrel, this container which requires endless filling. Thus, there is a tyrant in each man, desire, which becomes manifest when it finds favourable conditions for its expression. At the same time, just like the "last man" of Nietzsche, Plato makes us contemplate the terrible perspective of a man whose desires would be fulfilled, and whom he compares to a soaked sponge, metaphor symbolising the death of the soul. The point is not to satisfy the desire, but to educate it, to purify it, to make it conscious by lifting the spirit towards celestial desires, towards the contemplation of one's own primary nature, sort of reconciliation with oneself. But this cannot occur without *agôn*, without a confrontation between the self and the outer world, as The Myth of the Great Cave tells us. As a matter of fact, unlike various wisdoms which invite us to plainly contemplate the absolute, if one wants to escape the illusion of the senses, one must confront oneself to others, and therefore to its own self, which must necessarily occur through a symbolic and violent death. This is why a fine speech or a plain conversion of the soul to great ideas will not suffice.

Now we are getting slowly to what distinguishes the various types of "consolation", especially one significant division. To outline it, let us remember the beginning of the famous text from Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. The author, Boethius himself, unfairly condemned to death and in prison, is overcome

with the fate that awaits him. To comfort himself, he writes poems, where he can express his suffering, so as to soothe it. There comes Reason, in an allegorical form, who gives him a good scolding: “You have always cultivated me, and now, just because you are going to die, you are letting yourself down, you are being complacent with yourself.” And it undertakes with Boethius a long thinking pilgrim, true consolation, requiring him to exercise his mind. Poetry is gentle, reason is harsh. This can be compared to the Nietzschean ethics which refuses the gentleness of the Christian consolation, love, empathy and compassion, so as to defend the Greek idea of exercise, the principle of confrontation: “no philosophy without agôn”, says Nietzsche, or “to philosophise with a hammer”.

Therefore, the philosophical consolation does not conceive the subject as a patient, as a vulnerable person, as someone in difficulty, as a weak helpless being to protect, help or save, but as a training athlete, as a wrestler preparing himself for battle. The subject is a priori “strong”, he just needs to practice, whilst for other “therapists”, he is weak and must be taken in hand until he is “back on his feet”. The subject must determine himself, through himself, rather than depend on an exterior authority. And when there is authority, if any difference of experience or of knowledge, there is scarcely any difference of status. There is here no priest and his faithful, nor a psychologist and his patient, but two philosophers who are speaking, one of them having slightly more experience or skills than the other, but yet of equivalent status. There may be some asymmetry, through the difference of skills, but no disparity in terms of legitimacy. But the priest does not invite the faithful to become a priest and the psychologist does not invite his patient to become a psychologist, whereas the philosopher invites his interlocutor to become a philosopher. First of all because being a philosopher is not a status or a function, but an activity: to philosophise. Secondly because philosophising, taken in a broad sense, to a minimal degree, seems to be a necessity that one needs to accept, simply because one is a human being, a thinking being, and it doesn’t seem to relate to a specific practice associated to some conditions, a culture or circumstances. We wish to defend the universality of the philosophising, of its practice and of its necessity. Furthermore, the origin of any philosophical act can only be found within oneself, within one’s own reason, and not within a doctrine or other given paradigms allo-

wing or determining an interpretation. Thirdly, both the priest and the psychologist want to “save” their interlocutor, almost against himself, whilst the philosopher wants to practice his thinking with his counterpart. The philosopher acts first and foremost for himself, by necessity or desire, whereas the two others act for the other: they are both beyond this necessity. Fourthly, the philosopher takes an interest in the humanity of the person, whilst the two others are mostly and almost exclusively interested in the specific individual, his soul or his psychological health: the person is scarcely its own finality, which would be a reductive vision of the subject. It is true that each one of those criteria can more or less apply to the two other functions, according to the conception that each one has, but let us state that, globally, this set is more a specificity of the philosophical practice.

The human being experiences pain; its forms, its names and its symptoms are innumerable. The being is driven by pain, he may complain about it and not accept it, but he may also contemplate himself complacently in it and become impotent. Without pain, man would be nothing, he would not be what he is. Without lack, he would not be aware of his own humanity. Just the gap between his own finiteness and the surpassing of this finiteness, forms his identity. Life already is an unbalance, or an unstable balance, creating there a momentum, a tension, a permanent urge. Existence is an amplification of this principle of living, taking the biological principles to a moral and spiritual dimension, along with the necessary distortion implied in the passage from materiality to non-materiality. Yet, it is difficult to avoid the desire for stability, the tempting illusion of homeostasis is watching out, sort of endless stability, immutable and permanent balance, guarantee of eternal happiness. This would mean not accepting ourselves as humans, but maintaining a perspective that is both childish and ideal: a nostalgia of a lost terrestrial paradise or hope for a celestial paradise. The whole point here lies in the consciousness of this pain, in the means implemented to treat it, in the appreciation of the difficulty that this treatment represents, in the meaning given to both the pain and its cure. There lies the problem of consolation.







# THE SCARECROW CONCEPT

From the beginning, more or less explicitly, quite unknowingly, we carried out philosophical consultations in an informal and semi-constructed way. Then, over time, we formalised this practice. However, one day, after having decided to “officialise” the practice, we discovered that there was a specific quality to the so-called consultations, which is undoubtedly owed to the dramatic emphasis on the context, or perhaps to the more established stage setting, and definitely to the gesture represented by a financial transaction and its outcome. Something which appeared more clearly in the human psychological pattern. We discovered, during one of our first “official” discussions, a crucial principle, which turned out to be very useful.

A few years later, we called this principle: the “scarecrow concept”, the “ghost concept”, or the “the black hole of the thinking”.

## Everything to be happy about

One of these initial formal consultations introduced a man who asked me the following question. “I have everything to be happy about, why am I not happy?”. In his sixties, he was a doctor who described himself as having everything to live for: “A life without major worries, a rather harmonious family, some successful professional and social lives, and even a gratifying artistic activity...” However, he could not find happiness, and even felt periodically quite unhappy. This was not

preventing his functioning, neither was it obsessing him insanely; whilst talking, he feigned a certain detachment in the observation of this aberration which was affecting his psychological functioning. He wanted, however, to understand the nature of it, an intellectual desire which was somewhat haunting him. As I was asking what in his life made him the happiest, he replied that it was music. After I requested some precisions, he explained that he played the traverse flute, that he took part in an amateur group of music chamber, and that he played from time to time in small concerts. When he played the flute, he confided, he seemed to be finding an inner flawless peace which he could not find anywhere else. Since the secret of his happiness lied there, I decided to deepen the nature of what was so satisfying to him. “What makes you so happy when you play the flute?” I asked. His reply was a little surprising. “What I like most is the touch, the movement of my fingers on the keys, and feeling the frailty of the column of air at the core of the flute, which is as palpable as a living being”. I had already noticed, earlier in the discussion, the significant use of various expressions of material or organic type when expressing himself or answering my questions, but here, his answer was quite striking. The description of music as a physical activity exclusively, the manner in which he described the fact of playing his instrument, was somewhat surprising. So I asked him about the nature of what he used to play, as he had not mentioned it yet, happy to just tell about his connection to a material object erected as a living being. “What do you like to play most?”. Without any hesitation, he replied: “Mozart”. “So Mozart comes down to a touch and an air column?”, I asked. He stared at me in disbelief and granted a reply to my ludicrous question. “No, Mozart is much more than that! Mozart...”. He stopped and looked thoughtful. I insisted: “You did not finish your sentence. What is Mozart?”. He played it as if he had just emerged from a deep daydream, made a gesture so as to gain some courage or to support his own words, and said: “Mozart is...”. But he did not finish his sentence, interrupting his gesture, his hand frozen in the air, then falling heavily whilst the words could not come. The colour of his face had changed, his features were somewhat broken out, and his body was slowly collapsing on the chair. This man was not the same anymore, he had seen something, the exact nature of which I did not know, something I could only sense. Certainly, he had not replied to me, and although I could not reply for him, I could vaguely imagine what this was

about. But he had perceived the “problem” himself, a true black hole in his thinking: the absence of a reply is sometimes a reply which is as substantial as a “real” reply: an absence often turns out to be a greater and more vivacious presence than an actual presence. The hollow has often more to tell than the full, for words as much as for people.

On several occasions I had to repeat the question without ever getting a clear and articulated answer. The main thing was for this man to become aware, and this enlightenment had occurred, even if he was not yet ready to name the object or phenomenon in question. I kept my inquiry during our discussion, in different ways: “What else do you find in Mozart, other than the touch and the air column?”. Sometimes he totally ignored the question, talking about something different, as if he had not heard, and other times he stared at me, speechlessly. This rational man who at the beginning of the session had answered all of my questions without any major problems, was not there anymore. Later, through experience, I would learn to stay away from a question which was too striking and I would use different angles to get back to it in a more natural manner. But here, I over-wanted a reply and in a way that was too direct. In the absolute, this was not a problem: he had perceived what I now call “his ghost”, this thing which lived in him, the reality which caused him a problem. However, through subtler and more precise questioning, perhaps he would have been able to name it, and then undoubtedly to reconcile with it. Today however, I doubt the possibility of such an outcome, as it seems that this man had done so much to deny this reality that it would have been almost impossible to summon it so bluntly. Perhaps, various hypotheses could have been discussed with him to see if one of them was speaking to him.

## Attempted explanation

This is however how I now analyse this man’s situation. He had been trained as a doctor. The living must have been such an important concept even before his studies that he chose to devote his life to it, dedicating himself to the body and its har-

mony, fighting against pain and death. Besides, whilst speaking, he was using organic metaphors and explanations in a very natural way, more than his choice of studies could justify. I have met some doctors on other occasions who, although they shared a similar tendency, did not manifest it in such a sustained way. Also, he conveyed a rather organicist vision of medicine, or a materialistic one, where the first vision is the one of the organs, whether functioning or not, in other words a medicine of the visible, typically French, almost mechanical, where the materiality prevails, and not the processes and the psychological side of it. Now, if we follow one of Spinoza's principles, quite useful in the work involved in the philosophical consultation, any assertion is a negation. To choose something is to reject something else, to choose a concept or an explanation is to refuse another concept or another explanation, however unpleasant this might seem to the contemporary believers of the inclusive thinking, which should actually be named the omnipotent thinking: those who think that everything is in everything, and the reverse. So, within his finiteness, within his partiality and his imperfection, man does choose, and what he does not choose says at least as much about him than what he chooses, the range being much wider. Therefore, by choosing to have the organic and the material prevail in his life, this doctor was trying to shelve a different reality which could be named, according to the circumstances, to the people and to the cultures: metaphysical, spiritual, mental, divine or other. As in general concepts have several contraries or opposites which, when they are pronounced, imply a choice that shed light on the initial term. So, if our man had "openly" picked the "other" reality, by qualifying or determining it, by naming it, we would have known more precisely which reality he was denying, but we would have also been able to specify the nature of the reality to which he desperately hung on to, through a mirror image process. But failing to do that, we only had a rough idea of what he was denying, yet still substantial.

Now if we go back to his initial question: "I have everything to be happy about, why I am not?", what could we deduce? Let us try a "wild" interpretation of his case. On the material level, in both financial and practical senses of the word, I have everything I need, I am fully satisfied, I do not have anything else to ask for. Yet, I need something else, an "other", something that is different and which I pre-

fer to ignore the existence of, a desire which I shall admit to only if disguised, whether referring to its articulation or its satisfaction. This thing, which we will name “immaterial” since we know about it only through its negation and not through the assertion of its identity, yet constitutes the most urgent need, or even the only need, since the rest is fulfilled. Now, needing is necessary in life, without it we are dead, since life is desire and satisfaction of desire. So here is a man, haunted by life, denying his own life since he is denying his own need, preferring to ignore it. He fulfils it covertly however, pretending that it is something different from what it is: he conceals the immateriality in the folds of the materiality, since this is how he describes or explains his musical activity. However though, since the object of desire is being veiled, hidden, denied, the satisfaction can only be frustrated. If it were announced and clarified, it would undoubtedly still be frustrated, but at least there would be a reconciliation with the self, whereas here, this reconciliation is impossible and the self denial produces a pain which can become nagging and hard to bear. This is understandable since a whole portion of the self is denied, amputated, but in fact quite perplexing to find in an organicist mind for whom the being must be complete, integrated and fixed in order to be truly alive. We are left here with a form of partial suicide, or self-destruction. But to get to a reconciliation, the identification of the presuppositions on which the existence was founded, the existential engagement – in this case, the primacy and exclusivity of the organic and the material – would be required as well as the acknowledgement of this exclusivity is wobbly. But how to reach this with a man in his sixties who has endeavoured all his life to focus on one side of his being only. He managed to fulfil adequately, or even brilliantly, the various and numerous requirements of this idolised side of him, and he would now need to admit that he was acting in a reducing and rigid way, and recognise that he had only been grinning and bearing it. It is himself, but also his social recognition, the glory he had been granting himself all his life, his status, his personality and his relatives’ eyes which would be put in question here; his entire existence which had organised, crystallized or stiffened itself around a denial.

## To recover or not

There is yet a certain difference between an approach of a psychological nature and an approach of a philosophical nature, if one can make such a generalisation. In our philosophical perspective, getting better or healing are not sought for, neither is reducing the suffering, not that these therapeutic or palliative dimensions should be excluded, but simply because they are not the purpose of our work. We do not deny that there might be a problem, that there might be suffering, or even a pathology, and those terms are useful to characterise what is happening, however we do not have to “heal”, we are no “therapists”, although the philosophical practice has a therapeutic dimension to it and our clients periodically tell us that they found in our practice a certain well-being or some attenuation of their moral suffering. Certainly, people visit us in general because they have a problem which they find hard to bear; certainly, a few colleagues call themselves philo-therapists; certainly, the consolation or the search for happiness are familiar terms in the philosophical culture; but despite all that, it is not how we conceive our practice. We would actually be in agreement with Spinoza: it is not by looking for happiness that we may find it. We could say the same about the problem itself: it is not by looking to “resolve” the problem that it may be solved. Actually, solutions are often just a “fig leaf”, a haven to hide away from the problem, to ignore or deny it. Moreover, to endeavour to solve a problem at all price is somewhat a reductive vision which pertains to a phobia of the problem.

In our opinion, philosophy is an art of the elsewhere, it is the place for the alterity, the unexpected and the unthinkable. In order to philosophise, in a certain way, one should not know what to look for. A problem can still be solved – there is no reason to exclude this possibility – but one can also accept it, ignore it, perceive its ridiculous nature, learn to love it, dissolve it, understand the constitutive dimension of its nature, one can sublimate it or transcend it, re-articulate it or transpose it, so many different ways to process a problem, but to do that, in order to find the appropriate way, one must give up any specific desires which would subordinate our reflexion to a predetermined purpose and prevent us from seeing what is going on. As the keyword, if there is any, is for us awareness: seeing, perceiving, noticing; there lies in our perspective the rooting, the non-negotiable, even though in the end the subject acknowledges, explicitly or not, that he does not want to see.

Before we meet, the subject “knows” that there is something that he prefers not to see, he is necessarily aware of his desire or his will not to see. But does he accept this “knowing”? Then, with the philosophical dialogue, through the questioning, he sees, he knows, more explicitly, more inevitably. Then again, he has seen, he has lost this false virginity, the nature of which he ignored, and if he wishes to get back to the original, if he misses the garden of Eden and wishes to return to it, he will do knowingly. He won’t ever be the same. Even if, secondly, he manages to somewhat forget his own reality.

So, Socrates invites us to search for what we are searching for not knowing what we are searching for, even if it means deciding to stop searching it: we are not to decide in advance what to search for, the nature of the object that is sought for has yet to be determined. We ought to create new routes using clues, and slowly discover the object of the quest, knowing all the way that this object is not an idol but an icon; it does not constitute the substance, it does not stand for the unconditioned, it is solely reflection and circumstances. So when our doctor client does not name this dimension which inhabits him but which he refuses to inhabit, there is nothing extraordinary there. For Schiller, man is caught up in a tension between the finite and the infinite, he stands at the junction of two paradoxical dimensions, precisely the fracture of the being. There lies a human specificity. Animals are in the finite only, gods only know the infinite, as Plato tells us, so neither of them need philosophising. This rupture between the finiteness and the infinite nests at the heart of the human history, a singular or a collective history, at the heart of the human tragedy, a singular or a collective tragedy, and we do not see how we could either escape or fix this. In the same way, we could not escape our mortality or our humanity, since these diseases are constitutive of our existence. Or, ironically, let us say that we can only cure them through their accomplishment, through their realisation. Just as we would say that a cancer is cured by getting to the bottom of its process. Philosophy tells us that man is his own disease, so is there anything it could cure us from?

What will our doctor do once out of the philosopher’s practice, will he escape the questioning effect? Will he evade the awareness? We do not know and in the absolute it is not our concern, as cruel and inhuman as this may seem. We are scar-

cely interested in this, or just on an anecdotal level. He came, he saw, he did not say, but he perceived, he recognised or just made out the unspeakable; what more is there to do? We invited him to name the ghost, he preferred not to call upon it. Was he not ready? Was he not made for this? Does he not want this? We do not have to know for him, to decide for him, to want for him. He came to the Ball, we invited him to dance, he only cared for a few dance steps, either he got bored, he got scared, or he decided that dancing was not activity for him. The premise about the philosophical discussion is free consent: here we have an autonomous person, we may think whatever we want about him but what only matters is what he thinks of himself, what he thinks for himself, what he thinks from himself, although through our questions we invite him to think further, to think aside, to think differently. We have invited him to see, he has seen only what he could see, he has seen only what he wished to see. We have launched a process which will last what it lasts. No more no less.

## Seeing and hearing oneself

Once this is said, we have to admit that we are not neutral in our practice: we do have a wish which is not completely undetermined, one without which our practice would not be called as such, or its nature would be unconscious. We actually feel suspicious about those who do not know how they operate, those who under the pretext of freedom or creativity pretend that they work in different ways according to the circumstances, as if things changed completely for each person. They simply do not dare to admit or identify their philosophical rooting, whether it be about the content or the methodology. This vagueness is just a pretext for the worst aberrations, for inconsistency and for narcissism. So for us, the key concept is awareness. Anxious about this, we found out that there was a practical problem. We wanted the subject who consults to be able to see what was going on, but we realised that during the consultation, having to focus on our questions and on the answers having to be produced, he could not see what was happening. He could not see himself answering, neither could he see us questioning him. Caught up in the succession of things, he could not have any general perspective allowing him



to go further in this approach, which is to see better. Moreover, after an hour of consultation, the subject is frequently in a state of cognitive dissonance, feeling knocked sideways by the strange places he has had to visit, and it is hardly possible for him to remember what happened. We do however want this recollection, both for him to know himself and enjoy his philosophical work, and also for him to see how we operated, for him to understand that there is no jiggery-pokery, so that he is able to recognise a few basic operations of the thinking which he can re-use at later stage. So, at the beginning, we started offering any volunteers a recording of the discussions, then, later, once the technicalities taken care of, we offered them to videotape them so the dialogue could be watched later. We even wrote a questionnaire to ease the work involving assessments and analysis. But to our astonishment — naivety knows no limits — we noticed that most people did not wish to hear or watch those recordings, not facing up to this fact, hiding behind obscure alibis. The few times when we got an explanation for this phenomenon, although just introductory remarks, other than “I did not find the time” and “I will do shortly”, they had to do with a feeling of self hopelessness which, supposedly, was associated to the exercise. Besides, this was confirmed to us by several clients amongst those who managed to find the courage – and the time – to watch and hear themselves, they found themselves “silly” or “unable to answer the questions”. However, those who had invited a close friend to share this moment with often said that the friend’s perception was different from theirs, that they had found the exercise more revealing and interesting than they had themselves. Something which confirms a very useful hypothesis for the group work: others are clearly more aware than ourselves of our own limits or imperfections; they have less to lose and so they accept better to perceive them, and also they are used to them. So others often know us better than ourselves, another premise which distinguishes us from many therapists. More recently, we started inviting clients to analyse the recording of their consultation with us, so as to go beyond the first impressionistic, shameful or fearful degree, and to try together to find the meaning of what emerged.

## Self rejection

There are two incidents which seem to illustrate significantly this “self rejection”. The first one concerns a man in his thirties who visited us because he had a practical question: “Should I go back to studies?”. After a quarter of an hour of discussion, the underlying problem, the problem behind the problem – or at least one of the problems behind the problem – appeared clearly, as always out of the man’s mouth itself: with his own words. Actually, he just hoped to be loved, and going back to studies mainly represented a strategic tool designed for his personal and social success so as to be better loved, more loved, or actually loved like he hoped, some wishful thinking. When this person heard his own words, after a short moment of quiet hesitation, he suddenly stood up, angry, and declared that he wanted to leave, that he “had had enough of it”, an expression which is in fact quite interesting, expressing both irritation and saturation or satisfaction. For anyone who hears such words, “I want to be loved”, not being involved in the internal drama of this person, what is there that is so extraordinary about them? Wanting to be loved, wishing to be loved more or better, how unremarkable! There is nothing to make a fuss about! But for this person, this confession is a true tragedy. Why is that? What is his story? Here again, as inhuman and cruel as we may seem, the narration of a story is not our business, the historical origin is scarcely interesting; we would even add that it is often misleading, or that at most it conceals the actual reality of the subject. So this man could not bear to hear himself say that he wants to be loved, this sentimental or emotional side of himself was something unthinkable, unbearable. Now, it is precisely this place of resistance that matters to us. Since the nature of man is predominantly the one of a living being, with needs, vulnerabilities, fears, which the philosophising tries to deal with, to solve or to conceal, to shift or to annihilate. Therefore, to pinpoint a resistance, to obtain a reaction, is to make the life behind the words, or the spirit behind the letter, or the subject behind the object, visible. Just like a doctor would gently use a reflex hammer on the knee to examine some reaction and liveliness, the questioning tries to find the sensitive nerve centre of the thinking and therefore of the being. It is where the resistance is that the being can be found, the being as a pathology, the being as a way of being, the being as a momentum, the being as a reason of being, the being as an absence of being. About this man, it is not the

fact that he wishes to be loved that is interesting, but the fact that he cannot admit it. What will he implement so as not to see this significant dimension of his being? Will he accept it when he sees it, or will he get angry, as he did with us?

The second incident concerns a woman in her sixties. She already knows me because she has taken part in some collective workshops in a town library for a few years and she has a practical problem which she would like to resolve. She has been working for her employer for many years and he now wants her to go into early retirement. She does not want that, however she wonders if it is worth fighting and refusing, whilst she still can, or if she should just accept what she is asked to do. I ask her a few questions to understand the context and I learn the following facts. She has been working all her life for the same employer, she hasn't had any family and she got very much involved in her job. Obviously, whilst looking to identify her main motivation for the work, we naturally and easily stumble across the fear of death. Here again, nothing extraordinary. As we explained, there are a certain number of concepts which I name "scarecrow concepts" and each one of us unknowingly elect one, which is exactly the concept which we permanently try to evade or not to see. These concepts all revolve around the annihilation of the being, they incarnate the nothingness in different ways, disclosing different aspects of it. Broadly speaking, we almost always find the same concepts. They relate to not being loved, not being useful, not being recognised, not being free, having nothing, being lonely, being nothing, being impotent, suffering, and of course dying, which was the case for this person. One might say that these "negative" ideas all converge, that they all revolve around the same thing, which we do agree to, since they all deal with the "non-being", with the cessation of being, the absence of being, the lack of being. Now, as Spinoza says in his conatus, the being always strives to persevere in its being. If psychologically these distinctions all fundamentally amount to the same thing, on the existential level it is totally different as, according to the cases, the subject will be mainly looking for love, usefulness, recognition, freedom, possession, company, over-existence, power, pleasure, life. And as much as the subject could be wanting several or pursuing them all, there is in general a specific concept which is the key-concept and which refers to what I call the "scarecrow concept", the one which most incarnates the nothingness for this specific per-

son. This fear, or flight, will constitute the keystone of her existential and conceptual axiology. Of course, it is sometimes necessary to dig into the conceptual mess and untangle the web of ideas to identify this keystone as, according to the principle of the octopus who throws ink in order to protect its running away, the human mind creates confusion in order to conceal to others and to itself the nerve centre of its functioning, a perspective of which the simple mention could be frightening. And when a subject is questioned so as to detect this nerve centre, he often shows the characteristics of what we call the syndrome of the drowned person. He struggles frantically, throws his words all over the place, protests, becomes aggressive, jumps from one subject to another, so many red herrings which are certainly unconscious and which sometimes become hard to contain and avoid, since the reason is given up. Sometimes, the conclusion that the person is not ready to identify this black hole in their thinking simply has to be reached. I call this concept the “black hole” because, like the astronomical black hole, it seems to be absorbing all the mental energy of the subject, in such a degree that nothing appears in the region of this concept, where a void is being created. It is therefore very tricky to define.

