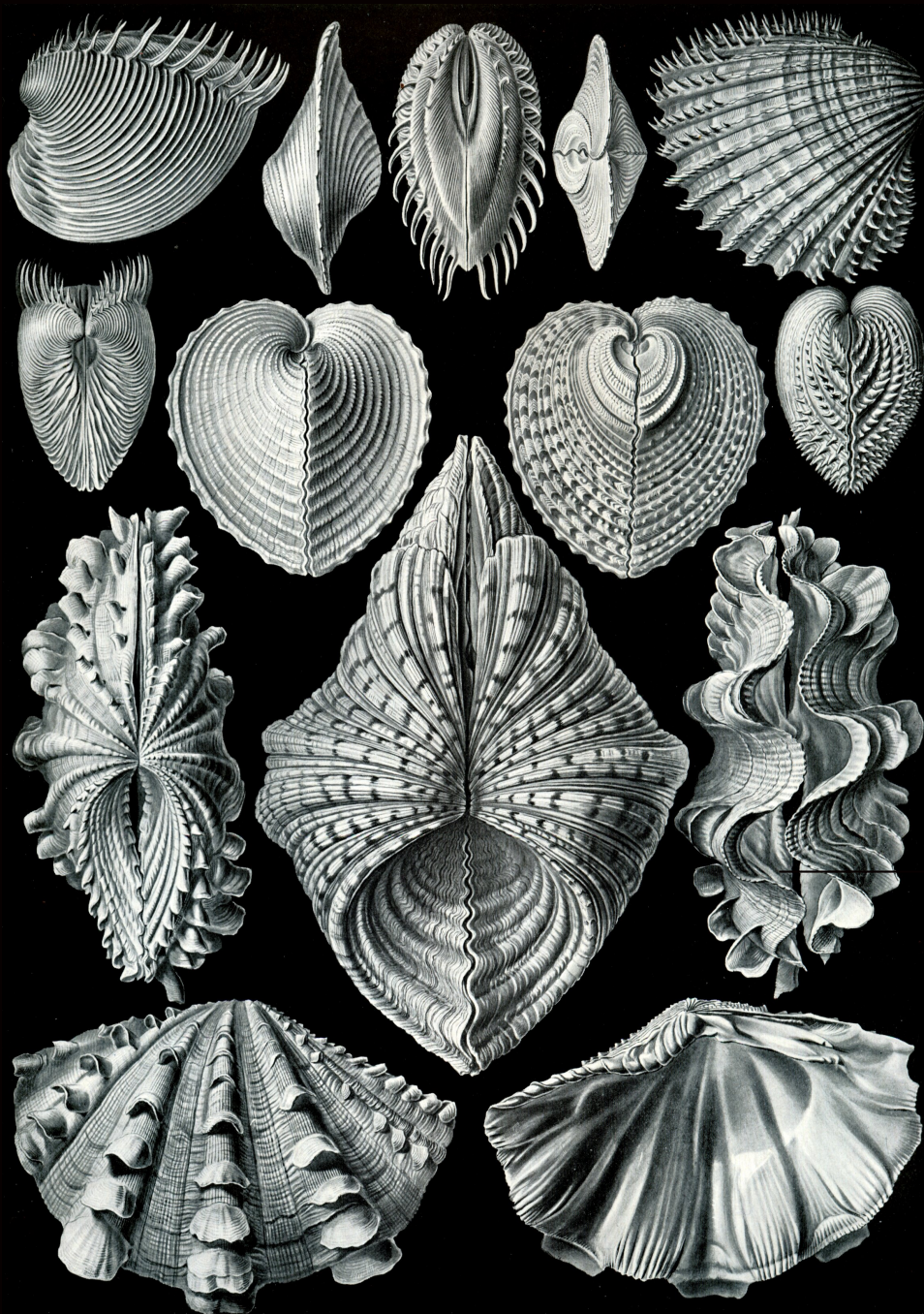


Resistances to Thinking

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Editions Alcofribas

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The Messenger of Allah said: "The fire of Hell is hidden behind desires and passions, while Paradise is hidden behind efforts and difficulties."

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One can often notice in our fellow men a certain resistance to intellectual work, a lack of enthusiasm for the work of thinking. We only think when it is useful, or necessary, when there is the promise of an immediate result, or the fear of an unfortunate event that we must avoid. Otherwise, intellectual exercise is eluded, put aside, just as some physical activity would be for a person who does not enjoy exercising his body. So, as we try to invite everyone to the pleasure of thinking, we asked ourselves what the obstacle to the work of the mind was, why this asceticism was so little appreciated. Indeed, the principle of effort itself is not very popular, nevertheless we can see that some efforts are more avoided than others. And the work of the mind seems in this sense well off, it seems quite off-putting. Let's examine some hypotheses that could explain this phenomenon.

Inertia

Inertia is a physical and general principle that postulates the difficulty of change, the resistance to any modification. Thus, any movement tends to perpetuate itself, any immobility tends to maintain itself. All changes are thus expensive, painful. Even if we value action on the moral and practical level, human beings tend on the psychological level to rather value rest. To interrupt this rest, we need a strong motivation, an obligation, or an immediate pleasure, which the activity of thought does not provide. Certainly, to compensate for this tendency, most civilizing traditions, religious, moral or others, condemn inertia by naming it "laziness", which in Christianity, for example, is a capital sin. Action and work are considered as humanizing or salutary values, but this often takes the form of an obligation. Thus, the child will be told: "You must think", rather than showing him or making him experience the joyful and liberating dimension of reason.

Emotional chaos

Emotion is a natural phenomenon, which the child knows even before being born. But if emotions are educated over time, it is not a natural process. For such a transformation to be carried out, the work of reason is necessary, tranquil and pacificatory, initially on the entourage's initiative, then on one's own, as we become an autonomous being. However, since not everyone was provided with such an initial opportunity, some people remain in a very primary state where emotions dominate, a permanent effervescence from which they find difficult to extract themselves, or from which they do not wish to extract themselves. Some people actually defend such a state of mind, which they value by calling it spontaneity, which seems to them more natural and more authentic than "cold" reason. They overlook the fact that spontaneity, like sincerity, when we fully coincide with our feelings, is actually an agreement between our action and an immediate impulse, rather than an agreement between our action and our thinking, more distant and reflective. By flaunting such behavior, they abolish self-mastery, and therefore their humanity, since the crucial issue for our freedom is to

determine if we primarily satisfy our urges or control them in order to maintain a larger perspective on our thoughts and actions.

It should be added that our time, very subjectivist, is quite fond of the concept of emotion. Nevertheless, no one can totally deny to himself the excessive dimension of this latent effervescence and the ensuing damage to the psyche. Although, emotional drunkenness is a very effective strategy to avoid seeing oneself face to face and confronting oneself. Very often, this fear of oneself constitutes the very basis of the phenomenon.

* * *

Emotions can inhibit reason in several ways.

COGNITIVE BIAS: Strong emotions can lead to cognitive biases, where reasoning is influenced by personal feelings rather than objective facts. For instance, someone who is angry may interpret neutral events as negative, as an attack or a criticism.

IMPAIRED JUDGMENT: Intense emotions, like fear or anger, can cause an individual to focus narrowly on

certain aspects of a situation, leading to rash conclusions without considering all the evidence or consequences.

OVERWHELM AND DISTRACTION: High emotional arousal can consume a person's attention and mental energy, making it hard to focus on logical reasoning.

MEMORY INFLUENCE: Emotions can color memories, which can influence reasoning processes. For example, a negative emotional state can lead someone to recall more negative memories, skewing their reasoning towards the negative.

RISK PERCEPTION: Fear can exaggerate the perception of risk, leading to overly cautious judgment, while anger can minimize the perception of risk, leading to impulsive reactions.

STRESS RESPONSE: Under stress, the body's fight or flight response can inhibit the parts of the brain involved in complex thoughts and decision making, favoring quick, instinctive reactions over deliberate reasoning.

CONFIRMATION BIAS: Strong emotions often drive people to seek information that confirms their current feelings or beliefs, ignoring evidence to the contrary and leading to one-sided reasoning.

MOTIVATED REASONING: Desire or want can lead to motivated reasoning, where a person is driven to rationalize or justify their emotions and desires, even if they contradict logical or factual information. They fall into the trap of instrumentalizing their thinking, instead of keeping an open mind.

EGOCENTRIC THINKING: Emotions can lead to egocentric thinking, where individuals have difficulty taking the perspective of others or considering the broader context, leading to biased reasoning.

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS: The physical symptoms of emotions, like a racing heart or tense muscles, can also be distracting and make it harder to think clearly.

However, it's also important to note that not all emotional influence on reasoning is negative. Emotions can provide valuable information about our environment and our values, which can enhance decision-making

when integrated with reason. The whole issue is to let emotions inform our thinking, but not to overwhelm rational thought.

Circumstantial chaos

We live in a world in perpetual movement, where unpredictable phenomena follow one another and affect us permanently. We find ourselves like an object tossed by the waves, where it hardly seems possible to have access to our internal space. We have the impression, in order to survive, that we must react to all external solicitations, and we find ourselves caught in a permanent turmoil. Thus we are busy, very busy, and from this permanent occupation we derive some identity, an impression of meaning and a certain drunkenness, so many reasons to perpetuate this circumstantial chaos which seems to feed our need for "fullness", the specter of the void frightening us. Moreover, the exciting moments of chaos periodically suffer from depressive backlashes, where we are very preoccupied with the state of our navel, which lasts for a more or less long time, before "happily" plunging back into the whirlwind. However, in order to reflect, we must extract ourselves from this chaos, and to do so, we must know how to ignore circumstances, or at least learn to distance ourselves from them. Emptiness, the absence of external demands, is a necessary condition for the exercise of thought.

* * *

Surrounding or circumstantial chaos can inhibit rational thinking in several ways.

OVERLOAD OF INFORMATION: When there is too much information or too many stimuli, it can overwhelm the brain's capacity to process it all thoughtfully. This can lead to shortcuts in thinking, such as relying on heuristics, usual, instinctive or biased schemes, rather than thorough rational analysis.

STRESS RESPONSE: Chaos often triggers the body's stress response (fight or flight), which can decrease the brain's ability to engage in higher-order cognitive processes. Stress can impair the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for decision-making and rational thought.

EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY: Chaos can provoke strong emotional responses which can dominate the thought process, leading to impulsive decisions rather than considered, rational choices.

DISTRACTION: Chaos distracts. It draws attention away from the task at hand, reducing the mental focus and clarity needed for rational thought.

FATIGUE: The extra mental energy required to navigate chaos can lead to fatigue, which further diminishes the capacity for careful, rational thought.

UNCERTAINTY: Chaotic situations are often unpredictable, making it difficult to form a stable basis for rational decision-making. Uncertainty can lead to anxiety, which can further cloud judgment.

LACK OF STRUCTURE: Rational thinking often depends on the ability to structure problems and identify patterns. Chaos, by definition, lacks structure, which can impede this aspect of rational processing.

PRIORITY TO IMMEDIATE CONCERNS: In chaotic situations, the immediacy of concerns can lead to a short-term focus, neglecting long-term consequences and rational planning.

To preserve rational thinking in the midst of chaos, it's often necessary to create mental or physical "islands

of calm”, structured, quiet spaces where one can retreat to think things through. But one has to train himself to recenter the mind on peaceful and thoughtful processes, rather than responding immediately to numerous external solicitations. Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher, called this practice of creating internal mental space or tranquility amid external turmoil and adversity "the inner citadel". He emphasized the importance of developing self-control and inner peace, viewing one's rational mind as a refuge and a stronghold against the vicissitudes of life. The inner citadel is a metaphor for a state of mind in which an individual can retreat to find clarity, tranquility, and rational thinking, irrespective of external circumstances.

Anxiety

Anxiety is the state of feeling nervous or worried that something bad is going to happen. When anxious, one worries. But there is a common confusion between thinking and worrying. The human being, by his animality, is worried: he is concerned about his survival. Moreover, in the human being this survival is not only biological, but also psychological and symbolic: for ex-

ample, overcoming the lack of life meaning or the devaluation of the self. Thus, we are caught by anxiety. And we often observe that we prefer preoccupation to occupation, the former being more complacent, which easily saturates our mind, preventing us from channeling our efforts towards a specific task.

But worrying is different from thinking because it is compulsive, painful, chaotic, repetitive, whereas strictly speaking, thinking is free, joyful, deliberate and creative. But even if both are activities of the mind, they are strongly opposed: worry prevents us from thinking. Although worry, if peaceful and focused, when meaning to care and reflect at length about an interesting problem, as a source of reflection, keeps the mind alert.

* * *

One compulsive behavior that is very anxiogenic is the principle of comparison, which of course implies competition, a typical form of circumstantial thinking. “Comparison is not reason” wrote Blaise Pascal, even though the contrary idea can be defended as well, since comparing is the basic principle of any evaluation, quality or quantity wise, and our judgments are more comparative than absolute. The criticism of comparison

bears more than anything else on the subjectivity of the parameters used for the comparison, on the arbitrariness of the frame of reference. For example, people will often compare themselves to their relatives, since they are the closest people to them. Then there are some people who compare themselves automatically with high achievers, so they often feel incompetent and worthless, when some other people rather prefer easy comparisons that make them feel superior at little cost. As well, a comparison is always relative, thus it does not have any truth value, and it does not quite proceed from a rational process. In a more psychological way, some people cannot enjoy their life and appreciate what they have, since they always compare themselves and their accomplishments to what they don't have, the latter being of course always more consequent than the former, a cause of deep dissatisfaction and anxiety. But they are not conscious of the procedure they use, they are not self-conscious, they are primarily moved by a sort of instinctive greed nurtured by the comparison, quite contrary to the activity of reason.

There are certain other forms of anxiety that visibly impede the thinking process and dialogue. One of these is the replacement of the "what" with the "why" or the "what for". Thus, when a person is confronted with a phenomenon or an action, instead of asking what it is about, the issue at stake, and analyzing the object in question objectively, he immediately looks for a cause, and especially for an intention, especially by suspecting a malicious intention, a rather paranoid form of thinking. In the same state of mind, when he asserts something, or when he is questioned, he is very concerned with justifying himself and his speech, to the point of not being really aware of what he is saying, of not being clear, and even of contradicting himself. He is especially concerned with proving the truth of his statement, trying to convince his interlocutor, which he strangely calls "explaining", without even bothering to know if this interlocutor understands him or not, overloading his speech with compulsive and confused explanations. In fact, he doesn't clarify anything, he complicates the content, he overloads with details, trying to "cover his back", as if he were accused of something. And of course, when they are questioned,

they do not deal with what is asked. They either answer “pernicious” questions they imagine or suspect, or questions they would prefer to answer, rendering the discussion chaotic and incomprehensible.

Discredit of thinking

Even though we admire intelligent people, and we all want to be intelligent, the life of the mind is not valued in daily life. We prefer to focus on practical activities, and the mind itself remains quite discredited. The intellectual is easily criticized, even mocked, for his uselessness, for his lack of rootedness in daily life. Most prefer to channel their efforts into solving problems rather than understanding the nature of things. Another reason for its discredit: exercising thinking is not considered pleasant, or at least not as easy, accessible, intense or immediate as other pleasures can be. The mind can certainly provide great pleasure, but at the cost of great effort, so we can easily consider that the game is not worth the candle, that we have better things to do to enjoy, even if these other pleasures are more fleeting and insubstantial. So much so that the idea of enjoying intellectual activity is a very strange thing for

many people. Or it remains a vague myth: "One day...". Either because the effort makes us uncomfortable, or because we feel incompetent or inadequate.

One of the ways in which we discredit the life of the mind is commonly found in a prejudice often expressed in the contemptuous form of "These are only ideas". The term "idea" here takes on the connotation of unreal, phantasmatic, illusory, for lack of concreteness, materiality, efficiency or other usual characteristic of reality as conceived by common opinion. The concept of idea is also often opposed to the one of action: "It is fine to think and to have ideas, but what we really need is action!" Problems are not interesting in themselves, we need solutions, as quickly as possible. Thinking is perceived as passive and powerless, if not lazy, and is therefore not appreciated or respected.

Nevertheless, in order to problematize a little our apology of thinking, let us mention the criticism that Nietzsche makes of ideas in themselves, of transcendental concepts, for example in Plato, who remains an essential reference for philosophers. "It was indeed reversing the truth and denying the perspective, the fundamental condition of all life, to speak of the spirit and

the good as Plato did." Thus thought is opposed to life, when it is presented in a dogmatic way, detached from any context, when ideas are presented as absolutes. For we can think that life does not exist in itself, that there are only living beings, singular, engulfed in their specific reality, whose existence can never be reduced to abstract generalities. So it is for the "good", which is always articulated in a framework, according to the needs and the circumstances. Through this personal specificity, the immediate experience of each human being is therefore constituted, individuals who then naturally distrust these universal schemes that hardly speak to them. Thus they fear those intellectual projects, which seem to them to be disconnected from any concrete reality, not very accessible but above all not very useful, a suspicion which is quite understandable. In this way, the philosopher, or philosophy, comes naturally to discredit itself, insofar as reality is no longer taken in charge, even if one can defend the usefulness of this uselessness.

Utilitarianism

Utility remains the value primordially cultivated by human beings. But thinking, very often, has no immediate utility, just like artistic activity. One could even say, in a paradoxical way, that the utility of thought is precisely its uselessness since it frees us from utilitarianism. A utilitarianism that transforms us into a production machine, where we fear to waste our time. We instrumentalize ourselves. Thus, when it comes to thinking, the immediate reaction is to look for a goal, a predetermined finality, whereas in order to think, thought must be free and not bound to a result. This, of course, does not prevent us from appreciating the concept of utility at its just value. The problem arises when the finality is overdetermined, because the action of the thought is instrumentalized. As for example in the academic world with the famous "publish or perish", or when an artist cares above all about selling his works, which has a corrupting effect on the mind. Especially since in order to remain open and creative, we still need to maintain the principle of "thinking the unthinkable" as a horizon of thinking, which contradicts the utilitarian requirement.

As an alternative to the utilitarianism which parasitizes the thinking by subordinating it and limiting it to a utility, let us propose for example the principle of an aesthetic of thought. The term "aesthetic" comes from the Greek *aisthêtikós*, that which has the faculty to feel, the sensitive, the perceptible. From this point of view, the things are not taken in relation to a function, to a further goal, as the means to an end, because they are the object of an activity which is its own end. Thus, we appreciate thought as we would a beautiful landscape or a masterpiece: we appreciate it for itself, whether it is at the level of creation or contemplation. We can say, for example, that the purpose of philosophy is to create new concepts, because it is not only a matter of thinking about things for a later purpose, but of functioning as a creative activity, like any art. One can find beauty, grace, elegance, harmony in thought, by its form and meaning, by its originality, as in the plastic arts. It gives the soul a feeling of infinity and freedom, it gives the impression of touching the essential, the ineffable and the sublime, an experience that enhances existence. Through this, the individual transforms his own vision of himself, he makes the experience of the

singularity of his being in a consubstantial relation to the universal and the transcendent. He is no longer simply a "machine to survive", he is no longer confined to a functional and utilitarian scheme, a prisoner of obligations, with as only compensation enjoys small ephemeral pleasures. Satisfaction is at hand, through a work on oneself, and not in obtaining a future or illusory social recognition. Existence itself becomes an aesthetic activity, not an instrumentalization of oneself, as a small cog in the great machine of the world. We make the visible finally visible, as Foucault writes, by conferring it a sustained and joyful attention, instead of simply seeking utility. Zhuangzi tells us that "intention" is what blocks our access to the Dao, to transcendence, to beauty and to peace of mind: by always wanting something else, something we don't have, we no longer appreciate what is already before us. Thus we can see how the aesthetic dimension of the mind favors the activity of thought more than utilitarianism does, even though the quest for utility can also in the absolute somewhat move the thinking.

Heidegger distinguishes two modalities of relation to beings. The "ready-to-hand" and "the present-at-hand".

The former is the most common, when we perceive things within the view of achieving something, within the frame of an intention. The being of the “ready-to-hand” announces itself as a field of equipment to be put to use. The latter is when things appear as “there”, merely in front of us. It happens when we regard an object in isolation and study it with an attitude like that of a scientist, merely looking at the object’s bare facts, as they come to us. The latter perspective is more fundamentally connected to our *dasein*, to our being-in-the-world, it allows better our access to Being, to transcendence, to our becoming, to our own self. When we are in “need”, when we fabricate “need”, when we determine ourselves through “need”, we lose our very access to Being, we corrupt our own freedom, we become alienated from ourselves.

Greed

We fear the lack, so we seek to accumulate. Whether it be possessions, power, love, relationships or knowledge, we calculate, we seek, we want to fill the void in our mind and life. A natural tendency. But in order to truly exercise itself, the mind has to get rid of the need, it

has to ignore the feeling of lack, it has to establish its own legitimate fullness. This is a very different state of mind, where we do not fear poverty, because the mind must be self-sufficient in order to be appreciated. Such a paradigm shift cannot take place without working on oneself. Greed can be an obstacle to reflection for several reasons.