For this woman on the verge of retiring, as we indicated, the “black hole”, the “scarecrow” concept was death, which is – quite sensibly – a classic. What could be more natural for a living being than to refuse death, even if only the idea of it! So, during the discussion, it was established clearly and without much resistance that the flight or fear of death had been the main reason for this woman to get so involved in her job. But naturally, as a principal of reality, all the things that had been postponed indefinitely during the working life were sent back inevitably on the cusp of this new period, as long as it may be. This rendezvous, missed a million times, now became unescapable. I must admit however having been surprised by the relative ease with which the concept had emerged and had been work on during the consultation. But another more significant surprise was yet to happen. Once the discussion over, I left for ten minutes to get to my computer to engrave the recording of the conversation onto a CD. When I came back and held the CD out to this person, she stood up, made some grand gestures with her hand and dropped: “It wasn’t me speaking! It was not me!”. I answered gently that, anyway,

this recording belonged to her, that she could take it and do whatever she wanted with it. She took it but it was the last time I ever saw this person again; she never took part in a workshop again.

## Failure or not

This last reaction, and others of the same kind, pose the question of the continuity of the philosophical work and its commercial profitability, since it is so risky. On that subject, the practitioners do not have the same vision. During an international congress in Seville, Lou Marinoff, a famous colleague of mine, and myself had different views. As a matter of fact, quite proud of his work, he was narrating his successes to the audience when he “confessed” one of his failures. It was about a client who never came back after a session where he had discovered an upsetting concept. Since this incident was described negatively, I raised the objection that, on the contrary, this proved that a crucial point had been reached, which seemed to me to be point of a philosophical consultation. Ironically, but not jokingly however, I ventured a hypothesis that, on the contrary, it was undoubtedly the most successful session described that day, since the subject in question had reckoned he had completed what he had to do with the philosopher, and that it was up to him, alone, to pursue his own work. And undoubtedly, or maybe, during this last – or only – consultation, he had perceived or identified the “scarecrow” concept which inhabited him, and which had been enough for him. Once out of the philosopher’s practice, it is up to the client himself to determine whether he prefers to forget about this concept or bring it to life, it is not the philosopher’s business anymore, since the subject will now deliberate autonomously on the question. It is up to him to find out later if he feels an urge to consult a philosopher again, to decide if he needs a certain assistance in case he feels overtaken by his own thinking, or simply to carry on as he used to, after a short philosophical break.



# UNRAVELLING THOUGHT

Ludwig Wittgenstein

"Philosophizing is first and foremost about fighting the fascination that we have for certain forms of expression."

"Philosophy unties knots in our thinking."

Baruch Spinoza

"The concept of a dog does not bark."

"Any idea that is absolute in us, in other words adequate and perfect, is true."

"Any statement is a negation."

Hegel

"What is rational is real, and what is real is rational."

## The concept, condition or obstacle

It is fascinating to see how certain terms are mesmerizing. Whether positive, through attraction, or negative, through repulsion, certain words or expressions

seem to produce great effects on us, or to crystallize an intense psychic phenomenon. They can usually be identified through their repetition, whether it is a recurrence in the personal or social speech of a larger group, that of a population for instance, or of a smaller professional, political, cultural, family group. They then operate as a kind of code, keyword, password, thanks to which we recognize "one of our own". But these words also contain a magical or religious value; they invoke, they exorcise, they attract good spirits and drive out demons; they hold power. We realize this when we see the emotional charge that those who pronounce them put on these words, even though they seem to articulate them with the greatest rationality. Terms such as "love", "success", "wealth", "freedom", "happiness", "belief" thus seem to have a great power of attraction. In the same way, some words are rather frightening: they are too strong, "this word bothers me" will say some delicate minds. The reality they cover is too raw, too embarrassing, our "modesty" would rather dismiss them; they bring bad luck, some will even say. So it is with words related to death, body, sex, money, but also words strangely taboo for our modernity like "judgment", "duality", "rationality" or "interpretation", which by strange blows of fate are suddenly banished from discussions between "right-minded" people because they represent "evil", a sort of "threat" to collective or personal identity. The concept of the evil eye is tenacious and has many avatars. Nevertheless, what may be attractive to some seems repulsive to others. The strength however is the same, in such a way that some of them seem to be as much a curse as an excellent reason for being, a meaning without which life no longer has any significance or interest.

In any case, if Wittgenstein is to be believed, the harmful influence of words which create knots in thought and make it rigid, should be abandoned. Deleuze's violent denunciation can then be understood: in his *Abécédaire*, at letter W, in which he accuses the Viennese philosopher of being "a philosophical catastrophe", of having "put up a system of terror": "they break everything... They are assassins of philosophy." For Deleuze, "philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, fabricating concepts", even if he would want us to go beyond that. And it remains relatively undeniable that thought is developed around concepts, which constitute its fra-

mework, its cornerstone. Although at the same time, the critical position, so dear to philosophy, tends however, in a dialectical or antinomic movement, to simultaneously produce and destroy concepts, dragging in this contradictory or dialectical process the proposals that generate the concepts, and surround them and make them meaningful.

There are different ways or styles by which this critical operation is articulated; critical in the dual sense of importance and negativity. This may be Heraclitus' vision, according to which the struggle of opposites constitutes the reality or substance of being. The Socratic questioning, which refuses the evidence of any kind and questions it relentless, until it sometimes becomes unbearable for its interlocutors. The Cartesian method, which rejects any argument of authority by distilling doubt and seeking an infallible way to establish certainties. Or, the principle of conjecture, which Nicolas de Cues believes is the only way to conceive a statement, however well-founded it may be. Or, as well, Kant's antinomies, which establish that any statement is based on specific conditions of possibility, and therefore opposable.

Even if we realize that this critical dimension is intrinsic to philosophizing, a special status should be granted to Hegel's dialectics, in its systematic aspect. For this philosopher, this process is a crucial moment or modality of thought, which he calls "negativity" work, necessary for scientific and non-dogmatic treatment. Once a thesis has been formulated, its limits, flaws and imperfections should be formulated, so that thought does not confine itself to it and progresses further. It is not necessarily a matter of destroying the thesis in question, but of transforming it, or reevaluating its content, in order to raise the level of thought qualitatively. This dialectical overcoming allows a more complete, universal and stripped-down synthesis.

At the same time, we are not here trying to support a kind of accomplished "metaphilosophy", as its author would have liked, or claimed. In fact, Hegel will encounter various objections to this. Schelling, Hegel's fierce enemy brother, denounced the desire for omnipotence and the claim of the absolute that animated



Hegel. Nietzsche criticized its laborious and academic side, heavy, while he advocated a philosophy of lightness, dancing, an assertion of life. He uses the Hegelian concept of "bad conscience" to turn it against its author: he suspects that the work of negativity has its source in a pathological dimension of the human mind, that it is a morbid and nihilistic philosophy, a reactionary force rather than a philosophy of life. Dialectic would be the ideology of resentment, linked to idealist philosophy: the latter advocating "back worlds" as an alibi for a refusal of reality. Nevertheless, while advocating a philosophy of assertion, Nietzsche advocates the practice of transvaluation, which consists in reversing the value of values, because in this reversal he sees the abolition of nihilism, the promise of new life and the advent of the superhuman. This plasticity would allow us to escape a certainty that leads to madness.

## The concept's master stroke

But let us return to the concept itself. We find with Spinoza another way of looking at the problem. An adequate or true idea must first of all be determined in a relationship to itself and not to an external object. In this respect, it must be clear, distinct and determined, i.e. excluding. In doing so, it will be unique, since there can only be one true idea for a given reality. Another consequence is that it will be endowed with fertility, it will be able to generate and follow up with other appropriate ideas: for example, it will be able to adequately relate to its implications and effects. A true idea would therefore be a clear and distinct idea, in itself and its implications. Of course, the truest ideas are the simplest, because they do not go beyond the limits of the concept to which they belong, and therefore they cannot be false. The idea is an intellectual synthesis that is expressed through a definition. Its fertility is based on the implicit and implied consequences contained in the initial proposal, which consequently make it possible to make a number of general judgments and laws, through a series of rational truths.

But the word is not the thing, says Spinoza. The concept of dog does not bark, the concept of fire does not burn, one can even say that the concept of dog or fire does not exist; existence is not a predicate, as Kant later wrote. The concept is an abstraction. Starting from a physical reality, we remove, we abstract, all the material and particular reality, or the content, to retain only certain general characteristics considered essential to define the object of thought in question. This generalization can legitimately be described as a reductive operation, insofar as there is a dissolution of the materiality and singularity, or even the experience of the thing in question. But on the other hand, it does make it possible to think without cluttering up with secondary details and to communicate with others in the simplest way, avoiding complex statements: I can say "automobile" instead of "vehicle equipped with wheels and intended for transport with a propulsion engine". We can also avoid extended lists: I can say "human beings" instead of "Pierre, Paul, Marie, etc.". ».

The concept is powerful: it has a cold and economical rigor. Through the operation of the act of abstraction, conceptualization chooses, slices, and dissects. It takes the radical option of the rational, that is, of disjunction: on the one hand in the separation of objects of thought from each other, but also in the distinction between the subject and the object, what can be called the Cartesian paradigm, which is widely criticized nowadays. In this way, man keeps himself at a distance from the world, although the concept, through his operativity, allows him to act on this world. Certainly, man can be accused of building and inventing an abstract and unreal world through language, a world in which he ends up believing, a world in which he grants himself autonomy and power both real and fantastical, where power and imagination are mixed. Nevertheless, it is also through this construction that our humanity is developed, not as a given but as a freedom, because it is this humanity, collective and singular, that we inhabit and that inhabits us.

Conceptualizing is an act of force. It means deciding more or less arbitrarily to determine the order of the world, to tear from reality snippets that seem to us to grasp its essence, to gather and collect countless multiplicities in unique forms, starting with the whole world itself, supposedly captured for example under the reality

of a simple name that seems to us to have a certain power and an undoubted truth: "universe". And why not, insofar as we remain aware that these acts of force remain at the level of conjecture, even though they allow us to carry out various psychological or practical operations. For we must not forget, as we see with physical concepts for example, that these emanations of the human spirit still allow it to reshape the world around it, to act on it, making our species the only one that can make its mark on its environment to such an extent that it distorts it or even destroys it almost indelibly. Master and possessor of nature, Descartes tells us, a logical consequence of the power attributed to the concept, this scientific model of thought. Certainly, like any particular operation, driven by a specific will, the act of conceptualization, including what it entails, implies a certain reductionism, since it involves making choices. And like any choice, it is a question of giving oneself fully, of surrendering oneself to it, and yet of remaining capable of seeing its limits, that is, of being both inside and outside: one must both judge and suspend one's judgment.

This dual perspective presents both cognitive and psychological challenges. Cognitive perspective, because it is a question of thinking through two parallel perspectives, one reduced and engaged, the other broadened and relativizing. Psychological perspective, because the emotional mode of both dimensions is far from coinciding: judgment, decision, as well as action, implies a certainty, a kind of immediacy, while the suspension of this judgment implies to postpone, to take control, to distance oneself without worrying about constraints or consequences. However, any act of thought worthy of the name requires this impossible simultaneity.

## The concept as a practice

To conceptualize is to work on words, by identifying them as closely as possible. There are different ways of conceiving conceptualization work. It is about inventing terms, either by giving existing words a new meaning, or by making neolo-

gisms, in general to solve a problem, or to identify an object, being or phenomenon. It is also a question of defining terms, an activity so dear to philosophy teachers who often make it the essential prerequisite for philosophical work, in an almost ritualized and sacred way. In any case, it can be considered that there are several ways of defining: stating a definition, providing synonyms, giving examples, or simply pointing the finger, each of these "subterfuges" having their advantages and disadvantages. Conceptualizing also means identifying the keywords, those that structure a speech or idea, those that touch on the essence of the thesis being defended, insofar as they are explicitly pronounced. Or, it is a question of searching for these keywords, of making them emerge from a more opaque background, of summoning them, if they have not yet been pronounced, a conceptualization that enables to clarify the meaning of the speech or the idea. It is, therefore, also a matter of using the concepts mentioned, implementing them within a proposal, producing a context that clarifies them and gives them meaning.

But let us stop for a moment on Wittgenstein's position, which criticizes the idea of definition, preferring instead the principle of what he calls establishing "a family resemblance", i.e. working the terms in a variety of applications that alone can adequately capture the concept in question. A position that we could call anti-essentialist, as opposed to the definition that seeks to grasp the essence of things. According to Wittgenstein, definitions always refer to other definitions anyway - since it is necessary to explain the words that explain, in a kind of infinite regression that adds nothing to understanding, and which would also suggest an illusory "essence" of words, then words find their meaning only in the language process, through a polysemic and moving usage. The same is true for the ostentatious definition, which serves to render the meaning of a term by showing the object that corresponds to it, because too many words escape this empirical designation. This is the case for derived concepts, such as reporting or comparison, which do not offer any kind of evidence. However, by using the word rather than defining it, we make visible and understandable the link between language and human daily life: a word is necessarily engaged in a process, in a context, of whatever nature that

process or context is. It is this incorporation or embodiment of the word that Wittgenstein calls "language games".

“Language games” are the specific forms of speech training by which a child begins to use words. These include, for example, learning to "give orders and obey, ask questions and answer them; describe an event; invent a story; tell a joke; describe an immediate experience; speculate on physical world events; make hypotheses and scientific theories; greet someone...”

Through this practice, the child learns to recognize "family resemblances", he refines his understanding as well as his mastery of words and expressions. These language games can be natural, or made as an experiment, in order to develop and evaluate ideas. This practice has its origin in the principle of "experience of thought" as Galileo had stated it as a method of scientific research. It is not a question of asserting any truth, but of making a working hypothesis in the face of any problem, then finding and formulating any objection, and testing the hypothesis, in view to assess its outcome. A scientific scheme that resembles philosophical dialectics. The only difference would be to ask whether it is only a question of sanctioning the hypothesis, or whether it should be improved. Does the objection participate in the elaboration, as in the dialectical process, or is it only a test, a verification?

In the restrictive sense of an "artificial" experience, language games involve the determined use of one or more words. They serve as models because they introduce the reader to the "method" of the "language game", by introducing him to the issues of language. During these exercises, the functioning of the language, which is that of thought, is revealed. Through all this, it is also a matter of clarifying what we say, what we talk about, and by clarifying the problems, showing how we lock ourselves into our own speech, so that we no longer get caught up in these inextricable impasses of which we make our private hell. In this sense, it is a language therapy, or a therapy through language, by becoming aware of our own rigidities and confusions.

The comparison with the game, which remains for Wittgenstein the paradigm par excellence of language, engages us in a performative vision of speech, where it

is about practicing, and not theorizing or justifying. The actions to which he invites us are like "moves" in the game, which have meaning only within the game, without seeking to attribute to them any ontological or anthropological charge, any connotation of the absolute. These "moves" are assessed in relation to a context, in relation to a concrete situation, in relation to a specific problem. It is within this determined framework that words take on their true conjectural meaning. We learn to speak as we learn a sport, through specific gestures and the art of articulating them.

## The unravelling truth

From this point of view, the enemy is theory, established patterns, predetermined and fixed concepts. "Whatever people tell me that's theoretical, I'll say: no, no, I'm not interested. Even if the theory were true, I would not be interested in it, it would never be what I am looking for." It is the "what" that interests Wittgenstein, not the "why". "I never do anything but draw the other's attention to what he is actually doing and I refrain from making any statements." It is a question of describing, and therefore knowing how to observe, rather than explain, justify, seek causes, as is customary, especially in the intellectual world. "... It can never be our task to reduce anything to anything, or to explain anything. Philosophy is really purely descriptive." And he takes a very radical stance on this subject: "I mean here that the explanation is devastating in philosophy, as in a therapeutic approach, insofar as it creates new problems in addition to the problems it intends to solve."

As for Spinoza, we saw it in a different context, it is a matter of clarifying. If there is a truth, it is in the production of a clear perception that it is articulated and offers its veracity. The difference is between the rationalism of one and the empiricism of the other. For Spinoza, reason must work to clarify an idea or concept, and discover its essence, while for Wittgenstein, it is about learning to see, and recognizing similarities, no more and no less. Shocking position for those seeking philosophical depth! For the Austrian philosopher, everything is there before us: what

we have before us is the most difficult to see and yet the most meaningful, the most real, by ignoring the myth of interiority, by forever disregarding the senseless promise of "the bottom line". It is a question of posing the problem properly, not to solve it, but to make it disappear, a more realistic form of problem solving. It is not the true and the false that matters to us, but to draw the red line between what is intelligible and what is confused within the speech. Because we project so well the confusion of our language and our thought on the world, a world that we then shamelessly call "complex".

It is in this sense that the metaphorical concept of the knot finds its interest. From now on, the question is about restoring the fluidity of thought, since the knot, by tying, tightens and prevents the natural breathing of things: the knot strangles. It intertwines what should be disentangled, and you can no longer find yourself in it, like a fishing line whose beginning and end you can't recognize. The knot attaches, it does not unwind or roll up in a fluid way. Unfortunately, through aesthetic or rhetorical temptation, the knot also embellishes, or is believed to embellish, just as the knotted ribbon is supposed to embellish the gift and make it even more attractive. Thus, the "knot" of thought is often produced, offered and maintained, because it seems to give a certain finesse to our existence, a certain adornment to our thought, without which we would be embedded in an insipid, smooth and hitchless reality. This is why we love to create problems, to tell them better to others and to ourselves, to have a better feeling of being special and overexist. The knot becomes the crucial point of the whole matter, which everything tends towards, in particular misunderstanding and mystery, impossibility and pain, all reasons to prevent the dissolution of the knot; it has become "worry" and "reason to live".

The knot is also a crossroads: you feel less alone. Although if we look more closely, we realize that it is an obsessive repetition of an identical that withdraws into itself, that intersects itself. A feeling of fullness which is only confusion. The node of the matter is the core, the heart, the most resistant part and the most insoluble of the question. The node of the plot is the most complicated, irreducible, dramatic part of the plot. The node or knot is the nerve centre, the place of intersection,

where various things are intertwined, which may or may not have anything to do with each other, but which suddenly find themselves artificially and inseparably linked. What a magnificent art it is to produce confusion! The node is where the trunk thickens and hardens, where it resists the saw or axe: it is the dimension of our existence that seems to be the most resistant to any dissolution, so it is where our *raison d'être* seems to lie. How could we not want to keep it that way?! The node is the swelling, the projection, the visible part, some call it our personality, our character, what is perceptible and therefore what makes us be, in the eyes of others and ours. The node is the cluster of cells with a well-defined function, a specific agenda, that distinguishes them from the rest of the organism, and this node can modify the development of the whole organism that hosts it, or even become its neuralgic centre. The same is true for these nodes of the mind, specific functioning or particular obsession around which the totality of our thought and being seems to be formed or distorted. The knot is the articulation around which everything circulates, the centripetal force that absorbs us, that becomes the centre of gravity of our existence. The knot is what is most serious for the good reason that we give it gravity and seriousness, even though it makes our lives heavy and cumbersome. The knot is the attachment, the tie, the chaining, the intense and compact place that prevents from letting go, from abandoning, from taking distance. The knot is a feeling of strangulation, an emotion that asphyxiates, a suffocation of the being. That is why unravelling is a daunting prospect that we strive hard to resist.

## To unravel or to cut off

The knot is the subject of a famous myth that dates back to Ancient Greece. According to legend, the drawbar of King Midas' chariot was bound by the famous "Gordian knot", whose prophecy announced that anyone who succeeded in unravelling it would become the master of Asia. It was Alexander the Great who achieved this feat. Unable to find an end to untie this knot - probably impatient because he had a lot to do to conquer the world - he cut it with a simple sword stroke. Heroes are precisely those who dare to think and act, without accepting the



data of the problem as it is presented. Because they do not respect the statement, because in some way the problem is not a problem for them, they can emerge from the context and put reality into perspective, rethink the problem to clarify the issues. Alexander refused to respect the knot and cut it off, without any other form of trial, thus demonstrating his power, and therefore his legitimacy to become master of Asia.

To untie the knot is to refuse appearances and dismantle them: to untie is to deconstruct. It is at the same time an aesthetic, practical, psychological, metaphysical, moral and existential problem. The knot touches the totality of being, it constitutes its arbitrary substance. The knot is both being and appearance, it is endowed with a polymorphic nature.

The aesthetic nature of the knot, because it is the image that we produce of things, the combination that makes us attractive to ourselves and others, reality becomes acceptable by reformulating, mixing, combining until the fragrance flatters the palate. But not without ignoring a crucial principle: we do not play with the reality of the world and stay unpunished, the latter always catches up with us, faithful and cruel. We are condemned to the unravelling conclusion willy-nilly, now or tomorrow. Might as well get ready for it. Might as well enjoy its incoercible and enjoyable thrill.

The practical nature of the knot, because the knot, by creating an identity for us, adapts us to the world, its codes, its jaws, its criteria for success and bankruptcy. But it is at the cost of alienation, corruption, incessant comedy.

The psychological nature of the knot, because we end up believing in this knot, even though it weighs us down, by loading us with guaranteed resentment.

The metaphysical nature of the knot, because we give it a certain ontological value, we derive the essence of our being and that of the reality of the world from it, thus condemning ourselves to being nailed to fundamental and immovable certainties.

The moral nature of the knot, because if we pamper this knot in order to feel better, it is at the cost of guilt, that of lies and bad conscience.

The existential nature of the knot, because this is how we claim to build an identity, to elaborate a project, risking at any moment to discover its facticity, by ourselves or through the eyes of others, making life impossible for us.

In the end, the entanglement of the knot constitutes this confusing framework that guides our daily concerns and actions.

The knot holds together the bun or shoes. Sometimes it is more of an ornament, sometimes it is more practical, sometimes both. Either it holds only itself, it is only its own purpose, sometimes it holds something, or even a whole set: in these cases, a singular scaffolding rests on it, impressive in its imbalance and precariousness. When it has an aesthetic function, the knot is used to avoid showing by showing something clearly visible, the big tree that hides the forest. The knot decorates: it is nothing for the gift, it is not part of the offering, yet without it the gift is no longer a gift, but a simple object that is given, an object with a nature merely utilitarian. A gift that is not made attractive is no longer a gift. Strangely, even if the knot is not the gift, the knot is somehow the gift, in the empire of appearances, signs and symbols where we evolve.

To work, to hold, the knot must be tightened. As a result, it is difficult to undo. Moreover, the more it holds, the tighter it tightens, and the tighter it is, the more difficult and painful it is to undo. Except for those gifted people who know how to make knots that can be untied with a simple gesture of their fingers; these are artists, real actors: they also have their own tragedy, their own sword of Damocles, since they tie without knotting. For others, the knots must be constantly monitored: sometimes they tighten when used, sometimes they loosen over time. When they tighten, it becomes more difficult to untie them. Nails get exhausted, teeth too sometimes, so we give up, we leave, or we cut this knot, too dense and too thick. Knots have their own lives, their own nature and their own susceptibility. To undo them, it is sometimes necessary to take them gently, sometimes to pull them out at once. Cutting is not always appropriate when the knot is vital, as is often believed to be. So nothing must be wanted, nothing expected, just patience: it is a matter of

playing quietly with the knot, just like that, while it softens and loosens its grip on itself. Knots make their holders febrile, they create dependence, frustration; they make us want to tear them off, but we cannot, or do not want to: the consequences are too painful.

As in dramas, it seems that knots are always awaiting their unravelling conclusions, even when those never arrive, or are very slow. What is this knot hiding, something, or nothing? Is it useful, does it decorate, or is it pure facticity: it is there because it is there. We cling to the knots of our soul, as if it were our own soul. A bag of knots, one might say sometimes. The soul is then no more than knots, no more than a knot: a set of well welded knots is no more than a single knot; we can no longer distinguish the container and the content, the shape and the matter. Knot and knots, nothing more than knot and knots: we can no longer distinguish the singular and the plural, as if the knot were only a matter, raw, inchoate and indistinct. Knotted matter.

## The knot and the link

Let us stop spinning the metaphor - as long as it is metaphorical - and let us return to the psychological knot. One would think that there is nothing to look for behind the knot that is presented to us. But we realize that one knot leads to another. We know that our knots, however tied and tight they may be, are always fragile, that they are only there to compensate for the fragility of the being, to protect its susceptibility. The being is always threatened by nothingness; around the being, within it, lies non-being, which fascinates and attracts it, while repelling it. Everything is contained in the knot: the constituent elements of thought, concepts, predicates, conceptual links, axiologies: everything is there, the being is there, but in a confused, chaotic, indistinct and compact way: it looks just like non-being. No breathing gap is allowed, there is no room for otherness, for breathing, for rhythm. In absolute terms, it could just be redesigned, reworked, reorganize. A new meaning would then emerge, or quite simply, meaning would then emerge: a context, possibilities, universality, openness, distinction and link would appear.

Strange paradox, the knot does not allow the link: it is too stiff, too possessive, too closed, too tense for anything clear to be woven. Neither weft, warp, nor stitches, nor any of the elements necessary for weaving are allowed: it is the reign of protective chaos. For thought, for consciousness, it would then be a question of clarifying, formulating, using, playing, in order to recognize, in order to articulate. These are the language games, according to Wittgenstein. One might as well say, it is dialectic according to Hegel, it is clear thinking according to Descartes, Spinoza or Leibniz. For it is in consciousness that the world appears to us, as Kant thinks, and this consciousness needs to untie the knots to find its way around. It is a question of weaving, Plato tells us, for whom this ancient art is the metaphor par excellence of thinking.

Thus by unravelling speeches, by questioning like Socrates, through language games like Wittgenstein, through decomposition like Descartes, the problems would disappear: they would dissolve or impose a solution that would be self-evident. Links would be established, or re-established, that would bring the problems back to their proper dimension: to that of a non-problem. But to do so, we would still have to accept the new data that are emerging, the strange relationships that are arising, the paradigm shifts that are needed, the enlargements or restrictions that are disturbing us. This can also be called the principle of life, the principle of reason, or the principle of necessity. Everything becomes visible, everything becomes negotiable again: syntax, grammar, morphology, logic are summoned and put into play. Of course, opinions, emotions, assumptions and any other form of certainty are put on the table, questioned. In this archaeological work, or anagogical work, we take up the thread again, we dismantle the architecture, to rebuild the thought and abandon the debris. But to give way to meaning, one must not be afraid of absurdity.

In this regard, we can include in this development the way Montaigne approaches the problem of the knot. For this author, it is necessary to know how to unravel false reasons, to claim evidence and reasons that cannot be resolved, and to

know how to decide by putting an end to inextricable and futile discussions. His approach consists in showing the primary knots, the elementary strands and ends of the experience, cutting short the vain and verbose ratiocinations. His approach consists in "seeking the knot of the debate", "the knot of the cause", by unravelling what is meaningless. There would therefore be real knots, which tie legitimately, and false knots, which deserve to be untied. He thus grants an ontological status to the knot, to the various knots that according to their legitimacy would be considered as being or not being.

## Therapy and reason

From what we have just seen, we conclude that philosophy is a therapeutic work. A term that we will find explicitly at least in Plato and Wittgenstein, implicitly in the other authors mentioned. Bewitchment, confusion, blindness, dogmatism, emotionality, passivity, phantasms, and illusions are all pathologies denounced by philosophers, those practitioners of the soul, the mind, or the thinking body. Philosophical diagnosis. More than wisdom or knowledge, it is the disease that is at stake. And in the face of these universal and common diseases, or this one polymorphic disease, "human, too human", Nietzsche would say, the ultimate prescription: it is the reason we are talking about, the reason that seems to be the window or the key to emerging from our misery. Even if this faculty is articulated in different forms or takes different, even contradictory names, for historical reasons, for reasons of connotations, so dear to philosophers, everyone always wanting to stand out from the neighbor. A reason that, for one is madness, for the other prescription. A reason that is sometimes rational, sometimes reasonable. Reason "pharmakon", poison and remedy. Reason and fever, salvation and loss, lead an incessant ballet, a quadrille of reversals. Pathology of singularization, which seems to be the philosophical disease par excellence, the desire to be special, to be original, even to be unheard of or incomprehensible. This desire is very present, very prevalent in these "thinking beings", even though we will encounter criticism of such a desire here and there. For these great minds always seem to find their meaning and essence in the frantic pursuit of a particularization, even when they laugh at

meaning, essence and particularity. A philosophical knot, one might say by way of conclusion.



# TO SPEAK IS TO PLAY

## Beliefs

Most of the time, when we talk, we want to believe what we say. Moreover, we do everything to ensure that this belief is shared, we want others to believe us; for this, we make enormous efforts; we justify ourselves, we argue, we promise and swear, and we have difficulty tolerating to be doubted or contradicted. We would prefer the discussion to stop when it does not proceed as we want. If this is quite understandable on the existential level, where our commitment is heavy and very substantial, full of expectations, it is a problem on the thinking level. Obviously, for anyone who claims to make no difference between living and thinking, such a distinction will make no sense. However, when we ask not to take words literally and to consider the metaphorical dimension of speech, when we recommend not to hypostatize our thoughts, when we invite the speaker to distance himself from his speech, we are not addressing the biological and material constraints, which indeed are immediate and tangible, literal and harsh, or appear to be so. However, we might also consider, as a second step, to somewhat "de-realize" our existential "realities", these terrible "needs". A proposal that would have the definite advantage of alleviating the various heavy sides of existence, when existence that is often felt or expressed as a burden. Almost always if you take the trouble to dig a little deeper. Sisyphus and Atlas are very much alive.

First, let us start by considering what happens to words, to our words. When we speak, we do so to describe things, the world, or ourselves, on the one hand; we

pretend to describe the diversity of phenomena, to explain or analyze them, in a certain way we claim to instruct the neighbor and ourselves. On the other hand, we speak to ask for something, to solve a material need or an emotional requirement, to command and forbid, always with a practical concern that needs to be solved. Finally, we speak because we need to speak, we want to express ourselves, to exchange, to create, simply to overexist through speech, to give meaning or pleasure to our existence; a speech that acts and makes one act. Whether descriptive, prescriptive, or performative, these three figures of speech, even if they seem to differ, have in common that they are all about need. There is a necessity here, in a more or less urgent way, more or less prominent, more or less acute. And because of this, there is suffering, and even if some readers will retreat before this word, which they will find exaggerated, excessive, caricatural or outrageous, we realize that speech is always the expression of a lack that we seek to fill, a kind of discomfort that inhabits us, a worry, an imbalance. And to be twice as quirky, we will affirm that even the absence of speech, silence, censorship or self-censorship, are also related to this suffering. We are condemned to speak just as we are condemned to remain silent. This may explain why and how verbal exchange can easily lead to emotional or physical confrontation. Behind the speech, within it, there is always a tension, linked to an expectation, a request, a desire, a fear. However, in a certain way, this pressure or emotional charge puts a strain on our thinking process and encumbers it.

## Emerging out of emergency

The question now is whether we can avoid this emotional and cognitive burden, or whether we are condemned to it. This question involves the possibility or necessity of philosophizing. Because it seems to us that even before the holding of a speech or the implementation of some cognitive competence, we encounter a problem of attitude, which both allows and conditions the implementation of philosophizing. Not that we think it is impossible to philosophize under the constraint of need, as evidenced by the history of man, where need was never abandoned, and the history of each of us, equally full of necessity. It is indeed still possible.



Need can even be a driving force for philosophizing. But, if our job is to invite our fellow citizens to philosophize, and also to mobilize our own self, we must examine how and in what way we tend to refrain from philosophizing, how we make it difficult for ourselves, and even by what strange means we refrain from doing so or make ourselves indifferent. Now, our experience has shown us that the first and substantial obstacle is precisely to tear ourselves away from need: the urgency of philosophizing comes mainly from dragging away from urgency. In our professional practice, when people who make an appointment for an individual philosophical consultation are driven by need, a need about an issue that haunts or obsesses them, our first task is precisely to help put this need, this immediate pressure, on hold in order to start thinking. The first condition to implement thinking is the possibility or impossibility of this suspension, even if only momentarily. If the subject does not know how to become an object for himself, if he does not know how to operate a *mise en abyme* of himself, if he does not allow himself to be distanced and to think critically, both about his being and his mind, if he retreats before thinking the unthinkable, then he will wish to speak, to express himself, to defend himself or to justify himself, even to attack, but the awareness required to philosophize will remain absent.

## The speech tool

Let us now try to examine the nature of the paradigmatic shift that we advocate as a condition for the philosophizing. We propose that speech be disinvested from its existential pressure and become a simple tool, and philosophizing an art, the art of using this tool for the production of speech, that is, the production of new tools. At this point an objection will be raised; it involves introducing or reintroducing a need, since a task must therefore be completed. This is a very relevant objection, since we will then define a goal, for example that of raising awareness, or that of producing concepts or constructing thought. Even if it is a question of deconstruction, we define something that is still referring to necessity. And we have to plead guilty here, at least in a certain way, because strangely enough, the "non-need" is still a "need" for the animal that we are. Although the paradox is precisely

what could define the specificity of this animal, defined as "paradoxical animal", even more precisely than the concept of "reasonable animal" traditionally does. We will justify our position with different arguments. First, art, or the artistic attitude, is the modality that best allows us to be part of a dimension of gratuity, where we can most, as an ideal regulator, abandon all necessity and place ourselves in a perspective of freedom. Although art is not necessarily reduced to this, since it is often the expression of a pressing demand for subjectivity. Then, if speech becomes a tool, it frees itself from its ontological heaviness, it becomes able to ignore the need to affirm or account for being, in order to be manipulated according to the artist's wishes, an experience shared by poets and philosophers. It must no longer be systematically accountable to a so-called reality that would transcend it, that would endorse and sanction it, nor must it be an expression of an act of faith. It becomes its own reality, at the service of an art that is nothing more than the production of this speech. And we must not forget that art generates its own constraints, especially since the free dimension of art means that constraints are not external to art itself, since it is practice itself that generates them. Especially in the case of the philosophizing, since this art produces all of its tools, a consequence of the total non-materiality of its modality. This is not the case for the painter, musician or sculptor; if they can participate in the development of the tools, they are not their producers, and their art does not consist in producing these tools. Although in general it can be stated in defense of the freedom of art that the latter does not, in theory or in an absolute way, have to satisfy external constraints insofar as it only responds to its own request. It can do so if it wishes, as would an art that defines itself as realistic, or that conveys a message or a self-expression, but it will still be a matter of subjectivity, because of a personal decision, and not of any criteria that is intrinsic to the art itself. The same is true for philosophy, which can also be used to serve a cause, a personal or collective commitment, a teaching task, the resolution of a problem, but any choice of this type will refer to a particular conception of the philosophizing without being able to claim to capture or define the universality of the philosophizing. Moreover, as history shows, this type of reductionist commitment has existed, exists and will continue to exist, because this aberration also has its *raison d'être*. Since we defend philosophical freedom, we must also defend the possibility of its instrumentalization. To prohibit it would pre-

cisely determine an extrinsic condition and a prerequisite for the philosophizing, some criterion somewhat pertaining to the non-disputable, the non-problematizable. However, a good reason not to worry too much about the red line between the philosophizing and the non-philosophizing is to be able to observe how philosophical concepts that emanate from radical freedom will be called upon and mobilized in the world of need and necessity. The prohibition of instrumentalization would also constitute another aberration, quite a common one actually; the ivory tower syndrome, which would protect the "philosophical genius" from the banal demands of this world. For, without worrying a priori about the "consequences" of the concepts and the thought it engenders, without falling into the trap of utilitarianism, the philosopher can be quite interested in the use of what philosophy produces without fearing reductionism, without disdaining necessity, without ignoring that the philosopher cannot forget his own humanity, even without denying his animality. We must accept the testing it imposes on us, without making reality or any other concept an absolute.

## Abandoning certainties

Let us now try to further define the relationship to speech that would not or no longer proceed from need. Let us take an example: that of a teacher who, in order to make his students discover something, tells them something false or meaningless, the teacher who provokes, the teacher who creates uncertainty. Is what he says serious or not? In a more or less subtle way, he tries to pose a problem, which his students have to perceive and analyze, perhaps solve. Is this teacher a liar, a cheat, a being without morality? Some will not appreciate this type of "surprising" teaching method, especially if the teacher does not warn his students. Socratic irony, humor, games or provocation all pertain to this type of teaching. This playful form will displease the academic minded, for its "lack of seriousness" or "lack of integrity", the psychological minded for its lack of "compassion" or "violence", the moral minded for the "manipulation" or "lack of respect" it represents. But if we can forget for a moment our prejudices and suspend our judgment to think only about the nature of such a strategy, or its effectiveness, let us see what happens.

Such a teacher tries to induce a certain relationship to thought and speech; he teaches us to no longer take speech for granted, especially that emanating from authority, not to incite any kind of banal and easy rebellion, but because it is precisely those speeches which convey established truths that end up teaching us how not to think. The teacher's word therefore changes its status; it is no longer the one that transmits knowledge, i.e. certainties, but the one that prompts thinking. It does not only prompt it with regard to the content advanced, because the teacher's authority may also put in question the relationship of thought to itself. Certainly, the content passed on also offers things to think about. But, more significantly, more deeply, the "questioning" teaching induces thinking about the very conditions of thought, about the possibilities of its own existence. He raises questions on what any articulation of speech must presuppose, i.e. this directly challenges the subject through an object of thought. It sends the subject back to himself, as this thinking subject is ultimately the only legitimate object of thought for himself. To be concrete, there are two fundamental positions from which I can listen to a word or read a text. I trust the author, or I don't trust him. If I trust him, I listen to him, write down what he says, and try to record what he passes on to me. If I don't trust him, I take everything he says very carefully and contradict or challenge him as much as I can, because his intentions are unclear or unreliable. The first attitude encourages me to be credulous, the speech is about knowledge, it passes on sure values; the second one encourages me to suspicion, the speech is about mere opinions, or the intentions are questionable. However, we would like to introduce a third position: the one we will call the "game" position. In order to play with someone, I have to trust them and not trust them simultaneously, or neither trust them nor deny them my trust. In the latter case, the speech is no longer of the same nature; it is no longer a question of knowledge or opinions, but of hypotheses; everything is conjecture. The other becomes a means to confront oneself. At the same time, if these are only hypotheses, if one tries to make others think, the distinction between the position of the teacher and that of the pupil becomes blurred somewhat; both are there to try to think and make the other think, even if one has more experience than the other. Everything is at stake, everything remains to be thought of.

## Thinking the hypothesis

This leads us to analyze and evaluate for a moment the status of the thought of a hypothesis. When we ask someone to problematize their thinking, by objecting to their own statements or making proposals contrary to their own, and the subject eventually produces such statements, we ask them if it makes sense. They often react by saying, "But that's not what I think!". It was them who however raised this objection, it was them who made this contrary proposal. "You forced me," they say. Forced or not, it is still their idea. Why do they say they don't mean it? This brings us back to what opposes opinion or knowledge to hypothesis. Opinion and knowledge are kinds of certainties, they maintain a determined relationship to conviction even if they are formally of a different nature, and they often merge; we defend them both equally, we attach ourselves to both, we hypostatize their content by loading them with a connotation of truth, and what they refer to is some relatively intangible reality that we will defend tooth and nail. An hypothesis is devoid of such heaviness, it is only there to see, merely to examine the implications and consequences of a content; the hypothesis arises as a mere attempt to identify the truth or reality; it is imbued with gratuitousness. "It's just another speech", the certainty believer will proclaim. Because it is not so much the proposal that interests him but rather his "truth", the unshakeable one, conceived in the traditional way of the adequacy between the term and the thing, but which is mainly conviction. He wants to proclaim this truth. Strangely enough, he is bounded by it. He does not know how to say false things to examine their degree of truth and falsity. In the same way, for the same reason, he does not know how to say true things to discover the degree of truth and falsity. Truth cannot emerge, it cannot be born; it undergoes an abortion at its very conception; this conception of truth is contraceptive. Because there are choices that paralyze any possibility of choice. And the seriousness of those who precisely raise the specter of truth has to be admired; it seems that this truth unknowingly murders the truths to be born. An hypothesis is precisely this possible truth, this truth "outside the walls" which is truth because of its simple status as a possibility; what is possible is true. Even truer than what is pro-

ven, because the possible leaves the space open; something that neither opinion nor knowledge allow.

But where do we find this kind of truth? In a way, it is found in pragmatism, in the idea of abduction, which is different from both induction and deduction. It is the genesis of an idea that emerges from "nowhere", a kind of dazzling force that we take for what it is, without worrying about its origin or status. Creative thinking, one might say. Then, verification is made however, to see if this idea "works", if it "operates", and it is forgotten if not. This idea is freer a priori than that of deduction and induction, it does not have to account for its anteriority, but a posteriori nevertheless. It has to satisfy some principle of reality; if it does not, it is condemned. But at least it was able to live, even for a short moment, the time to examine its operativity in a restricted context. It eventually suffered the fate of the "truth outside the walls" prohibited by truth a priori, with the advantage allowed by the empirical vision of the world: any idea is good and healthy a priori, has the right to be tested, and will be condemned or banished only a posteriori. Woe to the idea that does not correspond to the proposed experience, that does not satisfy the set goal! We forget too easily that its meager existence, as ephemeral as it was, gave us for a short while an oxygenated healthy mind.

## The truth of the game

The relationship to truth that we propose looks more like a true game. How can a game be true? A strange, paradoxical, or senseless question, we will be told. Because, truth has nothing to do with playing; truth is something serious, something you don't joke about. What is true is what counts, what is true is what corresponds to "objective reality", whether material or intellectual; what is true is what is coherent; what is true is at the very least what is effective or what is commonly accepted, especially by competent people. But, a true game, what an absurd formulation! Unless you say "a real game", that is, a game where you really play, where you play seriously, not a foul game. To play a foul game means that the rules are not respected, that there is cheating. From then on, the game is no longer a

game, it becomes a game of anything, a place where anything is allowed, where in fact all moves are authorized, where there are no more criteria, no more constraints, no more requirements. There is no longer this wholehearted fight with the self, neither with reason, nor with aesthetics, nor with ethics, nor with the other; only freewheeling desires, unbridled wills, are experienced, no more testing. To really play, one must know and master the rules and regulations, but also be creative enough to laugh at them and play with them; one has to know how to take risks and dare risk himself in the merciless mirror of truth, of reality, without ever taking them seriously, because the important role of arbitrariness and convention that determines them stays in mind. It's all conjecture and shifts.

To reconcile the astonished or confused reader with our hypothesis, we will also use the concept of beauty, an aesthetic appreciation; we will try to save the true through the beautiful. We are interested in beauty for several reasons: admission of subjectivity, possibility of immediacy, dimension of gratuitousness, plurality of criteria, positive function of aberration, richness of paradoxes and opposites. In beauty, everything is good, even the ugly, as shown by gargoyles and scarecrows, but at the same time, nothing is acquired, nothing is given, nothing is preserved, since the ephemeral is no less equipped or less substantial than the permanent. However, we are not introducing here some blissful relativism, because the requirement of beauty is no less strong, rough and present than that of truth. Already because there is "kairos" in beauty, this sense of opportunity, of temporality, of circumstance. Time is a crucial factor, time can be appropriate or displaced, context can be decisive. Like an exoticism that is only appreciated in its location, which on the contrary gains nothing from being transported or imported. Like an atmosphere or a gesture that matters only in a certain company, without whom it loses all magic, all effectiveness. What is beautiful now may not be beautiful in a moment, some fashion effect, some fashion that has its reasons to be as well as its reasons not to be. Context plays a role; it imposes its diktats and changes the rules. The singular is possible, so are reversals. Sustainability and timelessness should not be banished, because they have some legitimacy. Admittedly, in its radical nature, this singularity may make things easy, since we no longer have to account for it. However, if one refuses to build mental dungeons, to dig spiritual cells where the subject

takes refuge, barricading himself from all strangeness, the risk is to be taken. We should protect ourselves from a true and a good, even a beautiful, that would claim to protect us from false, evil or ugly. For the beautiful admits its opposite; the ugly is not necessarily less beautiful than the beautiful; also the beautiful that is ignored is not necessarily less beautiful than the beautiful. If only truth was inspired by such an approach! It is possible however: the true that mocks the true knows that the true is no more true than the false, because it understands the truth of the false, just as it understands its own rigidities, its own blindness. It does not say: "Every man his separate way, every man his own opinion", nor does it say "This is true because this is false", since this "true beyond the true", to paraphrase Pascal, states that there is truth in what we say although we do not know the nature of that truth, or its extent. Certainly, fearful minds will dread such a prospect. How to ensure that we are not sucked into the abyss of lazy relativism? Bending over the void is not without danger. One has to be calm and cold-blooded to look into the abyss and not be taken away.

## Thinking the unthinkable

Let us go back to our case: the game of questioning and the status of hypotheses. Certainly the game must be fair and well played. But its validity, its legitimacy, its conformity with reality or truth, will manifest or be accomplished in the very fact that it produces an effect, a beautiful effect; this is how we know that the work is appropriate, that it suits, that it is timely, that it is original. When a particular hypothesis that emerges along the way is amusing, surprising, provocative, interesting or awful, what more could we ask from it! So, the questioner points his finger at some future reality, and the replier avoids answering, with one of these innumerable strategies that we all instinctively master, an animal survival instinct or comfort pulse. But by insisting, the question ends up producing what it must produce, the replier ends up looking in the direction pointed out by the foreign finger, the strange finger, and he sees himself and hears himself think, speak strange words, to which he must gradually get used to, in order to appreciate the depth and meaning. At first, he is confused, at second, if he accepts it, he sees his world recreating



itself before his amazed eyes. The unthinkable becomes the foundation of what is then thought. Perhaps a conversion will take place, perhaps not, but we will have dared to look into the abyss.

The main axis of the movement of thought, the evolution of free thinking, lies in the play of opposites. Subjective refers to objective, and vice versa. Particular refers to universal, and vice versa. Multiple refers to unit, and vice versa. Space refers to place, and vice versa. Abstract refers to concrete, and vice versa. So, there are a number of these antinomies which structure thought by their tension, but they constitute a determined quantity. Given the specific nature of antinomy, they represent the particular form that otherness, the undetermined, the infinite, the unknown takes for each of us. Here, we are at the heart of tragic, the great game of human comedy, the theatre of thought. Torn within some antinomy, a tragedy according to Kant, or the absurdity of a shadow theatre, the thinking subject becomes able to make a Copernican reversal, or several, if he accepts to perceive the possible magnitude of it. This famous conversion, an apostasy and renunciation. What was previously obvious, the foundation or umbilicus of the world, suddenly becomes the partial, tense and reduced mere end of an infinite axis. The center is blurred; thought turns to infinity and discovers the immensity of the elsewhere. The infinite becomes a concrete reality; alienation becomes the most intimate place of the self. It is no longer a question of telling the truth; it has evaporated, it has taken off, it has gained altitude. The whole point is to raise issues, not tell the truth, but to experience the *mise en abyme* caused by this unspeakable truth. A moment that has an immeasurable effect on the mind. The tragedy of thinking, i.e. the perception of tragic and dramatic irony, becomes the ultimate experience; a more humane thought than all the feelings that supposedly constitute our "humanity", a humanity more real than man, more human than all the bodily, existential, or narrative tragedies that compose our daily lives. This human tragedy is not the tragedy of others, but ours; it is not done out of empathy, but directly. We are not ourselves anymore, we are the other, this common denominator of humanity. As Ulysses said to answer Polyphemus, to be human is to be nobody. This is probably the only condition for being a real person. A human, this undetermined species, and not a beast that lies down fully clothed.