NARROW-MINDEDNESS: Greed often causes individuals to focus on their desires, reducing their ability to see a bigger picture or consider other perspectives.

IMPULSIVITY: Greed can lead to impulsive behavior, making decisions based on immediate gain rather than careful thought or long-term consequences.

ETHICAL BLINDNESS: Intense greed can lead to ethical lapses and a disregard for moral considerations, which can cloud judgment.

EMOTIONAL OVERLOAD: Emotions associated with greed, such as excitement and fear of loss, can overwhelm rational thought processes.

SOCIAL ISOLATION: Greedy people may manipulate or exploit others, they do not hear them, damaging their relationships and depriving them of the social resources that can provide diverse perspectives and feedback.

RESISTANCE TO LEARNING: If a person is greedy, he or she resists acknowledging or learning from mistakes because this could threaten his desires or goals.

COGNITIVE BIASES: Greed can introduce biases into thinking, such as overconfidence or the illusion of control, leading to poor evaluation of information.

RESOURCE DEPLETION: The pursuit of greed can consume a great deal of mental energy and time that could be devoted to reflection or learning.

FEAR OF RISK: The desire to obtain more, the fear of making a mistake, can lead to overestimating negative risks and avoiding the adventurous freedom of free thought.

MENTAL RIGIDITY: Greed can fix a person's mindset on certain goals or methods, reducing openness to

new ideas or adaptive thinking. When greed takes over, it can limit the scope and depth of a person's cognitive processes, leading to a narrower and potentially more erroneous understanding of the world.

Fear of emptiness

When we start to think, we are invaded by a feeling of infinity, we have the impression that an abyss is opening in front of us, because questioning continues indefinitely. Our landmarks seem to vanish, our certainties collapse as we naturally problematize them. If such an adventure can be a source of pleasure, it also produces a certain fear, with which we should reconcile, not an obvious endeavor at first. For some, it represents an impossibility, or a radical refusal.

Socrates' idea that "I know that I know nothing" is in fact an apology for poverty, for emptiness, without which the thinking process does not get initiated. The "rich", those who know, hardly need to think any further. They either pontificate, amuse themselves or rest, but their minds are not moved by any need to delve deeper, problematize or engage in real dialogue. So they prefer to avoid confronting the abyss of a thinking that

thinks itself. Such an in-depth examination requires us to consider the radicality of a groundless grounding, which is nevertheless the reality of our mind, which cannot avoid a dimension of arbitrariness and fragility.

Thus fear of emptiness, often associated with a sense of meaninglessness or lack of purpose, can cause a person to retreat from the deeper levels of thinking necessary to challenge oneself, grow, and change. It can lead to a state of mental stagnation where safe and familiar patterns of thought are recycled, rather than creating new pathways and insights. Thus Individuals may avoid deep thinking or self-reflection because it could lead to confronting an inner void or existential questions that are uncomfortable.

As well it can inhibit thinking in other ways.

DISTRACTION SEEKING: To avoid feeling empty, people might constantly seek distractions, which can preclude the time and mental space necessary for thoughtful contemplation.

OVERWHELM: The anxiety that accompanies a fear of emptiness can be mentally overwhelming, paralyzing one's ability to think clearly or critically.

DECISION PARALYSIS: Fear of emptiness can lead to indecisiveness as individuals may fear that their intellectual and practical choices could result in a greater sense of void or lack of fulfillment.

NARROWED PERSPECTIVE: In an effort to fill the perceived emptiness, individuals may become fixated on specific goals or ideologies without considering a broader range of possibilities or alternative viewpoints.

RISK AVERSION: The fear of exacerbating feelings of emptiness may cause a person to avoid risks or new experiences that are essential for personal growth and the development of new thinking patterns.

EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY: Constant worry about existential questions can consume mental resources, leaving less energy for creative or abstract thinking.

SUPPRESSING EMOTIONS: Attempting to suppress feelings of emptiness can also lead to suppressing other emotions, which can dull intuition and reduce emotional intelligence, both of which are important for effective thinking.

IMPAIRED PROBLEM-SOLVING: When the mind is preoccupied with a fear of emptiness, its ability to focus on solving external problems is diminished, as the internal struggle takes precedence.

COGNITIVE BIAS: To protect oneself from feelings of emptiness, an individual might fall back on cognitive biases that reinforce their current beliefs and knowledge, thus avoiding the challenge of new ideas or perspectives.

Freedom

We all desire to be free, which generally means to follow our desires, our whims, and our impulses. From this point of view, intellectual activity is easily perceived as a constraint, a threat on our freedom. This is why it is often necessary to find a master, or masters, or exercise companions, in order to guide us or to call us to order, until we are able to be autonomous and to maintain the effort by ourselves, if this ever happens. Let us underline the apparent paradox, namely that real independence sometimes articulates itself through some form of dependency. Like the plant that initially needs an external support in order to later on support itself.

Freedom is not given a priori or a right to be claimed, it is acquired over time through work, through a confrontation with the harsh actuality, through an engagement with necessity, by a face-to-face encounter with empirical factuality and the laws of reality. Thus the spirit cannot wallow in its desires and its feelings, even in its lofty ideal. It must initially accept to patiently contemplate and adapt closely to the contours of the world in order to be able to articulate its singularity and to carry out its projects freely, compellingly and vigorously. Freedom is in the end and before all primarily a work on oneself.

* * *

The desire for freedom can therefore conflict with the exercise of thinking in several ways.

COMFORT-SEEKING: The desire for freedom can lead to a preference for personal comfort, and avoidance of situations where critical thinking might challenge this comfort.

REJECTION OF DISCIPLINE: Structured, in-depth thinking requires rigorous intellectual discipline. If the

desire for freedom is understood as an absence of constraints or discipline, this can limit the ability to engage in demanding intellectual tasks.

AVOIDANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY: A desire for absolute freedom may lead to neglect of responsibility, including the responsibility to think critically, to engage in difficult dialogue, or to perform a demanding intellectual task.

CHOICES AND PRIORITIES: The pursuit of freedom can steer the individual toward choices that privilege immediate experience or personal satisfaction at the expense of reflection and contemplation, which take time and effort.

CONFIRMATION BIAS: To protect their sense of freedom, individuals may unconsciously ignore information that contradicts their desires, thus limiting the ability to think openly and critically.

CONFLICT WITH THE FREEDOM OF OTHERS: The desire for personal freedom can lead to conflict with the freedom of others, limiting the ability to think

ethically and empathetically about the consequences of personal actions.

It is important to note, however, that the desire for freedom can also be a powerful driving force for the exercise of thought, prompting us to question conventions and seek innovative ways of solving problems. There is sometimes a tension between the desire for freedom and the discipline required for critical, structured thinking.

Impatience

The work of thinking is an exercise in patience. Urgency is its main enemy, as René Descartes tells us, warning us against haste and prejudice, two obstacles to reflection that naturally combine. . But human beings are often in a hurry. They want results, in quantity, rapidly. The fact of facing the unknown, uncertainty, to work with no guarantee of results, is unbearable: we appreciate immediacy. The individual wants to find his pleasure by satisfying his desires, by carrying out his obligations, without procrastinating, as quickly as possible. Maintaining a process without obtaining an

immediate result anguishes him, as long as he has not learned to find his fare and his pleasure in it.

Thinking takes time, it is a slow process, and we fear what takes time. Slowness provokes discomfort and impatience. We don't like wasting our time, for life is short, as the common expression says. We desire to enjoy existence as much as we can, we want to accomplish great things or fulfill all our obligations. So many reasons to avoid endlessly spending time wondering, speculating and asking oneself questions. We prefer to take advantage of the immediate and make the most out of it.

One can here propose the opposition between immediate self-interest and long-term self-interest, the latter being generally more substantial and real, more satisfying. The capacity for delayed gratification is generally considered a sign of maturity and intelligence. The infantile and primary "I feel like.." or "I don't feel like..." is opposed to the more thoughtful gratification over time, which implies a certain dose of self-restraint and askesis, i.e. of frustration. Moreover, this dependence on immediacy is generally a sign of inconstancy, of pow-

erlessness, in the long run it leads to a certain passivity, as it neglects the need and pleasure to reflect.

Algophobia

We dislike pain, it makes us suffer, it is unbearable. The mere prospect of pain makes us suffer as well, sometimes even more than the pain itself. So, any effort, synonymous with psychological or physical pain, is to be avoided, unless we have developed this particular culture of effort, a sign of maturity. Just as with physical exercise, we must learn to challenge ourselves, to endure the pain of intellectual effort, otherwise our mind stagnates, we do not develop mentally, we do not actualize our power of being. But like children, it is often difficult for us to reconcile ourselves with this self-challenge, even if on a theoretical level we perceive its interest. Moreover, thinking breeds doubt, doubt breeds pain, and the pain in return breeds again doubt, in a kind of vicious circle.

Generally, we can accept pain to a certain “reasonable” extent, when we expect a result from it, more or less impatiently waiting for it to cease soon. But it is a different matter to educate ourselves to enjoy the pain

of the effort in itself, for the overcoming of our own immediacy that it represents. We can here think about the famous Nietzsche quote: "Man is something that shall be overcome. Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman, a rope over an abyss. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end."

Procrastination

We know we must do certain things, but we don't manage to do them. We put off the initiative, we postpone until tomorrow. We find all sorts of reasons not to get started: "I'm not ready", "It will be better tomorrow", "The circumstances are not right", "I don't have time", "I have something else to do", "I don't feel well today", etc. And we are so good at convincing ourselves. We know how to use all sorts of little things in order to avoid the big things, we privilege the urgent over the important. And this process is endless: the longer we put it off, the more impossible it becomes to make the decision to start. "The hardest thing in order to start running is to put on your sneakers", says the proverb. Procrastination tends to privilege circumstantial thinking rather than ontological thinking. That is

to say, we emphasize circumstances as the conditions of our actions, circumstances that are of course rather unfavorable to us; in fact we are evacuating our dimension of being and freedom. Our causes are external to ourselves, we are the victims of chance, of lack and of malfeasance. And we grant a great ontological, existential and psychological value to these circumstances.

* * *

Procrastination can be a significant obstacle to thinking and intellectual activity for several reasons.

DELAYING ACTION: Procrastination involves delaying tasks that require thinking and intellectual engagement. By postponing these tasks, one also delays the cognitive activities associated with them.

WASTED COGNITIVE RESOURCES: The stress and anxiety associated with procrastination can consume mental energy. This energy could otherwise be used for the task at hand, including the thinking process.

DISTRACTION: Procrastination often leads to engagement in other activities that serve as distractions,

pulling focus away from the thinking required for more important or complex tasks.

REDUCED TIME FOR REFLECTION: Procrastination cuts down the amount of time available for a task, which can also limit the time one has for reflection, analysis, and synthesis — all crucial components of deep thinking.

IMPAIRED PROBLEM-SOLVING: Effective thinking often requires sustained attention and effort to solve complex problems. Procrastination disrupts this process, potentially leading to less effective problem-solving.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: Knowing that one should be engaging in a thinking activity while choosing to do something else can create internal conflict, which may inhibit the ability to engage in focused thought when one finally does start the task.

QUALITY OF THOUGHT: Rushed thinking due to limited time, as a consequence of procrastination, may lead to lower-quality outcomes, as there may not be

enough time to fully develop ideas or consider multiple perspectives.

HABIT FORMATION: Chronic procrastination can lead to a habit of avoiding difficult cognitive tasks, which may result in a decline in one's ability to engage in sustained and rigorous thinking over time.

MOTIVATION: Procrastination can sap one's motivation to engage in thinking activities, particularly if these activities are seen as challenging or if there is fear of failure.

LEARNING AND GROWTH: Continuous learning and intellectual growth often require persistent effort and the tackling of challenges. Procrastination can impede this process, leading to stagnation in one's cognitive abilities.

WEAKENED WILLPOWER: Engaging in the process of thinking often requires an act of willpower, a decision. The person who tends to procrastinate blunts his power of being, weakening himself, a lack of determination which requires even more effort to get down

to work, In essence, procrastination disrupts the flow and quality of intellectual work, undermines the development of thinking skills, and can lead to a cycle of avoidance and anxiety that further inhibits cognitive performance.

Primitivism

Existence, the specificity of human life, is articulated through a struggle. The first, or the principal, lies in our effort to tear ourselves away from our animal dimension. But sometimes this poses a real problem. For reasons of education, context or personality, some individuals have difficulty to blossom, to develop their power of being, to actualize themselves. They remain in a primitive mode of existence, which tends to make them unhappy and angry, without knowing why, since consciousness is realized mainly through a process of reflection. Thus, it becomes difficult to access one's own humanity and develop their thinking capacity. They play the "little game" of survival, which they consider the "big game" of life: going to school, working, getting married and having children, or some other variation with equally little scope. Work, small pleasures and

obligations are the three main components of such an existential arrangement.

An important aspect of this primitivism is a difficulty in growing up, which can be called infantilism. Such a person frequently expresses a desire to be taken care of, for lack of autonomy. He is easily bored and discouraged and needs to be motivated and supported by others. He is always ready to express his needs, which for him are always pressing, he can hardly stand not being satisfied, frustration is felt as intolerable.

The Peter Pan complex is an important example of this phenomenon, a term used to designate the anguish linked to the idea of becoming an adult and leaving childhood, characterizing an emotionally immature person. While the "inner child" is a useful and necessary part of our psyche, being too attached to it is problematic. Such patterns affect reflective abilities. Here are some examples. Difficulty in assuming responsibility, in committing oneself and keeping binding goals, which generally leads to procrastination and abandonment. An important preoccupation with appearances and one's own personal well-being, little concern for others, quite a narcissistic attitude, a fear of the gaze

of others and a difficulty in dialoguing, which limits the horizon of thought and causes an allergy to criticism. A fear of the outside world and at the same time a fear of solitude, which creates a strong feeling of dependence. A psychic instability caused by excessive emotional reactions, often unjustified, unless emotions are repressed or denied, which provokes an absence of self-awareness and relationship to oneself. A recourse to a "magical" way of thinking, where one attributes an important power to circumstances, thus a loss of autonomy, a sense of victimhood, a devaluation of oneself and one's own thinking. An important weight given to parental or family relations, with a mixture of love and hate, respect and rejection, where one alternately wants to please and gets angry, asks for help and pretends to be autonomous, which excludes the use of reason and self-control.

Let us examine different cultural schemes dealing with the issue of primitivism and higher level forms of existence connected to thinking. In the Chinese culture, there is a classical opposition between the "junzi", the person of noble character, and the "xiaoren", the petty person. The first is identified through wisdom,

benevolence, and courage, respectfulness and propriety, a righteousness and generous attitude, self-restraint, and self-cultivation. He is always concerned with learning, thinking and improving himself. While the second is not concerned with ethical, spiritual or intellectual values, he only seeks immediate pleasures and personal gain, he is egotistic, anxious, he does not consider the consequences of his actions. Confucius wrote: "The noble person acts in harmony with others but does not seek to be like them; the petty person seeks to be like others and does not act in harmony." In the Daoist tradition, the noble person has access to Dao, to the fundamental principle, to reason and peace of mind.

Plato distinguishes three types of persons through the nature of their soul: the gold, silver and bronze souls. The gold represents the guardians, who are governed by reason, making them suitable to rule. The silver represents the auxiliaries, who are guided by courage, predisposing them to be military. The bronze represents the farmers and other craftsmen or physical laborers, who are led by their appetites and are defined through their practical utility.

Traditional Hindu society has a system of classification called Varna (color), which is determined by the function and value of its members. There are four classes: Brahmins who are priests, Kshatriyas who are warriors, Vaishyas who are skilled traders and merchants, and Shudras who are unskilled workers. The Brahmins hold the most power in society, being a priest meaning to be a spiritual and intellectual leader. They devote their time to studying, teaching, performing sacrifices, and officiating religious services.

We can see from these different examples the connection there is between the social, psychological and intellectual levels of an individual, how access to reason and knowledge values individual existence, when being deprived of it indicates a lower form of existence. We can observe that being driven by passions and lowly preoccupations is opposite to the free activity of thinking.

Excitement

The quest for excitement has always animated human activity. To escape from routine, from the flatness of daily life, from the absence of meaning, from the sensa-

tion of lack, or to overexist, that is to say, to exist in a more intense, fuller, more joyful way. Without always admitting it, we expect a great intensity, a full satiety, a form or other of absolute experience, a total and immediate realization. But intellectual activity, rather subtle, does not produce such a sensation, or at least not immediately, and with difficulty, at the price of patient and laborious efforts. Furthermore, today, thanks to technology, more than ever, excitement is at hand: we just need to turn on the screen, and according to our taste we have access to shows, to games, to infinite chatter, to the rapid scrolling of bulk information, numerous easy ways to distract ourselves and avoid any work, any effort of reflection, at the risk of addiction. Thus, it becomes difficult for us to interrupt this abusive and permanent recourse to strong stimuli and settle down in order to carry out an intellectual task. We run away from boredom, it inflicts a feeling of emptiness on our soul, when thinking is easily considered boring because it is slow, indeterminate, elusive. We prefer to spice up our existence with fleeting little joys, of ephemeral and superficial "parties", of easy occupations, which tem-

porarily calm our feeling of emptiness, the pain linked to the existential void.

In another way, more traditionally, we invent "paradises", that is to say that we concoct representations which by their simple contemplation, as an ideal, or by attempting to actualize them, even briefly, compensate for the feeling of lack which inhabits us, through providing a certain excitement. Certainly, there are classical and common paradisiacal schemes, like those of the great religions, but the representations of "paradise" remain nevertheless rather varied. Depending on individuals and cultures, they are modulated according to contextual and historical circumstances.

* * *

Let's take some national cultural examples, which show the diversity of excitement and "paradise". But first, let's clarify the meaning of the concept of excitement, which could be too connoted by the idea of emotional overflow. The most common meaning of the term is indeed the state of agitation of a person, who can be nervous or upset in front of a given situation, when confronting an unpleasant expectation, or very happy when facing possible or actual, favorable or pleasant circumstances.

But as well, it can be more calmly the happiness felt when we are joyful, interested or enthusiastic about something important for us, that is happening, that will happen, that could happen, or simply that we hope for, which generally characterizes the idea of "paradise" or ideal. Let's look at some cases.

In Norway, *friluftsliv*: outdoor life. It means spending time outside, having picnics, taking long walks with friends in the forest, walking a dog on a cold morning. This probably refers to a nostalgia for the wilderness, an important landmark in Norwegian culture.

In Sweden, *smultronställe*: "wild strawberry field". It is a personal corner, where one can hide from the world. An individual "holiday" place, where all miseries are forgotten, a form of escape from reality. Often, this place is kept secret, protected from others, where one recovers his energy. We notice here how alienating life in society is considered.

In Portugal, *saudade*: melancholy, nostalgia. It is a pleasure mixed with pain of sadness that something happy has already happened and will never come back, or has never happened, but may happen one day or will never happen. For example, a former first love, imag-

ining that they never parted. Saudade is the presence of absence, which allows us to feel a past or imaginary moment with great acuity. This again is opposed to the banal and painful reality.

In China, *xingfu*: happiness (*xin*: luck, *fu*: satisfaction). This indicates the state of well-being of fulfillment, a meaningful existence, a long-term goal, an accomplishment that implies effort, a liberation from suffering, i.e. an ideal of joy and satisfaction, both on the material and spiritual levels. This is opposed to *kaixin*: joy, which is more temporary, superficial, elemental or material, often related to greed of desire, a palliative of lack, but of course the reference to *kaixin* in daily speech is much more common than that of *xingfu*.

In Russia, *azart*, a term untranslatable in English, which comes from the word "hazard". It means above all a strong emotion, which refers to the lexical field of "unpredictable, fate, chance, risk, danger". There is an anticipation of success, even if it is very uncertain. It is a term of "play", but also of any activity whose outcome is unpredictable. It is both a joy, but also the piquant and pleasant pain of being on the edge of a precipice. Russian roulette is a good example of it. It is a form of

over-existence that allows us to escape the dullness and misfortunes of everyday life.

In contrast, for the Swiss, happiness is found in control, security, assurance, order, cleanliness, stability, a good standard of living, when everything works as it should, which of course remains as well an ideal distinct from reality, even though this culture tries with some success to apply this model.

In India, *jugaad*: ingenuity, inventiveness, expediency. This presupposes solving problems quickly and doing everything to obtain what you want, being tenacious and cunning, in order to face the vagaries of life.

In Syria, *tarab*: musical ecstasy. During the experience of *tarab*, one enters another dimension, with songs that can last from 30 to 60 minutes, speaking mainly of love and religion, that is to say of the absolute. *Tarab* is described as an existential experience, a journey that requires time to be lived, an emotional ecstasy that can be experienced in community during a concert.

In the USA, *homeyness*, another relatively untranslatable in other languages, which simultaneously expresses the terms of "welcoming, friendly, cozy, comfortable, familiar, simple, personal". The word comes

from “home”: the domicile, the hearth. In contrast to Scandinavian minimalism, it should be full of familiar objects, which denote our intimacy, starting with home-made things, like embroidery or knitting, simple and economical. Time slows down, we feel good, and we bond with our loved ones.