Playing with opposites becomes the guarantee of a vibrant thought, a thought in action. But we encounter different types of behavior in the face of antinomies. The most frequent is the negation of the opposite, a fixation on one of the poles of the axis, whether in the form of ignorance, denial or criticism. The opposite then remains unthinkable, unthought of; it is the object of the most radical rejection, the most virulent condemnation, if only through silence, a voluntary ignorance. The second, quite fashionable, is the negation of the tension between the antinomies; it is claimed that they are complementary, that they go together; the mind therefore claims to be a kind of quick and complacent coincidence of the opposites; a rejection of the principle of noncontradiction that avoids any tension, any choice, any finiteness, any rigorous work of thought. The third posture is a distant skepticism, another form of non-thinking, which is content to look at the whole case from afar, arguing that a choice cannot be made, only to detach itself from it, seeking shelter in some certainties elsewhere, without admitting it. By placing itself in a position of pure exteriority, by opting for the exclusive gaze of God, Sirius' unique perspective, the mind lies to itself since it denies its status as a subject, this subject that cannot escape a specific or various positions in this matrix of antinomies. By wanting to keep all options open, it claims to be omnipotent, it falls into excessiveness, everything is good to escape tension and not reveal itself to itself and to others. A common pathology of the philosopher. Kant denounces this skepticism as euthanasia of thought.

## Access to humanity

The passage through the antinomy, the detour to the elsewhere, is necessary to access humanity. Heraclitus already invited us to experience the struggle of these opposites that generate all necessity. The subject's education then becomes this unselfish pleasure that excludes immediate satisfaction, because the detour is significant: it is costly to our identity. Thinking here is no longer about possession or consumption, but pure action. There is no game worthy of the name without trying a hard, risky move. One has to accept to lose something, but in the same way, it is by having nothing to lose that one can accept that something will be lost. It is by stop-

ping calculating that one learns to calculate. Each one plays against himself, the other is only a pretext, the one we help to play against himself. As Socrates teaches us in his hand-to-hand combat with the sophists, Gorgias, Callicles and others, to philosophize is to fight, to play at war. Nietzsche invites us to remain merciless for the loved one, to love our enemy in battle, but without hatred or envy, perhaps even without a fight if we are a saint. What's best is not what's most pleasant. This is where Socrates is most opposed to the sophists: the battlefield is the archetype of philosophizing, not the living room or the classroom. Not to defeat the other, but to defeat oneself. It is for this reason, among others, that living means dying; that "to die exults living". No authentic thought without dying to oneself. At the same time, not to think is to die, or live a life that is only a slow agony. To die in order to live, or to live by dying, the choice is easy, but hard unless you learn to die. It is no longer a question of being polite or having good manners. Ethics becomes a decoy, the illusion of a good conscience, of being on the right side of things. Being nice to others, so they'll be nice to us. Fearful well-mannered worldview, because the truth is that the other repels us: he is not himself, he is the other, the one who defines himself in relation to us; as another, a vague image of ourself and our sordid calculations, he is a pure object of speculation and not a being in his own right.

When everything is hypothesis, when everything is conjecture, thought is freed from the ancestral, cultural and personal burden. Terrible burden of a solid "truth", cast in concrete. The burden of Atlas carrying the world on its shoulders. To put forward hypotheses is to risk the unknown, for free, just to see what happens, it is to try a few new paths. It is to love error; not to tolerate it, but to love it, as a nourishing mother for thought. Everything in being is linked, Leibniz thought, and we can multiply new connections infinitely, some conceptual short-circuits, those that we have never dared to imagine before. Connect what has never been connected, and then reverse that connection. Just to see what happens, time to give meaning to the senseless, to forge meaning through the senseless. After all, isn't that the very principle of the hypothetical-deductive scheme. Apart from the fact that, in general, we unknowingly favor the deductive over the hypothetical. Too often we prevent the latter from being by asking it to submit to the for-

mer, to ask its permission before even sticking its head out, to let the consequences be weighed too much by antecedence. What could be more sterile and common than this spasm, even among those who have no sense of logic, who nevertheless intuitively block the way to what does not suit them. The *ars philosophica* is not about stating the true a priori, nor is it about agreeing or not, it is about letting an original production of meaning take place, then examining it, in order to make the most of it. It is not even a question of producing this new meaning, but of letting it happen, of not preventing its emergence. To do this, one must let go of the catechism, and become sensitive to the aesthetic dimension of the word: enjoy the beautiful idea, appreciate the beautiful problem. In this way, as in the game, there is often more truth in the spontaneous jet than in the long prepared answers. The latter being more false, more artificial. And we are once again reaching the essence of the Socratic dialogue. "Don't tell me the tedious speech you've been preparing for ages, but tell me off the top of your head what your answer is to my question." No more academic lies! Let yourself think! So don't be so serious: to play well, you must stop acting as a philosopher, and start enjoying playing. Even the written word, in order not to be a trap, an encyclopedic heaviness, must be nothing more than fun. Only the human soul interests Socrates as the place of writing, because it is alive, it responds. Engraving on an object is worthy of those who have nothing better to do and fear losing something: greedy souls who want to forget nothing. Fear that ideas will disappear, fear that men will disappear. Fear becomes the way of life par excellence. There is no place for gratuity there, everything must be placed, recorded, registered, stored, analyzed, frozen, like beetles stung in the museum's drawers. In the soul, it is the effects produced by ideas that interest us, what they generate, more than the ideas themselves.

## Producing meaning

Playing the concepts together, strange and unexpected combinations, the production of new concepts. This is about producing meaning, not rationalizing, justifying or explaining. A real investigation in which chance, for lack of a better name, must play its leading role. To say stupid things just to see where they go,

how they sound, without worrying about the critical look, that of the outside, but also and above all, that of the inside, this terrible and merciless great inquisitor who forgives nothing and prevents everything. There is no need to say everything, another temptation of man's omnipotence, but only to say a little, let go a few snatches, then watch, contemplate, admire, analyze, without shame or worried narcissism. It is no longer a question of thinking about what we are going to say, but of thinking about what we have said. In any case, we always mean what we say, even when we don't think about it, even when we don't think it. If not, where would it come from? The word accident never explains anything; it excuses. For this reason, it is better to say little to know what you are saying, and to say something to know what you are thinking. According to their temperament, some hide in prolixity, others in laconicism. Certainly, in such a scheme, the master takes on a strange appearance. He is no longer the one who thinks, but only the one who makes you think. One could almost say that he no longer needs to think, and even less to know, in any case he hardly needs ideas since he is no longer there to pass on but to induce. He is the one who invites to say, who makes people say, who forces them to say, who invites them to listen, who makes them listen, who forces them to listen. Strangely enough, the master is no longer a man of knowledge, but a man of action. Closer to the gymnastics teacher, or even the choir master, than to any other teacher. Unless the teacher disappears, so that the student can do his work in peace. The swimming instructor does not have to dive into the pool to make one swim: it would be useless. It is quite an art to know how to disappear, without however retiring. Finally, perhaps there is neither a teacher nor a student there. At least as a regulating ideal.

Critics are right, this is a reductive approach. Terribly restrictive. And it is understandable that the teacher who wishes to express himself or spread his erudition feels frustrated, that he even considers such a vision as an aggression against his status and himself. But let us also think of the poor student, who, like his teacher, wants to express himself and show what he knows. We sometimes, or often, ask him for a single sentence, even worse a single word, where he would have so much to say, where there would be so much to say. But, playing football is not about kicking a ball, practicing a martial art is not about fighting; as in architec-

ture, everything is about constraint. The latter is the very condition of artistic practice. And, if we can happily disregard constraints, we cannot ignore them. Thus, if we have to choose, if we cannot be everywhere at once, if we cannot say everything, the requirement is important, frustration awaits us, because the choice is necessary, however the reward is worth it. When we demand to elude the context, to forget the intention, the mind rebels, it wants to contextualize its own word, to produce preambles. It prefers to work on an individual basis, so as not to be trapped; it likes phatic expressions, which claim nothing more than to take advantage of words in order to create presence, so that it can be reassured. In no way should it try to escape, neither by silence nor by words.

## The reality of words

Another paradigm shift: it is the proposals that interest us, it is the words we are talking about, not the things to which their words refer. The truth of a word is no longer so much the classic adequacy between the latter and the objective reality it claims to describe, although we do not exclude this important dimension of truth. The truth of a word is above all the relationship of that word to itself, the work it does on itself: work of analysis, evaluation, conceptualization, self-transformation. For the word's work on itself provokes and manifests the work of the being on itself. That is why we look at the statements, not at things, that is why we favor reasoning over proposals, because everything is in the relationship. "Substantial link" said Leibniz. It is the implications and consequences that have meaning, because they reveal the subject, the subject who daily seeks to hide behind objective facts. "I don't have time", "I don't have the means", "It's the circumstances", "I was forced", "I couldn't do it any other way", "I had to", "It's the way it is", "Because that's how it is", etc. The break is necessary: the cord must be cut, the distance established. To accomplish such a gesture, everything is good, everything is useful to send the subject back to himself, to place him in front of the worldview he produces, he maintains, or rejects. But for this to happen, it is necessary to tear the word away from itself. It will understand its own speech only when it agrees to produce another one, and only then. Without it, it says what it says, period, it repeats it un-

til it endlessly. No perspective is possible unless the discourse is problematized, unless it goes out of itself to consider itself in its nakedness, certainly a little pale, sometimes a little ghostly. Death lurks, the feeling of finitude embraces us, and we prefer not to linger too long in such unsure places. If we don't free the speech by taking it to this elsewhere that it forbids to itself, it will be confined to its own commonplace, to its words repeated a hundred times, like those jokes of old husbands that make their wives laugh no more, unless laughter is also integrated into the ritual fixed for eternity: masks take on all kinds of appearances, more or less grotesque.

The principle is simple: the word that speaks of the world speaks more of itself than of the world. The subject who talks about the object speaks more about himself than about the object he claims to be talking about. But he must be aware of this. In the end, the subject is his own object, even if that is not his intention, even if he forbids the other to see and hear: "Now you are interpreting!". Obviously, it is easier for the other person to see that the subject speaks about himself, because he is so used to the sound of his own voice that he no longer hears it. Unless he is used to playing with his voice, to modulating its sounds, in which case he will never again claim any neutrality or seriousness. In the same way, he who changes his opinions, he who experiments with new thoughts, he who knows how to tear himself away from himself will be able to recognize the specific nature of the speaking subject in the speech he produces, he will be able to identify and name his own nature, that of the moment or that which lasts, because he will perhaps even be able to make the difference between the two. But more often than not, we ignore the sound of our own voice, we prefer to ignore it, we do not like to hear it, and more often, we pull out our claws if someone wants to show us the specificity of our own words. We do not trust others, yet they are in a better position to hear what we say than we are.

## Self-alienation, condition of thinking

The conclusion is clear: for speech to be a tool of consciousness, and not of knowledge and conviction, it must become alien to itself. This will save it two pitfalls. The first is the one where speech constitutes its own purpose: it says, it expresses, it is happy; no matter then whether to be understood, to be sensible, the speech does not care about being interesting or important, it is only urgent. The second is the one where the word is only the instrument of desire or will. It has no need to understand: it aspires to only one thing, to satisfy the desire that motivated it: to command, to advocate, to prohibit. In both cases, the subject is not alien to himself, he is not his own object, and does not wish to be. An object is what has distance, what is not part of the subject, even if it is connected to it. If the bond is too strong, the object is no longer an object, it is an integral part of the subject, and no more than a parent is really free to think about his child, consciousness cannot clearly think about the object that inhabits the subject. To think is to dialogue with oneself, Plato tells us. But to dialogue with oneself, there must be a minimum of disagreement, a minimum of distance between the parties of the being: there must be difference, a double perspective, a fault, a tension; a form or another of duality or multiplicity must be established. For this to happen, the unity of being, its integrity, its indivisible nature must be abandoned. But, this feeling of fracture can be terrible: it will be experienced as an aggression, as an experience of death. The subject does not wish to be present at its dissolution. He generally aspires to protect himself, to defend himself, and many words have no other function than this one. To express oneself is often intended to reassure oneself, to exorcise, to calm the anguish that inhabits us. As for the speech of desire and will, it is directed towards a single goal: it aspires to nothing more than to satisfy a need that seems necessary for it to exist, and any frustration would be experienced as a loss of being, wrongly felt as a threat to that perseverance in the being that Spinoza calls the *conatus*. By an unforgivable confusion between the empirical and the transcendental. The tragic or comic staging of the artistic, literary, pictorial, or other work offers us in this respect a sublimation of the pain associated with the fracture, in order to allow us not only to become aware of it, but also to appreciate it, to enjoy it, as a privileged access to the truth. To love the truth, the painful truth, to know how to laugh about it and to know how to cry about it, simply because it no longer threatens us; on the contrary, it makes us be, it constitutes us. By moving away



from ourselves, we gain access to humanity, we gain access to our humanity, by de-personalizing we gain the status of a real person: we have nothing to defend, nothing to want, nothing to think about. It is the very condition of living and thinking.

What we are describing here is only an attitude, a way of being, which gives free reign to the hypothesis, which allows us to think the unthinkable. Once we no longer want anything, once we have nothing to defend, as far as possible, we can play with ourselves, laughing at our obstacles and fears. Certainly, we do not have access to any absolute, to any perfection, but at least we become available, we have access to ourselves, we give our consciousness a chance to accomplish its work: that of seeing, hearing and thinking. But if our thoughts and ideas escape their status as hypotheses, if they fall into the urgency and univocity of certainty, then all distance is abolished, everything is frozen. Admittedly, we can think that this makes it possible to act; since the doubt is fading, some will affirm that it is the very condition of action. Nothing is less certain, but that is how human beings often work, in this radical opposition without which they cannot mobilize. The slightest uncertainty paralyses them, any interstice of thought becomes a pretext for immobility. Implementing is therefore closing their eyes and going for it: rushing forward, or backward, becomes the essential paradigm for action. Since living is acting, hence the refusal of any thinking, which supposedly prevents us from living. But, let's leave that for another reflection. Let us be satisfied this time with having played with the idea that word is just a game, no matter how serious it may be. But, this is after all only a simple hypothesis, the unstable substrate of a moment of thought.



# Transcription and analysis of consultations

Kim came to participate to a philosophy festival, organized around the theme of love. She is a professional translator. Once there she heard about the practice philosophical consultation and decided to give it a try.

Oscar: Do you know that when one comes for a consultation, one usually raises a question. Were you told that?

Kim Ha: No

O: OK, it doesn't matter. But do you have some topic that you would like to think about? It can be about anything, about you, about the world. Some issue where you tell yourself: "I would like to think about it".

K: Well, since the topic is about love (nervously laughs)

O: And do you have a question about love that you would like to ask?

K: Yes. Is long lasting love possible?

When Kim first comes in, she presents herself in an assured way; she is calm and collected, clear and coherent. Until she announces the subject she wants to discuss, which visibly seems delicate and painful for her, by the manner her behavior changed drastically. The presupposition we can derive from her attitude and question is that her love stories – or story – do not last, at least not as much as she

would wish, she most likely gets abandoned and feels betrayed. This makes her doubt of her strong desire or expectation: that love would sort of last forever.

O: OK, I will write it down. (writes down the question). So, “Is long lasting love possible?” This is the question that interests you?

K: Yes.

O: Since French is not your native language, does the word presupposition speak to you?

K: Presupposition? Yes.

O: What would be the presupposition of someone who asks: “is long lasting love possible?”

K: (Laughs) The presupposition would be that the answer is “no”.

O: That means you have reasons to think it is not possible, do you agree?

K: Yes.

O: What could be the main reason that makes you think that long lasting love is not possible?

K: It is through experience.

O: Is it your experience or in general experience of human beings?

K: Mine, life experience.

Oscar writes the question, a gesture that has both a practical and symbolic function. The practical dimension is to remember the initial question, which indicates the starting point, the crux and the anchorage of the discussion. The symbolic dimension is to indicate that this question is important enough that time and effort

should be taken in order to transcribe it. And the short interruption provoked – the question could have been written while speaking - for doing this creates a certain tension ensuring that some thinking take place. Sometimes, the subject announces a “false” question, some superficial, disconnected or side issue, used consciously or not as a decoy. Even then, it is worth marking strongly the question, underlining, thus, what it stands for.

The question on presupposition is geared at verifying the degree of consciousness of the interlocutor, as well as his general literacy, for example his capacity of analysis. This will give us some indicators for determining the nature of our strategy in the development of the discussion. And visibly, Kim is rather awake: she is well educated, smart and relatively conscious of her own speech. She knows what a presupposition is and can identify one quite rapidly, knowing very well that the formulation of her question rather implies certain despair, through the negative answer. Although this negation could as well be a sort of exorcism, expressed in order to get reassured or to magically dispel the horrible possibility. Her laughter at that moment is rather ambiguous, but it rather confirms the emotional tension she is undergoing in this discussion.

Since she confirms that indeed the answer is most likely negative, we investigate the reasons for her thinking in such a way. And of course, she tells us that her personal experience points definitely in that direction, a conclusion that was rather predictable and confirms our hypothesis of her suffering.

10 - O: Did you notice that the question you are asking is general? The question “Is long lasting love possible” is a general question, do you agree?

K: Yes

O: So you’re answering a general question with a particular experience? Do you agree?

K: Yes.

O: And do you consider it legitimate to answer a general question with a particular experience?

K: It is a little piece of it...

O: But in French, the word “piece” indicates an important proportion or very little?

K: (shakes her head) Very little.

O: Very little. Do you know the principle of induction?

K: (nodding) Induction, deduction.

O: Yes. What you are saying looks like saying “I have seen such a tree, therefore all trees are like that”.

K: (nodding) Exactly.

O: So it is very limited. Do you agree?

K: Yes.

O: And when you answer a general question with a particular experience, can we as well think that it is a bit limited?

K: Yes, yes.

O: Does it surprise you that your argumentation is a bit limited?

K: No.

O: And why doesn't it surprise you?

K: Because I am not a great thinker. (Laughs)

20 - O: Ok, you are a little thinker. (Laughs). I don't know you very much, but I asked you if you knew what induction and presupposition is and you said you knew. Do you realize that such knowledge would already exclude a lot of people?

K: Maybe.

O: I am not asking if it is “maybe”...

K: (interrupts) But I cannot know the others.

O: Oh, so you don't know the others?

K: One cannot know if the others know...

O: Right, right. Do you have a hard time knowing the others?

K: (nods affirmatively) It is possible.

We attract Kim's attention to the fact that if her question is general, the answer or proof for the answer is of a particular form. Visibly she understands the idea, but immediately she tries to justify it, instead of simply acknowledging it. This indicates a certain anxiety, a desire to look good, especially to look smart, since this deals with intellectual matters. Most likely, she fears being caught making a mistake.

Of course her attempt at justification, like most quick reactive justifications, is of rather low quality. In this case, it is a weak argument since, as she further realizes, the experience she mentions is a very reduced aspect of reality. Including the fact that our personal experience is generally a warped one, deprived of objectivity. The choice of using one experience as an answer to a general problem tends to show a certain dose of egocentrism and excessive subjectivity.

Kim agrees that her argument is rather a limited one. But she justifies it with the avowal that she is not a great thinker. But this happens after different statements showing that is an intellectual: she knows what a presupposition is, she is familiar with the types of reasoning, like induction and deduction. And again she laughs when she makes this claim. This shows a certain ambiguity and worry about her intellectual status, between a desire to look smart and realization she says things that are not so smart. She probably suffers from the good student syndrome: looking smart, giving proof of knowledge, but afflicted by a fear of thinking, a fear of making mistakes, a fear of insufficiency and failure, a desire for perfection.

We try to investigate her statement of not being a "great thinker", by transposing it to being a "little thinker". It is always interesting to transform a negative statement in a positive formulation. Since those negative forms often are used to produce a euphemism effect, putting it in an affirmative form will have the opposite

effect of creating a strong effect, more striking to consciousness. We then show her the contradiction there is between such a statement and her previous admittance of intellectual culture. There, she gives a very evasive answer, a “maybe” attesting that this issue is a rather perturbing one. Of course, it is always possible in general to answer maybe, but in this particular case, like in all cases of rather evident statements, pronouncing a “maybe” indicates an emotional reaction: something here is bothersome, consciousness is deranged, there is some cognitive dissonance. Although all answers which show a clear discrepancy with logic tend to indicate such a cognitive dissonance.

When confronted to this situation, the level of tension goes up one notch. First, she interrupts me, which is out of profile with her behavior so far. Second, she answers with a very radical statement about the impossibility for her to “know the others”. We see here a drama unfolding, telling us the solitude that she is plunged in, the relational impotence, rendering the others inaccessible to her. We start seeing the amplitude of her initial question, about the eternity of love: it echoes the eternity of her loneliness. Again we confront her about this ignorance of others, which she confirms by generalizing the problem: “One cannot know if the others know.” Therefore it is the whole of humanity that is plunged in this deep solitude, showing the strength and radicality of her emotional glut. We try a simple question to therefore get her to admit in a different formulation her difficulty to understand others, but again we stonewall our question with the evocation of a mere possibility, a classical dismissal, apparently soft but actually rather aggressive. She is manifesting her passive aggressive behavior.

Although, interesting feature, through nodding, her body admits more freely the problem. Often gestures of the body more readily tell us some truth that words deny, ignore, try to evade or dilute.

O: Have you noticed it already before? That you are rather ignorant of the other one?

K: (starts to wonder, her eyes go up) Not ignorant...

O: Visibly the word “ignorant” bothers you

K: (interrupts) It is just that I don’t see many things in others.

O: Well, that is what is called being ignorant. Unless you have another word that you would prefer.

K: If you want (laughs).

O: It is not if I want, it is for you to decide. Do you have another word beside ignorance? You told me that there are a lot of things you don’t see in others. Do you prefer another word beside ignorance?

K: Unconscious (with a questioning tone).

O: You are unconscious (writes down the word). Generally, when someone is unconscious, will he be rather ignorant or no?

K: Yes, it is true. If you want.

O: No, it is not “if I want”. I don’t know if you know but in French when we say “if you want”, it means we want to get rid of the other one (shows a sending away gesture with a hand).

K: (laughs) I would agree that I am a bit constrained here.

30 - O: So in this way you get rid of the constraint. Do you agree?

K: (laughs) Yes.

O: You see, you are not conscious of the others. But when I talk to you, you tell me: “you bother me, stay away from me” (shows a sending away gesture with a hand).

K: (protests) No, you don’t bother me. (keeps speaking indistinctly).

O: (stops her with a gesture) Slow down, slow down. To be constrained, in your vocabulary, is it rather something positive or rather something negative?

K: It is rarely positive.

O: (laughs) You are answering me with “rarely”. Is it rather positive or rather negative?



K: Rather negative.

O: Ok. When someone constrains you, you are not happy. It doesn't please you very much. Do you agree?

K: (nods)

O: So one makes these signs, it means he is not too happy. Do you agree?

K: (smiles) Yes.

Now that the subject has been evoked, we invite the subject to realize in a plain way her difficulty to know others, by naming it with a crude word: ignorance. A word that of course we expect her to dismiss in some way. And she does not fail to do it, "ignorance", is an unbearable qualifier, especially when applied to her. She interrupts again, to claim "she does not see much", a formulation that seems more palatable to her, and after this she proposes "unconscious". But we insist, in order for her to become conscious of an important problem, connected to her initial question: her ignorance of others. She wiggles and jiggles, troubled emotionally and cognitively, and finally her defense system becomes clearly aggressive with the "if you want!", a classical indicator of rejecting the other.

Again she half admits the violence of her reactions, but by justifying it. It is a classical way that children learn very young: the "it's because", where one replaces the admittance of a personal fault or a problem by right away attempting to give the reasons for their actions. They replace the "what": the phenomenon or objective fact, with the "why": the genesis, the cause, the circumstances. They short-circuit the immediate harsh reality by diverting the discussion to the general situation or context. And, in the present case, the context is "constraint", a term that indeed makes sense: it explains her pain and her instinctive desire to get rid of the interlocutor. And when this desire is outrightly mentioned, she admits it with a chuckle, showing a certain embarrassment coupled with some pleasure or relief.

So, now comes the time to show her a major problem in her functioning: the coherency between her not understanding or knowing others and her rejection of others because she feels constrained by the relation and discussion. Even though the type of discussion we are having is a bit particular, it indeed bears constraint, the performative dimension of it reveals the patterns of behavior she tends to fall into. There, she protests, because her rational or moral side rebels against the idea she would be rude or rejecting me. She mumbles and speaks fast, which means she speaks to herself, displaying the tension of her internal debate. So much that we have to calm her down in order to reestablish the dialogue.

We then question her about the concept of “constrain”, about its connotation. To interrogate someone about the connotation of her word, positive or negative, pleasant or unpleasant, and other criteria, is always a useful way to make some conscious of his words, thoughts and being. In our choice of words, we most likely are not deliberately choosing our words in this way, aware of the semantic field, identifying the harmonics of the terms chosen, its overtones and echoes in the mind.

Of course, she uses again the euphemistic form to answer me, with a “rarely positive”. This shows her difficulty with reality: negating the negativity of things, repudiating the dark side of the world and self, is the most common form of reality denial. Although the reverse exists as well, a sort of depressive or paranoid vision of the world, where everything is bad and dangerous. And those two extremes can easily join: the negation of the negativity, in order to hide or disguise the fundamental horrible nature of the world. And on insisting, she admits that the constraint is negative, showing that is still capable of reason, she is not overwhelmed by emotions. Some other persons would remain much more adamant about refusing the evidence of their words’ content. She even smiles, granting full status and reconciliation to the perspective that she is not happy about what is going on. A mental shift implying that she now can deal with it: accepting that we don’t like the nature of reality is one step toward accepting this reality. Denying we don’t like it or despise it indicates a very strong conflict within self.

O: I will propose to you an idea that meeting with the other one usually implies constraint.

K: It is possible.

O: I am not asking if it is possible, I am asking if it is probable. (Kim is silent). You see, your “it is possible” is another way of getting rid of me.

K: Ah really!

O: Now it is “Ah really!”. Do you notice, you have several techniques to get rid of the interlocutor?

K: (laughs) Well, I learned it with French language. (reaches out for her bag on the floor).

O: Now you are trying to justify yourself, saying it is the fault of the French language. Do you notice?

K: (takes out the fan out of her bag). If you allow me, it is very hot here... (starts to move it next to her face).

40 - O: So you said that you learned it with French, right?

K: Yes.

O: So it is like saying “I was not like that before and they made me like that” do you agree...?

K: (starts to make a resisting face, moves away with the body).

O: (stops her because of the face she makes). Stay with me, stay with me!

K: (interrupts) It is some kind of rhetoric...

O: Exactly. Right now I don't manage anymore to talk to you. Each one of your answers after another is rhetoric. Do you agree?

K: (doesn't answer).

O: Yes, no?

K: (doesn't answer).

O: You have used this term “rhetoric”. Do you agree?

K: Yes.

O: So, with me you are using these rhetoric tricks. Do you agree?

K: (unwillingly nodding, speaking in a low voice) Yes.

Since she is reconciled with her own concept of “constraint”, we decide to work on it, through a common technique of banalizing it, universalizing it, examining its global sense and operating power. We will ask if it applies globally to all human relations, a perspective that de-dramatizes the term, depersonalizes it, and allows it to be thinkable. She admits it, but in a weak way, again as a mere possibility. When something obvious is only granted a status of possibility by a subject, this implies that this subject does not appreciate very much the idea, it is a way of pushing it away, as a mere toleration rather than full acceptance, because it would be too difficult or impossible to deny it totally.

In this affair we use a rather important distinction in order to determine the ontological or practical status of a phenomenon. The gradation between four terms: impossible, possible, probable, and necessary. Often they are confused, and we slide easily from one to the next. For example, we take as impossible what is in fact possible with difficulty, making ourselves blind and impotent. We declare possible what is probable, just like if we hoped it not happen when in reality it most likely will take place, a situation that can be called wishful thinking. And we judge necessary what is merely probable, a mistake that implies that we refuse to examine the possibility of failure in our expectations, which can be called an absence or lack of critical thinking.

So, we try to make her think further of her “constraint” concept by checking its application in human relations, through the distinction between its mere possibility of presence and its probability. But, we don't do it through a question, but through a provocation: telling her that by using the term “possible”, she is trying to get rid of me. Of course, the pedagogue which wants to apply the Vigotsky principle of

“zone of proximal development” will assess that we are overwhelming our dialogue partner, since in theory it makes the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he can do only with help. Maybe indeed we go too quick and jump over some logical steps. But, for one, we have sufficient trust in her that she can fill the gaps by herself, and it is useful to challenge her, even at the risk she does get the point and feels frustrated, misunderstood, or even attacked. Furthermore, like Socrates, the Cynics, or the Zen teacher, we think provocation, even in its absurd dimension, is a healthy principle to make someone go beyond himself, facing the uneasiness, perplexity, and destabilization, with the confusion deriving from it, as a way to break the usual patterns of thinking and allow new connections to be established, creating space for new schemes to take place.

Indeed, Kim perceives the problem, she laughs again, a usual strategy, and this time she dodges the issue by convoking the French language as an argument. By learning it with the language, it is not her responsibility anymore, but some vague cultural or institutional authority; it was imposed on her. And when we try to make her conscious of her last strategy of avoidance, she suddenly feels very hot, which from our standpoint does not really make sense from an objective standpoint. We can probably say she is now feeling the heat of the discussion. And, when we insist by telling her that she has some passive or victim position, “she was made like that”, her face contracts unhappily and she backs away. We invite her to stay with us, but she accuses us of manipulating her, implying we would have some bad or minimally suspicious intentions, by claiming it is “some kind of rhetoric”.

The mind is a very strange operator. A person is using rhetoric as a way to escape, initially rather unconsciously. As we make her conscious of her functioning, making the tricks rather expensive, the concept of rhetoric surges in her mind, and she uses it, against us, as her last trick. We can call it a sort of projection, projecting our own schema upon the interlocutor. But in this case, since our client is still rather rational, when confronted with this psychological phenomenon, she rather accepts it, even though her low voice and tense look express some kind of shame or embarrassment. We say Kim is quite rational, because most clients, taken in this situation would rather deny totally, or at least resist for a while before acknow-

ledging this kind of tendency in themselves. After all, their whole strategy is based on this technique, revealing its nature makes it totally inoperative.

O: Are you stubborn?

K: I don't know. It is possible.

O: (sighs) It seems you are pulling again the same trick on me, with this possibility? Look, you have lived with yourself for quite a few years, no?

K: Yes.

O: So, should you know if you are stubborn or no? Or you really don't know?

K: (looking sad) I would like to answer you with the answer...

50 - O: (interrupts) And you are doing the same thing. I am asking you a question and you want to answer me with "I would like to answer you with the answer". At the very beginning you were answering me, but since a little while you abandoned me. You are not answering anymore and you are using rhetoric. Do you notice it?

K: (smiles sadly) No, I do not realize it.

O: (starts to speak)

K: (interrupts) It is because I cannot answer with one hundred percent certainty.

O: Did anyone ask you here to answer with one hundred percent certitude? And answer me with yes or no.

K: When you ask me "yes or no"...

O: (interrupts) If you don't want to answer my questions I will stop, because I cannot do it anymore. Did anyone ask you here to answer with one hundred percent certitude?

K: Yes.

O: Give me a term that I used that would indicate that I am asking 100 percent certitude.

K: “Are you stubborn? ”

O: Ok, then when...

K: (interrupts) If I answer with yes...

O: (interrupts) Wait, wait. Do you realize now what you are doing? You want to add things, to complicate things.

(During this time she has been vigorously agitating a Spanish style fan).

O: You know, it is not an accident that you want to ventilate yourself now. I am glad that you refresh yourself, but do you know what it as well indicates?

K: (doesn't answer).

O: (picks up a sheet and starts to ventilate himself). If you are talking to someone and he does that, what can it indicate to another person?

K: (shakes her head, showing she doesn't know).

O: Come one, it is easy. What can it indicate?

K: (doesn't answer, her face looks sad and stuck).

60 - O: You see, you don't answer me anymore. If I talked to a child 8 year old, he would have answered me. “If a teacher does that, what do you think happens in her head?”.

K: (doesn't answer).

We decide to straightforwardly ask Kim if she gets stuck in her own mind, therefore taking a fixed position in the dialogue, what is commonly called being stubborn. First, she pleads ignorance, than admits the possibility, a slight progress in her mindfulness, but still resistant. Since she pleads a relative ignorance, we use a familiar trick where the subject is invited by someone to consider his life as a whole

and make a judgment about himself. This came about by noticing how much people ignored themselves, since when they are asked to determine if they are endowed with some specific quality, they don't seem to know, or they commonly tell us to ask other people than know them. Just like if those people had more competency or authority, and just like if those people had never told them anything about it, even though they are close to them. Or, they answer it depends, referring us to a case-by-case situation, instead of making a judgment on their global personality as a whole. The know thyself is not very popular.

As we are putting more pressure on her to take the risk of answering, she starts wanting to set her own agenda, express her frustration and desire. She realizes her attitude is a problem, since she is giving up on the process, so she looks sad. But she cannot resist trying to say what she would like, the way she would like, undergoing a strong desire to express herself. We don't let her get away with this abandon, trying to maintain the tension. This results in an interesting outburst on her part, the fascination with the "one hundred percent certainty", haunting her mind. "When you ask me yes or no" implies total certitude in the answer!

At this point, we have to outline a phenomenon that we have discovered throughout years of philosophical practice. In our endeavor to invite subjects to answer clearly to our questions, we provide them with some alternative such as "A or B?" or "Yes or no?", to which they have to answer in a determinate way. Taken aback by the resistance of most people toward this form of question, we tried to investigate the reason for their resistance to something that constitutes a mere exercise. And we discovered, among other reasons, that most people are obsessed with certainty, coupled with a fear of making a mistake. Thus, when they are asked a question that needs a clear answer, they freeze and cannot answer because they are not "one hundred percent sure". Just like if life or thinking had anything to do with certainty! But most human beings have a certain phobia about uncertainty, which is probably why they want guarantees and assurance, and why they are often disappointed with others and themselves. And having this desire for certainty, we see some expectations of perfection, of some earthly paradise, a rather unrealistic perspective that makes their life rather heavy and painful, that makes their rela-



tions difficult. Thus, sometimes, we soften the question by asking if it is “rather yes or rather no?”, but we realized it does not modify the problem much.

To make her conscious of the problem, we ask her to give a term I use that would indicate a necessity for the answer to be one hundred percent certain”. And predictably, she takes the question are you stubborn, that with her perfection scheme she reads unconsciously as: “Are you totally sure that you are stubborn?” For her, it is not a matter of thinking and hypothesis; it is a matter of knowledge and certitude. But, through our different questions and her answer, she probably understood the problem, since when we want to question her further, she suddenly interrupts the process, not waiting for the question to come, with the beginning of an explanation starting with a conditional conjunction: “if”. This simple word is characteristic of an attempt to complicate things, to get away from commitment and enter some undetermined process where we get lost in a series of conditional clauses. Of course, there are moments when going shifting from the categorical to the conditional can be useful, but in other situations like this one it is only an attempt to complicate the course of the dialogue and create confusion in order to protect oneself. We call this the strategy of the octopus, projecting ink in the water in order to blind his enemies and fly the coop.

We in turn interrupt her to make her realize what she is doing. We raise the issue of the refusal to answer and escape the dialogue through the attempt to complicate the discussion. But, we notice that she is more vigorously agitating her fan. Her gestures seem so violent that we choose to attract her attention on this behavior, quite revealing of her own internal mental state. We ask her what such a gesticulation would indicate to the interlocutor one would be talking to. But she first remains silent, then nods to answer she does not know, two different ways to refuse consciousness, reflection and dialogue, and remain stuck. As a way to get her out of this slump and invite her to reason, we try to delocalize her thinking, to decenter herself, a strategy we periodically use to help someone escape the trap of his own subjectivity. We invite the person to become someone else, like a little boy, a proposal that sometimes create a mental shift and resolves the problem. But this time, to no avail. She prefers to remain stuck. The wager is too high.

O: So, you don't want to answer me anymore. (looks at the notes). Your question was: "Is long lasting love possible?". I have been talking for 10 minutes with you, do we see a problem in your functioning that can create a problem for a long lasting love?

K: (nods with a sad look).

O: Yes, right?

K: Yes. I don't dare answer anymore.

O: Look at that: "I don't dare answer anymore". When someone says it, do you know what she says to the other person?

K: (doesn't answer).

O: I will translate in vulgar terms. She is saying: "get lost".

K: Not at all! Not at all!

O: Do you know that when you say something, you cannot control the interpretation someone gives to it?

K: For sure.

O: I will repeat: "when you say something, you cannot control the interpretation someone gives to it" Do you know that?

K: Yes.

O: So, when you say something, the other one interprets it based on how it appears, or how he feels, but your intentions do not count, the other person does not care here about what you want.

K: (shakes her head in a protest) It cannot be the same thing...

O: Well! Do you know that it is rather hard to talk to you?

K: It is the first time...

O: (interrupts) Try to answer. Do you think it is easy to talk to you?

K: In general?

70 - O: Let's see differently. You know, in my work, I speak with a lot of people, and lead this activity in a number of countries. For example, I do evaluations for businesses where I must make a judgment on how a person is. Do you believe me?

K: Of course, yes.

O: Try just yes or no.

K: Yes.

O: Do you think that my judgment could be useful for you?

K: Yes.

O: So, if I find it difficult to talk to you, do you believe me or not?

K: Yes.

O: Am I the first person who tells you "It is difficult to talk to you"? Or someone else has told you before?

K: Yes.

O: When this person told you this, you said: "you are right or you are wrong?"

K: (sighs) I didn't answer.

O: Ok. Do you know that not answering to someone is a way to send this person away?

K: (smiles) Yes.

We now decide it is time to go back to the initial question. There always comes a moment when this becomes useful, and necessary, since the initial question is after all our anchorage, what we are dealing with, at least formally. In this case, the deadlock in the dialogue we arrive at, coupled with the emotional climax, indicates a good moment for making the shift. We do it in a classical way: we ask if there is a connection between the past exchanges and the problem in question. Kim acquiesces with a sad look on her face. We insist to get a clear vocalized answer. This

is important for two reasons. First of all, to force the person in front not to stay half in himself and be totally present in the dialogue. Second, is to induce some consciousness of what is being said, in this case awareness of the affirmation and what it stands for: the connection between the behavior in the dialogue and the question about love. And since some problems clearly showed up, the subject prefers not to think about the connection, not to establish any link: probably they would be too painful.

When the answer is articulated, “yes”, it is accompanied by an interesting comment: “I don’t dare answer anymore”. This statement is rather ambiguous. On one part it means “You are bothering me. You are not letting me speak the way I want. Therefore, I won’t speak to you anymore.” But as well it signifies: “This is too painful. I don’t want to get involved in this discussion anymore. I refuse to participate from then on because I am scared.” Does the responsibility lie with the subject or with his interlocutor? The formulation remains vague, but the refusal to discuss is clear. And in general, when there is an ambiguity with no clear orientation toward either possibility, we conserve the option that both make sense simultaneously.

In order to force the issue and clarify the stakes, we choose to radicalize the statement by interpreting it primarily as a dismissal of the interlocutor, and observe the reaction of the subject. But, she protests, meaning either that she wants to remain polite and well behaved, or that she wants to maintain in the dialogue, which for her has probably some interest. But to continue her reflection, which has to deal with relation to other persons, we invite to examine a new angle of it, which is probably a blind spot for her, since she does not see or understand other persons. That is the perception they might have of her behavior. She is so self-centered that she must have no clue about the messages she sends through her way of talking, her responses and how she handles herself. She is full of her desire and intentions, and if she does not see others, she does not see herself. First, because she is not used to look at people from an objective standpoint, that is looking from outside. She only feels her own perceptions. Second, because the mirror others incarnate for all of us does not function for her. She ignores what they would tell her about herself. Either she does not listen to their signals, does not understand them,

or she forgets them. And when the signals disappear because the people are gone, she wonders why reality is so cruel and mysterious.

So, we try to put forward the idea that there is an objective factual reality of her behavior, and that is what people perceive, not her inner feelings or intentions. But, at this point she seems to be a bit gone. She shakes her head as a sign of protest, and pronounces a cryptic sentence: “It cannot be the same thing”. The probable interpretation we can give of this statement is that when reality is presented to her it does not fit her idea of things, or what she would like this reality to be like. Whatever it is, at this point, Kim is folded on herself and being very emotional. The other is evidently a threat.

So, we invite her to wonder about her behavior, just by asking if it is easy or hard to speak to her, although the question is almost rhetorical: the answer is obvious. But, she first tries to justify herself by speaking about the “first time”. It is an excuse we hear periodically in our work. When people have a hard time reasoning or admitting things, or get overemotional, they claim that is the first time they do a philosophical consultation. They just ignore or forget that even though this type of dialogue is more tense or formal, it involves the same competencies and attitudes that are necessary on a daily basis to maintain relations, think adequately, and function in life. Their claim to the exceptionality of the experience only demonstrates how little they use those functions in their daily life, a lack which explains their difficulty in the present situation. The second time we ask the question, she answers with another classic. Answering the question with a pretended specification question: “In general?”. Of course, in the absolute, the question could bear about the specificity of the present moment, but most likely it is asked as general principle. The rhetorical trick is here to answer the question with another question. For one, by keeping in mind a quite remote possibility and not going with the most probable interpretation. Second, by trying – or seemingly trying - to ensure oneself about the meaning of the question. It is a way to not take any risk, by being both not thoughtful and not generous, while pretending to be rigorous.

One element of analysis we should give about rhetorical answers is that they are neither a straightforward or honest answer, nor an outright lie. They are a contradictory or paradoxical way to say the truth while not saying it, or to lie while

not lying. Such statements – or questions - are often a mixture of truth and honesty with more “impure” elements, often said indirectly to better deceive the listener, or they use irrelevant issues, sliding of meaning, preempting, pretense, and other gimmicks. Often rhetorical speech says the truth but on a different subject. But, in spite of all, in the practice of the rhetorical answer, there is a sort of moral concern, be it in reality or in appearance. Blatant lies are an arduous endeavor, morally and cognitively. There is a compulsion to somewhat fit the truth, to coat the lie as much as possible. Be it lies of commission or omission, one feels rather compelled to say something that would at least be possible to accept, something plausible. Although, in spite of the disguise, we see the lie, or we can see it. But, since social habits prohibit confronting one’s neighbor when he pretends to be “good”, since critical thinking is little practiced, and since by the principle of reciprocity, a pact is made whereby fellow citizens as much as possible do not confront each other in the matter of dialogue, in order to maintain peaceful relations, we learn to accept the rhetorical truth, the packaged lie. This way we feel protected.

Since the questioning does not seem to function, we decide to operate more straightforwardly, somewhat using indirectly the argument of authority. So we tell the client we are experienced in making professional judgments. We ask her if she trusts us on this matter. She does, showing her connection to authority. As well she first adds “of course”, to insist on the trust or respect. We ask her to “try yes and no”, as a way to make her conscious of those superfluous words she often uses as a way to prove something and reassure herself. Then we state that it is “difficult to talk to her”, which she believed, and then asked her if anyone had ever told her, to which she responded again by the affirmative. Here we have to mention that this particular question: “Has anyone ever told you that...” is one we use regularly and is rather efficient. The principle behind this question is that whatever strong trait of character we have, has necessarily been remarked by people surrounding us, because it is a noticeable feature and most likely because it must have engendered a relational problem at some point in life. When people deny any such comment from others, I insist: “Father, mother, grandparents, spouse, children, colleagues, friends, no one has ever said anything on this matter, in those words or in other words, or even by reactions they had?”. And in general, quickly or with lag, we fi-

nally get an “Oh yeah! Now that you mention it!”, periodically with a funny grin. Then we ask them how they said it, which word they used, and if at that moment the subject told them they were right or wrong, to which most admit that they denied the problem at that point, with a certain a posteriori embarrassment. Often this subterfuge touches some visibly important relational issues.

And, this is the case with Kim, which readily admits that she was told the problem. Then with a sigh, indicating heaviness or pain, she remembers that she answered nothing, a likely familiar scheme in her life. And she accepts to interpret this behavior as a way to reject the other person. Of course, all this echoes the problems that she encounters in her love life, expressed in her initial question. As often, the point is to make people realize how they have a way to send away relation partners, sometimes coldly and brutally, like in this case, sometimes in a more violent and agitated fashion, to make them see their rejection stratagem, instead of acting and speaking as an important victim.

O: So you have a way of sending people off? When someone tells you there is a problem, you don't answer him, it is his problem.

K: (doesn't answer, looks pensive)

O: Did you do something of the sort to me?

K: No.

O: And if I tell you that you did it many times, you will think it is false, right?

K: (sighs heavily)

80 - O: I will take your sigh as an answer. Does this sigh indicate that there is pain?

K: (doesn't answer, starts crying)

O: Let's go back to your question: “Is long lasting love possible?” Is it possible there is a necessary condition for this “long lasting”, called “generosity”?

K: (silence)

O: Do you know generosity?

K: Of course!

O: In your way of talking to another person, do you think you are generous?

K: I don't know.

O: Is it that you don't know or that you don't want to give an answer?

K: (Silence)

O: Do you know what is a performative answer?

K: (shakes her head)

O: It is when you don't answer with content, or words, but you answer with a gesture, an attitude. And here again you answer with a non-answer.

K: (nods silently)

O: It is the least generous act, when we don't even answer.

K: (keeps nodding)

O: So I think you have an answer to your question about "the possibility of long-lasting love", and the answer in your case is "no", because you are not generous. Does this conclusion surprise you?

K: In words, in gestures?

O: Ok, you don't want to answer me, no problem. We will stop here. I just want to ask you two or three questions. Did you like our discussion or no?

K: No.

O: Tell me, why didn't you like it?

K: It is not that I didn't like it...

O: So, did you like it or not?

K: No.



90 - O: So let me know why you didn't like it. It is the last act of generosity I will ask you for today.

K: It is because it hurts (smiles with tears in her eyes).

O: Did some reality appear in our discussion?

K: Yes (keeps crying).

O: But now, when you see it and you notice that there is some reality in this description, there is a choice to be made. Either we say "It is like that and I will learn to accept it", or you prefer: "I want to change something". So what do you want to do?

K: This I don't know.

O: You should know there is a principle in love: taking risks. We don't know, but we take risk. An act of generosity means to take a risk. Did you know it?

K: No (smiles sadly).

O: So, let's stop here. Do you want to add something else or ask something?

K: No.

The Idea of "sending people off" seems to bring memories back to our client. But, when I ask her if she did this to me, she denies, which probably implies that what she did to other persons was harsher than with me, since she is still talking to me. We insist on the repetition feature of the phenomenon, since when a strong feature appears in a personality, the expression of this feature and the problematic consequences it entails must reiterate themselves frequently. The sigh which answers the question confirms the hypothesis, and states the painful dimension of the affair. A pain that when explicitly stated provokes tears in our client.

Having gathered enough elements on Kim's functioning, we decide to go back to the initial question, and examine what insights we now have on it. If the subject was more lively and responsive, we could ask her to relate her behavior to the ques-

tion and produce a concept, but this is not the case right now. It was doubtful she would give us anything, and such a request would only intensify her doldrums. So, we prefer to produce a concept, the one most striking to us at this point, very present through its absence: generosity. For it seems indeed that the act or attitude of “giving” this fundamental dimension of love, is rather absent in her existential dynamic.

We ask Kim if she is generous in the way she speaks to other persons, and she answers: “I don’t know”. Such questions indeed can be considered difficult, since we are not used to make general judgments about ourselves, and we feel slightly embarrassed about the tension it creates in our conscience when the time comes to make such judgment. We can call this the Osiris judgment, or weighing of the heart. The old Egyptian story told that the soul of the dead was placed on a scale, with a feather of Maat - goddess of truth - on the other side. If the soul was heavier than truth, it would be devoured by a monster, if it was lighter, it would live forever among the blessed in paradise. Thus comes a moment where we have to make a simple and clear assessment on our “whole” or “undivided” being. But, when we try to execute such an appraisal, different parameters enter in conflict, rendering difficult or minimally complicating the formulation of such an assessment. Here are some elements of this complexity, without any hierarchical order. The desire to be sincere or truthful. The attempt to give a precise, certain, or absolute answer. The difficulty to answer generally about our being and not refer to a case-by-case or situational context. A tendency to be good to ourselves, or complacency. A pretention to complication, nuance or depth, repulsive to any simple or clear predication of our being, the attribution of a simple adjective, viewed a reductionist endeavor. The fear or being judged or even condemned by others, or by our own glance. The difficulty to analyze our own functioning. Still, or for these reasons, we find interesting and revealing to ask thus the type of question and observe the reaction and answer of the subject. Beside the fact that it is a rather healthy exercise on the path to know ourselves, to confront ourselves.