We see that various patterns exist, all of which speak to us at various degrees, which attract, excite and motivate the mind, but which in fact have little to do with the activity of thought, they are even rather contrary to it. Except probably the Chinese concept of *xingfu*, which indeed implies a certain challenge of the intellect, but which, as we have seen, tends to be ousted in favor of the *kaixin*, more banal and insubstantial.

Nevertheless, there is also a purely intellectual, or spiritual, excitement that animates some people. Certainly, the prospect of a “great thought” excites us all, “genius” enthralls us, but the slowness of the learning process, the regular demands of practice, the feeling of loneliness that such asceticism implies, puts us off. We crave frequent, immediate, and intense emotional gratification, even when we know we cannot obtain them, thus the slow, invisible progression of an ongo-

ing thought hardly motivates us. It seems contrary to our legitimate expectations.

The adept of intellectual or spiritual excitement, the ecstatic, expects the genial, the unheard, the extraordinary. He cannot stand banality and repetition, the stammerings of a beginning, going round in circles, which however constitute the heart of the reflexive operation. For this reason, he does not dare to put anything in writing, or he immediately erases it, because nothing he announces seems promising enough. Just as in dialogue, where he prefers to observe rather than suffer the pangs of uncertainty and self-deception. His need for excitement does not allow him to take risks, he could find himself facing a void that he fears and abhors. He is haunted by the absolute, or by perfection, which makes him powerless, since he is immersed in reality, in finitude and imperfection.

Another classic form of intellectual excitement is indignation, or moral excitement. The indignant person needs to be animated by a holy anger, which makes him vituperate against the wicked, the felons, the vicious and other sinners. This anger is necessary for him, without which dialogue is for him of little importance: he is not

very available to others. He cannot reflect calmly, put things down, examine the different perspectives: he has to cut to the quick, it is of the greatest importance, of the greatest urgency, and this responsibility falls to him personally. He projects his moral agenda in all directions, any other consideration is somewhat irrelevant. Like the ecstatic, he is easily disappointed or bored, because neither people nor ideas really interest him, and they never live up to his expectations. He has great psychological needs. He is always facing withdrawal, or on the verge of withdrawal, which leaves little room for reflection. But we also meet the tired indignant, those who are discouraged and content to whine: their spirit is moribund.

Some people experience excitement from interaction with their body. For example, through sport activities, when they want to push themselves to the limit, through personal challenge or by participating in different competitions. During such exciting physical exercises, thinking slows down or ceases, which is often what people like about it: a temporary state where there are no worries. Excitement comes as well from overcoming oneself, winning something, succeeding in

something that is concrete, visible and tangible. Another form of bodily excitement is to take care of one's health: some people are obsessed with undergoing different treatments, they consult diverse doctors or specialist, hope for diagnostics, practice different fashionable diets, they often consider food as medicine, they are fond of "miraculous" practices and products, what can be called a hygienist mania. They will not eat what they consider "harmful" for their health and take a strange pleasure in depriving themselves of enjoyable taste experiences, as vegan fanatics do for example. Another form of bodily excitement is connected to aesthetics, an obsession more characteristic of women: they frequently attend various beauty salons, undergo surgical procedures to improve this or that part of their body, possess a large variety of creams, regularly change hairdos, etc. This drive for "beauty" can as well be manifested through gymnastics and bodybuilding, when one is ready to exhaust oneself exercising, swallowing special protein drinks, in order to achieve a "great" look. In this latter case sport activity is the means to reach a certain appearance. In all these cases the body occupies a large portion of one's mental space, one obsessively

thinks of how one looks, what one eats or what disease one has or is trying to prevent, a form of excitement which of course prevents any type of intellectual endeavor.

* * *

Another popular type of excitement is “admiration”. Some people enjoy very much to admire, they rejoice in expressing publicly if not loudly their admiration; they are eager to share their adulation for some object. They are always prowling for some reason or opportunity to admire, whatever they admire, intelligent people or books, artists or their works, leaders or heroes, moral qualities, or even members of their own family. A typical example of the latter are those parents who speak about their offsprings by describing them as “wonderful children”. Admirative people generally cherish the usage of hyperbolic words, such as awesome, extraordinary, amazing, fabulous or fantastic, adjectives always accompanied with some exclamation mark when written, of course. They revel in the theatrical pronunciation of those excessive words. It seems that there are two main reasons explaining such an enthusiasm

for admiring bouts. The first one is the simple pleasure of getting excited, an emotional effervescence that provides the subject with a definite pleasure, primarily because like all excitements, it takes him out of the weariness of his daily life and routine, and provides him with a sense of overexistence. A superlative experience that offers some transcendence, allowing us to take part even just a little bit to some significance of life. And if as we have seen some individuals prefer moral indignation as a source of such exhilaration, others prefer the more positive and rather psychological admiration. The second reason is that such admiration spells allow people to connect with the wonderful world of the “admirable”, an elite sphere where reside the people, the phenomenon, the objects or all these entities that deserve special attention. By relating to it in this way, they are drawn into this world, and directly or indirectly, they themselves become admirable, they share the admirability. For example, the person who claims his admiration for a “wonderful speaker”, through his vivid admiration, manifests how much he perceives the admirability of this speaker, and therefore demonstrates the acuteness of his perception, which in return should

be admired. The refined person who knows which wine to recommend and informs others about the right choice, through his definite recommendation expresses the quality of his good taste. The expression of “admirability” is even more obvious when a parent speaks of “my wonderful children”, an explicit case of indirect narcissism, where “the greater my children are”, “the greater I am”, of course. It is rather amazing to observe how many parents are somewhat unconscious of the projection of their own self on their children, a very basic instinctive phenomenon, where one can easily boast about himself without seeming to do so, to the extent the public, complicit, accepts to remain gullible. And of course, such admiration, through the excitement it offers and the “positive reinforcement” it guarantees, is not conducive at all to thinking, primarily because of its lack of distance, its bias, its absence of critical thinking, etc.

One other point about admiration is a more artificial one. In this case, the admiration is not really felt, it is more of a psychological ritual, a formal expression in order to establish personal or social bonds, to make someone feel good about himself or his actions, or to

make a person accomplish some task, to encourage him, to motivate him by affirming him. In some cultures, like in the USA for example, this ritual is almost an obligation, therefore an expectation, if not a collective ceremonial to promote simultaneously bonding and action, in order to foster personal initiative.

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It is true that to a certain extent, the expression of admiration tends to boost people, gives them energy. It fits the fact that Americans are achievers and doers. Their educational system is lot based on praising, therefore they believe they can conquer the world, and they somewhat do it or try to do it.

The principle is that great excitement gives you boost to do great things

In such a context, one would have a hard time to both express and accept criticism: everyone is supposed to feel good and make others feel good, at the expense of objectivity, of honesty and truth. For example on social networks, someone advertises a banal personal “good news”, and everyone is supposed to “like it” or to congratulate the person, even better by using ecstatic words, without thinking too long about it. Probably

with the unconscious presupposition that one will receive the same approbation when he writes his own “good news”, feeling good about the two hundred messages of “friends”. And since in a large group every day is someone’s birthday, one can practice this collective “bonding” every day. Thus any real dialogue becomes prohibited, since human relations are always supposed to produce a light sense of euphoria. Each exchange should be superficial and pleasant. Although with time no one really “buys” it, the meaning fades out and the interaction loses its efficiency, words become mere words, people get bored.

Admiration can as well be an idealized projection on someone else, devaluating oneself in a comfortable way, since the admirer gets the benefit of some indirect greatness at little cost, with hardly any risks and no responsibility whatsoever. Words have the power to create an ideal world, they make us believe in it, and of course participate in it, so we feel good about ourselves, which is probably the reason we prefer to believe those words even though they obviously look dubious. We believe, even though we have the insidious suspicion that we don’t really belong to such a great reality, since

we are not good enough for it. But when things are “fantastic”, we can feel good together, through sharing the greatness that we are producing with the mere words we are uttering. When we support someone else in an enthusiastic way, the other one feels happy about us, we feel happy about making him feel happy, and we both share a great bout of happiness. In this type of “exaltation”, the last thing we are inclined to indulge into is any type of objectivity, of critical thinking, of realism, of reason, etc. It is a form of social ecstasy. And even when we are alone, this self-generated excitement still has a pleasant effect, one bathes in good feelings. The content is actually secondary, it can actually be totally fictitious, we can easily use admiring expressions for meaningless objects, in a complacent manner. The forced emotions compensate for everything, they saturate the mind. We entertain the doubtless impression that something important and pleasant is happening. Reason is not really welcome here.

Obligations

An important man of the city, reputed to be wise, came one day to ask advice from a famous master.

- What should we do in order to be happy?

The master answered him:

- Simply recite the name of the Buddha several times a day.

The other replied:

- Indeed! I will do it as soon as possible. But there are already three things I have to do first that I haven't had time to do yet. First of all, my father just died and I have to take care of his funeral. Second, my son still hasn't found a career and I have to find a position for him. Finally, my daughter is still single and I have to find a husband for her. Let me solve these three problems, and as soon as it is finished, I will follow your advice, because I am sure you are right.

A few weeks later, this important man was stricken with a serious illness and died quickly.

Some people function very much with a system of obligation. They have or construct for themselves numerous obligations of various kinds. These can be of moral nature, social, practical, even intellectual, generally an obligation of production, and they determine one's daily schedule and future planning through some indeterminate list of unavoidable duties. In this "hav-

ing to” system, there is no freedom, it largely seems to be determined by some external uncontrollable force that imposes tasks and chores that cannot or should not be avoided. In general, though some manic and unconscious process, the list is so long that it is impossible to completely fulfil it, an impossibility which intensifies the mental suffocation of the individual. Therefore, he will either enter into a frenzy of activities, eternally trying to catch up the “lost time”, or he will simply paralyze and procrastinate. In such dynamics, the freedom that thinking implies seems like an anguishing waste of time, there is no mental space for such gratuitousness.

Obsession

In order to think, the mind needs to remain plastic, to remain available, be it to new information, to contextual fluctuations, to processual changes, to paradigms shifts, etc. Its intrinsic power implies that it can remain distant from any fixed entity or parameter, that it can problematize, criticize, or doubt any thought or perspective, even though it can and will momentarily commit itself to a given object or procedure. Therefore, we can see from such a point of view how any obses-

sion tends to constitute an obstacle to the activity of the mind. An obsession is an idea or thought that continually preoccupies or intrudes on a person's mind, it inhibits any free process through the fixation on some specific object. This object can be any particular idea, desire, fear, pain, pleasure, expectation, memory, worry, etc. Through its constant or repetitive action, such an object becomes a "black hole" for the mind, since its power or strong gravitational force attracts everything in its "orbit". It prohibits any new perspective, any new field of reflection, any deviation from a pre-established purpose or modality. Therefore, the thinking is inhibited or even paralyzed.

Narcissism

Narcissism is a common feature of our society, some psychologists even claim that almost all of us are narcissists today, in our society of "freedom", individualism and consumption. Moreover, we easily perceive ourselves as vulnerable and as victims. Thus, we need to be constantly reassured, by others and by ourselves, to perceive an embellished image of our self, to be confirmed in our identity. Our own ugliness is unbearable for us.

However, the rigorous activity of thinking provokes an abyss, it destabilizes more than it reassures or comforts. We must confront our finitude, our difficulties, the vanity of our existence and of the world. This provokes in us a certain vertigo which echoes and amplifies our impression of emptiness. It exposes our superficiality, a feeling that can be quite painful if we have not learned to enjoy it. And this narcissism makes us allergic to critical thinking, especially about ourselves.

Consumerism

Today, all products are at hand, just a few clicks on the computer and the product is delivered to your home, quickly. There is not even the need to go anywhere. Provided we have the means, of course. But even if we don't, the pattern remains the same, as an ideal of life, as a representation of eternal happiness. This consumer ideology, this scheme of immediate satisfaction, is in direct opposition to the demand for thinking. For the latter finds its essence in a process and not in a result, one engages in it without guarantee of success because the latter is of lesser importance. To set oneself a task, reading, dialogue or writing, to work at it relentlessly,

driven by a desire free of any crude calculation. Infinite search for truth, an impossible task, for the simple beauty of the gesture, for the love of reason, moved by the life of the spirit. We are far from home delivery.

Banality

Is considered banal what is very ordinary, actions or speeches that contain nothing really interesting, original or important. It refers to what is rather common and repetitive, not very inspiring, not challenging. Of course, numerous people will claim that what could be considered banal gives meaning to their life, since it provides them with safe repetitive rituals, such as cleaning the house, telling about our day or speaking about the weather, a major topic in numerous usual discussions. Those banalities ease the course of daily life and the interaction between individuals, they are not threatening, they are easy to comply with. The problem is that they naturally become an exclusive habit, precisely because they feel so natural. We can notice this phenomenon quite well on social networks. And these rituals unconsciously incite people to limit themselves to superficial exchanges and preoccupations, they

induce us to a certain complacency. Therefore thinking, for example referring to truth and reason, which implies work and a more challenging behavior, easily becomes unwelcome.

Strangely enough, if banality is an obstacle to the exercise of thought, fear of banality is just as much of an obstacle, in another way. This is particularly true when it comes to writing. For some people, banality acts as a scarecrow, inhibiting the risk-taking that a work of thought represents. They want to be brilliant or extraordinary, immediately, they aspire to produce the exceptional or the unheard of, although they don't admit it to themselves so bluntly. So they are never satisfied. They may not be pleased with the work they have produced - a feeling of frustration periodically encountered by great authors like Camus or Dostoyevsky - but this would be of no consequence to their work, perhaps even motivating them to create anew. But for many people, it prevents them from articulating their thoughts, and they remain silent, hardly writing at all. The words they might utter, their draft thoughts, don't seem to measure up to the greatness of their intentions: everything they say or could say seems banal, unremark-

able, disappointing. Nothing they could say lives up to their expectations. They come up against the flatness of words, the limits of a language that can never convey the depth of their “intended thoughts”. They resemble lovers who exhaust themselves in words that they always find conventional, artificial, superficial, repetitive: whatever they might say will never be equal to their passion, their speech will never be able to capture the intensity of their feeling, always inexpressible and unspeakable. They look for other forms of expression, but hardly ever find them, even if some poets do succeed in this impossible exercise. This is undoubtedly where music is irreplaceable, as an expression of pure feeling. But these cautious characters don’t really realize their claim to genius; they remain shy, anxious and touchy, and what’s more, they feel frustrated by this self-imposed silence, convinced that they will always be misunderstood.

One of the classic forms taken by this phobia of banality is the fear of repetition, whether of repeating what has been said by others, or by oneself, whether in form or in content. But repetition is an inescapable part of any practice. Firstly, because it’s extremely difficult

today, in the mass of discourse that has already been uttered for centuries, not to repeat what has already been said. But also, as every musician, artist and practitioner of any discipline or technique knows, repetition is an integral part of learning and performing a skill, whatever its nature. Thus, any thought that takes shape, in the slow process of its elaboration, cannot avoid going round in circles, repeating itself, in order to be able from time to time to take off or let some flash of insight or originality shine through. However, this condition of thought can give rise to fears and resistance. Some people feel an unpleasant pressure to "succeed" when they repeat themselves, and may experience insecurity or fear of failure. Perfectionists may feel that constant repetition of a task does not lead to any evolution in their skills or projects, and does not allow their originality to shine through. Fear of monotony may also dissuade them from taking on a task that always seems to be the same, because they want variety. Repetition can be perceived as boring, demotivating and tiring, especially if it involves a major expenditure of physical or mental energy. It can lead us to think that we're stagnating and that there's no point in continuing, and we

come to regard ourselves as personally uninteresting, reviving in our minds the ghost of insignificance and nothingness. It can be seen as counter-productive to creativity or the search for originality, and can censor free expression. Another form of repetition is imitation, in which we do exactly what someone else has already said or done. To fear repetition is to fear the loss of our specificity, the risk of looking stupid or insignificant. Hence the feeling of banality, a criticism that may be directed at oneself or at others. While imitation may be perceived as a cheap shortcut or a weakness, its importance in the learning process, as a source of inspiration and action, should not be overlooked.

Mythomania

Since the dawn of time, human beings have told stories. They like to invent them, they like to hear them. Indeed, the role of imagination is important, it is a factor of freedom, of creativity, of beauty and of understanding. Myths are producers of meaning and identity, they constitute a vector for our existence. But the myth is in fact a double-edged sword. It can also be used to escape reality, to lie to oneself and to others, to take

refuge and hide. Thus, one can invoke numerous circumstances, concoct a narrative, to justify almost anything, for example to describe oneself as a powerless victim. Whether they are collective myths, family myths or or personal ones, they can be an important factor of bad faith, a denial of reason and truth, or an expression of resentment. However, myths must be subjected to the test of reason, they must be thought about, analyzed, and criticized. But very often, we prefer to protect the myth at all costs, we consider that we have too much to lose, rather unconsciously. So we tell stories, without really believing them, without others really believing them. And the myth resists thinking.

Apathy

Apathy is the feeling of not being interested in or enthusiastic about something particular, or things in general, it literally means “absence of passion”. It produces a state of anesthesia, which indicates the partial or complete loss of sensitivity, generally used in the physical and medical field. But there is also psychological, emotional, or intellectual anesthesia. An example is affective anesthesia, which implies an absence of all feelings

and obvious interest in others, including loved ones. The subject realizes the abrasion of his or her emotions, which indicates a depressive withdrawal, a confinement in moral pain, accompanied by a feeling of uselessness and guilt, even a desire for annihilation. This anesthesia can be due to a traumatic shock, but more commonly it occurs through a kind of existential wear and tear. Either an abuse of work, which is nowadays commonly called burnout, or an excessive emotional and moral torment, but also by exhausting oneself in an intellectual and formal task, devoid of work on oneself, disconnected from concrete reality. In these different cases, our psychical being rebels against the excesses imposed on it, and it goes on strike. It becomes insensitive, like those people who after the Covid lose their sense of taste or smell. Some people deliberately choose this anesthesia, for example by regularly consuming alcohol, by working a lot, or by getting numb with their screens. Thus, when apathetic, the mind is no longer available for thought, its natural and nourishing activity no longer provides any interests, it feels very tired. Beauty becomes a foreign land, the soul is estranged from itself.

Body

According to Plato, the body is the tomb of the soul. This may seem a bit radical, but he nevertheless enjoins us to practice physical exercise, just like learning music, in order to globally educate the individual. Nevertheless, it seems that indeed the fascination with the body, and not the body itself, can represent an obstacle to thinking. After all, as advocated by empiricist philosophers, as well as Kant and others, the perception of the senses represents an unavoidable access to discovery and knowledge. For Plato, this sensory perception awakens ideas, by the principle of reminiscence. The body is an obstacle to thinking when we identify with it in an exclusive fashion. Whether it is by an immoderate taste for physical exercise, the abuse of sensual pleasure, excessive health worries, fears of illness, fatigue or death, permanent concern for appearance, etc. The body can represent an obstacle to intellectual activity insofar as it is a very visible and palpable entity, because it seems obvious, prevalent, inescapable. We can thus easily identify ourselves with it, taking it for the ultimate reality of our existence. The spirit is vast and indeterminate, somewhat elusive, whereas the body

is incarnate, concrete, finite, precise, so it is more reassuring, more certain, we have the feeling to control it. It is difficult for us to escape from the body, even if it is necessary to periodically be able to free ourselves from it: we would have the impression to abandon reality and pursue shadows.

Negativity

Thinking has a strong negative or dark dimension. In Dante's *Inferno*, the pilgrim, Dante himself, explains that he is not worthy to undertake the journey, through Hell and Purgatory, to Heaven. I lack the strength and skill, he says, and Virgil, Dante's guide, listens patiently before he replies: you are merely afraid. Hegel will coin the concept of "unhappy consciousness", a necessary step where we see nothing in ourselves but sin and weakness, and everything that is worth living for, everything that is essential, can be found only in a distant beyond, ultimately unreachable, as a regulatory ideal. Thus, thinking is an arduous path, where we must accept to see and analyze the negative dimension of being, the world and the self. It implies a sort of symbolic death, a sense of disappearing and worthlessness. Ca-

reer, family, housing, all the usual goals of daily life, those life affirming purposes, seem to vanish into meaninglessness. Therefore, thinking does not help to calm our worries, since it makes us deal with them directly, confronting them, when we would rather try to forget about them, even though it is impossible. But we prefer to maintain our painful illusions rather than enjoy the process of understanding the reality of human existence, rather than dealing with the true needs and deep aspirations of our own self.