One thing we have noticed about the question “Are you X?”, X being some adjective, when persons answer say “I don’t know”, they are bothered, it is something that is a problem and preoccupies them. It is a refusal to answer, rather

strong. Stronger still is another answer: “You have to ask others!”. Therefore the issue of generosity is a problem for the subject. As well, we can take the performative dimension of the answer: very few words, no content. “I don’t know” is not a generous answer, far from it, and that’s the way Kim tends to answer. Either she says what she wants, or she resists, pouts, and closes herself. And as often, we try to check the meaning of the answer, through a verification question: “Is it that you don’t know or that you don’t want to give an answer?”, and the ensuing silence confirms the problematic dimension of generosity concept in the life of our client. We tell her the implications of her answers or non-answers from this standpoint and she nods affirmatively. And at this point, we decide, that it is time to stop, since the subject seems to have reached her limits and the discussion has some elements of conclusion.

So we use this absence of generosity as a way to answer the initial question. Starting from the standpoint that love has to do with generosity, the lack of generosity can easily be a reason for the dying out of love. Indeed it is a common feature we have observed in couple’s ruptures or in a family feud: the absence of giving, the tightness of self, the not giving of oneself. Unless the other partner - especially women, since men are less good at this “art” - is capable of a strong attitude of abnegation and a sense of sacrifice, the absence of generosity makes the relation rather unlivable. When we propose this hypothesis to Kim, she understand rather well the suggestion, it means something to her, since she asks a specification question about the lack of generosity: she wants to know if this means in words or in gestures. Just like if she could escape the question by problematizing it, a typical “intellectual” trick. At the same time, as usual, she found a way not to answer, although she expresses her worry, her insecurity. Visibly, at least one of these two aspects - if not two - shows in her usual behavior a clear lack of unselfishness, kindness, compassion, benevolence, decentration, charity, big-heartedness, free-handedness, goodness, or whatever one wants to call a form of altruism.

She did not like the discussion, she says, but there is a “but”. She did not like because it hurts, but when we ask her, she has the courage to admit the truth of what came out, and it hurts because it brings the pain of reality, a cruel reality. We ask our usual question: “Do you want to learn to accept it or do you want to change

it?”. There again, a mixture of trouble, impotence and lack of generosity, Kim answers “I don’t know”. The “this” just insists on how crazy it is to ask her such questions and moreover expect an answer. She tells her she is far from taking such a decision. We propose to her as a last shot that “to love is to take risks”, and she answers with a sad smile. Visibly, she understood something, which is a bit much for her.

This dialogue with our client is rather asymmetric. Such an encounter naturally tends to be this way, since someone comes for help, advice, coaching, or whatever assistance, and is ready to pay for it. But, in this case it is particularly accentuated. We provide most of the content, and when the subject wants to speak it is to move elsewhere, to justify herself or concede a minimum lip service, to look like she is answering. We have to use to the maximum of her scarce words, although her behavior answers rather more than her words, a rather unusual situation, since interpretation of gestures or demeanor constitutes in general a minimal part of the exercise. We usually function more in the production of ideas and concepts. But, in this case, the question initially announced already warned us, the issue is so much about subjectivity that there is not much room for articulation of ideas. We are left working primarily with an attitude problem, with a psychological issue. Although it is invisible that our client is following the process, she has access to the reasoning. So, in that sense, in spite of the strong emotional dimension of the problematic, we are still engaged in a philosophical work, since the process is largely determined by rationality.

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Consultation with Tulsa

Oscar : What is your question?

Tulsa : What is the most important or happy duty?

O: Well, you need to choose.

T: What is the most important duty?

(Oscar repeats the question)

T: What is the most important duty to me?

O: Now, why do you want to distinguish yourself?

T: I think that it would help me to live a fuller life.

O: So, if you distinguish yourself from other people, you will have a fuller life. Is that what you say?

T: No (Hesitating).

O: Just tell me yes or no.

T: No (Still looking hesitant).

O: Well, you see, I ask you, why do you want to distinguish yourself from other people, because you added the “to me”. And then you told me, because that would lead to a fuller life. Did you say that?

T: Yes.

O: So, if you follow that, by distinguish yourself from other people, you will live a fuller life. Isn't that what you're saying so far?

T: Yes.

O: Well, is that ok with you, or do you see a problem here?

T: (Hesitating...) No, that's ok.

O: So, you think that by distinguishing, somebody, if he distinguishes himself from other people, he needs a fuller life?

T: Yes.

O: That means, what is the opposite of distinguishing?

T: (Long silence) Being anonymous.

(Oscar repeats the answer)

O: So for you, to be distinguished is to have a name. Is that what you're saying?

T: Yes.

O: All right. So, by having a name, by distinguishing yourself, you'll live a fuller life. You have no name, you're anonymous, how will your life will be then?

T: (Speaking indistinctly) Low.

O: How you life would be? What's the opposite of full?

T: Less full.

O: (reacting) No, not less full... Ah!

T: Empty.

O: (repeating) Empty! So for you, if you're anonymous, your life is empty?

T: Yes.

O: You're ok with that?

T: Yes.

## Analysis

As usual, and especially when the subject knows the process or was warned, we ask Tulsa what is the question she wants to investigate. We have to add as well that this consultation takes place within the context of a one-week seminar, and that Tulsa is in theory a practicing philosophy consultant therefore, at a minimum, experimented and self-conscious. But right away, she has a hard time giving us a specific question: she falls in the usual trap of persons that are undecided, or confused, and tries to give two questions in one. An answer which already warns us of a possible insecurity or anxiety, a certain greed or desire of perfection. The concept of "happy duty" as well reveals a certain desire to get one thing and its contrary, since "duty" and "happy" are rather opposites in nature: the first one has to do

with obligation and therefore constraint and pain, when the second implies facility, natural, and pleasure. The difficulty to choose implies that one wants everything, even when not possible, does not want to give up anything, therefore has difficulties with any dilemma and a hard time to decide.

Although between the two formulations, when forced, she chooses the most rational one, although connected to the concept of importance, somewhat echoing the idea of quantity, the concept of “greed”. But when we repeat her question, probably unsettled by the sound of her words in someone else’s mouth, she adds a strange “for me”, rather useless and superfluous, like if she wanted to specify the belonging, the possession, the specification, all different expressions of self-centeredness. When all she had to do was to confirm the choice she was making. This as well is a typical symptom of insecure persons, who cannot just repeat what they already said or confirm a formulation they used: they have to change something, or add some words, because they are always under the impression that what they just pronounced is flawed or not good enough. We even notice this when they simply have to read what they wrote, and only what they wrote: they compulsively add preambles, explanations, justify their sentence, modify it or even change it totally, convinced that they are of their own insufficiencies.

So, we question Tulsa on the matter of self-distinction she added to the formulation by asking her about her desire to distinguish herself contained in the “for me”. And she made the surprising claim that this distinction would help her to lead a fuller life, showing that the apparently innocuous addition had a heavy meaning, as it is most of the time. But again, when we ask her to confirm her idea, she is bothered, she hesitates, we have to repeat the question and ask for a confirmation, and we still don’t obtain it. We have to reformulate the idea and insist until she finally admits having pronounced this idea and more or less reconciling with it. Visibly, something is bothering her about it, beside her natural insecurity and her pervasive doubts. The “No, that’s ok” is not enthusiastic. Maybe the egotist dimension of the idea is slowly sinking into her, annoying her.

To make her conscious of the implication of her idea, we invite her to think the opposite of her concept, a classical strategy we use to make people realize the nature of what they are saying. And after her usual hesitations, and her insecure repe-

tition of the question, she proposes that the opposite is anonymous, which implies that this anonymity would be an obstacle to ‘leading a fuller life’. Having no name is therefore bad news. We should mention here the idea that having a name allows us to be known, to be renown, to exist through the eyes of others, instead of being lost in the crowd, like the anonymous, the unknown. And after some weak attempts at avoiding the issue, we arrive to the idea that anonymity threatens us with emptiness. We now perceive the abyss our client is living above, explaining her anxiety hesitations and procrastination strategies. Unless you are recognized, you are threatened with void. Life is indeed dangerous.

## Part 2

O: What kind of criticism could someone make, to somebody who says “look, for me, for my life to be full, I have to distinguish myself, have a name. But if I’m anonymous and have no name, my life is empty.” What criticism could you make to this person? Do you have any idea?

T: That you’re self-centered.

O: That you’re self-centered. Make sense?

T: Yes.

O: Are you self-centered?

T: Yes.

O : All right. So, nothing surprising here.

T : No.

O : Ok. Now, do you think that by being self-centered, you’re going to have a fuller life?

T : No.



O : No! (laughing) So you see where is the contradiction.

T : Yes.

O : So, what's wrong here ?

T : Hum, that the question specifically focuses on myself but...

O : Yes! But is that a guarantee of a fuller life?

T : Hesitating...

O : Well, at least you have strong doubts visibly...

T : I'm sorry?

O : You seem to be surprised now.

T : No, I'm thinking about perspectives.

O : In the way now, you have difficulties to answer, you notice?

T : Yes.

O : Are you surprised?

T : Yes.

O : There is a problem there?

T : Yes.

O : Are you surprised that there is a problem there, or you know the problem?

T : No, that is the problem I think.

O : So you're familiar with it?

T : Yes.

O : What is the problem ?

T : The problem is priority.

O : And now, if we listen to you, what is the main priority? If we listen to what you're saying so far?

T : Myself.

O : Yourself. And is that ok with you?

T : Yes.

O : Ok. So, if you have yourself as a priority, you will have a fuller life?

T : Yes.

O : Ok. So, what is the most important duty to me?

T : Hesitating... To be self-centered. (laughing)

## Analysis

As usual, once we have clarified a concept, we invite the subject to problematize it, to identify its limits and drawbacks. In order to do this and have a clear shot at it, we recapitulate the idea so the person hears it from someone else. We connect “full life”, “distinction” and “name”, opposed to “no name” and “emptiness”, and ask Tulsa how such a scheme could be criticized. The objection she comes up with is “self-centeredness”. This hypothesis has more to do with her moral issues about herself than about the problem just described, where “dependency”, “fear of disappearing”, “superficiality” or “insecurity” are more striking. Although what she proposes can make sense as well. And indeed she confirms that she is self-centered when we check with her. So, we now check with her on the relation between “self-centeredness” and “fuller life”, to see if she is coherent with herself. And, as often, people realize that what they are does not coincide, far from it, with what they would like. Their actual way of being is often opposed to their ideal, or the means of their ideal, be it moral, emotional, psychological, practical, or else.

At first, she admits the contradiction, but when we try to investigate it we experience some resistance. The first one is the “but”, a typical sign of escape, at the moment where we should enter into an explanation or an argumentation of the is-

sue. The “yes, but...” so typical of teenagers eager to fight it out with their parents. A meaningless statement since the “yes” is very unclear: we don’t know if it refers to a “yes, I heard you”, “yes, I agree with you”, “yes, keep talking”, etc. The important word here is the “but”, a clear sign of disagreement, if not a desire to fight in certain cases. This is the reason why we cut her off when she pronounces the “but”, in order to first stay on the problem of the relation between “self-centeredness” and “fuller life”. And indeed she hesitates on the answer to give, she visibly feels split, after admitting that there was some kind of contradiction. And this split makes sense, since after all both those desires come together in her mind, while logically she feels there is a problem. She does not really answer, and then claims she is “thinking about perspectives”, which indicates a certain confusion in her mind. Often people use the verb “to think” in a very indiscriminate way, as the expression of wondering or confusion, rather than indicating a constructed, conscious, and rational process. The immediate context of this dialogue tends to take us as well in this direction of analysis.

We invite her to realize that her “thinking” shows a difficulty to answer, to which she agrees, showing certain rationality and consciousness on her part. She even admits being surprised by this difficulty to think the issue, probably because she is familiar with the issue without realizing the confusion or contradiction involved when she navigates this crucial problematic. At the same time, she knows the problem, and we question her about it, she explains it through the concept of “priority”. And, of course “priority” is a practical way by which we can solve the tension between two contradictory concepts, by determining which one should take the lead in case of conflict. Here, the priority is determined as “myself”, and we ask a few questions to our interlocutor to check her commitment to this concept. She seems to have no qualms while answering different checking questions. But unsurprisingly, she finally hesitates and breaks into a nervous laughter when she pronounces “To be self-centered” as the “most important duty to me”. There is visibly some shadow of guilt around this psychological choice, rendering the decision rather murky.

### Part 3

O : To be self centered! Are you good at it?

T : No.

O : Oh, you're bad at being self-centered? Right?

T : Yes.

O : Oh, and you would like to be better at being self-centered ? Like you have an ego ideal, "I would like to be self-centered", I have a difficult time, I have to be more self-centered. Is that the way I understand or no?

T : Hmm... Yes.

O : So ok. Now, what makes it difficult to be that self-centered?

T : Duties to others.

O : Repeating... Ok.

And what is the main duty you have to others? The main one?

T : Not to harm them.

O : Repeating.

So you shouldn't harm others? Is that a duty?

T : Yes.

O : So you tell yourself in the morning : "Ok, today, I shouldn't harm others."  
You tell yourself that?

T : Yes.

O : Ok, now, when somebody, you know: are you familiar with Kant ?

When somebody takes something as a duty, is it natural to him?

T : Yes.

O : Oh but then, why would it be a duty? You tell yourself: “Ok today I have to breath.” You tell yourself that?

T : No.

O : Why not, you don't tell yourself that?

T : (Hesitating...) Hum... Because you don't have to make an effort.

O : You don't have to make an effort! So you agree, when you have a duty, it's because you have to make an effort, and it's not natural. You agree?

T : Yes.

O : It makes sense?

T : Yes.

O : So, not to harm others, is not natural to you?

T : (Hesitating...) Hmm... No.

O : Ok, so natural, you would not harm others?

T : Yes.

O : Well, what do you want to do to other people? Do you want to kill them? You want to steal from them? You want to rape them? What do you want to do to them?

T : Hum...

O : If it's not a major secret you know, I would not want to... (laughing)

T : Putting my own interest before theirs.

O : Yes, but what would you do to them ?

T : I would insult them.

O : You could insult them. So naturally, you want to insult people. Yeah? Like you're a natural born insulter?

(Both laughing)

T : Yes.

O : Do I understand?

T : Yes.

## Analysis

So, Tulsa wants to be self-centered. We thus decided to check the reality of this self-centeredness, in order to find out why it is such an issue. For this, we simply ask her if she is good at being self-centered. She is bad at it, she says, and she would like to improve, confirming it is even an ideal. Although she does maintain certain doubt about the problem, as we notice in her “hmm”. So we ask her the nature of the obstacle, and she answers she has duties to others, which prohibits her to be selfish, described as a constraint. We try to specify, in order to not stay in an empty generality and give a concrete reality to this idea of duty. This is a rather important move in the process of questioning, since periodically we will encounter what Kant calls an ‘empty category’, a general concept that seems to be real but contains no intuition, no concrete example, and remains rather phantasmic or illusory.

The main constraint she encounters in her social life is the ‘prohibition’ to harm others. We check this surprising statement, through a reformulation, somewhat banal and concrete, even funny. But, she confirms, she tells herself not to harm others. And of course, such a statement is full of consequences, since it implies one has a desire to hurt others and must just control this impulse. It shows the conflictual dimension Tulsa entertains in her relation to others. And from this we can induce the violent and angry tendencies haunting her soul.

In order to make her conscious of the phenomenon, since she has philosophical culture, we use Kant to make her reflect about the opposition between ‘natural’ and ‘dutiful’, using the example of breathing. She understands that she there-

fore has to make an effort in order not to harm others, meaning she would in fact like to hurt them. Her different hesitations shows that this realization somewhat bothers her, but she finally accepts. And, to drive the point home and make it more concrete we ask her what harm she would like to inflict people, giving her a list of caricatural propositions, a strategy which both de-dramatizes and provokes thinking. After some belaboring, she admits she would like to insult them. A declaration we joke about, in order to make her see it better while laughing about it. Since we have noticed that laughter, through its distanciation effect can help people see better and admit more easily some unpleasant reality. The only obstacle to such a strategy would be excessive or compulsive laughter, used as another mean to avoid contemplating a problem. And of course, this confirms our hypothesis of the violence and anger gnawing in her self, as she accepts to see this tendency to aggression as natural in her.

#### Part 4

O : Give me an insult you like to tell people for example.

T : Hum...

O : You can say it in Swedish if it feels better. Like asshole, motherfucker, stupid...

T : Oh yeah yeah, I like motherfucker!

O : So, you like motherfucker. This idea of fucking mothers, really, you like that?

T : I have a sort of...

O : No no! I am asking if you like the idea of fucking mothers.

T : I don't like that.

O : Well then what insult?

T : The word, I like.

O : You like the word but not the meaning?

T : Yes.

O : That's kind of strange. Hmm? You like the word but not the meaning?

T : Yes.

O : (laughing) What do you like in this word then?

T : It's a (hesitating) grotesque thing and it's...

O : Ok! You like grotesque stuff!

T : As words, not in deeds.

O : Wait a minute! You like grotesque words but not grotesques deeds?

Well, therefore, do you like truth?

T: (Hesitating). If I like truth?

O: No, if you like truth.

T: Hum...

O: You know, when people repeat my questions, it means the question is a problem to them.

T: Or...

O: Does it make sense to you?

T: Yes.

O: So, do you like truth or not really?

T: No, not really.

O: Ahhhh!

T: (laughing)



O: So, you want words that lie?

T: Yes.

O: And you know what is the function of grotesque?

T: (Hesitating)

O: What is the function of grotesque? What is the reason to be of grotesque?  
Do you know?

T: To... provoke?

O: To provoke. So you want to provoke?

T: Yes.

O: Why do you want to provoke?

T: It's a form of interacting.

O: OK! But what do you want to obtain?

T: Reactions.

O: You want reactions? And what kind of reactions do you want?

T: Sincere.

O: Wow! You're a liar that wants sincere reactions! Isn't that funny?

T: Yes.

O: How do you explain that? Isn't that grotesque?

(Both laughing)

T: Yes!

O: So, your whole being is grotesque?

T: Yes!

O: So, your whole being is just a mere provocation?

T: Yes.

## Analysis

Since Tulsa appreciates insults, at least to utter them – we can suppose she does not appreciate to be on the receiving end - people, we ask her to give an example of such insult. Of course, she does not readily give it, since it is obvious that there is a whole moral issue prohibiting her to be clear and open on this matter. She is torn between her violent impulses and her ethical considerations. In order to facilitate the work, we provide her with a few examples, offering some gross ones with the expectation she would not take them and go for something more palatable. But to our surprise she takes up “motherfucker”, showing the degree of violence inhabiting her, since it is a strong and gross insult, although rather unspecified in its actual content.

Thus, we check on her about the actual formal content of the expression, in order to challenge her choice. She has a strange answer where she claims to not like the idea of “fucking mothers” but likes the word because of its grotesque dimension. The grotesque refers to a style that is comically or repulsively ugly, practicing undue distortion, as we observe for example in the gargoyles of gothic architecture. It is incongruous and inappropriate to a shocking degree, somewhat macabre, for example in some monstrous interweaving of human and animal forms. The distorted facial traits of a person in pain are grotesque. The person in pain forcefully and artificially practices the grotesque to pretend alleviate the pain by overplaying it. The grotesque is absurd. It’s positivity or usefulness is in the showing, but it shows the absurd, the distress and the agony. Thus, if the grotesque laughs, it is not joyful: it indicates a mirthless, sour, or painful laughter. Thus, indeed it can fit the state of mind of our subject, which seems to combine a bitter soul and a desire to provoke others. Although she does not seem to appreciate the actual content of her statements, to the point of even denying it, depriving it of its objective substance.

She insists: “words, not deeds”. Such a declaration signifies that speech creates its own world, that words are powerful enough to engender their own reality; there is not truth outside of language, since the words can be taken without the facts they refer to. No wonder Tulsa wants to act upon society through insults. Because words have some magical power, and can be wielded as we wish. Because they resist objective examination and we can do with them what we want. Because they can affect other persons and hurt them while denying any responsibility, since they are only words. Because they are a good way to express our pain in a strong fashion while remaining within the bounds of what is allowed in society, or remains within a limited reprobation. She can use the symbol to express her rage, signifying her violence without actually practicing it. But we have to add that to words is as well a sign of impotence. “Barking dog never bites” says the proverb. To hurt someone with words indicates the impossibility or incapacity to hurt them physically, but with no less desire. We encounter here again the constraint Tulsa feels or gives herself, by forbidding herself to “harm others”, a categorical imperative that prohibits her from fully existing, from being the center of her own existence.

Since Tulsa fell in some kind of rhetorical scheme where she likes the words but not what they refer to, we question her about truth. Since truth refers precisely to the tension between words and the objects they designate, it supposedly indicates the adequation between ideas and the intellect, the conformity between speech and facts. And indeed, our hypothesis is correct, after some reluctance, she admits to not milking truth. The reluctance constituting the performative dimension of not liking truth, a dislike that implies to deny the truth or attempt to deny it. Her reluctance is expressed by classical strategies such as repeating the question, uttering sounds like “Hmm” expressing reflection, uncertainty or hesitation, in order to gain time and fabricate some answering artifacts, or using a euphemism such as “not really”, that attempt to dilute the content.

Faced with this new insight, we invite her to contemplate on her relation to speech. For she is not concerned with the descriptive reality of words, their capacity to fit reality. She is only concerned with the performative dimension of speech, the effects words can have on the auditor, what she calls provocation. Since in-

deed, the purpose of grotesque is not to fit what we can observe, it has no claim to objectivity; it merely creates some imaginary reality, rather gross, that has for unique function to seize or shock the observer, to create cognitive dissonance through a strange or warped rearrangement of nature.

Although, when Tulsa is asked why she wants to provoke, she states that it is merely to interact. This indicates a certain poverty in her capacity of interacting, a real difficulty to maintain relations with other persons, an incapacity to attract attention, interest or love from them other than by bothering or annoying them, an attitude showing some impotence to obtain anything more meaningful. She wants “reactions” she says, “sincere reactions”, therefore she believes that only irritation can reveal the true self of people, anything more positive or substantial cannot be trusted. She expresses a profound sense of loneliness and fear. Thus, this bout of the discussion ends with the recognition of the grotesque dimension of her behavior, an attitude expecting nothing more than provocation as a way of existing.

Grotesque enfolds a double dimension: it makes one laugh and at the same time suscitates a feeling of repulsion. We feel the power of it, but at the same time we are threatened by it. To use it therefore means to exercise power on others and oneself, and to chase away, as a form of exorcism. We summon the devil in order to expel it, with the terrible consequences of enduring its appearance and wrath. We are fascinated by the grotesque, attracted by the beauty of its darkness, but we don't want to come too close to it since it is formally ugly. We look from far away, in order not to be affected, in order not to be infected.

Grotesque is strange and surprising, it is otherness, in a striking or excessive form, it represents some radical alterity, visualized in a rather outward and aggressive fashion. We could say there is some omnipresence of the grotesque in the behavior and face of others, those others that seem strange and stranger to us, exotic and foreign. This alterity, often excessive, bears a scary dimension. We have to go beyond the repulsion to perceive the fragility and pain of this other, a power or competency that is not given to all, or in weak doses. To see the deeper reality of the grotesque, one has to go beyond the perception of appearance and feeling of repulsion in order to perceive the fragility and pain and have compassion. As an active mode, the grotesque is used to fend off others and prevent them precisely

from having this compassion and pity, to hide the precariousness of our nudity. Thus, Tulsa actually does not like the content of the words she uses when confronted with them, but she is fascinated by their ugliness and power.

Grotesque, through distortion, expresses pain, but in a sublimated way. For example, the professor, the waiter, or the attendant that strongly overplay their role, exercising their micro-power, as Foucault calls it. For many, this dynamic represents the basic mode of relation to others, as a way to obtain identity and recognition, provoking both attraction and repulsion in the interlocutor, respect and fear, admiration and irritation. The usage of grotesque words, excessive, violent and absurd, such as “motherfucker”, or “shit” and “fuck” used in every sentence, as commonly practiced for example in uneducated persons, express an attempt to take power over the bad by convoking the ugly, sort of controlling the demonic. There is evil power in the grotesque. The usage of gross words, to ward off the other, since the other is evil, since the other is the problem. The aggressive power of defending oneself against the threat of otherness. Just with his eyes, the glare of his glance, the neighbor threatens us, reminding us of our mortality and imperfection. He wakes up our own self-incrimination, our self-discontent. Thus Tulsa, fearful and angry wants to insult this other.