This suffering which inhabits the heart of man prevents him from thinking, because he refuses to confront, contemplate, understand and apprehend all that seems to him rather negative, all that echoes his pain, all that is of the order of the limit, the impossibility or the lack. So he forbids himself the pleasure of thinking, by censoring himself, a bit like a doctor who would not want to hear about illness because he finds it too painful. The joy and the freedom of thinking are put in check by their own objects, those thoughts one should not think about. The power of reason is interesting and productive only if it is concerned with pleasant or positive things. Thus the mind becomes bastardized and

superficial, it must please, and not soar vigorously towards the great horizons which attract and nourish it. He is relatively conscious of his own misery, it could not be otherwise, but in filigree, he tries to console himself with the vague hope of a beyond, of another place or another moment, of other circumstances, where all will be as it should be, because should of course happen some day the sublime instant of the great reconciliation.

Confusion

“Confusion will be my epitaph. As I crawl a cracked and broken path. If we make it, we can all sit back and laugh. But I fear tomorrow I’ll be crying. Yes I fear tomorrow I’ll be crying.” As the song of King Crimson describes, confusion is the cause and the product of a mixed feeling, laughter and tears, joy and sadness. Confusion is disorder, the opposite of reason which is order and clarity. Therefore, things are muddled, obscure, we feel disoriented and lost, a rather painful situation. A second derivative meaning of the term means shame and embarrassment, “I am confused”, implying that such a state indicates a lessening of our self, an

abasement. But we can notice that confusion is a regular feature of the human mind, it characterizes many dialogues and relations, for diverse reasons. Because rigorous thinking is not a regular practice, it is therefore difficult. Because emotions and desires tend to take precedence over reflection. But on a more “positive” side, because confusion can help us to hide reality, or to hide from reality. Some persons explicitly engender confusion as a relational or existential strategy. As well because confusion can produce in our mind a sort of drunkenness, where everything is possible, where we enjoy gibberish, where our subjectivity can express itself in an unbridled and unchecked manner. This powerful dimension of confusion can explain why it is so popular, in spite of its dimension of ridicule and absurdity. And therefore, why clear thinking is not welcome.

Fear of surrender

Certainly, to think is to know how to commit oneself, to dare saying "yes" or "no", it is to argue, to hold a hypothesis at arm's length and to defend it, it is to commit oneself to certain values that we hold dear, because thought cannot progress in indifference, and it is also

to take the risk of being wrong. To think is to assert and to be assertive, but it is not to be stubborn. To be stubborn is to maintain a position or ideas in spite of evidence, without caring about contrary arguments that one prefers to ignore, without taking reason into account, ignoring the specter of truth that looms on the horizon, excluding all the regulating concepts from the process of reflection, for example logic or common sense. To think is to know how to obey as well as to know how to command, it is to be able to impose as well as to be able to capitulate. A thought worthy of the name advances openly, it clearly announces its presuppositions and its postulates. Because of this, it is tempted to protect its anchoring and its expression, but if it does not know how to surrender, to compose or to give up when it is visibly put in failure, it sabotages itself. Either it becomes rigid, or it becomes confused and lost in quibbles. But the fear of losing face, pride, fear of nothingness are obstacles to a real authenticity of being. So we must learn not to be attached to our "products", and to free ourselves from ourselves by aiming at something greater than ourselves.

Fear of dialogue

In numerous contexts, starting with the most intimate one the family represents, or in the adult love relation itself, dialogue is often banned or reduced to its most primitive or basic expression, numerous taboos are installed. It is a common complaint, in particular from women, to regret the absence of any real dialogue, if any dialogue at all in the relationship, men often seeming less sensitive or more ignorant about this issue. This difficulty or resistance to substantial dialogue is visible in numerous different contexts, from exchange between neighbors to colleagues in the intellectual or academic milieus, whereas the monologue is often much more popular. And when they are so-called dialogues, as we see on social networks, either people ignore each other, or they argue in a purely reactive manner.

Of course, this will affect the thinking, for diverse reasons. First, the very action of expressing ideas is the best way to produce and develop our thoughts, which otherwise remain unclear. Second, through this exchange, we can hear ideas we never heard or thought about, which awakens and opens our mind. Third, the exercise of dialogue is like a game, that includes some em-

ulation and friendly competition, a rather stimulating context for thinking. But different obstacles come in the way of this dialogue. First, the lack of interest for others, an indifference to interacting with others, as we prefer to remain in our little world rather than engaging ourselves in unknown grounds. Second, the fear of exposing oneself, ourselves, of showing our limits, of losing face, of looking stupid, a threat to our identity, although it implies taking responsibility for ourselves in front of the world. Third, the fear of rejection, just because we are other than the other, because we doubt our own worth, because we presuppose we will not be understood and appreciated, we protect our inner self from this other. Fourth, the fear of contradiction and confrontation, the fact that each one wants to defend his ideas and identity against the ones of others, the desire to “be right” and be recognized as smart or knowledgeable, provoke a painful tension. Fifth, a certain xenophobia, which makes us fearful of others, a priori suspecting that they have bad intentions, that they are not well disposed towards us. According to Nietzsche, there is no thinking without agon, without a dimension of confrontation to otherness. In a less dra-

matic way, we could say there is no thinking without availability to otherness.

A recurrent obstacle to true dialogue is the fear of violence, even if only verbal and even contained, so we avoid speaking frankly and clearly. However, it seems to us that opting for non-violence does not mean pretending to eradicate our violent streak, intrinsic to life, but rather wanting to understand and interpret this impulse in order to transform the vitality it contains into a creative energy. Being oneself instead of censoring oneself. It is a question of transmuting violence without repressing the energy of its movement, without annihilating the energy that it expresses. It is very common to fear this vital dimension of our self, some persons will openly say they are actually scared of themselves if they “let the demon out of the cage”, so they opt for a formal or meek persona. They might appreciate the aesthetic and power of violence, but only in distant objects, in paintings or movies for example, as their only way to reconcile with this crucial dimension of being.

Our relationship with others always involves a relationship of adversity, of tension, of confrontation, simply because we are not them, because they are not us.

Thus conflict is always present at the very center of our interactions with the world. To assume this reality of the conflict, the individual must thus express his own aggressiveness. This aggressiveness is a power of combativeness which allows one to face the other peacefully, without giving in to fear and without evading. Spontaneously, we are afraid of conflict, the temptation is not so much to resort to violence as to flee. It would be useless to ignore or deny this fear and pretend to repress it. On the contrary, it is a matter of recognizing it, of welcoming it, of taming it, of trying to master it. To be aggressive is to assert oneself in front of the other by walking towards him. The term aggressive comes from the Latin *aggredi*, the initial meaning of which is "to walk towards". Thus, to be aggressive is to accept the conflict with the other without submitting to his law, by seeking to build a relationship with him based on the mutual recognition of our individual rights and wills.

One last concept we should address as an obstacle to dialogue and thinking is the one of "respect", a very common alibi for not really speaking out and stifling our thoughts. The term respect comes from Latin,

respicere, which means to “look back”, to “regard”, in other words, to look more attentively and carefully, implying a sense of prudence and precaution. In the context of a dialogue, we practice respect in order to avoid hurting anyone, or to prevent some type of conflict. Therefore, respect comes in opposition to being frank, straightforward or even honest, since we have to weigh the consequences of our speeches and actions, and to a large extent we therefore have to avoid truthfulness. All the opposite of parrhesia, which according to Foucault is “the courage of truth in the person who speaks and who, regardless of everything, takes the risk of telling the whole truth that he thinks, but it is also the interlocutor’s courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears.”

In opposition, people who are in the respect scheme do not actually think, because they actually speculate, they calculate, they worry, we could say that they think too much in order to really think. They calculate the respect they must give and what they will get out of it, morally and materially, they calculate the respect they get and the respect they deserve, although they don’t worry very much about truly respecting them-

selves. They permanently evaluate the formal social agreements, a strong preoccupation in some cultures.

Let us examine in detail how this respect works. When people assert their opinions, they think their utterances or ideas ought to be respected, treated properly and cautiously, which for them means either to be admired or minimally to be accepted with a certain interest. Of course, they should not be criticized, this would indicate a lack of courtesy, a lack of appreciation, an uncouth and aggressive behavior. Our opinions constitute our image, and our image should not be defiled or desacralized. Therefore these persons would prefer a formal acquiescence, even if totally artificial or hypocritical, rather than an open disapproval or rejection of their speech. And in return, they graciously offer that respect to others, as a normal and expected payback, an exchange which includes practical advantages and benefits. Of course, they will avoid precise argumentation, to the extent it is susceptible to show some disapproval of the other person's thinking, unless they manage to twist it sufficiently, hiding it in circumvolutions and ambiguities, so it becomes acceptable to the other party. Therefore, people that are in the "respect

business” avoid thinking, since they censor and fade out their own reasoning. In fact, what we don’t dare to say, we don’t dare to think, we don’t dare to think it anymore. And to authentically affirm one’s thoughts easily implies disrespect for the ideas of others, if only inadvertently. In this paradigm, any boor who merely proposes respectful people to think or consider another perspective regarding some social truths that are culturally accepted as unquestionable is violating the social contract of polite society. The unvarnished person who expresses himself without the usual precautions is considered rude, ill-mannered or violent, and of course disrespectful. No matter how interesting or true his words are. When thinking should rather be the opposite and on the contrary welcome any strange, unbecoming and surprising idea, especially when they challenge our own paradigms.

Fear of mistake

Most of us have been to school too long, where the “official” mistake is systematically hunted and chastised, where what is considered an error is a cause of self-devaluation and shame. This phenomenon is perpetu-

ated in society, where inaccuracy, blunder or misunderstanding is easily criticized. Of course, depending on the milieu we evolve in, the nature of the “sin” and its social punishment will vary. But very often, the fear of fallacy or oversight, whatever the mistake may be, haunts us, inhibiting our thinking process, prohibiting the expression and the development of our thinking. According to Hegel, “the fear of making mistakes is the first mistake”. Simply because we don’t dare think anymore, since we presuppose fixed formal standards and the existence of some absolute imaginary censor watching our every move, listening to every one of our words, with a stern and disapproving look. We can as well call it the “ghost of perfection”, which haunts many minds, rendering people timorous and fearful. Although, paradoxically, we know this perfection is an impossibility, we claim it unconsciously all the same, pretentiously, thus we will fear and fight any negative judgment. Vigorous thinking should obey a principle of trial and error. We take a risk and formulate our thoughts, we then examine them critically, we might ask others to do the same, in order to finally decide if we should maintain our hypothesis, modify or abandon

it, depending on the evidence and rational arguments encountered. But if we fear mistakes, we will abort any attempts to think, we will hide, from ourselves and from others.

In a way, all thinking is wrong, in the sense that Spinoza speaks of "inadequate thinking". Not that what we think is totally false or totally inadequate, that is probably never the case either, because we can always make sense of any proposition. But because we can always identify a limit, a counter-example, a flaw in what is proposed, no idea having an absolute value. The art of thinking always presupposes the error as constitutive of any formulation, without prohibiting its articulation. To think is to endlessly say and re-say, to write and re-write. We can find there the principle of the "zugzwang", the guaranteed defeat, whatever we do. That is to say that any process of thought, any dialogue forces us to advance, but any mental gesture taken leads us invariably and inexorably to failure. In fact, thought is "zugzwang", life is "zugzwang", therefore we are all losers on the ontological level.

Fear of authority

It is difficult to be a teacher if you want students to think by themselves and as well to dialogue with you. Because you are the “official” authority, some always seek your approval, they want confirmation that you agree with them, they want to be patted on the back, to feel more secure, they want to be appreciated and liked. Others want to fight with you, compete with you, in order to prove themselves, for themselves or to show their peers, you then become their “enemy”, or they simply move away, since you are not really interesting. And then there are those who are simply scared of you, they avoid you, they are ashamed of themselves and their own thoughts, or their lack of thoughts, so they hide from you or passively try to get rid of you. Thus, when we want to dialogue with those students in order to establish a thinking relation, we obtain all these weird behaviors and reactions. Probably one has to be patient. Just like when educating your biological children, until you discover that in reality they are not “your” children. One can accept as well that dialogue will often be impossible with most students, and

joyfully let go of any expectation. Let us call this unavoidable phenomenon “teacher’s fate”.

But if we examine this problem from the standpoint of the students, one can identify a phenomenon called fear of authority. The authority is anyone in some position of power: the professor, the boss, the judge, the parent, an older person, or simply someone who knows more than us, or someone smarter than us. This fear inhibits our thinking, since we do not dare formulate our thoughts. Either because we fear his wrath, his chastisement or his reprobation, or simply because he makes us feel small, impotent or worthless, thus we either hide, obey or become angry. But in any case, the emotional dimension takes precedence over reason, we lose our freedom to think peacefully and constructively. An interesting common concept in this domain is the term “populism”, quite controversial, which indicates a type of politics or social movement that claims to represent the opinions and wishes of ordinary people in opposition to the ones of the elite, as a clear cut antagonism. A striking aspect of this phenomenon is the fracture it represents, between a restricted elite detaining formal governance and the mass of "ordinary" people, each of

the two groups holding a form of power and therefore of authority. The power of the small "superior" group and the power of the quantity, where each fears the authority of the other by conceiving it as illegitimate and dangerous, which terribly distorts the analysis of the phenomena.

The fear of authority can express itself both through obedience, since one has to respect and accept the external rule, or through rejection, as the authority becomes the enemy to destroy, it indicates what we should fight, what we should go against, which as well is an expression of fear towards the mighty and omnipresent authority. In all cases, formal authority represents high expectations, a form of strict obligation, and a deprivation of freedom.

The fear or rejection of authority is a problem from the standpoint of reason, since reason is demanding, it imposes itself on usage for some mysterious reason. It implies an education of the mind that can hardly be accomplished without some relation to a higher authority as a form of challenge. This authority can be represented by an individual, parent, teacher or else, an embodiment that makes the task easier, but it does

not have to be so: reason is as well an internal authority in each and everyone of us, what can be called common sense for example, a condition for mutual understanding within society. At the same time, because of its demanding nature, reason can as such be perceived as a kind of elitist endeavor, therefore bothersome, painful and threatening. Many prefer to go with what is commonly called “good sense”, or “horse sense”: a robust form of common sense believed to be found in poorly educated but shrewd people, an instinctive “street smartness” rather than a formal and learned “book smartness”. With the former, closer to popular opinion, people feel more free, when the latter seems to impose some counter-intuitive or external constraint, hence the perception of an authority and naturally the rejection of it, since authority connotes an absence of primitive freedom, some counternature exertion. Reason is then seen as an attack on common thinking, since it questions the immediacy of our intuitions and sentiments, making us feel lowly and stupid, destabilizing our landmarks, a very unpleasant perspective. Although the paradox is that those same “free” persons will naively accept in an uncritical way some

authority without even realizing it, for lack of a regular practice of reason. Lao-Tzu articulates the issue of authority in an interesting fashion: "When a student is ready, a teacher appears. When a student is truly ready, a teacher disappears."

Doubt

Doubt plays an important role in the history of thinking. Descartes is a famous example, with his "I doubt therefore I am", the only ontological or existential certainty he can reach being precisely the fact that he can doubt everything. This radical doubt he called "hyperbolic doubt", which generates a kind of generalized skepticism. But it is not a question of remaining there and feeling powerless, it must serve us to identify fundamental truths. In order to build thought, Descartes introduces another doubt, less radical: "the methodical doubt", which allows by means of arguments and proofs to analyze, examine and question the ideas, with the aim of hunting down the "false". This does not mean to know everything about a thing or an object, but to establish a basis, a method, in order to arrive at a plausible result. Another significant example of doubt

is found in Zen philosophy, which in proposing its three essential elements of practice: “great faith, great doubt and great determination”, seems to express itself in a paradoxical way. In fact, the three injunctions coincide, in the sense that it means abandoning the need for certainty and remaining open to not knowing, being aware of our ignorance, as Socrates did. It means questioning everything by extricating ourselves from the obvious and the familiar. It is not a matter of being plunged into the throes of painful uncertainty, but of knowing how to freely and joyfully ask questions about everything.

However, the common practice of doubt generally works in the opposite way to what we have just described. First of all, doubt is experienced as a lack, because in fact we would like to be certain, despite the impossibility of this certainty. Secondly, doubt is a simple psychological state, it does not refer to a method of reflection, to a conscious attitude of interrogation of the world and the thought. This doubt is not active, it is powerless. Thirdly, it infantilizes the individual, who seeks above all to be reassured, generally by others, in particular by those who represent an authority, a pro-

cess which can be called "regression". Fourthly, it is a rather painful state, a sad passion as Spinoza would say, reducing our power of being. Fifthly, it inhibits or distorts action, since we remain hesitant and nervous, our gestures are then neither free nor straight. Therefore, such a phenomenon, for existence and thought, can be called "the poison of doubt".

In order to console ourselves with the presence of doubt, let us propose the idea that to think, in its fundamental dynamics, is to ask oneself judicious questions and try to answer them, while knowing that we will never find any entirely satisfactory answer.

Reaction

The term reaction indicates a movement that takes place in the opposite direction of a previous movement, be it in a physical, psychological or any other sense. A reaction is therefore a phenomenon that is dependent on a previous phenomenon, it does not happen by itself. It occurs as a result or in response to something else. From this, we can claim that it lacks autonomy and freedom. But at the same time, we can state that the fact this reaction comes "in opposition", can as well

be considered a sign of freedom, just like resistance or disagreement is considered as such. Nevertheless, a reaction is not necessarily antagonistic, it can also produce a simple inflection or pursue an idea in the same direction.

The reaction is predictable. Either it is mimetic, it imitates the one who makes it react, it is what we find in the "an eye for an eye" or "a tit for a tat", or by complying in a disciplined way to some authority or group behavior. Or it is radically opposed, it goes in the opposite direction, for example the flight in front of the aggressor, or by the contradiction, as the teenager in front of his parents, by choosing values contrary to those of the people he cannot bear.

But often, a reaction indicates a modification in the speech, attitude or behavior caused by disapproval of another person's speech, behavior or attitudes. In a political sense, a reactionary is a person who regrets present customs and ideologies and would like to return to the past, or a rigid defender of the status quo, therefore who reacts against "modernity", a term which often has a negative connotation since it is considered as opposed to the need for progress. In a different way, to

be reactive means to be responsive, generally viewed as a positive attribute, in opposition to being apathetic or phlegmatic. And the person who simply reacts will be opposed to the one who is proactive, since the latter takes the initiative of the action, anticipates the difficulties and adopts measures to overcome them, instead of passively waiting.

Therefore, in a general way, reaction can be considered an asset for thinking, in the sense that it indicates vivacity and mental alertness, and a capacity for criticism and opposition, which implies dynamism, freedom and autonomy. At the same time there are reasons why reaction can be considered a hindrance to thinking. First of all it can indicate a certain hastiness, where one does not take time to think. Second, it can indicate a reflex behavior, automatic and compulsive, where the individual is actually deprived of thoughtfulness. Third, it can indicate a lack of distance from oneself, one is too close to his own thinking, therefore incapable of peacefully examining other ideas or possibilities. Fourth, it can indicate a systematic opposition to ideas of others, prohibiting the emergence of new ideas and the establishment of a real dialogue, and it can even be a

hindrance for one's own production of ideas, through compulsive self-denigrating. Some persons, in order to exist, cannot help criticizing everything they hear, at the risk of bad faith and semantic quibbles. Fifth, it can indicate a strong emotional state, where the individual is hypersensitive and reacts immediately to the slightest stimulus, generally in a thoughtless, negative and painful way, a behavior that can be stressful and contagious. So many reasons to think of reaction as an obstacle to thinking, although the main issue between a positive and negative meaning of the term lies probably in the intensity and the frequency of the reaction.

Constipation

Intestinal constipation is a problem that affects many people, the same goes for intellectual constipation, which is less talked about, a regrettable but understandable oversight given the predominance of the body in the minds of our fellow citizens. "When health is fine, everything is fine!", they say, forgetting that the mind is an integral component of health.

Just like its physical equivalent, mental constipation is a blockage of vital movement, an interruption of nat-

ural processes. On a psychological level, it is usually due to anxiety, resentment or shame. The thoughts are still or chaotic, but forcibly held within, constricted, unexpressed, which of course cause pain. This is how Socrates offers himself as a midwife to help give birth to the ideas that are prisoners, through questioning and dialogue. Although he claims that sometimes it was only a restrained fart. He uses irony as an epidural, he provokes the movement of the spirit by his interrogations. By establishing a relationship with his interlocutor, he takes him out of his self, so that he allows himself to become a progenitor, an "author". On an ontological level, this reminds us of the most ancient and universal narrative about the origins of life: the myth of the primordial emergence, where all beings came to exist by coming out from the entrails of the earth.

There are different forms of constipation. There are those who do not speak, convinced that what is inside them is mediocre, and therefore not worth exposing. There are those who, on the contrary, are admiring of their excretions, but do not dare to show them because they are not yet "ready": they would like to produce nothing less than perfection. Let us mention here

this pleasant quip of French writer Jules Vallès: "The doctor does not know if M. Bergougnard is a philosopher because he is constipated, or if he is constipated because he is a philosopher." And then there are those who fear that others will not appreciate their excretions, so they wait for the right time, for the right circumstances, which may never happen. So all those people are stuck or slow, cautious, reserved, expression is difficult for them, their thinking becomes numb, insubstantial. Their behavior may be timorous or stiff, they are uncomfortable, they express themselves with difficulty, they are reluctant to write. The gesture of thought is not free, it is heavy and hampered. Their interiority is compressed, they want to control too much, and nothing happens, they want to exist while they suppress themselves. They are too afraid to expose their own imperfection, and so they identify with it. One could almost say that they do not want to part with their treasured excretions. After all, Freud claims that anal pleasure is the most primitive of all pleasures, anal retention being a form of this pleasure, as we see in the miser. But anger, the feeling of frustration, is in fact never far away.

Of course, we cannot close this part without mentioning “diarrheal” people, those who on the contrary expel and spread their excrements too quickly, what is also called logorrhea, an expression of chaos which is just as much an obstacle to real thought. Moreover, this phenomenon can very well be combined with constipation, alternating with it.

Heteronomy

Immanuel Kant wrote a now famous text to describe the Aufklärung (The Enlightenment), the great rationalist philosophical movement to which he belonged. "What is the Enlightenment? The emergence of man from his minority for which he is himself responsible. Minority, that is to say, the incapacity to use his understanding without the direction of others, a minority for which he is himself responsible, since the cause lies not in a defect of the understanding but in a lack of decision and courage to use it without the direction of others. Sapere aude! (Dare to think) Have the courage to use your own understanding. This is the motto of the Enlightenment."

Laziness and cowardice are for him the two main causes that explain why so many men do not depend on themselves to reason, reflect and decide on their actions. This is what is called heteronomy, as opposed to autonomy which implies that an individual relies primarily on himself. He calls this a state of "minority", in the sense that this heteronomy implies behaving like a child, depending on an external authority to think, instead of taking upon oneself this activity, with all the freedom and responsibility that this implies. Such an attitude indicates a disengagement from thinking, insofar as one relies on others to analyze, to criticize, to make a judgment. This behavior can also stem from a lack of self-confidence, a devaluation of oneself, a fear of error and other problems that we have already considered in this text.

Fear of judgment

"Judge not, that ye be not judged.", Christ warns. We see here that this threat of judgment shows its unpleasant or even terrifying aspect. Moreover, this positive figure adds elsewhere: "I have not come to judge the world, but that the world may be saved". Judgment is

thus perceived in opposition to "good", to salvation, to eternal happiness. But this is not quite the case with his "Father", of whom it is said: "He will come in glory to judge the living and the dead", in reference to the "last judgment", the ultimate moment of all things, when everyone will receive their due, the benevolent and the wicked. God also announces: "I, the Lord, search the heart, I try the reins, to give to each one according to his ways, according to the fruit of his works", so we are all already judged statutorily, at every moment, *nolens volens*. This being said, the name of the devil, Satan, in Hebrew means "the accuser", so he is also the one who judges.

We can notice a strong ambivalence about the concept of judgment. "You cannot judge, but the father can." So if you judge you are practicing hubris, only the mighty have the authority and the power to judge. Both God and the Devil judge, the divine elite only, good or bad. That is why the snake told Adam and Eve "Taste this apple and you will be able to discern good from bad" in order for them to rebel, since to judge means to become like God, or the Devil. Thus there is a double fear related to judgment: we fear to

be condemned when we are judged, but as well we fear being the one who holds the power.

Thus the paradoxical dimension of the concept of judgment, both inevitable and formidable, which makes us fear its use, our own and that of others, especially when it concerns us. Here, we can contrast it with Kant's conception, for whom judgment is constitutive of thought, since the act of thinking is nothing else than the attribution of a predicate to a subject, i.e. judging, to describe how things are and how they act. Of course, this broadens the concept of judgment, which is not limited to the moral domain. Let us also take the case of the wild animal, which in order to survive must constantly evaluate its environment, which again can be called judgment.

Thus we cannot not judge, we judge even without wanting to, and yet judging poses a problem for us, whereas this gesture is at the heart of reflective activity. "You must not judge", some people command, very sanctimoniously, or "Who are you to judge?", they ask in an accusatory, highly "judging" tone. Let's try to clarify the problem. First of all, we judge, whether we want it or not, because the mind does not know

how to remain neutral; it constantly evaluates, judging events, things and beings in either a rather positive or rather negative way, instinctively and often unconsciously. For German philosopher Leibniz, “the fabric of the soul is a swarming of small itches”, and he opposes a live thinking conceived as “caring”, to a mortifying indifference. The problem is therefore to make this act conscious, deliberate, discursive rather than intuitive, which requires some intellectual work. Then, a judgment must be argued to be justified, and we must also critically evaluate the arguments used, our own and those of others, which requires not only an effort but also cognitive skills, and a certain distance from ourselves. Another problem is the fear of being judged. As we are worried about our value and our identity, we fear the gaze of others who might devalue us, remind us of our finitude, so we propose to others, or impose on them, a “non-aggression” pact, a non-judgment pact, with the “wonderful” term of respect. Lastly, we easily confuse judgment with condemnation. The latter is definitive and without recourse, it concludes, it blames, it condemns, it frightens us, whereas judgment can be reviewed and corrected, it argues, it tries to grasp a di-

versity of predicates, positive or negative, it can be performative, that is to say, it can be issued to produce an effect, it elaborates a thought rather than wanting to produce a sentence and to punish, it is free and joyous. Thus, we recoil from judgment because it confronts us with the reality of things, because it can be conflicting, because it represents a real effort of thought, because it makes us face ourselves, because it has uncontrollable repercussions on our existence. But it is necessary for us to keep our mind available, to improve our understanding of the world, to clarify our moral and existential values, to remain aware of reality while reconciling with it.

The fear of judgment also manifests itself emotionally. Emotions or feelings generally have a cognitive dimension, they result from an evaluation of the order of things, from a subjective perception of reality. For example, fear expresses the knowledge of a danger, shame expresses the perception of an impropriety. It would be somewhat reductive to conceive these feelings or emotions in a purely arbitrary and irrational way, as being devoid of grounding. On the other hand, our mind is never in a state of neutrality, such a com-

plete detachment is somewhat impossible. Even though our mental inclination may be very subtle and almost unconscious, we cannot escape a certain disposition of mind, or even a certain recurrent tendency. Now some people are more or less gifted than others in terms of self-perception, more or less endowed with intra-personal intelligence, that is to say more or less capable of self-consciousness. Those in whom this faculty is less developed or more unstable, as it can vary according to circumstances, ignore their own mental state, repress their own feelings. Moreover, they do not want to and do not know how to use the mirror that others represent, because they easily feel threatened by their own reality. In other words, they are not aware of their own judgments about themselves and the world, they more or less unconsciously refuse to be aware of their mental state, and furthermore others represent a threat. Thus they easily pretend to be "neutral" or indifferent, by a self-protection mechanism. As a result, their judgments and emotions become all the more uncontrolled and excessive, which they will again want to deny. Strangely enough, they fear their own judgment of themselves, just as they fear the judgment of others,

which they protest vigorously against. Judgments are generally perceived in such individuals in a negative and disturbing way, because they have difficulty accepting themselves. Their strong emotional tendencies are therefore related to a refusal of emotions and a fear of judgment, which of course affects their reflexive capacities. The issue is therefore a matter of distancing ourselves from our emotional judgments, of no longer adhering to our own subjectivity, which can be called a principle of de coincidence, i.e. of no longer “sticking” to ourselves, in order to no longer allow ourselves to be frightened by our own judgments.

Habit

The notion of habitus - the Latin origin of the term habit - is already found in Aristotle (hexis), where it designates on the one hand habit in the modern sense, as an habituation produced by repetition, but also the idea of virtue, which does not have an entirely automatic character, since it refers to the fortitude of a person, to his moral value, that is to say to his way of being, which partially expresses his freedom. And indeed, it seems to us to find in the experience of the habit a dou-

ble nature, on the one hand circumstantial, since it is about a simple repetition bound to the context, which could be interrupted, and a more ontological dimension, constitutive of the subject itself, which refers of this fact to an idea of freedom in the sense of being oneself. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who worked this concept in its social dimension, speaks about "a realized political mythology, incorporated, a become permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, of speaking, of walking, and, by there, of feeling and thinking", where the individual is determined collectively by social habits.

It is true that our society does not privilege the activity of reflection, so this anti-intellectualism seems to be part of our way of being, and each individual will take this fold in a structural way. Nevertheless, we cannot abandon the transcendental dimension of the subject, which allows him to reach a more radical freedom, that of breaking with his empirical being, of splitting up, of decoupling from himself. Nevertheless, such an action will seem unnatural, insofar as these acquired habits seem to be part of our being. We meet many people who openly define themselves by actions or thought

patterns that are mainly habitual, explicitly, they are even proud of their habits, however banal they may be. From there to conclude that everything is a mere habit and could be modified, there is only one step that could be interesting to cross, except that this habit has slowly accomplished its work of formation or deformation, its work of crystallization or erosion, which could reduce to nothing any attempt of transformation. Thus, when one invites a person to reflect, one can ask oneself if it is only the matter of a simple effort to be made, or if in fact this person will answer this invitation according to what he or she is or has become. This option implies to accept as such the given answer, whatever it may be, acceptance or refusal to think, since it presupposes that "people are how they are". For this reason Plato thinks that virtue cannot be taught: it is there or not there, period.

Let us add here various concepts which seem to belong to the same semantic field, such as tradition, conformism, history, custom, ritual, inheritance, all of which are related to this same repetition, individual or collective. Even the term "institution", insofar as at a given moment certain habits are inscribed in mar-

ble, become "constitutional", structural and structuring, and thus obligatory, under threat of sanction. Thus, in certain contexts, the right to speak and to think is abolished, and let us even advance the idea that in any context, whatever it is, a habit is imposed which obliges and prohibits, which advocates certain taboos, consciously or not. Nevertheless, proof of the contingency or fragility of the habit, we observe that societies transform themselves, sometimes abruptly, in surprising paradigmatic reversals. Nevertheless, it is rare to find societies where thinking is put forward as a primary value without some unavoidable postulate.

The habit, in its passive dimension, is produced by the sleepiness of the being, by its inertia, and this habit produces in its turn sleepiness and inertia. In the same way, a necessary decoincidence is produced by the activity of thought, just as thought is engendered by this decoincidence, which becomes another form of habit. This is what we can call the vicious or virtuous circle of habit.

Xenophobia

Human beings tend to be xenophobic, to fear the outside, to fear otherness. Like for the animal, what is other is often dangerous, a direct threat or competition. Therefore, we prefer to stay with “our own”, with those we know, whom we can trust, because they are like us and we grew up with them: we share common interests. Our family, our friends, our culture, “ours”, they are part of ourselves, they represent the extension of our being, unlike strangers. This is why we naturally avoid these foreigners except when we need them, we prefer our inner circle to humanity or to society. It does not necessarily have to express itself in an open or aggressive way, it is what we call “latent xenophobia”, an underlying feature of the human psyche.

Such an inclination poses a problem for thinking, insofar as a thought worthy of the name necessarily risks plunging into the unknown. The incomprehensible, the different, the strange, the new, constitute the favorite terrain of a vigorous thinking, which must be adventurous. Thinking the unthinkable is the mark of authentic thinking. But such a prospect is uncomfortable and disturbing, even morally reprehensible. Cer-

tain hypotheses or perspectives become prohibited, certain postulates thus impose their epistemological dictatorship, and thought freezes into presuppositions that it often ignores, and which in any case it does not problematize. Familiarity becomes a jail, where jailer and prisoner are one and the same person, although our entourage strongly encourages us in this direction, warning us against any pact or betrayal with the stranger.

"I'm not talking to him because I don't know him" is a common, self-justified attitude and form of thinking, whereas it could be the exact opposite: "I'm talking to him precisely because I don't know him", which would be much more interesting and rational. We fear the unknown, whether it is a person or a territory, we dread getting lost. We are a priori suspicious of what we do not know, rather than expressing a passion for exoticism and adventure. We like stability, balance, since disturbance disturbs us. We fear the world, either because it is dangerous or simply because it is not "us". There are, moreover, different ways of refusing the world. That of the "bad guys", more aggressive, who hate this outside world and want to fight it. And that of the "good guys", who are content to not really be

interested in it. They are hardly eager for otherness, through passivity, through lack of passion. They have a clear conscience but are no less xenophobic. They kindly refuse to think.

We should mention as well a type of xenophobic scheme that might sound aggressive and primitive, but is rather common, as a cause of war for example, or personal fights. It can be called “an eye for an eye”, or “three eyes for an eye”, or even thought of as a preventive strike: “his eye before my eye”. In such a scheme, thinking is conceived as an obstacle: it makes you soft, slow and indecisive, when life is dangerous and you are surrounded by enemies. If you feel offended or threatened, you have to impose yourself quickly, otherwise you will be beaten. Thinking will make you weak, you will not be able to act on the basis of your needs or desires and assume them, you will be busy “understanding the situation or the causes” and “observing various perspectives”, or you will become so flexible that others will take advantage of you.

For the xenophobe, the other is therefore a threat, or a competitor. He is not driven by universal love, as Christ preaches, or by the natural sympathy between

humans, as Adam Smith explains. It presupposes either an enmity, rather aggressive, or a simple disinterest, more passive and victimizing. We call this last form "gentle xenophobia" or "soft xenophobia", because it is often expressed by the idea of "not bothering others", an attitude that seems full of respect or consideration. At first glance, the other person is not really interested in us, he has better things to do than to take care of our case, he probably does not want to meddle in our business and help us, he does not care to converse with us. So let's keep our distance, let's stay at home. This particular and common instance of xenophobia presupposes in fact that everyone is xenophobic, because in such a worldview, xenophobia is a generalized phenomenon, a universality of character. Everyone is egocentric, each individual or small group such as the family sees itself as a center of gravity and an enclosure, which in principle excludes others, who must remain on the periphery, outside. An exteriority that must therefore be respected; in other words, each one in his own home and everything will be fine. One prefers to stay with one's family rather than go to the neighbors. One prefers to stay with one's own rather than venture out to the "bar-

barians", these strange people who are not "ours", those whom one does not really know. Those from the next village, those from across the bridge. Like us, they do not wish to be disturbed. And it is easy to see how such a skimpy scheme is reductive and inhibiting of thought, since any adventure, any surprise, any discovery, any risk-taking is banished.

There are various other forms of "soft" xenophobia, which are not immediately perceived as xenophobia. A classic example is what is commonly known as shyness. A lack of self-confidence, a fear in front of others, whose judgment seems threatening. This apprehension in front of "foreign" eyes shows that we distrust them, that they are not our "friends", but that they are indeed a threat. It is easy to feel sorry for the shy person, without realizing that there is a radical, even violent rejection of otherness in him, which can become quite obvious when the shy person is pushed into his limits. The "shy" person is definitely not generous, that is why he easily folds on himself: others are either not interesting or disappointing, since he has high expectations towards them. Of course, this shy person as well carries out a rejection of himself, what we can call "internal

xenophobia", a rejection of the other in oneself, since he as well is uninteresting or disappointing. Although he is often narcissistic, a strange mixture between self-loathing and his admiration towards a phantasmatic self, a projection which periodically comes out in the open, in the intimacy or in specific circumstances. This manifests itself for example in a refusal of introspection or self-examination, a rejection of self-awareness. The "I" does not want to see the "me", it avoids becoming an object of reflection for itself. Of course this avoidance vitiates any process of reason, as Socrates explicitly tells us through his injunction of "know thyself, you shall know the universe and the gods". The one who is frightened or disgusted by himself is in fact xenophobic, he cannot stand the fundamental strangeness or intrinsic otherness of being.

Image

French writer Guy Debord explains that "The whole life of societies in which modern conditions of production prevail is announced as an immense accumulation of spectacles. [...] The spectacle is not a set of images, but a social relationship between people, mediated by

images". Thus, in our postmodern society, it can be said that relationships and thought are structured and defined by images that play a central role in the construction of social life and in the elaboration of meanings. The functioning of social networks in terms of identity and relational structuring, where everyone tries to create an image, to create themselves, is a striking example of this. In a sense, even what is of textual nature remains ancillary and serves to concoct the image, the representation.

It seems that we are arriving at a historical period in which the image tends to replace speech and writing. Immersion in the visual context penetrates daily life, and images are replacing speech as the privileged channel of communication. The current world is conceived as "visible", reality as "text" has been replaced by reality as "picture". The end of the great narratives that characterizes postmodernism is effected, among other things, by the transition from a discursive culture, a text inscribed in time, to a culture of the image with a strong immediate impact. And we see in the media the effect on the public of totally constructed visual experiences, where certain striking or repetitively projected images

prevent any distance, any analysis, any criticism. The flow of images in our homes today is almost uninterrupted and seems natural, to a point unimaginable in earlier times.

However, the image that seems obvious to us today, as pure objectivity or as an obligatory passage, has historically been a subject of controversy. Certainly, from the origin of humanity, in parietal art, we already encounter the phenomenon of the image, nevertheless with a view that is undoubtedly more symbolic and metaphysical than decorative or representative. But, for example, in civilizations based on the "religion of the book", a major component of human history, one encounters a severe warning against the worship of the image considered as idolatry, as an obstacle to the true faith, inhibiting access to transcendence, because the latter escapes all representation. The image is criticized as an idol, in the sense that it is taken as a reality in itself, and not as an icon, that is to say a mere representation, a superficial reflection. The debate between iconoclasts and iconophiles has raged at various times in history, for example in seventh-century Christianity. Thus, historically, Islam has taken sides against images,

while Christianity is rather iconophile. An interesting expression to defend the image was to call it "book of the illiterate", which clearly indicates that the image is a lower modality of thought, intended for the ignorant, since it does not require any imagining or interpretation. From there to seeing the image as a tool of manipulation or propaganda, there is only one step. Like all myths, the image is civilizing, and therefore it is also a factor of illusion and instrumentalization.

One can easily notice how the image saturates the thought, how it can fully satisfy the mind. So it can make us believe that there is nothing beyond what it shows, we take for granted what it "presents", forgetting that it is merely "representing". That is to say that the image is always a bias that must be interpreted, and not an objective datum on the reality of the world which invites us to intellectual passivity.

One added impacting dimension of image, which has a very concrete application, is speed. The moving image has more effect than the still image, that is why movies and videos are even more powerful instruments. And since the public has a weakening concentration capacity, the shorter the video the better, as we notice that some

social networks specialize in this type of message. This is a skill developed by agencies specialized in advertisement or propaganda. Fast videos of fifteen seconds are now quite popular, which of course leave no time to think, we just want to move on to the next one, since this type of exciting spectacle is quite addictive. The "message" ends up not mattering at all, it does not exist anymore, all that is left is the "massage".

Indeed the image can constitute an obstacle to thinking, as we exposed it, by saturating the mind which paralyzes or gets bogged down. But let us not forget all the same that the graphic representation can also constitute a tool of reflection, a means of communication, an educational instrument. It is well known by publicists and pedagogues that the image is useful or even needed to hold the attention of the auditor. On one side we can and have to do with this reality. On the other hand, overusing the image reinforces the lack of focusing practice of the auditor. For this reason it should be limited to the extent possible if we want to develop the thinking skills of the individual, both in terms of his capacity of abstraction and his power of attention.

Aesthetic education is also the function of art, as Hegel explains at length. According to him, art is form of knowledge, but non-conceptual. Its goal is the representation in the sensible existence of what is higher and more spiritual, for example truth or freedom. Thus the art of an epoch expresses the spirit of its time, we can find in it the adequacy between a content, an idea, and its form or sensible expression. The ideal of the art is to "manifest, under a sensitive and adequate form, the contents which constitute the bottom of things", just as in language, the human communicates his thoughts and makes his fellow men understand them. The "beautiful" is the "Idea" under a sensitive form, even the absolute offered to intuition. Art is an objectification of the conscience by which it manifests itself to itself. We could conclude on the idea that it is not so much the image in itself which is determining for the thought, but rather the nature of the relation that we maintain to the image, as we evoked it in the difference between "idol" and "icon". Although we should not exclude altogether the hedonistic relation to the image, the pure pleasure or contemplation, even though it has little to do with the thinking issue we are now speaking about.

Identity

The term “identity” comes from the Latin word “idem” which means “same”. Indeed, the identity of an entity, of something or someone, is what remains the same in this entity, what is not subject to change, otherwise this entity is not itself anymore. This identity is defined as the permanent and essential character of the entity, or the set of elements that establishes that this entity is what it is, in conformity to itself. But this “idem” can apply as well in the comparison between two or more entities, when they are similar. Thus there is a common identity between diverse entities when their characteristics are quite similar, when they entertain a strong affinity.

Now, the word “same” or “identity” is a real problem for the human being. On one hand, since he was a new-born, he has wanted to fuse, to belong, to be “same”, first in relation to family, then to friends, lovers, or society in a restricted or larger sense. On the other hand, he does not want to disappear in the group, he wants to be unique and special, so he wants to be “same” only with himself. We could say that the first type of identity is a “what”: “what I am”, which is comparable and re-

lated, and the second is a “who”: “who I am”, which is totally singular. I want to be “someone”, some incomparable entity. And these opposite forms of identity can be expressed in terms of existential issues, professional, psychological, relational, etc., where sometimes we want to associate and sometimes we want to separate.