## Part 5

O: Does it make sense to you? That your whole being is just a provocation?

T: In the frame of yes and no, yes. (Laughing)

O: Why, do you know another frame?

T: Yes.

O: What is that frame called?

T: Hum... Nuance!

O: Oh... You like nuance! Now why does a liar like nuance?

T: Cause it helps his lies.

O: Good, right? Make sense?

T: Yes.

O: You're very coherent.

T: (laughing)

O: But tell me, if all you want is lie and provoke, why the hell do you speak about duty? Or it's just another bullshit thing that you're pulling?

T: (looking up) Hum...

O: Is a liar concerned with duty?

T: Hum... Yeah!

O: Why would he be concerned with duty?

T: To be obedient.

O: A liar who wants to be obedient. Now, you see many liars who want to be obedient?

T: To conform.

O: No, no, no! Do many liars want to be obedient? Or it makes no sense?

T: Yes!

O: And generally, liars are known for being obedient?

T: Yes.

O: Then, why do they lie?

T: They want conceal.

O: They want to conceal! So, is to conceal a form of obedience?

T: Yes!

O: How does that work?

T: That's why you have to lie.

O: And how does that work?

T: If you're hum... (Long silence) If you try to conceal that you are a liar...

O: How are you obedient? You obey to what?

T: Well you can seem as if you're obedient.

O: Ok! But do you want to obey? Or you want to seem to be obedient?

T: I don't know!

O: Well! Does a liar want to be obedient or seem to be?

T: He wants to seem.

O: He wants to seem! So that's appearance?

T: Yes!

O: Do you see how strong appearance is in your functioning?

T: Yes.

O: So, what the hell is this thing with duty?

T: Hum... It's a strong value.

O: It's a strong value for whom?

T: For me.

## Analysis

The subject recognizes that provocation as a way of being is a problem. In this sense she is rather rational. She as well is rational when she recognizes at that moment that answering “yes or no” is a problem for her, and she would prefer the recourse to “nuance”, a much more flexible frame to manipulate the discourse.

At this point we should indeed make a parenthesis to justify the utilization we make of this reductionist scheme that commonly shocks or indisposes so many people. The obligation to “yes or no” implies clarity, commitment, an explicit positioning of our thinking and emotions, rendering an unequivocal judgment. It has psychological implications: one has to surrender. Since there are only two options, we have to practice abandon and flexibility. Giving up all that we want to say, explanatory details and rhetorical curlicues. We have to adapt and conform to some framework that is not natural to us, revealing our fears and rigidities. The main objections will convoke the concept of “precision”, accusing this reductionist scheme of being coarse and gross. It is superficial, since it does not allow the expression of our depth and genius. Of course, precision can be a useful concept, since allows to come as close as possible to describing objective reality. But, what we are asking for is to establish the general state, framework or direction taken, before entering into more minute elements, shades or circumstances. Before specifying the hues, the brilliance or the intensity, before listing its overtones and impurities, we are asking to determine the nature of the color, its general category. Distinguish the essential and the accidental, as Aristotle recommends, making priorities in our ontology or epistemology, drawing an axiology, establishing the primary before the secondary, the substantial before the superficial. In order for the details not to drown the general, in order to prohibit the foliage from hiding the tree.

Thus, Tulsa recognizes her desire to use nuance as a way to escape and lie, showing her own coherency in the attempt to protect herself. Facing this, we decide to bring back the concept of duty she had initially brought up: it seems to bring a contradiction, since duty is a moral concept when lying is not. Tulsa seems indeed to be bothered with it, but not so much since she brings up rather quickly the con-



cepts of obedience as a way out, implying that she is rather familiar with this dilemma, or at least that consciousness of it is not far. And to pursue the coherency of the scheme, she explains that obedience is a form of concealing, not the most obvious idea, but an interesting lead, that we did not expect. For indeed, obedience is a powerful manner to hide, to escape, to betray ourselves, in a calculated or instinctive way, in order to survive. Obeying means to display the behavior or thoughts expected by authorities or social context, in order to survive, or in order to get what we want, as a form of manipulation. Of course one can criticize it for being hypocritical, but it can be defended as a strategy of “making it”, of “getting what we want”, by accepting the power in place, its regulations and obligations, playing the game or following the rules as a means to obtain what we want. For this, we give up on our subjectivity or authenticity, or we channel it, sublimate it, postponing the moment of revealing our true self and going for the “kill”. In the absolute, one can play it in a supple way and maintain elasticity, but it is a rather difficult endeavor on the long term, because of the constant suppression and betrayal of the self that implicates such a strategy. And since we have observed the anger and resentment in Tulsa, we can presuppose that it is not for her a tranquil posture, but a painful one. No wonder she has a hard time in her relations to others and herself, and that she wants to insult people, the members of the society that in her mind force this behavior on her. She has to comply, to “conform” she says, she has to lie in order to “make it”, and it is not a pleasant task.

Of course this obedience is fictitious, which she knows, it’s means to maintain an image, a social identity. She must work on her “appearance”, and she calls it a “duty”. This issue of appearance is quite striking when one sees her look and posture, real efforts are made to look good. She reminds us of those fashion models that are trained to look good at the expense of their true self, hiding their existential wounds, fragilities, and insecurities behind a mask of glamour.

“Duty” in this case does not bear a connotation of morality but of existential necessity, out of practical considerations, what can be called necessity or survival. This specific sense of “duty” clearly appears when she is asked “for whom this is a strong value”, and she answers “for me”. Since at that moment she does invoke in any way the universality of such a perspective that would indicate a moral issue,

some kind of categorical imperative, but a purely personal consideration or justification, that can in no way be generalized. At that moment, in this principle or dynamic, the frame of mind is only herself, this obligation only concerns herself, in her struggle to weather the pressure exerted by society. It is a strong value only for her. She wishes in no way this scheme to be generalized.

## Part 6

O: For you? A liar? Who is into appearance and the grotesque? Is duty important or not important?

T: It's important.

O: So most liars, who are into provocation, are concerned with duty? Or only appearance of duty?

T: Appearance of duty.

O: Ok! So what is the most important duty to me? Is a bullshit question.

You only want to look dutiful, but you don't want to be dutiful. Is that the case?

T: Yeah, maybe, Yeah.

O: What do you mean maybe? It has been what, like fifteen or twenty minutes with you. Does it look your concerned to be honest and dutiful or no, you're only into appearance?

T: (hesitating)

O: Don't think!

T: Yeah.

O: If you think, you're just going to produce some more bullshit. Does it look like you're into duty or into appearance?

T: Appearance.

O: Appearance! So your concern with duty, is just appearance. You want to look good!

T: Yes.

O: All right. So you want to look good? But you're not concerned! So now can you please give me the real question?

T: Hum...

O: Are you surprised by the way about this whole thing with the grotesque, appearance etc. or no, you're familiar with it?

T: Hum... No, I'm familiar.

O: You're familiar with this, right! So you pulled a little trick?

So, duty is not your problem.

(Tulsa not reacting).

Hello?

T: Yes! Hum...

O: Well, does it look like duty is your problem, or not your problem?

T: It doesn't seem like it, no.

O: But it is your problem? Or you don't know? You're so much into grotesque, that you have no clue where you're at.

T: I thought I...

O: You thought what?

T: I am concerned with duty and hum... how to problematize.

O: And that's a very important question.

T: Yes.

O: Do you see what doesn't fit this whole discussion? You see what doesn't fit in the different answers you give? Or no you don't see?

T: Yes, I see.

O: So, does it fit or it doesn't fit?

T: No, it doesn't feet.

O: So! And the fact of not fitting, is that an experience you know? When you say it doesn't fit. Are you familiar with this experience?

T: Yeah! Yes.

O: So, you know that a lot of what you say is just hot air? The appearance! Is that ok or not?

T: Yes.

O: You know that?

T: Hum...

O: Or no? Hello?

T: Yes!

O: Are you lost?

T: Yes!

## Analysis

At this point we decided to push further into the problematization of the situation, by contrasting the contradictory elements presented to us, in order to see what will come out. We should mention in this context that contradiction or incoherency are constitutive of any mental map, of any existential scheme. First of all, it reflects the fracture of being inherent to all of us, where some fundamental

antinomies, existential, moral, psychological, among others moves us in the opposite direction and work us over. Second, as was rendered explicit by Freudian and other paradigms of psychology, ourself is divided between different tendencies, structural elements, and energies or impulses. Third, the multiplicity of situations or issues we face everyday, of different nature, lead us to function according to different schemes or modalities in order to adapt to reality. Certain persons have more striking contradictions than others in their behavior. But, the main difference is rather between persons who contradict themselves and are conscious of it, and those who contradict themselves and don't quite realize it. In general, the second type of psychic functioning, rather unconscious, turns out to be more problematic and painful.

For our subject, on one side, we have the lying, the preoccupation with appearance, the grotesque or provocative behavior, and on the other side a sense of duty. The former pattern stands more on the immoral or amoral side, preoccupied with satisfying one's need at any cost, power and manipulation, self-centeredness. The latter stands a priori rather on the moral side, what we must do and owe to others. But let's examine for a moment the concept of duty. The idea of duty echoes the concepts of responsibility, obligation, commitment, allegiance, faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty, etc., all of which point toward relation to other, concern or care for other. It can be as well formal or juridical more than moral, like in the case of a job, a task, an assignment, a mission, a function, a role, a responsibility, etc., which points toward a more practical aspect, but still endowed with an ethical dimension in terms of relation or obligation to other. And in all those cases, some type of universality or generalization of the principle can be recommended. In all those cases, some imperative bonds us to the context, makes us accountable, a situation that does not let our own immediate self-interest or pleasure as the criteria.

In this sense, the idea of duty to oneself seems a contradiction, since duty is primarily oriented towards others. Now, we could defend the idea that one's duty to oneself is for example to preserve one's own life, to develop one's talents, or to preserve one's self-respect, a duty to our own person. This would imply in reverse that we would have some right against oneself, to protect our being from oneself, like not destroy oneself or preserve our integrity, meaning that transgressing this right

would violate one's duty to oneself, a position that could seem absurd or meaningless but still makes sense. Of course, one can maintain this position, but at the expense of a great tension within the self.

Let's examine further the notion of duty in itself. The idea of debt is at the heart of this term, which conveys a sense of moral obligation toward someone or something. It cannot remain a matter of passive feeling or mere recognition, it should result in a type of action bypassing one's own immediate self-interest. Its fulfillment generally involves some sacrifice of our desires or selfish wants. Here we can overhear the ideas of justice, honor, or reputation. It is about doing the right thing, more than doing things right, which would represent mere efficiency. In virtue ethics, duty has more to do with working on oneself in order to do what is good in general, therefore signifying an abandonment of the self, rendering rather absurd the duty to self. Unless we speak of a higher form of self, a "transcendent" identity like self-respect, moral integrity or rationality. Kant defends the idea of 'perfect' duties to oneself by describing duties he regards as fundamental, like conscientiousness. A perfect duty is one which we must always do - although it is in general articulated as an interdiction - while an imperfect duty is one we must not ignore but remains more problematic and haphazard. Kant specifies two imperfect duties: the duty of self-improvement and the duty to aid others. They are imperfect because we should accomplish them according to possibilities and circumstances. For perfect duties, we don't need any opportunities or material resources, only our good will and nothing else. Kant gives as an example the problem of "arrogance", an attitude which seems to consider our own self above other persons: it constitutes a violation of those perfect duties to oneself by treating humanity in one's own person with contempt, just by treating someone else with contempt. The problem is not so much in treating your own existence too high, but in rating the existence of another too low. We should just never do it.

In the Anglophone tradition of moral philosophy, the concept of obligation to oneself is commonly applied to alleged duties to promote one's own welfare, since utility or happiness are the goals. But, there is still the idea of happiness and utility for the majority. And we can still claim for example that acting irrationally is contrary to any wise self-interest, or that pursuing mere pleasure can deprive us of a

true happiness. Therefore, duty toward oneself does not allow any principles or behavior contrary to our well-understood self-interest.

Now, if we go back to the case of Tulsa, no matter how we look at it, we cannot avoid thinking that the concept of duty she uses does not make any sense, or very little in the present context. Neither does she seem to respect herself or other, nor does she act in order to make herself or others happy, nor does she claim to propose any general principle of ethics. Her concept of “duty” expresses rather frustration and pettiness more than anything else, a sense of anger and impotence, an aggressive and defensive view toward others. By “duty” she means she should do something for herself, since she feels she is not doing something right and she should do it, but she has no clue what it is, and whatever impulsion she has in this sense is self-destructive more than anything else. That is the reason she hesitates even in the formulation to give to her initial question, between “most important duty” or “happy duty”. She has a hard time determining what is important, meaning she feels being lost in meaningless secondary issues. She encounters difficulties in determining what would make her happy, meaning she is sad and angry.

So, we decided to investigate further this psychological pit by using the tension between her immoral or amoral side and her moral pretensions. We underline her ‘lying’, ‘appearance’, and ‘grotesque’ dimensions, and ask her if in such a scheme “duty” is important. She maintains that it is. From a purely formal logical standpoint, it can make some sense, but from a psychological one, it does not. She desperately feels she owes something to herself, even though she does not know what it is. We could presuppose that it means she owes herself happiness instead of the pain she is in, self-respect instead of grotesque, truth instead of lying, something that would satisfy her transcendent self instead of pandering to her empirical self, a distinction that would echo Kant’s concept of perfect duties.

Important : self worth    false social: convention to be accepted

Part 7

O: And you know why you're lost?

T: No.

O: Well, just listen to what happens. Do you know why you're lost? Somebody who is in the appearance all the time, is that person going to know where she is, or be lost?

T: Yes, she is gone be lost.

O: And are you into appearance?

T: Yes.

O: And therefore, are you lost?

T: Yes.

O: So, what do you want? Are you ok with being lost, or do you want to change that? Or no, lost is not bad?

T: I'm ok with lost.

O: Ok, so you're happy! You're into appearance, you're lost, everything is fine! We're good?

T: Yes.

O: So, that's your question or you actually have no question?

T: (Long silence) Hum... (Hesitating)

O: You have a problem?

T: If I skip the part with me, at the end, I could ask "What is the most important duty to me?"

O: Is duty important to you?



T: (breathing heavily) Yes...

O: Well... Why do you breathe?

T: Because we're back.

O: Back... Back where? Back at what?

T: Because you're asking me if duty is important or not.

O: But, does it seem there is anything in your thinking showing that duty is important? Or nothing?

T: Hum... Well, the fact that I am bringing it on as a question, I think it's an indicative...

O: Really? Do you know what a bullshit artist is?

T: Yeah.

O: Well, a bullshit artist can bring anything in the discussion, but doesn't give a damn about it! Is it possible?

T: I'm not in this seat.

O: Is it possible?

T: Yes it's possible.

O: All right! So far, do we see anything that's coherent with duty in your system?

T: No.

O: No! But does duty look good? "My duty"! Does it sound good?

T: Yes.

O: How does it sound?

T: Responsible.

O: Responsible! But are you responsible?

T: Yes.

O: Is someone that is in the grotesque, responsible? Or is that the opposite?

T: Hum... I think it can be grotesque.

O: I'm not asking you what it can be. If you put grotesque and responsible, does it seem to belong to the same semantic field or not?

T: No.

O: No! Is it more opposite?

T: Yes.

O: All right. So do you see again the contradiction?

T: Yes.

O: And are you familiar with all these contradictions you bring? Are you familiar with them?

T: Yeah.

O: So you're full of contradictions!

T: Yes.

O: And somebody who is full of contradiction, is he more into appearance or honesty?

T: I don't know!

O: Well, think! What is more contradictory? Appearances, or honesty?

T: (Showing gestures of hesitation) Contradictions?

O: Yes.

T: Hum... appearance!

O: Appearance! Is it possible that appearance is the real name of Tulsa?

Maybe even in Swedish... I don't know Swedish... Maybe Tulsa means appearances! Who knows? You know, like the Indians. First, you have the name of your birth, and then you have the real name. How do you say appearance in Swedish? Or it doesn't exist in Swedish?

T: (Looking up, hesitating) Hum...

O: You know a name or you don't know appearance in Swedish?

T: I can't think of anything.

O: Oh well, that's interesting! Isn't that funny? Being Swedish, you don't know what appearance is. Isn't that a funny disappearance? You don't know appearance in Swedish! Funny or not?

T: Yeah!

O: Well, maybe it's your name! And you remember, you don't want to be anonymous. Remember?

T: Yes!

O: But if you don't know appearance in Swedish, maybe you're anonymous?

It's funny, or no it's not? It's French irony...



# ANNEX

This is an article from Olivia Benhamou published in Psychologies Magazine, November 2004.

## I tested a philosophical consultation - *Olivia Benhamou*

Why not consult a philosopher like one would consult a shrink? Our journalist was lead into temptation. Here is the report of her session with Oscar Brenifier, a rigorous and exciting dialogue.

### **I always wanted to meet Socrates**

When I realised, reading the book by the American philosopher Lou Marinoff, *The Big Questions. How philosophy can change your life* (Bloomsbury, 2003), that some philosophical « consultations » were available – and widespread in the US – I immediately felt like going. I had been in analysis for three years, but still restless with many existential issues. I felt an urge to try a new method which would somehow be less at the mercy of my subconscious. It required quite some perseverance to find what I was looking for. After a few hours on the Internet, I finally found how to reach Oscar Brenifier, an ageless and address-less man since he was reachable by email only.

Several times, I wondered if he wasn't looking to put my motivation to the test: first, he sent me a couple of rather arduous articles explaining in fifteen pages the

principles of the philosophical consultation and the problems that could arise during them. After making sure that I had read those texts and that I accepted to submit to this process, he gave me an appointment for the following month. Apparently, the money side wasn't a priority for him: "Fifty euros, but if you can't, I will do the consultation for free".

### The dialogue

As the son of a midwife, Socrates was well placed to invent the maieutics, a method for "bringing the mind to birth". Four centuries before our time, he used to wander about the streets of Athens in search of possible interlocutors to whom he would apply his dialectical method, his goal being to teach how to reason. Any topic was good to explore as long as the interlocutor accepted to submit to the fire of his questioning, which aimed at stimulating the thinking and igniting reason. Thanks to Plato, his most devoted follower, we can still have access to dozens of Socratic dialogues on topics such as love, friendship, citizenship... some essential texts for whoever wants to learn how to philosophise.

On a summer afternoon, I am facing the gate of a house, in Argenteuil, a French town in the Val d'Oise department. Oscar Brenifier is waiting for me on the last floor. It is very warm in this office which feels like a cave although it is an attic. The man is tall, with glasses, and rather cheerful. But I soon realise the rather harshness of his thinking. The intense intellectual test is however yet to come. I sit opposite him and the consultation begins.

- What is your question?
- How to find the right distance with my parents?

He repeats my words and notes them down.

- So, first we need to clarify the elements of the question. What does "the right distance" mean? I don't expect hundreds of answers from you. I want you to

define precisely what you mean by right distance, in the absolute, away from the context of your question.

I find it hard to concentrate. Shyly, I venture:

- A reasonable distance...?
- No, it's not precise enough. Let us beware of concepts that are deprived of intuition, as Kant would say.
- A balance between authority and freedom.
- Now there you go. But where are your parents in all that?
- A balance between the authority that my parents have on me and my ability to be free.
- So for you, freedom is the ability to emancipate yourself from your parents?
- Yes, that's it.

I don't really understand what is going on. Only that the thinking is happening, through the mysterious grace of a dialectic which had always seemed theoretical to me. I am now fully focused and I take my time to give my best possible answers to the questions.

- Then, reformulate what you initially meant by "right distance".
- The balance between authority and emancipation.
- How does the problem articulate with this authority and this emancipation?
- My problem is to understand what value I should award to my parents' authority.
- And what about emancipation?

Oscar Brenifier is demanding. Tension is rising. I realise that, in order to move forward, everything will have to come from me.

- It would be the possibility to be living with the authority, without it being a nuisance.
- And why would it be a nuisance?
- Because I can't make do with it.
- Ok, so let's go back. What value should be awarded to the authority of parents?
- A moral value?
- Is this moral value disputable?
- I don't know. It should be.
- No, you need to give a real answer. Is this moral value disputable, yes or no?

Is it the heat, the intense effort of concentration, the unusual confrontation with an interlocutor paying attention to every word I say? Suddenly, I feel tears in my eyes. I think I am at the heart of my problem, although I haven't shared anything personal or the slightest painful memory. I had never felt a comparable feeling elsewhere than in an analysis session. I pull myself together and resume thinking :

- So, this moral value, is it disputable?
- I can't manage to dispute it.
- But why would you want to dispute it?
- Because it weighs heavy on me.
- According to you, can one live without any weight on them?

- I would like to think so.
- This is not an answer. I repeat: can one live without any weight on them?

A rigorous thinking is demanding and cannot bear any compromise. Painfully, I keep up my effort. At this rhythmical relentless pace, the philosopher gradually takes me to the essential.

- Ok, so this balance, does it need to be found between your parents and yourself, or between you and yourself?

Reluctantly, I end up conceding:

- Between me and myself.
- Exactly. Because if you knew how to emancipate yourself, would there be any problem with your parents?
- No.
- Then, what could be done to emancipate oneself from the judgement of others?
- I don't know.
- Think of the question differently. How does a judgement become a problem?
- Basically, when it leads to doubt.
- Descartes on doubt, does that ring any bell?

I vaguely remember the famous cogito, but nothing precise... He explains:

- According to Descartes, doubt leads to knowing. Do you agree?
- Yes.



- Ok so if you doubt but this doubt leads you to knowledge, what is the problem? And is there any problem?
- My problem is to be able to assess people's judgement without overestimating it.
- And why would you overestimate it?
- Because I lack confidence in myself.
- There we are."

He pauses, then resumes, looking satisfied:

- Here is your true question: why do I lack confidence in myself. Your initial question was just an alibi question.

The demonstration is brilliant; I have nothing else to add. I pay the fifty euros without noticing. Before I leave, Oscar Brenifier humbly asks me what I thought of the consultation. I am quite moved and totally exhausted after this hour and a half of a mental harsh gymnastics.

I still manage to express my gratitude: despite the wave of emotions during the discussion, he enabled me to cope with a rigorous thinking. Without forcing, but without giving in to my hesitations, he allowed me to view my personal problem from a new perspective, and to reveal the true meaning of my words. The result is somehow close to what I had been able to obtain lying on a sofa. But the process is completely different. Nowhere near a shrink session, where the subconscious speaks involuntarily, and nowhere near a philosophy class which gives access to a fixed knowledge, the philosophical consultation pertains to a lively and subtle mechanism of the mind, which can only deploy itself in the presence of a stimulating interlocutor. A follower of Socrates, for instance.

## To be or not to be a consultant

The philosophical consultation is an opportunity to put one's received ideas to the test. A poor listening, an inability to slowly unwind a coherent reflection, an embarrassment about the question you are asking will just show that you have knocked at the wrong door.

There are very few philosophical practitioners; however, some “café-philosophy” speakers do offer some consultations in their “private practice”. I visited one of them. After kindly noting down the reasons for my visit, the verdict came: “In your case, I recommend Epictetus and Spinoza!”. After a quick rundown on their thoughts, he swamped me with examples to help with my issue. I felt like attending a high school philosophy class, a bit messier though. In the end, I was given some homework: “Take five maxims from the book of Epictetus, and reformulate them in your own words. Justify them all and then contradict them all.”. Fifty euros for this seems excessive to me... A philosophical practitioner is not whoever wants to be one.

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## Serious games - *Morten Fastvold*

ON SERIOUS GAMES AND THE POSSIBLE RESHAPING OF A PHILOSOPHICAL PARADIGM: SOME REFLECTION ON THE SESSIONS OF OSCAR BRENIFIER

*Written by Morten Fastvold*

To play games, by way of exercises of thought, has not been at the center of attention of Norwegian philosophers wanting to engage in the new and rather unde-

defined art of philosophical counseling. Instead, we are mainly focusing on the demands that our consulting guests might put forward, based on intellectual as well as emotional problems, thus covering a wide range of topics shared with psychotherapists. Rejecting only persons with obvious and severe mental disturbances, our guests are supposed to be anybody that just as well might consult a psychotherapist, but for some reason, clear or unclear to himself, chooses a philosopher instead.