That is what Kant calls “the unsociable sociability of men”, since on one side he feels he can accomplish himself through social interaction, and on the other side he wants to be himself and acts in opposition to others. And self-recognition can be in conflict with the recognition by others, for differences in criteria, but in both cases we can often observe a strong sense of need. Of course, the mimetic dimension, being alike and with others, is the grounding of any civilization, but it is also a source of alienation. It is the source of harmony, but as well of conflict, since we all desire the same things, we want them because everybody wants them. As we see in the phenomenon of fashion, we all want to be the same and different at the same time, to be simultaneously special and ordinary. We want to be visible, and we end

up becoming invisible. Paradoxically, we copy others in order to be different.

Here we should introduce an important distinction, in order to establish a relation between identity and thinking. The difference between a simple “I”, pre-reflexive, and a “me”, an object of reflexive nature. The first is based on simple experience, on feelings, on impressions, on emotions, it is not reflected upon, when the second is more conceptual, more analyzed and conscious, it is the object of a conscious and deliberate reflection. That is the idea of the socratic injunction “know thyself!”. If we know ourselves, we have access to the reality of the world because we can think more adequately. But most people, for the diverse reasons we are examining in this text, restrict themselves on a pre-reflexive level. Thus the whole issue of identity, with its internal tension, becomes an added source of chaos, of obsession, of pain. It becomes an emotional and cognitive obstacle, as it becomes heavy with expectations that the subject does not question. We unconsciously want to protect and defend this identity, to promote it and sell it, a corruption which parasites free thinking.

If the identity issue is reflexive, then it can provoke and develop the thinking activity, but then it is not a “need” anymore, it is the source of a joyful investigation, a critical self-challenge. But too often, the need for identity, the incapacity to “not-exist”, deprives us of freedom and inhibits our capacity for reason. Paradoxically, our desire for such an artificial identity stops us from being authentic, from being true to ourselves. That is why in the history of ideas, different schemes have been proposed in order to “dissolve” this identity, offering a perspective of a “beyond” personal identity. For example the Greek idea that the individual soul is a mere spark of the original divine fire. Or the Daoist idea that our real substantial individual identity is in fact the Dao, a cosmic identity, since the Dao is in all things, the principle of all principles. In Hinduism, the atman, which means “self” or “breath”, is the eternal core of the personality, its fundamental reality, a pure consciousness of being, in opposition to the ahamkara, the reduced empirical self. The atman is part of the universal brahman, the absolute, with which it can commune or in the ideal even fuse. Buddhism is even more radical, since there is no separate individual self, which

is a mere conditional illusion that the enlightened being overcomes by accessing the vacuity. For Christian mysticism, the individual soul reunites with God. For existentialism, the fundamental self is first and foremost an experience of “being”, considered as an emergence to existence, a primary transcendental reality. In Marxism, one has to abandon his bourgeois personal personality in favor of a social or human identity. We can notice that in all these theories, the individual restricted identity is an obstacle to freedom, to reason and illumination.

Aging

The brain is an organ that acts like a muscle, and as any muscle, if it is not trained, it continuously loses its strength and plasticity. As we become older, we naturally tend to lose some capacities: our memory weakens, we lose concentration power, and especially we become more rigid. If we have not been training our thinking regularly, different psychological tendencies will become ingrained habits, rather difficult to modify. For instance, we can observe some professors that have great difficulty to listen to others, students or

colleagues, or to articulate their ideas in a clear way, since their whole life they have been delivering monologues from a position of authority, without worrying so much if they were understood or not. So when they are invited to think with others, which implies to escape their personal matrix or stream of thought, they demonstrate a manifest difficulty, a certain close-mindedness, which gets worse as they get older. For example, they don't really listen to the other's questions, they are not aware of the over-complication of their speech, and of course they feel misunderstood, which probably represents a source of frustration. Aging is an interesting phenomenon. Thus age is revealing, it brings to light the reality of an individual, his faults and weaknesses, as well as his strength and qualities. It is commonly said that we die the way we lived, it can be said as well that we age the way we lived. Aging seems to accentuate certain traits of the person. If individuals were rather conflictual, or rather anxious, or rather banal and unsatisfied, these traits will be amplified as they get older, but if someone had a passionate life, with a salubrious behavior and healthy relations to others, leading a meaningful existence, this will be rather visible as well

in his later years. Therefore, the advantage for thinking while getting older can be a certain peace of mind, a critical distance with petty preoccupations, a calmer approach to life and death, what can be called the wisdom of old age. But when we observe old people, we often see a strong anxiety, a certain bitterness, an existential dissatisfaction that is painful both for them and for their entourage. They are stuck in themselves, they suffer from the reduction of their physical and mental power, they are stuck in their frustrated identity, their thinking is plagued with resentment, towards others, toward themselves, towards life in general. Then, of course, thinking clearly becomes difficult, since those strong feelings and emotions blur the thinking process, which needs some peace and distance. Although we should mention that some old people become quite distant with the world, they are not interested anymore by their surroundings, but that is because they tend to be obsessed with themselves and their problems, another pathological form of behavior, which leads to boredom and depression, since their mind is not active anymore. When they speak, either they manifest disinterest or a profound sense of disappointment toward the present.

And we can observe that some people already get old at a very young age.

Opinions

Like weeds, opinions grow on their own, they are tenacious, a plague for the thinking. Some people are quite addicted to these opinions, they claim to really have opinions, just about everything. In general, they seem proudly attached to what they call “my opinion”, although what they covetously call “theirs” is often something we have heard in the mouths of numerous other persons, through some strange mimetic phenomenon. In a dialogue, they will easily and eagerly agree or disagree with what they hear, although the latter is more frequent, since they tend to be convinced that there is something unique and special in them, some unequaled and irreplaceable quality of their self and mind. They love to exclaim “I disagree! ”, it is for them the utmost expression of their difference, of their existence.

Thus they rush to take a position on any subject, instinctively, intuitively. Of course, when we investigate their reasons for such a positioning, it is not so clear, their explanations are either absent or not generous,

or again they are plentiful but quite chaotic and confused. But it does not really bother them. For them, the reason why we think things or have ideas is not so important, it is even insubstantial or irrelevant. The important issue is to have a determined position, to have some kind of identifiable standpoint. For them, those opinions are the projection of who they are, their image in the world. Even though those opinions might not represent the truth, they represent them, another sort of truth, therefore dear to their heart. Without expressing their opinions, their existence, their identity, would vanish in thin air, a painful perspective. (a painful perspective would vanish in thin air.) And any disagreement with their opinions is like (will be like) waging a war on their identity and their existence.

People with strong opinions are not sensitive to the aesthetic of the thinking process. Some have rather fixed opinions, others have fleeting opinions, it does not matter, the main issue is to have an opinion handy at the time it is needed, although fixed opinions seem to be more popular, since one needs some grounding in life. When they speak, they are guided by some primitive and unidentifiable force that lead them to certain

conclusions, and this power is not to be questioned: it has to be systematically honored. So once they are thus “installed”, they primarily repeat their conclusion and will oppose it to anyone that speaks differently. They are not really interested in these “other” persons, they don’t try to understand them or ask them for their arguments, because they “rightly feel” there is something wrong in what these people say. So why waste one’s time with inappropriate preoccupations. (preoccupations!) Just discard those other opinions, just oppose them, they are wrong anyhow! These opinionated people are rather impatient, they get tired of repeating the truth to those people that don’t want to listen and see the light. Thus they might get irritated, upset, or abandon the exchange, depending on the importance of the stakes. For them, arguments are convoked just to prove that one is right, as a rhetorical device, not as a thinking modality. When you know that you are right, there is no need to listen to the opponent’s arguments, it is neither interesting nor pleasant. So, even if they ever hear the arguments, they don’t hear them, even if they listen, they don’t listen, their mind is too jumpy. The idea that one might change his mind because of some relevant

and rational argumentation does not cross their mind: the whole issue is to have an opinion and protect it, defend it, proffer it, as much as possible. If we have arguments to justify our opinions, good, we can expound them, we can try to convince others, but if we don't have them, it doesn't really matter, the main point is to hold the truth, and truth is beyond mere arguments. Of course, they don't want to admit it, they are probably not conscious of it, they will even claim that they don't pretend to hold the truth, that what they say is "only" their opinion, but the way they cling to this miserable opinion clearly indicates that there is no room for any different perspective and no space for thinking. They trust their opinions, indeed, but not their reason.

Belief

To believe is already to know, or claiming to know. It is to postulate, i.e. to accept that something is true and to draw conclusions from it, to take it as the basis of a theory. To believe is to attach a truth value to a proposition, to adhere to a particular formulation of thought. Certainly, one can hear a certain distance or caution in the use of the verb "to believe", "I believe that...", but

it is all the same a conclusive assertion which for the moment hardly envisages any problematization. Moreover, one can easily "firmly believe that...", which implies the elimination of any doubt that might remain. Moreover, belief is opposed to knowledge, insofar as, unlike the former, the latter lacks foundation, it has yet to be demonstrated, but we take it for granted, even for certain. Thus we find in the fact of believing a dimension of arbitrariness which does not prevent us at all to affirm without the least doubt. We can certainly see the interest of taking such a risk, but in its daily practice, we easily perceive the dogmatism that inhabits it, especially when this belief is in fact unconscious, when it is not perceived as a belief but as a fact. This is quite common, given the need for certainty that haunts the human soul. Thus, belief becomes an obstacle to thought, since we refuse to rethink, criticize or problematize what we take for granted in order to establish our thinking and justify our actions.

Nevertheless, there is a dimension of belief that we cannot do without, what we have called "risk-taking", but which can also be called "leap of faith", "leap into the unknown" or "act of faith". This rupture seems to

us indispensable to the dynamic functioning of thinking, which requires one form or another of discontinuity. This is what the American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce calls "abduction", which can be defined as the creation of new explanatory hypotheses in the face of a cognitive problem, distant from the epistemological certainties of induction and especially of deduction. Such a gesture remains conscious of its fragility, of its ephemeral nature, so it remains in suspense, even if we engage in it temporarily, until the contrary is proven or confirmed. Thus it remains in brackets and requires further input in order to decide on its own status.

For a moment, let us compare "belief" to a "faith", two terms which bear a "family resemblance", as Wittgenstein calls it. Faith is trust, as opposed to the certainty of belief. Since we trust when we don't know, as we know that we don't really know, when we don't hold our object for certain. Thus, we trust for example our capacity for reason, as opposed to adhering to our beliefs, which implies maintaining a distance and a critical position with regard to the ideas that inhabit us. In this sense, faith integrates doubt, it asks ques-

tions, it authorizes and demands interpretative work, it embraces the uncertainty of thought, it hardly needs ultimate answers. Faith is uncertain, it is a commitment to the future, an allegiance, an intention, as the term "good faith" indicates, but it remains to be seen, nothing is certain, nothing is given. In this sense, it is more in line with the freedom that conditions thinking than is belief, which closes in on itself in order to reassure itself.

Faith allows us to make provisional judgments, faith allows us to take risks, faith allows us to decisively act without fearing mistakes, in that sense it remains dynamic and allows us to be bold. As Luther wrote in his famous letter to pope Pius, without faith, man is ego-centric and incapable of salvation. Through faith, man goes beyond himself, inciting him as a consequence to accomplish "good works", instead of realizing "good works" in order to obtain something, an attitude which devalues these "good works", which probably lowers their quality as well. Good works without faith are illusory, fallacious, meaningless: only faith is the path of salvation. Actually, this interconnects quite a bit with eastern wisdom, where the attitude is primary, holding

a primacy before action or knowledge, since our state of mind is the key to our existential posture, our most intimate experience of being. Although Luther gives a lot of this power to God's grace, rather than to human freedom.

Often, a learned algorithm, a technique or a method becomes an end in itself, that one learns and tries to apply as some form of absolute rule. We hold on to the certainty that any fixed sequence provides, finding safety and certitude in its application. This is particularly the case in theoretical work. But when one engages in "real" practice, he will necessarily resort to some dosage of faith, since the technique will be challenged by this reality, presenting obstacles and difficulties. This trust in the technique is then connected to our attitude, our relation to life, it must be supported by a general sense of trust, in the world, in reason and in ourselves. The "eternal student", the believer, who permanently requests certitude, will be paralyzed by any obstacle, he will be destabilized by the unpredictability of life and reality. In order to act, one must therefore perform a "leap of faith", since one must dive in the unknown, trying things out, following his internal

drive, instead of anxiously feebly giving up after banging his head against the wall. And strangely enough, one must momentarily forget the technique in order to uphold the technique, since faith is always impregnated by doubt, unlike belief. Belief refuses what goes against it, it condemns the obstacle, denies it, when faith is more plastic, it tries to adapt to the surging of events, it can suspend its knowledge and expectations, patiently waiting for the possible reconciliation. Faith is ready to do things “for the hell of it”, testing itself through time, instead of trying to fit everything in its pre-established fixed framework.

Fear of oneself

As we have already mentioned, Socrates views self-knowledge as the key to thinking and understanding, for two reasons. First, our thinking is affected by our subjectivity, our fears, desires and passions, and we have to be conscious of the way we are determined or weakened by those affects in order to become master of ourselves and engage in a clearer and more deliberate thinking process. Second, our mind is the crucible in which we reproduce or modelize reality, and since ideas con-

stitute this reality, understanding our thinking process allows us to understand the world. Thus, we have to know ourselves in order to think.

But there are different obstacles to this self-knowledge, contrary to what we might think when we observe the strong actual tendency to exhibit ourselves at length in social networks and magazines. Although, as previously referred, a lot of what is said and shown expresses our contemporary narcissism more than anything else. Then, what is it about ourselves that we do not see or do not want to see, and why is it that we don't display it or try to hide it? That is what we call the "fear of oneself".

There are different reasons why we fear to be conscious of our mind and being.

The first one is our fear of finitude, the pain associated with the perception of limits, of imperfections and drawbacks in our own singularity, and in the world as well, the causes of numerous frustrations. This is the case because our reason has the capacity to think the infinite, the absolute, the perfect, and we cannot help comparing what we are to those ideals, a comparison which leaves us with a profound sense of disappoint-

ment. We are fascinated by the absolute, and there is a strong discrepancy between what we would like to be and our miserable reality, a disparity with which it is difficult to reconcile.

The second one, connected to the first, is the principle of wishful thinking. We want to be this or that, generally a better self or perfect self that we hope or strive to be, especially when we compare ourselves with others who seem to already have what we want, often an illusory perspective. We are so engrossed in this desire that we end up believing in it with conviction, taking our expectations and dreams for a reality. And we claim to have or to be something which is a mere wish, in spite of all the evidence against it. Self-knowledge always implies a certain bias of self-indulgence, because there is a psychological imperative in us: to establish a satisfactory self-image. This can be considered as a salutary instinct, insofar as we happily seek to live in peace with ourselves, to reconcile ourselves with ourselves. Thus we are more complacent towards ourselves than towards others, we forgive ourselves more easily than others, we justify ourselves easily. Although some people are terribly handicapped in this respect: they make

themselves suffer permanently. But this complacency can indeed indicate a lack of demand towards oneself and thus an existential lack.

The third one is that our self is not a fixed entity, it is rather fluid and mobile, hard to seize and fleeting, but we desire some certainty and stability, we fear being deprived of an identity, so we remain blind to ourselves, being oblivious to our thoughts and actions, or we twist our perceptions so it fits our expectations. Our complacency makes us rather inert, we lack plasticity.

The fourth one is our lack of distance with our own self. We see ourselves permanently, or we think we see ourselves, we are used to our own presence, we are not surprised anymore, or we prefer not to be surprised. We could use the others as a mirror, to give us feedback, if they accept to be surprised and have a critical look at our actions and attitude, although they often prefer to avoid it, lest you return the “favor”. Anyhow, generally we choose not to trust others’ comments and reactions, we feel threatened by them, we view their critics as an attack on us, as mean intentions, instead of using them to reflect on ourselves.

The fifth one is the fear of solitude, the moment when we are our only company and facing exclusively oneself. Some people find those moments quite painful, it gives them a feeling of emptiness, weakness or boredom, especially when they are facing a thinking task where they have to focus, solve problems or provide ideas, like is the case with a writing exercise for example. They commonly procrastinate to avoid such a one-to-one encounter, and they will use different strategies for this, like engaging in practical things, looking for diverse entertainments or finding people to speak with. Self-confrontation is too challenging for them.

The sixth one is that we don't know how to think about ourselves in a light-hearted way, we easily fall into tragedy, shame, guilt or any other dramatic tonality, or we victimize ourselves, we have to find a fault and a culprit, ourselves or others. And we naturally become obsessive, an obsession which hinders a free thinking of the issue. Looking at ourselves becomes unpleasant and difficult, we prefer to avoid self-consciousness. We should here mention the syndrome of the "original sin", the principle postulating that there is something wrong, faulty or evil within each us, without any par-

ticular reason or specific wrongdoing; we are sinners just by the fact that we exist, and we are not God. It can take two forms. Guilt: I am intrinsically faulty or I have necessarily done something wrong, I feel bad about this imperfection. Or shame: people know, see or think that I am not good enough or that I have done something wrong, they see my imperfection and their look is unbearable.

The seventh one is the refusal to objectify oneself, what would allow and condition our self-judgment, a necessary assessment in order to know oneself. We oscillate between a rejection of our self, because of a bad self-conception and a self-condemnation, and an excessive self-admiration, connected to wishful thinking. A typical manic-depressive behavior for most people. We are either too good to be evaluated, or we are too lowly. We prohibit ourselves rational judgment, and of course we prohibit others even more: we forbid them to judge us, denying their legitimacy to do so, a prohibition that reflects on our fear to think about ourselves. Nevertheless, we sell an image of ourselves, bragging about different attributes we grant our persona, but we do not want to examine peacefully and objectively those

attributes. We grant ourselves comfortable and fragile labels, we refuse that others provide theirs, unless they are pleasant and non-threatening.

The eighth is the fear of liberty, the anguish that embraces us in the face of our individual freedom, our capacity for choice, with its share of decisions, consequences and responsibility. "Man is condemned to be free", as Sartre wrote, a "condemnation" that is often heavy and painful, because it puts us in front of the void of uncertainty. And for some people, this abyss is intolerable, they do everything to escape it, looking for authorities, obligations, sources of dizziness or other "diversions of self".

These are some of the reasons why our mind is rather heavy and foggy with our own self-conception, encumbered with numerous filters and obstacles, we are not so ready to identify them and to work on them. Therefore our thinking lacks the necessary fluidity and clarity necessary to know ourselves as Socrates recommended. On this topic, there is an interesting concept of daoism we should mention as an inroad to self-reconciliation and empowerment, called in Chinese Ziran. The radical Zi means "self" or "since", ran means "right" or

“correct”. This key concept literally means “of its own” or “by itself”, from which derive “naturally”, “spontaneously”, “freely” or “doubtlessly”. Ziran refers to a state that can be called “as-it-isness”. It implies returning to the source of our original and genuine being, letting flow through ourselves the great current of life emanating from the universal Dao in a spontaneous, direct and uncontrolled fashion. In other words, each singular being, by accepting itself in a true manner, is an emanation of the fundamental reality of all.

Intellectual chaos

Proper thinking implies structure and order, it cannot be chaotic. But such a regulation is not easy. By lack of practice, by inertia, because of emotional and circumstantial turmoil, as we have already mentioned it. We jump from one thing to another, abruptly, without concern for coherence or connection, triggered by external and internal reasons or sollicitations. We would need to categorize, to proceed in a more continuous fashion, to systematize our thoughts. Plato compares our soul to a winged carriage, pulled on one side by a docile and reasonable horse, on the other side by a

fiery and wayward horse that does as it pleases. And if we do not learn to train the latter, the assembly will not go very straight, it will move in all directions in a disorderly way.

A characteristic problem is the difficulty to identify contradictions, for we are indifferent to oppositions, we confuse the same and the different, we inverse the cause and the effect, or we establish strange connections. As well, we are blind to the simple, we overcomplicate everything, or we indulge ourselves in superficial causalities, for example replacing ontological explanations with circumstantial ones, confusing the essential and the secondary. We don't pay sufficient attention to words, the ones we hear and especially the ones we pronounce, or we overload them with subjective and arbitrary connotations. We easily let the meaning of ideas slide, and we get lost in the construction of our thoughts. We pronounce "truths" without taking the time to think them through, to evaluate them and verify their grounding. Overall, we are not sensitive to the aesthetics of thinking, we do not cherish the form of the process, we are impatient, we are caught in the immediacy of any given insight or opinion, as we de-

scribed in the reactive modality of the mind. And we are not so keen to engage ourselves in the harsh and healthy exercising that is needed to work on these problems. We have more important things to do, we easily confuse the urgent and the fundamental.

If we criticize the impulsive and impatient dimension of the individual as a chaos which is an obstacle to thinking, the reverse can be just as true. This is the case with people that complicate everything, their mind is scattered in the multiplicity of details and circumstances. Because they fear consequences, because they have a strong desire for perfection, because they practice some type of self-censorship due to some chronic internal dissatisfaction, thus they do not dare think, they do not dare make judgments, they don't dare decide. Any thinking proposal is costly for them, such individuals hesitate, they dither, they postpone. They feel quite insecure, that is why they are adamant about "making sure", they are adapts of certainty. And since to think is to take a risk, to venture on assumptions, they resist thinking: they do not want hypotheses, they want certitudes. Because they do not want to look bad, because they dread mistakes, because they entertain a strong

sense of guilt or shame, a lack of self-worth. They do not put into practice the principle of the “sacrificial idea”, which consists in proposing an initial formulation that will be the basis of the dialogue, that will be crossed out and modified. It can as well be called the principle of trial and error: you articulate a clear or rough initial recommendation or argument, then you test it, you work on it. In other words, instead of endlessly thinking “beforehand”, before expressing an idea or writing it out, and come out with something only when we are sure of its perfection, an anxiogenic and powerless attitude, we expose whatever is on our mind, and we think about it “afterwards”, once it is openly set on the table. This “thinking afterwards” is more free and more objective, because we work on something real, and not on vague ideas and negative emotions.

Another interesting insight on the matter of simplicity is what Zhuangzi calls the “illumination of evidence”. The idea is that often we do not trust our intuition, we don’t let our “gut feeling” speak, and we postpone, we overanalyze, we ceaselessly speculate, wondering about the nature, the cause and the consequences of anything, instead of taking it for what it is, accept-

ing it at face value, at least initially, until or unless further information modifies the situation. This “illumination of evidence” implies freedom and trust, a direct relation to the world and ourselves, an absence of fear about revealing ourselves, a necessity in order to live and think peacefully. We allow ourselves to judge and decide without overthinking, to the extent we remain open to further examination and critique, otherwise this “gut feeling” will be rigid and dogmatic, revealing itself as a potential source of conflicts with others. And getting along well with our intuition, to the extent we educate through time and experience this intuition, displays the elegance of simplicity and authenticity, quite contrary to the chaos of the mind.

We should mention as well that Zhuangzi uses the plain binary approach a lot, in particular in his stories, where he periodically opposes contrary archetypes. Visibly he finds such contrast rather useful and real in order to bring forward and make visible some fundamental issues. For example a dialogue between the small-minded frog and the broad-minded turtle, where he wants us to understand both sides of this opposition, somewhat like in the Plato dialogues but in a different

style. Periodically he clearly has a favorite side, sometimes both sides have a problem, then he wants us to go beyond the limits of the antinomy. But anyhow, he never has a rigid approach to ideas and words, he is always flexible and playful. That is why he exaggerates a lot, he caricatures easily, in this sense he is not subtle, he wants us to laugh and think.

Misology

Misology is a term formed from the Greek *misos* (hatred) and *logos* (reason), it designates the disgust or repulsion that an individual may feel towards the principle and activity of reason. According to Socrates, as with misanthropy, it is a matter of some confident attitude disappointed by the fact of not having been sufficiently attentive and critical. So those who feel betrayed by reason abandon it and denounce it. From then on, they either speak randomly and erratically, without worrying about coherence, or they use words for instrumental purposes, in order to manipulate and exercise power. In the process, they abandon any concern for rigor and a desire for truth. They become indifferent to rational argumentation. Kant explains mis-

ology by the fact that reason is incapable of leading man to happiness – even if it provides us with a certain dignity – it represents more pain than joy, contrary to Spinoza for whom the opposite is true: only reason can make us truly happy. Some philosophers remain suspicious or critical of reason. As Leon Chestov, who defends existential philosophy against speculative and rational philosophy. Defender of the Christian revelation, he picks up the biblical opposition between the wisdom of God, madness in the eyes of the world, and the wisdom of the world, madness in the eyes of God, since for him only faith and revelation are sources of truth.

Nevertheless, if some philosophers criticize reason, they still do it in a rational way, in a philosophical, constructed and argued form. But the most common misology is clearly more primary, more instinctive. In general the individual refuses reason because it opposes his first impulses, his immediate desires. The intervention of reason confronts him directly with what he considers important and prevalent. Just like the parent who educates his child by making him think, by teaching him morals and common sense, by initiating him

to the reasonable rules of life in society, reason inculcates in us a certain number of formal principles which call into question a more primary psychological modality. So we resist the assaults of this alienating reason, especially when it is imposed on us by others rather than ourselves. The first resistance is thus of a very immediate nature: we do not wish to see our desires frustrated. The second is our fascination with sensual experience, when reason alienates, replaces, devalues, or even ridicules this sensual experience, the hedonistic pleasure of the body, which for many is the main source of pleasure and meaning in life. The third is that we find it difficult not to listen to our feelings and emotions, even though listening to them can be painful and lead to problematic consequences, and reason seems to have a castrating effect on our subjectivity. The fourth is that thinking requires effort and patience, an energy that we are not always ready to procure, which is painful to us. The fifth is that it seems to deprive us of our freedom, since we can no longer think and do what we want, however freedom is a fundamental value for most. The sixth is that it is conceived as artificial, heavy and formal, it is perceived as not genuine and sincere,

therefore it does not represent reality, which is more perceptible and intuitive. The seventh is that it requires contradicting or ignoring our usual opinions, which is unpleasant and even humiliating. The eighth is that it weakens us, in the sense that it prevents us from acting, it delays action, it deprives us of this power of immediate impulse which makes us decide and put ourselves in motion. The ninth is that reason forces us to become responsible, for our thoughts, our words, our actions, our decisions, our commitments, we must be able to account for all we do and make choices, when often we prefer, like children, to remain whimsical. The tenth is that reason invites us to detachment, it dispossesses us of what we hold dear, what belongs to us, because its nature is common, universal or transcendent. It hardly respects the personal in its insubstantiality and its reduction, inciting us to exceed it. This includes the deconstruction of a primordial egocentrism: our own singularity considered naturally as the navel of the world.

As we can see, these reasons are mostly psychological, and they are rather unconscious in most misologists, an oblivion which is consistent with misology, unlike philosophers who criticize reason with philo-

sophical arguments. Although we must add that those philosophical criticisms are in general not so much a radical repudiation of reason as the faculty of understanding and grounding of knowledge, as they are a warning about its limits and its claims of omnipotence, in relation for example to sensual perception, subjectivity, existential commitment, and other features of the mind's activity.

Sentimentalism

Contrary to a claim that is periodically heard, the human mind can never be neutral. As we discovered through the development of psychology, we are internally permanently moved and troubled by profound and superficial psychical streams, most of them invisible to us unless we pay close attention to them. If emotions are rather visible, being intense and often carrying physical manifestations, feelings can be much more subtle or even imperceptible. But they affect anyhow the way we think and behave. And as we all have experienced, we are regularly undergoing a fracture between those "uncontrollable" and "mysterious" feelings, and a more willful, deliberate, conscious and rational thinking. We

feel in a way, we think in another way, often contradictory. Of course, through the process of life experience and education, we can reconcile those two dimensions of the self, but there will always remain some type of hiatus in our being, which can alternatively be viewed as a hindrance or a blessing.

And what is true for the mind itself is coherently true for philosophy and intellectual activity in general. Since we can observe diverse traditions opposing each other, for example rationalist or scientific traditions and romantic or sentimental traditions. We can indeed grant credit to the latter, it has its own legitimacy, it is constitutive of human nature, but we have to accept the hypothesis that most likely the hegemony of feelings is a hindrance to rigorous thinking. And if great writers or artists were motivated to sublimate those feelings into some creative actions, the majority of people allow themselves in a certain state of passivity by listening rather complacently to their feelings. "I don't feel like it" is an easy, common and lazy comment to avoid any challenge. Plus our present times, for their own historical causes, are afflicted by a certain suspicion toward reason and tend to excessively glorify those feelings.

If strength, courage, effort and such lexicon were favored in previous periods, and still are to a certain extent, we have observed recently the promotion of a whole vocabulary of feelings. “Benevolent, kind, warm-hearted, humane, compassionate, tolerant, pity, vulnerable” are words that seem to hold the upper hand in our western contemporary culture. And of course, in opposition to this semantic field, reason and intellect seem “cold-hearted, inhumane or even inhuman, brutal if not violent, inconsiderate”, etc. One is supposed to respect or abide by feelings, of oneself and others. Vigorous thinking can make one feel uncomfortable and troubled, and that is considered uncouth and undesirable, even immoral. Rationality is assimilated to some of the worse features of human activity, for example industrial production destroying the planet, to take an easy cliché, even though it is not totally deprived of reality, like all clichés. This is what can be called sentimentalism, an excessive importance granted to feelings, in opposition to rational thinking. Now we should temper this last comment by mentioning that feelings can as well contribute to the thinking process, but that is the case to the extent that they become an object of re-

flection, instead of remaining a passive occurrence, in other words by educating those feelings, just the same way we educate our thinking. Spinoza writes that “feelings are confused ideas”, thus to understand ourselves, we have to deconstruct and analyze our feelings, instead of taking them at face value and glorifying them. But too often, we rather privilege our feelings, in life and relations, but as well in our activities, as we notice in music, in books, in movies. The pleasure they provide us with is infinitely more easy and comfortable than the arduous exercise of thinking, even though the latter is much more nourishing for our soul. One of the most visible aspects of this intellectual capitulation to feelings is the way we can live vicariously through the protagonists and heroes of literature or cinema.

Spirit of seriousness

Jean-Paul Sartre criticizes the “spirit of seriousness”, which according to him is the attitude of those who think that moral values pre-exist man, which amounts to making them principles in themselves, imprescriptible and inescapable, whereas values exist only through human invention. In other words, the spirit of

seriousness is the equivalent of bad faith in the moral field, i.e. inventing an essence that would relieve us of the weight of our freedom⁶ in fact a convenient illusion whose false reality cannot escape our conscience. In a broader sense, it is a question of taking our beliefs or our intellectual constructions for realities that cannot be questioned or criticized. From there, we can very well see how this "spirit of seriousness" can hinder the free flow of thought. No doubt we do this to reassure ourselves, because such an attitude provides us with a consolation when faced with the anguish of nothingness that inhabits us, when dealing with the uncertainty of existence. To take ourselves and our thoughts seriously allows us to believe that we are not "nothing at all", it authorizes us to value our own person, to grant our being a singular status, even to rank us a little or much above the mass of our congeners. Consequently, rituals, honors, titles, official functions, reputation, all factors of official or tacit recognition are important to us. And we have to believe in our ideas or theories, we have to promote and protect them in order to ease our mind and not to face the dreaded emptiness of the void.

This spirit of seriousness leads to different problems for thinking. Mainly, a tendency to hypostatize our own intellectual constructions, that is to say to consider wrongly our idea or concept as a reality in itself, objective, absolute and unquestionable, to assign it an excessive value. Our thinking becomes rigid, it no longer progresses, or at least it remains confined within a limited framework, we can no longer rethink or modify what has been stated, any real dialogue becomes impossible. The primacy of anxiety over thinking is another consequent effect: as soon as the stakes are high, we are afraid of losing, we have too much to gain, our vision becomes blurred, our gesture is insecure, we feel a certain pain, we lose the tranquility necessary for free and calm reflection. We even come to prefer not to know, not to dare envisaging certain hypotheses, considered too unpleasant.

The spirit of seriousness can therefore be equated with dogmatism, an intellectual rigidity. A critical and keen observer once wrote: "The apprentice philosopher writes a thesis in his youth, and then spends the rest of his life defending it". This irony is not without reality, when one notices the thetic position of many

philosophers or intellectuals, who take their theoretical bias very seriously, taken as unquestionable truth, and who come to openly despise those who think otherwise, who are indignant at the inconsistency of their opponents. Obviously, they are devoid of any critical distance from themselves, they take their subjectivity very seriously, whether it is cognitive or emotional. They ignore the salutary "fasting of the mind" recommended by Zhuangzi, the suspension of judgment of the Greek Stoics, or Spinoza's injunction "Neither laugh, nor cry, nor hate, but understand". This is the position of Leibniz who appreciated all theories, whatever they were, except those that categorically rejected the others, while engaging in a critical dialogue with everyone, as his abundant epistolary production testifies. Such an attitude can be called "perspectivism", that is to say that an author envisages a multiplicity of perspectives, an enriching vision, without depriving oneself of cultivating certain preferences. This is also the Nietzschean epistemology, the view that all truth is truth from or within a particular perspective, because such truth is always articulated conditionally. Socratic "ignorance" can also be associated with this, which examines and

questions a thought through its genesis in the mind of a given subject, who must become aware of his own pre-suppositions and the problems that derive from them, what Hegel calls "internal criticism". In this sense, even logic or rationality can be an obstacle to thought, if they ignore the postulates they convey without realizing it, because one cannot propose any scheme or any procedure without relying on one form or another of bias, always arbitrary in principle.

There is a paradoxical principle which invites us periodically not to take serious things seriously and to take non-serious things seriously, be they insignificant or banal. This transvaluation allows us to invigorate our thought, to renew it, to make it work on itself, to exercise that power of conversion necessary to its good health. This enables us to distance ourselves from what affects us or worries us excessively, to de-dramatize our interpretations and perceptions, and at the same time to be surprised by a good number of everyday phenomena to which we have become insensitive, that we no longer see even though they are very significant and revealing of our being, starting with the fact of seeing ourselves, in a sober and distant manner.

Bad faith

The concept of bad faith indicates the discrepancy that nestles in the fracture between our words and our thoughts, between what we know and what we want to believe, between what we tell others and and what we tell ourselves, between our empirical self and our transcendent self, between our different forms of consciousness, on one hand our pre-reflective consciousness (intuition, impression and feelings), on the other hand our reflective consciousness (concepts and analysis), and other such internal antagonisms. It is one of the crucial aspects of the fracture of being that characterizes human thinking and existence. It can be related to wishful thinking, to hypocrisy, to the spirit of seriousness, to the survival instincts and numerous other concepts we have already dealt with, but it deserves its own special identification. The Chinese daoist philosopher Zhuangzi has an interesting insight about this phenomenon, which he calls “intention”. We want certain things, or we reject certain things, that is the obstacle to reaching Dao, the latter being the principle of all principles, reason or reality, what makes things the way they are or makes things act the way they do. Thus it is with

bad faith, either we lie to ourselves and others because we want to get or avoid certain finalities, because we prefer to believe certain thoughts and we want to convince others of them, because of our desire for power, comfort and utility, because we chose to invest some limited reality that is more reassuring and controllable than the unseizable and unfathomable “otherness” at large.

It is easy to understand why such warping of our mind can affect the clarity, objectivity and authenticity of our thinking. Plus this bad faith operates on the ineffable fringe between consciousness and unconsciousness, since the strength of our intentions, be they conscious or not, necessarily affects our mental processes, blurring them. “Fake it until you make it”, says the proverb, and indeed it can work, to a certain extent, on a practical level. But on the ontological level, a typical internal human contradiction, this exertion engenders numerous negative secondary effects. Our words have power, our beliefs strongly determine the reality we inhabit, but there always comes the moment where such influence and even hegemony, since it induces a pernicious form of blindness, makes us pay a dear price.

Bad faith has indeed a cost. Bitterness, disappointment, anger, depression, are the most common consequences of our capacity to tell ourselves nice stories that we enjoy to listen to and believe. Our transcendent self is always lurking in a corner, waiting for a moment of tiredness or inattention on the part of our “intention” to impose its overwhelming and unavoidable presence. A blessing if we are ready to welcome it, a curse if we prefer to ignore it and fight with it.

Knowledge

As a criticism of knowledge, let us cite this beginning of Goethe’s *Faust*. “Philosophy, alas! jurisprudence, medicine, and you too, sad theology!... I have therefore studied you thoroughly with ardor and patience: and now here I am, poor fool, just as wise as before. I call myself, it is true, master, doctor, and for ten years I have been leading my pupils here and there by the nose. And I can see that we can’t know anything! That’s what burns my blood! I know more, it is true, than all the fools, doctors, masters, writers and monks in the world! Neither scruple nor doubt torment me any longer! I fear nothing of the devil, nor of hell; but also

all joy is taken away from me. I don't think I know anything good indeed, nor can I teach men anything to improve and convert them. So I have neither property, nor money, nor honor, nor domination in the world: a dog would not want life at this price!"

From this denunciation, we can conclude that there is something dead in knowledge, or deadly, something which is opposed to life, which in this sense is opposed to thought, this permanent movement of the spirit. It is sad and gloomy, according to Goethe. Certainly, it requires great effort, it arouses an illusory passion, we accumulate, but in the end it does not make us grow, it does not generate in us any achievement, nor does it generate any power of being. It can grant us status, fame and power, but it remains pretentious, unaware of its limits and its vanity. By saturating our mind, it seems to ward off doubt and uncertainty, moral or cognitive. Thus it abolishes all fear, by the feeling of certainty that it generates, but also all joy, because without fear there is no longer any overcoming, the satiated mind falls asleep, momentarily satisfied with itself, apathetic. Without fear, nothing bothers us, nothing can reach us, we are jaded, and we no longer appreciate anything.

When we are afraid, in the face of uncertainty, we are inhabited by something, even if it is not pleasant, we are alive, we are confronted with the world and with ourselves.

Thus, in this inert knowledge, nothing valid or useful, nothing to transform man and allow him to fulfill his destiny, to realize his humanity. Everything it promised was in fact only chimeras, it dangled tangible and seductive goods, it flattered our greed, that it could never satisfy. This conclusion leads Faust to consternation, to depression, and out of spite, or a burst of despair, he will come to sell his soul to the devil, another hope that will disappoint him just as much.

Of course, the character of Faust is an archetype, no one can claim to have read all the books and know everything there is to know. Although there is this type of belief implicit in many people, especially in intellectuals or teachers, and even in "normal" people: they know everything they need to know, they know! Often this actually means in their minds knowing more than others, knowing what there is to know in a given context, a circumstantial determination, a comparing

and competitive attitude, that unconsciously takes on the form of an absolute in their minds.

Thomas Aquinas, a medieval Italian theologian and philosopher, distinguishes two types of dynamics in the quest for knowledge: *curiositas* (curiosity) and *studiositas* (studiosity), the second being considered more salutary than the first. Among the critics of the vice of *curiositas*, described as "roaming unrest of the spirit", he cites the vain and immoderate knowledge, devoid of meaning, which accumulates without order or reason, the quest for superficial information, which consists to simply "see", and the knowledge that allows one to boast. In the same spirit, we find in Buddhism the idea that any knowledge that does not lead to "enlightenment" is useless and even flawed.

Out of vain curiosity, we pursue knowledge, we accumulate it, we display it, we transmit it, we sell it, often as a means of selling ourselves, and we derive an identity from it. Naturally, knowledge is satisfied with itself, it does not inspire thought, it only induces a need for additional knowledge, or else it encourages us to transmit, in order to exercise its power. We don't work on this knowledge, we don't question it, we don't problema-

tize it. And we are not interested in the other as an interlocutor: either he is a student who listens, or he is a competitor in knowledge. The issues of power are always present there, because “knowledge is power”, as the saying goes. Because it saturates the mind, there is no room for movement or freedom where one could rearrange things, reshuffle the cards. Especially since knowledge is coded, determined, frozen. In this sense, the spirit of knowledge lacks breath, lacks energy, it is not animated by the flame of thought, which is slowly extinguished. Taken in the evidence and the certainty, it lacks a critical spirit, especially in its relationship to itself. The process matters little, or much less, only the results achieved count. There is no anagogic principle, this search for substantial unity, or only by accident, because in general the accumulation of knowledge delights in a certain empirical fragmentation. To grasp the problem, we must remember that thought is always ready to start all over again, it can renegotiate everything at any moment, it throws itself into the void without a second thought, erasing its own traces, without experiencing the frustration of restarting all over. In this sense it pertains to the infinite, while knowledge

settles in the finite, in the determination. Knowledge is possession, it is tangible, whoever holds the information controls the world, as we notice today with the phenomenon of "big data", while thinking holds nothing at all, it is fluid, it acts in the interstices. Moreover, knowledge is immediately applicable, it is stable and recognizable, in a sense it is practical, while thought escapes utilitarian constraint, it can be applied to utility but it is not determined by it, a reality which for many pragmatic people makes it quite off-putting.

In fact, knowledge usually symbolically takes on a prophetic form: it is offered to us as a revelation, not as the autonomous production of a free spirit. It is the product of an arbitrary transmission whose mysteries remain unknown to us, so we can easily get lost in it. All the while hoping, without knowing it, that a kind of Holy Grail will eventually arise, a mythical form of initiation and ultimate power, provider of eternity, an illumination that will surge at the end of a book that they read, or write; a modality of mind completely opposed to the activity of thought, which has nothing mysterious about it. For it, everything is knowledge,

she marvels at everything, because everything is text, life is text, it is never without food.