To a large extent we are supposed to meet our guests in the same way as a psychotherapist would do: by carefully listening to what the guest tells us about his life and his problems, and by doing this in a sympathetic and empathic way, eagerly wanting to make the guest feel safe and at ease, thus creating a trusting atmosphere. The guest, and not the philosopher, is supposed to be in the front seat, so to speak, allowing the guest to change his topic or the direction of the conversation as he pleases, without risking much more than a mildly stated “Are you aware that you just changed the topic, and thus cutting off our discussion?”, followed by a consenting “go ahead” if he does not regret it, but wants to move on in his new direction.

All the time, especially during the first visit, we have to identify the guest’s “order” by listening carefully and gently asking questions that might reveal what really worries him. Then, with this “order” more or less clearly stated and the guest consenting to this, we might, if we are lucky, provide him with some philosophical based insights or related thoughts that may help him to see his problem in a new and refreshing way, liberating him from his narrow-minded way of perceiving his problem and its possible solutions. In most cases we envisage this as a “feel-good-experience” for both parties, even if we sometimes might encounter an unexpected emotional outburst, which we then must know how to cope with. These incidents are, however, supposed to be rare, and by no means due to any intended provocation staged by the philosopher.

Maybe this picture of the philosopher as “Mr. Nice” is a bit exaggerated, but I don’t think that it is very far from the truth. True or false, I have myself embraced it as quite evident, but have at the same time felt somewhat uncomfortable about it, without knowing exactly where to locate the faulty spot. Might it be that the bor-

der between our (supposed-to-be) profession and a variety of cognitive, conversation-based kinds of psychotherapy are quite unclear? That my probing into the embryonic field of philosophical counseling has left me with too few landmarks to assure me of not ending up as a pseudo-psychotherapist lightly disguised as a philosopher trying to do something he is not really trained to cope with? Where is the link between my philosophical knowledge, acquired theoretically at the university, and the practical enterprise I am supposed to undertake? Does it in the end exist? Or is “philosophical counseling” nothing but a whim, full of good intentions that nevertheless will fail to create a new profession?

Enter Oscar Brenifier on the scene, who wants to play games instead of doing philosophy as we – or at least I – thought it could be done. Stating that “I am not interested in the reasons why the guest wants to consult me”, he rejects one of the assumed cornerstones of our practice right from the start (the identification of the guest’s “order”), continuing with the demand that the guest must produce an idea that he finds important, without bothering if this idea is right or wrong, or reasonable or unreasonable, from the philosopher’s point of view. If this last assumption may not be too hard to accept, we are shocked once more when Brenifier does not permit the guest to explain why he chose the idea he put forward, and certainly not to furnish it with a personal context. What on earth is this Frenchman doing? asks the onlooking Mr. Nice (that’s me) to himself. How can he violate his guest’s autonomy or whatever he does when he wants no word of context or further explanation?

Just toying with an idea out of context, and with no regard to whether it is true or false, might not seem to be philosophical counseling at all. Even worse, it seems to violate the ethical demands of seeing and embracing the guest as a unique person that any up-to-date health-worker and psychotherapist embraces. And philosophical counselors, too, we suppose. Because, who would even dream of not bowing respectfully to Empathy, Ethics, Autonomy and Caring? Certainly not aspiring philosophical counselors in Norway.

Returning to Brenifier’s sessions, Mr. Nice gets really worried when Brenifier even allows himself to interrupt his guest again and again, forcing this poor guy play the philosopher’s game that makes him more and more frustrated. I even get

the impression that Brenifier, in the midst of the heated cloud of restraint and confusion he is creating, leads the guest astray by twisting his arguments and by doing some argumentation himself that makes the whole mess end up with some strange conclusions – or rather preliminary conclusions – that the guest is anything but happy with. This is far away from the feel-good-atmosphere I initially had waited for, where the guest was imagined to leave with a grateful grin on his face. Now he feels toyed with (I can see that) and not properly respected. In fact, he leaves even more frustrated than when he came.

And I have to ask: Has he been helped at all by this rather rough kind of intellectual game? At that moment I would say: “Not very likely.”

In the paper Brenifier mails to his would-be guests in France (see my translation of that paper), he uses the words “game” and “exercise” in outlining the kind of practice just demonstrated. Such notions might imply that his counseling consists of more than games and exercises, but as long as we don’t know that for sure, I will stick to his games, as we have witnessed them here in Oslo, and as they are more comprehensible explained in his paper. Obviously Brenifier’s games are challenging our nice Norwegian way of doing things, and now I am asking myself if this challenge has more to it than perceived at first sight. Is there in fact something to be learned from it after all? In hindsight I think there is, and I will claim that Brenifier’s challenge may even prove quite fruitful, enabling at least myself to rethink central aspects on what our profession might be.

Being inspired by Socrates and Plato, and even by Hegelian dialectics, and making this inspiration visible in his games, Brenifier’s contribution to philosophical counseling should not be turned down lightly. Undeniably, he seems to be more in touch with the philosophical tradition than I ever have been, or have thought possible during my first efforts on counseling, even if he does not appear to be nice or bow to the virtues in the way we do. But was Socrates known to be nice, Norwegian style? Certainly not, judging from the Plato dialogues. Nevertheless he was well liked. (Characteristically, Norwegians tend to assume that Socrates, being well liked, also had to be really nice; thus imagining him as some pre-Christian Santa Claus that absurdly was put to death by his mean-spirited fellow citizens.)

If Socrates from time to time seems eager to please or solemnly polite, it usually is pure irony, or some sugar to sweeten the bitter pill he makes his interlocutor swallow. Maybe Socrates was violating the ethical guidelines of the modern philosophical counselor; that might be an interesting discussion to undertake at some later moment. Here it is sufficient to point out that Socrates surely was discussing his interlocutor's propositions (usually definitions of some general term like "courage", "temperance" and "friendship") out of any personal context, and that he in a very shrewd way played intellectual games that left the interlocutor (usually some big-shot in society) just as confused and frustrated as recently was the case with Brenifier's guests. Rereading some of the early Plato dialogues, I once more realize that being subjected to Socrates' examinations was a rather disturbing and even painful experience that somewhat pulled the rug away from under one's feet, by making it clear that you didn't know what you thought you knew. The bystanders in Athens would surely have said, as a participant on a seminary-session held by Brenifier did, that: "It's interesting to watch, but I would rather not be the person you are investigating."

But, we might ask, what is achieved by Socrates, apart from this somewhat negative practice of making you unsure of what you really know? To shake the self-confidence of some important fellow might be acceptable on the scene of the Athenian agora, where this fellow agrees on having his intellectual understanding and faculties examined by Socrates. But isn't the conversation in a counselor's office another matter? Persons wanting to be our guests may not be self-confident at all; more likely they are unsure of themselves from the start, coping with some personal problem, maybe not knowing what to do next or which path to choose. The last thing these people need, we should think, is to be even more shaken than they already are by some philosopher's intellectual games, making their shortcomings even more blatant than they knew they were. Isn't it downright unethical to do this to persons who seek help and wisdom out of some state of distress? Here they come, vulnerable and hopeful, to be consoled and advised – and then they are lead into some game that they certainly not did expect, feeling interrupted and manipulated and their autonomy not respected. Can we expect people to pay good money for that?

A fear that a Socratic approach, even if proved justifiable, might be bad for business is, alas, entering my head. In a world where people have learned to look upon themselves as customers in most aspects of life, and certainly when dealing with professional people, we are led to believe that “the customer is always right”, and that his satisfaction of demands on a short term is something that cannot be ignored. If we are not exactly embracing an “eager to please”-attitude, we feel obliged to keep at least one eye at the customer’s well-being, trying to avoid anything that might really displease him. This, we have come to believe, is part of respecting the other person’s autonomy – which in turn is being ethical in the way we all are supposed to behave in order to be really “professional”. Strangely, then, how commerce and ethics apparently have come to an understanding in professional life. Will this eventually make the grooming practice of man’s closest relatives the ideal of every professional enterprise, my own included? In my darkest moments I fear this is so.

Quite different from the Socratic approach, but widely accepted as a way of dealing with personal distress, is the psychoanalyst’s concept of free flow of association, where the client is allowed to speak as he pleases, thus revealing some hidden traumas from his childhood, partly by displaying his resistance to the in fact impossible demand of speaking really freely, without discriminating his themes as more or less important, and without censoring his thoughts in any way. Since Freud, this classical psychoanalytical situation has been paradigmatic for much thinking in the field of psychology, also among psychologists who differ from Freud’s approach. The emphasis on “the unconscious”, the pivotal importance of feelings and the abyss of “irrationality” in the human mind, of “neurotics” and “dysfunctional personalities” haunted by “their inner resistance” to grasp the awful truth deep down in the soul – all these notions have during the twentieth century pushed reason away from the center of the scene, relegating it to the irrelevant domain of “idle thoughts”. One tendency that psychologists are warning against, is the client’s urge to “intellectualize his problems”, thus viewing his intellectual faculty a part of the mind’s “resistance” to reveal the feelings lying underneath – basic feeling of shame or guilt or fear, to name a few – that the client’s mind has stashed away to make life bearable, despite the symptoms of unhappiness and frustrations it produ-

ces. Feelings, not intellect, is what it is all about; feelings = depth, while intellect = superficiality. So don't be fooled by people who think too much. Playing their game is rendering them a disservice, leaving them forever trapped in their unwillingness to understand what governs their outlook on life and way of behavior.

Another part of this picture – which I will call “the psychological paradigm” – is the extreme amount of time a classical psychoanalysis demands. Seeing the analyst three-four times a week for several years is not unusual, and even if most contemporary psychologists have abandoned these ideals for much shorter and supposedly more efficient methods, the presupposition still remains that healing a person's mind takes a lot of time, and that the client has to do a lot of talk until he gets in touch with what really bothers him. As Foucault has pointed out, Europeans have since long developed a strong belief in confession – of laying bare all our sins and “dirty” thoughts – that is pivotal to every Freudian-inspired psychological treatment. Our belief in the healing power of endless confessional talk has become so strong that it passes on undisputed, even if it originally (and centuries before Freud) was propagated by the catholic church, in order to classify and control human sexuality, and hopefully transform our sexual energy to better use. This controlling device of confession was then adopted by scientific societies and society at large, thus making the supposed healing power of confession not the only, and perhaps not the most important issue a stake. Much due to Freud, this controlling aspect of confession has escaped our attention by his famous and supposedly liberally-minded free flow of speech, proclaiming it (together with dreams) to be the royal route to the unconscious, and thereby to freedom from our inner prison created by our parents and ourselves.

Where is this rather long digression into psychology leading us? Well, I think it gives us a clue to why contemporary people, myself included, have come to have such a small faith in reason. We have been accustomed to view thinking out of a personal context as an idle, and at best a pure intellectual activity that may have a beauty of its own in the ivory towers of academic philosophy, but with no bearing on our personal lives. Philosophers are surely upholding a tradition that for centuries had its place in the sun, but by now has declined into an enterprise stripped of its pretensions of being scientific, and thus having a significance in social life. At



the same time psychologists are boasting their scientific pretensions, making us believe even more that we cannot help people as much as psychologists can. If some cognitive therapist makes headlines in the papers or on TV, claiming to cure fright of snakes or of heights, or make people quit smoking after a small number of sessions, we are likely to think “wish it were true” without really believing it, because, as we keep insisting, our thinking faculty is superficial, and because healing of such deeply felt fears and habits are, as already mentioned, supposed to take long time. Rejecting the old Socratic conviction that a man who knows what is right will do what is right as too naïve, leaving out our deep-rooted modern knowledge of human irrationality, we are stuck within the psychological paradigm, lowering our ambitions to be doing some light-weight kind of counseling, much less profound in character than what psychologists can achieve.

So what can be done with this rather bleak position of ours? Can anything be done at all? I think it can, and that abandoning the psychological paradigm is crucial in getting further ahead. One way of doing this is to look back on our personal experiences as hobby-psychologists in everyday life, trying to listen to a spouse or a parent or a sibling or a friend in an attentive psychologist-like way, letting the other speak freely to get things off his or her chest. Each time I, at least, have hoped to make such a person reveal something to himself that puts his situation in a new light, and thus enables him to undergo some inner change. Which most often is not the case, as the person remains who he is, despite my long and enduring efforts in the art of empathic listening and counseling. Maybe I have become too pessimistic in this respect, or have been less fortunate than others in my efforts, but I have anyway grown sick and tired of endless talk leading nowhere, apart from the other person’s satisfaction of having been in the center of my attention for hours, again and again.

Lacking a professional training in this field may account for some of these meager results, but not, I strongly suspect, for the whole lot of it. Looking back on what is typical of such fruitless talks with persons who barely change, their intellectual dishonesty gets to my attention: the way their thinking has become quite undisciplined, either escaping obvious conclusions or jumping to conclusions, or not wanting to think things through (but only to a certain point, where they tend to get

uncomfortable or even hostile), or throwing in arguments or other subjects that are irrelevant to the matter discussed, thus escaping into a convenient confusion, or refusing to recognize the force of an argumentation better than their own. All this to get away with their present state of mind, in order to preserve their status quo, like an unchangeable rock that once and for all has become their much cherished “identity”. Surely they are unhappy or frustrated, and surely they want to get rid of all that. But by way of changing their “identity” in the slightest way? Forget it. “I am who I am”, people like to claim, and “you have to accept me as I am”. And a recent equivalent: “You have to respect my autonomy.” Well, who could object to that? Surely not a person who wants to be friendly and ethical and nice.

What also strikes me in hindsight, is how easily I have allowed my interlocutors to get away with such intellectual dishonesty, sometimes again and again, without even reproaching myself for letting this happen. Isn't this so because I tended to believe that: “What the heck, these are only intellectual thoughts, and not what really matters here. Only a clearer understanding of old sufferings may free him from his everlasting unhappiness or frustration, and surely no present quarrel on a specific proposition or point of view.”

In short, the psychological paradigm got the better of me. As usually is the case with paradigmatic thinking, I have take it for granted, without questioning its accuracy or relevance. Being a paradigm it constitutes the framework of thinking within a specific field, like what might cause and remove the sufferings of the human mind. Here, at last, I have located the faulty spot that makes me uncomfortable about my business. I now realize that trying to do philosophical counseling within this psychological paradigm is like trying to play football in the woods; you may occasionally make some nice moves, but most of the time you will feel handicapped by all the trees and bumps, making it clear that you are in a place where you were not supposed to do what you are doing.

If not to claim the psychological paradigm to be false (that would be a too hasty move), I at least feel the urge to get out of the woods, in order to find a new and better-suited field for our activity. For a start, I find it useful to ask a big what if-question or two: What if a mentally liberating force were to be found in the presumed barren field of intellectual arguing, maybe just as much, or even more, as in

identifying old traumas in the person's personal history? And: What if the quest for intellectual honesty proved to be a feasible and (compared with psychoanalytic kinds of treatment) quite short road to personal liberation from unhappiness and frustrations? Are we, students of philosophical counseling, even prepared to ask ourselves questions like that? Frankly, I'm not sure that we are, and that's thought-provoking in itself.

Here, I believe, is the real issue of Brenifier's philosophical games that so provoked us. And that caused lots of upheavals during his several settings, be they individual counseling, philosophic café and doing philosophy with classes in school. Since then I have come to ponder on this upheaval in a new way, finding it remarkable that they occurred every time, making it unlikely that they were mere accident, due to the interlocutor or school class in question. No, this upheaval seems to be the rule, and not the exception of the games Brenifier likes to play. What also is remarkable, is that such purely philosophical games are capable of making so much uneasiness and emotions burst up on the surface, again and again, sometimes revealing disturbingly much of the strains and obstacles haunting the interlocutor's mind. In spite of deliberately leaving "life" out of the game, "life" kept popping up, disturbing and prolonging the presumably dull and straightforward process of producing a proposition and laboring on its content and implications, sometimes making this process impossible to fulfill.

If Brenifier had been a rude and mean-spirited person, all this upheaval would not be remarkable at all. The culprit would then have been Brenifier's own personality, and not the kind of philosophy we was doing. This, I will contend, is not the case. Despite Brenifier's somewhat authoritarian approach during his sessions (he never claimed to be democratic in doing philosophy), I found his conduct to be without malice (very important, he once pointed out to me) and with much good humor, making his inquiries more endurable than they elsewhere would have been (also important, he says). By way of this and his Socratic way of shrewdness in asking the right question or finding the right argument (much due to routine, I discovered by repeatedly watching his sessions), he managed to produce a realm of non-contextuality where everyone, high or low in society, are treated equally, thus being utter democratic in spite of his authoritarian ways – a paradoxical fact to re-

flect upon. Being lead into this realm's harsh and exposing light was not a pleasant experience to anyone, nor was it supposed to be pleasant. Therefore: Daring to meet this light is, after all, not just playing games in a barren and idle way, but playing serious games that might have a much bigger impact on your mind than previously imagined. That is, if the questions I asked above are not completely off the mark.

Maybe the fallacy of the psychological paradigm is its presupposition that "pure" context-free thinking is impersonal in the sense that it is of no consequence to our mental state of mind what we think or do not think on this level. If truth and salvation are only to be found in the density of personal context, the person's intellectual dishonesty or lack of discipline will be of minor importance, apart from being a symptom of what lies underneath, which is supposed to be the issue being investigated. Then we are not encouraged to even consider the possibility of ascribing personal distress to faulty thinking on the non-contextual level. Asking my what-if-questions is therefore to start thinking the other way around, or at least conceding that "pure" intellectual thinking might have an impact on persons life, and might even be a source of distress, in some cases even more than traumas of the past and the "neurotic" ways of dealing with them.

Is this really a far-fetched idea? What if intellectual dishonesty or lack of discipline in fact causes suffering in itself, because it is a shortcoming that makes it impossible to achieve a peace of mind, which was the goal of ancient practical philosophy, especially in the Hellenistic epoch? What if context-free thinking in fact is a personal matter, revealing much more of what we are than we would like to think of? Maybe this kind of thinking is just as personal as our personal context, and often is the source, and not the symptoms, of an uneasy state of mind? Surely everybody has a philosophy of life, whether they are aware of it or not, and are we supposed to believe that this personal philosophy has no bearing on feelings and the way one's personal history is interpreted? That is not very likely, as Aristotle and the Stoics have pointed out. But if so, is it less likely that the person's "pure way of thinking" has no significant impact on his (often hidden) philosophy of life? If we hold on to this line of thought, Brenifier's philosophical games may not prove futile at all.

To lose yourself is to find yourself is an old saying (e.g. in Buddhism) that Brenifier has adopted (so he told me). By seeing the possibility of taking a person out of his tiresome personal context and find out what then might happen to him, Brenifier employs this basic insight (probably also recognized by Socrates) in a way that proves it to be less paradoxical than at first sight. Realizing 1) the considerable impact “pure thinking” has on our daily lives, and 2) the liberating effect of releasing us from context, if only for half an hour’s play or exercise, Brenifier is bypassing the psychological paradigm (which, by the way, was unheard of at the time of Socrates). By making his guest lose what Brenifier labels his “empirical self”, he enables the guest to find his “transcendental self”, which gets obscured by the heated and noisy cloud of empirical context. And, as Brenifier’s sessions clearly have indicated, encountering one’s transcendental self is no impersonal matter. Finding oneself to think inconsistently, either because of faulty thinking or too much confusion in thought, might really hurt and trigger profound feelings of shame and frustration.

This observation corresponds to my experiences as a sympathetic listener and adviser previously mentioned: at those occasions where I managed to identify faulty logic or inconsistency in my interlocutor’s reasoning, I was usually met with a fierce denial of this fact, mounting to angry and even hysterical outbursts. Clearly this indicates that a lot is at stake at this point, and that “pure reasoning” can be a very delicate and touchy matter indeed. Paradoxically as it might seem (for those trapped in the psychological paradigm), exposure of faulty or confused reasoning might be just as embarrassing to the person in question as spotting some traumatic event in his past, if not even more so.

Rereading the early Socratic dialogues I sense this embarrassment in the interlocutor proven to be wrong in his reasoning, without my knowing anything of his empirical self, apart from his rank, some previous deeds and his closest relatives. Still I can identify with him, and the more I do so, the stronger this feeling of embarrassment grows. Surely the Socratic interrogation takes place on the level of transcendental self, where I, too, put myself in my reading. After having witnessed Brenifier’s sessions, I more clearly sense the agony lying between the lines in Plato. Now I realize the amount of uneasiness that must have been present in Socrates’

interlocutors – in their way of speaking, and surely in their body language, their hesitating pauses etc. Plato’s writing understates this aspect of the dialogues, making them appear more smooth and “idle” than they probably were. These talks were serious games indeed, proving it to be utterly painful to think things through in the realm of “pure”, transcendental self.

“Utterly painful” – these words might make us shy away from any Socratic enterprise. But, I then will ask, what is the alternative if we really want to help people? Might it not, in the long run, be even more painful not to think things through? Might the unhappy and frustrated person’s unwillingness to change his ways to a large extent be rooted in his unwillingness not to think things through? If this is so, rising up to our transcendental self and sorting things out on this level will have no small significance on our empirical self. On this transcendental level there are no trees to hide behind, as there are on the empirical level, but just a plain field bathed in a clear, sharp light that surely is unpleasant. No wonder why people resist exposing themselves to this unmerciful light. No grooming service awaits us there, only a more or less painful treatment which might bruise our ego at that moment, but which later on might enable us to think in a less confused and more consistent way than before, thus enabling us to cope with our everyday problems in a better and more fruitful way.

If this is so, the games that Brenifier plays will after all be relevant in counselling people how to make life better for themselves. Then it will not be unethical to inflict some Socratic pain on people in distress, as this in turn will enable them to cope better with their problems. There is a word for that, and a quite fashionable word, too, among health workers of to-day. This word is empowerment, referring to the transformation of patients from a state of passive reception of care and treatment to a new state of being in charge, so to speak, of their own care and treatment, partly by managing daily tasks more on their own, and partly by seeking care and treatment in a more active and understanding way than before. Frustrating as this initially may be, patients undergoing this process of empowerment will gradually get an increased sense of being in command of their own life, instead of being made totally helpless and at the mercy of other people’s whims

and decisions. This, in turn, increases their autonomy, which is a goal in itself. And, as we surely know, a very ethical goal indeed.

Seeing Brenifier's games as tools of empowerment, his authoritarian and interruptive ways may not be violating the guest's autonomy at all. They might instead increase it by improving his mental capabilities, just like training people's muscles might increase their physical capability, enabling them to manage more on their own. (We should bear in mind that the analogy between training of thought and training of the body is present in Plato.) Isn't this a task to be undertaken by a philosophical counselor? Surely it is, as we are the professional people most qualified to do this.

Another point to consider: Are we respecting our guest's autonomy in the best way by letting him stay in his empirical self and talk and talk for hours without getting anywhere? Or had we better, for professional ethical reasons, make such a guest play philosophical games that might shake him out of his nonproductive ways of thinking, and make way for the empowerment process? Surely I by now am inclined to embrace this last alternative.

After having proclaimed his lack of interest in personal context and in psychology at large, Brenifier added a statement that I find quite revealing: "The only thing that interests me, is how my interlocutor relates to himself." This statement puts his initially shocking proclamations in a new light that proves them not to be violating his guest's autonomy after all. Not wanting to impose some truth on his guest, but just find out how this person relates to himself, and then point this out to him, is, I believe, very much respecting the other person's autonomy. Even more so if this kind of counseling in turn enhances the person's autonomy by way of empowerment. To do this by transcending the muddy waters of the person's context-ridden world of feelings and memories and hopes and disappointments and general confusion, is nothing short of a Copernican revolution to us trapped in the psychological paradigm. We might even say that this turning things around is a cornerstone in reshaping the paradigm of philosophy once created in antiquity. With some modifications, it is not unlikely that this ancient way of dealing with human distress may prove powerful and efficient beyond our wildest dreams. Even if it brings on several problems, like: How to cope with the necessity to displease our

guests by subjecting them to a kind of mental surgery done completely without anesthetics? And how to perform this kind of surgery? And how to integrate these serious games in our counseling at large? A lot of work has to be done until a philosophical paradigm fit for our modern world might emerge. But isn't this what we want to happen?

Vérifié – August 11, 2006