A typical attitude of reverence towards knowledge that poses a common problem for thinking is what we call the "good student" pattern, which can also be called the "academic" pattern". The good student listens attentively to the teacher, he reads the books carefully and does his homework, he tries as much as possible to understand, retain and render the content of what is proposed. He is docile, obedient and respectful of authorities, both institutional and erudite. He wants to get good grades and diplomas, signs of academic and social recognition, thus offering a guarantee of career and success according to the established paths. He knows how to follow the rules and formalities in order to prove his credentials. He fears error more than anything else, he is concerned with perfection and approval, he is not interested in alternative or unusual paths. Of course, he tends to be devoid of authenticity, he lacks critical thinking, since he does not consider his intellectual subjectivity and creativity, nor his curiosity, to be part of the learning process. There is no room for invention and interpretation, he faithfully sticks to the

given, he does not construct nor really experiments. He gorges himself on neologisms and quotations. All thinking must fit into an official frame of reference, which provides a sense of certainty and security, but also a certain anxiety, for fear of not being in the "right place". Especially since he is always in competition with his companions, of whom he is easily envious. We can also notice a certain devaluation of oneself, compensated by an external recognition, which with the passing of time ends up being internalized. The mind becomes rigid, since it operates within a formal prism, excluding any real freedom to think and act.

Many teachers do not care about this dimension of learning since they themselves have been educated in this way, so they do not challenge the student, except for a minority of pedagogical teachers. For them, teaching is above all the transmission of information, procedures, the legacy of a given culture, which they impose as much as possible, sometimes in a vengeful manner. Although one can oppose them to those for whom teaching is a very vague notion, who give precedence to a subjectivity without much value or requirement, a freedom devoid of necessity, in the "Summer Hill"

style, or an excessive, "benevolent" and lax pedagogism, without substantial content but reveling in "psychological realism". Or the dilettante, who is certainly freer and more subjective, more creative at times, but who lacks perseverance in the exercise of thinking. As always, we oscillate between Charybdis and Scylla, and the intermediate way is far from obvious.

One crucial aspect by which knowledge is opposed to thinking is the desire of certitude, or the illusion of certitude. This point is largely developed by Karl Popper, with his rejection of the classical inductivist views on the scientific method in favor of empirical falsification. Inductivism is the traditional and still commonplace philosophy of scientific method, which aims to neutrally observe a domain, infer laws from examined cases, hence inductive reasoning, and thus objectively discover the naturally "true" theory of the observed. It is the idea that theories can be derived from or established on the basis of facts, providing unquestionable conclusions. According to Popper, a theory in the empirical sciences can never be really proven, but it can always be falsified as the guarantee of its validity, meaning that it can and should be eternally scrutinized

with decisive experiments. He was opposed to the classical “justificationist” account of knowledge, which he replaced with his “critical rationalism”. We already encounter the embryo of such an epistemological attitude in Nicholas of Cusa, who defended the idea that all knowledge is always mere conjecture, since we have no access to absolute or objective truth, we can only speculate through the use of approximations, by examining their relevance, their grounding, their efficiency, always temporarily. In other words, as soon as we claim certainty, which is often the case with knowledge, the thinking stops, primarily in its critical dimension, the mind does not aspire anymore to furthering its understanding of the world and of itself. It becomes lazy and complacent, a very pleasing attitude for the common mind. By wanting to be “sure”, we are ready to “buy” any theory, just because it looks obvious or because it is recognized by authorities. As a consequence, the student does not think through what he learns, he does not propose hypotheses, he merely repeats what he hears with an intense feeling of “ownership”. And he always expects that all knowledge comes from the authorities, censoring his own thinking skills.

Benevolence

Benevolence as such is a rather sympathetic concept, which does not pose any problem in itself for thinking and dialogue, quite the contrary. It implies being in a favorable disposition to an interlocutor, to a thought content, that is to say to be receptive and not refractory, contemptuous or disdainful, which seems appropriate, at least initially, in order to examine without prejudice or circumspection a speech for example. But concepts also have a history, they emanate from a context, so they take on a particular connotation, especially when they become commonplace and become overused, banalized.

So it is with the concept of benevolence. Its popularity emanates from across the Atlantic, as often today's trends, through the rise of the "Ethics of care", which emerged in the 1980s. Stemming from feminism, this intellectual movement is a theory of normative ethics which holds as central that moral action is based on interpersonal relations, advocating kindness and concern for the person as primordial virtues. The word "care" refers to all the important gestures and words aimed at maintaining life, the dignity of people, respect for

others, relational well-being. It refers just as much to the disposition of individuals: solicitude, attention to others, as to the very activities of care: washing, bandaging, comforting, etc., taking into account both the person who helps and the one who receives this help, as well as the social and economic context in which this relationship takes place. This perspective is opposed to classical ethical theories, which are virtue ethics, mainly inspired by Aristotle and Kant, and Anglo-Saxon consequentialist ethics, inspired by Bentham and Mill. The first defines as virtuous the moral greatness of the agent, his attitude and his motivations, while the second, more utilitarian, asserts that what matters is the sum total of collective happiness generated by our actions. This new axiology of “care” is determined rather in relational terms, by the “quality” of the relationship between individuals, by sympathy or compassion. We no longer ask ourselves so much in a general way "what is right", but rather "how to respond or react ‘well’“ to an interlocutor, that is to say in a more specific and interpersonal way, according to expectations or needs of the other, aiming for comfort and well-being. Carol Gilligan, initiator of this “moral revolution”, criticized the

application of general standards as “morally problematic because it engenders moral blindness and indifference”. In line with the ambient deconstructionism, she saw traditional morality as being “gendered”, unconsciously promoting masculine, abstract and categorical values, to the detriment of femininity, more relational and fluid. From this perspective, the well-being or happiness of the partners in a dialogue becomes the central criterion of moral action. Another popular form of this trend is the now famous “Nonviolent communication”, a mere communication procedure designed to create empathy in human relations which evolved from the “person-centered therapy”. Its guiding principle in dialogue is to satisfy each person’s fundamental needs. Of course, those needs are not supposed to be examined critically, since the empirical self is considered “sacred”. One should only negatively limit himself in terms of the other’s needs, in order to establish a more harmonious relation. In such a context, subjectivity or intersubjectivity rules, not reason, truth or any other transcendental value.

Despite the sympathetic side of the affair, from the point of view of thinking and the nature of the dialogue,

we can therefore see the shift that is taking place, and how this can pose a problem for reflection. Truth, demanding reason, challenging the subject, are no longer so welcome, considered as intrusive, aggressive, violent or other negative characteristics. We can include the “masculinity” of the affair, which moreover poses an interesting paradigm problem. We are no longer so attentive to the idea, but to the person, which should not be made uncomfortable. By what right, after all, would one try to impose reason on anyone! It is therefore a question of promoting a very determined psychological and moral vision, to the detriment of an intellectual concern.

However, it seems that we can also support another form of benevolence, for example that shown by Socrates, who patiently but firmly encourages his interlocutor to think rigorously. A conditional benevolence, because he refuses to speak with anyone who does not seem ready to go beyond his own limits, until he decides to “grow up”, a benevolence that confronts those who abandon themselves to their primary impulses, by trying to make them aware of their true freedom, that of a subjects capable of reason. Obviously, this rational

benevolence seems merciless for those who refuse to critically examine their and other's behavior and habits. But it seems to us that such benevolence holds at least its letters of nobility, just as much as that which gives primacy to the individual, to his subjectivity and his vulnerability. Reason conceives the subject as a free and autonomous being, and not as the victim of a past, of circumstances and of a psychological suffering, which should be healed and comforted. Admittedly, everyone will choose their methods of action and relationship according to the values that seem appropriate to them, according to the circumstances, but if it is a matter of promoting thinking, it seems that we cannot do without confrontation. There is hardly thinking without agon, wrote Nietzsche. "Take off your shirt and come for the hand-to-hand combat", invites Socrates. No doubt this is a sign of trust, respect, appreciation and even love, towards others and towards oneself.

Therefore we can ask ourselves if wanting the good consists in forbidding oneself to criticize or denounce what one considers harmful or erroneous. To assume one's share of humanity is to be authentic, it is to assume imperfection, not to ignore it or make it taboo.

Moreover, in wanting to avoid disagreements and conflicts, can we still be fair? Immanuel Kant wrote: "A government which would be founded on the principle of benevolence towards the people, such as that of the father towards his children, is the greatest despotism imaginable."

Although some psychologists denounce "benevolent" education, rather trendy, and the excessive permissiveness of parents who do not teach their children reality. This promotes an irrational and illusory world, for reality must encompass displeasure, frustration and effort as much as pleasure and comfort. By dint of "sympathetic" and "nice", we can no longer say anything, for fear of "traumatizing" our offspring. One must of course respect the singularity of the child, but the parent must also be able to establish limits. Otherwise this injunction of benevolence becomes counter-productive, it is a decoy, because with the first school or relational frustration, the child will indeed be traumatized.

Dilettantism

The concept of dilettantism was born in Italy in the 18th century. At its origin, it characterized music lovers

who seek a certain ecstasy or enjoyment through their listening, then the term evolved and became generalized to designate an attitude, a disposition of the mind, which consists in taking an interest in some activity, as an amateur, motivated simply by the search for pleasure. The expression today takes on a rather pejorative connotation, since it implies an irregular and casual investment in an activity. The dilettante is in general one who seeks mere pleasure in an activity, who delights in aesthetics, beauty and enjoyment, without committing to it in a serious and professional way, he seeks to "benefit", more than to commit. He doesn't take things seriously, his soul is rather light and wandering. He does not care about work or perfection, he has a hard time to be serious, although he can be quite impulsively and temporarily motivated. One can imagine that this difficulty or disgust with commitment reveals a psychological flaw: a certain form of cowardice or softness. He undertakes, when it pleases him, but does not finish, he does not take pleasure in the work, neither on an object, nor on himself. He does not engage in a process, he does not seek to build, his approach being above all aesthetic and hedonistic. He is therefore

in search of a momentary pleasure, he does not really engage in any activity, and in particular he does not engage his being.

On the intellectual level, the dilettante does not read, he rather skims through, browsing a few ideas here and there, without noting or writing anything, without thinking further about what he is reading. He follows the text passively, lazily waiting for the end of the book. If you ask him what he has read and what he remembers, he often does not know how to make a constructed statement, perhaps he remembers a snippet or two. If he listened to a lecture, he can only say that it was interesting or not. Moreover, he gets bored easily, because he finds it difficult to listen over time; he is especially sensitive to the charm or the form of the speech, which should not require too much of him in terms of concentration. In general he likes to discuss, in a rather mundane way. That is to say, in a rather disjointed way, favoring “smart” or funny words, sometimes sprinkled with a few quotes or scholarly references, without analyzing them so much. He appreciates the art of conversation, to accompany a drink or a good dinner. He is socially agreeable, because his tone

is libertine, he does not demand anything from anyone, nor from himself. He can sometimes be quite erudite, therefore he will flaunt a scattered knowledge to impress the gallery. From time to time he will launch into a debate, especially to prove that he is right or that he is refined, without trying too hard to grasp the stakes of the controversy. He quite appreciates semantic digressions, style and elegance, subtleties of nuance, from which he derives a certain pleasure. He appreciates panache and “cleverness”, which often takes precedence over the rigor of reason. He can also get angry if he feels cornered, he can have a sense of competition, especially in front of the public.

From this description, one can easily perceive how dilettantism is an obstacle to the work of thinking. The absence of patience and perseverance, the rambling activity of the mind, the casual attitude, the lack of work on the content and on oneself, the pursuit of pleasant dialogues devoid of a real confrontation of ideas, all of which are characteristics that stand in the way of a serious thinking process. Moreover, the process matters little in the intellectual activity of the dilettante, only the bits of thought interest him. but he will easily

deceive his public, because for those who are downright foreign to intellectual activity, he will naturally pass for a refined being, for a fine mind, which is for him the height of satisfaction. Besides, if anyone confronts him in a substantial way, if his difficulties feel exposed, he will get irritated, because his image matters a lot to him: he will perceive the intruder as an aggressor, a boor who ignores good manners. We can find here the whole problem of the dialogues described by Plato between Socrates and the sophists, who could not bear to be questioned by this “ignorant”, step by step, in a sustained manner. When Socrates engages in a dialogue, he tries to establish a close proximity of thinking, a common experience of being, where both partners commit themselves to a real encounter, while the dilettante keeps his interlocutor at bay, to each his space of vanity. No one should reveal the inanity or the nothingness of speech and being. But anyway, it becomes obvious that the dilettante cannot not be unsatisfied. Even when it is not openly denounced and exposed, a feeling of emptiness prowls in his soul, for lack of substantial nourishment, leaving an aftertaste of existential bitterness.

The phenomenon now called “tinderization” is an interesting and extreme case of dilettante behavior, although considered normal today. You have at your disposal a whole number of potential partners, and you flick through their pictures to find a potential one available in your area. A fast and efficient procedure, just “swiping”. And once satisfied, it is easy and tempting to move on to the next one, without wasting any time. Our consumer society went from “ready to wear” to “ready to throw”. Everything is now an object of consumption. Everyone is an object of consumption, since the other has to make me “feel good”, our partners have to satisfy our needs, our sacralized needs. Our primitive subjectivity rules.

This new process becomes a “streaming” way of dealing with the world. With information as well. We receive a huge flux of data, which saturates our mind, leaving little space for any reflection. One piece of news replaces the other, permanently. And why read a whole book of Kant, when you can have a summary of one page, or a “short” of two minutes ? Something similar is happening in a kind of current disruption of the work ethic, where employees jump from one job to

the next, not conceiving of being loyal to a particular place or committing themselves. Practical considerations and personal comfort become the rule. Of course, one can conceive that this perspective has a certain legitimacy, social transformations are reactions to previous excesses, such as in this case the obsession with safety of employment and accompanying obligations. But still, we can see that this absence of commitment and the continuous “flitting” can be an obstacle to thinking as a continuous process.

Of course, as always, a concept can never be only negative, any idea can be transvaluated. Thus the dilettante attitude will be defended as a form of freedom, as bearing a certain lightness, in opposition to the seriousness and heaviness of the academic, contrary to the tedious and abstruse ruminations of the professional intellectual. Ideas can be appreciated for themselves, not as a tool for some official production. There is a very concrete problem for the layman who tries to get acquainted with some referenced knowledge or ideas and encounters complicated texts written by specialists who overload their explanations with esoteric and complicated details; they often seem to forget the essential

ideas that could be explained in simple terms. They are reluctant to abase themselves to such “simplistic” accounts. When the dilettante, who appreciates ideas for the pleasure of the mind they procure, will not hesitate to transgress those heavy rules and will appreciate a content for what it offers immediately. His relation to an intellectual production will be more natural, be it in terms of pleasure or by relating the content to the immediacy of his existence, rather than in attempting to prove some theory or display some erudition. In this sense, the amateur, literally the one who loves, entertains a more natural, substantial and real relation to the content he appreciates. After all, why would the expert musicologist benefit more from music than the childlike aficionado? And why not engage once in a while in a light conversation?

Dryness of the soul

"Spiritual Dryness", "spiritual desolation," "spiritually emptiness" or "spiritual exhaustion" are different terms that often have strong religious implications, but they can be considered as well in a cognitive or psychological sense. They can be conceived as one's relationship

with God, but also with others, with oneself, with the world and with one's mind. In China, this problem is also called "the empty heart disease". From the symptom point of view, it is rather similar to the diagnosis of depression, or to the *taedium vitae* mentioned by Seneca, the Roman stoic philosopher, which indicates a "loathing of life", a "contempt of life". It refers to a chronic unhappiness, an existential boredom or a fundamental malaise, which is not caused by a precise affection, but which spreads over the whole of existence. It is characterized by a feeling down, a decreased interest and lack of pleasure. Nevertheless, the symptoms are not necessarily serious and prominent, so the "victim" looks just like anyone from the outside. Such an individual tends to have a sense of loneliness and meaninglessness, a feeling that there is no real connection between him and others, being alienated from any substantial value or meaning of life. He can maintain acceptable appearances and hold apparently decent interpersonal relationships, but he is generally concerned about other people's views on himself, trying to maintain a good image. He might have suicidal tendency or thoughts, not really wanting to die, but just not knowing why he

is still alive, being deprived of good reasons to get up in the morning. But he more or less goes on with his established life routine, fulfilling his obligations.

Such an attitude has consequences on the cognitive level, as an obstacle to thinking. For example, such an individual perceives intellectual issues on a rather theoretical or formal level, he doesn't entertain existential connection with them. It makes the soul stuck and the thinking rigid, it lacks availability and plasticity. This lack of personal interest prohibits for example any capacity of being surprised, contrary to the idea of Plato that astonishment is the beginning of thinking. For the latter, wonder is the feeling that enlightens the mind, allowing humans out of the illusion and ignorance which shadow the understanding. Together with the observation and contemplation of ourselves and the world, which implies a keen desire to understand and discover, it is what allows us to ask questions and find the answers about reality and its fundamental principles.

Lao Tzu says: "A man is born gentle and weak; at his death he is hard and stiff. All things, including the grass and trees, are soft and pliable in life; dry and brittle in death. Stiffness is thus a companion of death; flexibility

a companion of life.” A dry plant doesn’t bear fruits, it cannot grow new shoots. Dry skin is cold or senseless. The dry soul lacks emotional intelligence and connection to basic human feelings, inhibiting thinking processes. The world is tasteless, one is not interested in the diversity of perspectives or paradigms, he remains blind to the kaleidoscopic nature of reality. Because it is not inspired by anything great or beautiful, it tends to be petty, easily getting caught up in small insignificant details. As a result, such a soul becomes bored, resentful and bitter, it gets hurt and offended easily, it is fragile, it suffers from numerous cracks, just like a dry skin which can easily burst open. As it lacks flexibility, the dry soul easily comes into confrontation with the external world, passively or actively. It cannot encompass otherness, it cannot welcome its diversity, it even rejects it. Because of its fear of surprise, such an individual does not want to be touched or disturbed. It prefers to stay in its corner, away from others, often disappointed and bitter. Like a shriveled leaf it got disconnected from the source of life. It gave up on natural movement, therefore it does not search for anything new, it does not rejoice when it comes into contact

with something different, it abhors otherness. It compulsively circles around what is habitual, inaccessible to the flames of passion. Such an attitude eliminates any perspective of transcendence, It preserves itself of being moved by any passion.

A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a broken spirit drieth the bones”, says the Bible. Dryness of the soul is lack of life, lack of energy, lack of desire or love, lack of generosity, an incapacity to turn towards others and give oneself, and a refusal to pay attention to anything encountered. Dryness occurs in a soul that remains in a “saving” mode, due to a need to preserve itself rather than to generate anything. After all, generously giving, moving outwards, is the most natural action of the soul. But the dry soul does not believe in anything or anyone, including itself. It faces nothingness but it cannot despair, that would be too passionate. It just shrivels. Why bother? What is the point? It needs a specific, concrete and calculated purpose in order to act. Being alive, enjoying the movement of the mind and interacting with the world are not sufficient reasons to exist.

One can wonder about the origin of such dryness of the soul. Maybe this soul was not fed appropriately, cognitively and emotionally. It always evolved in a morally and psychologically poor environment, either by lack of education and ignorance, or by excessive formalism and rigidity. As well, for circumstantial or personal reasons, it got caught up in a competing and surviving existential mode, folding on itself, viewing the outside as a threat, exhausting itself in an endless impossible battle. Chekhov immortalized such a type in his "The man in a case", where the hero, Belikov, clings to official regulations and insists that others do so as well, being suspicious and wary of everything, because "one can never tell what harm might come from it". The "moisture" provided by the world is for him a threat, thus he tries above all to protect his small, petty, anxious and lonely being, and of course he dies of "absurdity". Ending in a coffin represented the natural realization of his dry self.

Psychologism

In his "second topic", where Freud explains the tripartition of the subject between the "id" (impulses, instincts),

the "ego" (me, empirical self) and the "superego" (moral conscience, idealized self), he affirms that the subject "is not master in his own house", since his instincts guide his behavior. Consciousness, according to the co-founder of psychoanalysis (with Joseph Breuer), would thus be only minor compared to the role played by the unconscious, established as an autonomous and relatively invincible power. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre is opposed to such a perspective, he refuses that one can postulate consciousness as a passive and secondary phenomenon. The idea of a powerless consciousness is even absurd according to him: consciousness is always conscious of itself, it does not suffer neither inactivity, nor intermittence. Sartre considers the unconscious as the conscious which denies itself and chooses to be silent, a consciousness which refuses to assume itself. It is what he names bad faith, which we treated above. For him, the explanatory principle of the human behavior must thus not be sought in obscure psychoanalytical forces or various previous traumas, but well and truly directly in the human conscience and in the choices which it carries out, even if it prefers to ignore the nature and the stakes of the

dynamic. He denounces the fact that the theory of the unconscious reintroduces without announcing it, in a surreptitious way, a determinism that repudiates our individual freedom and the power of thought. He sees in it a new form of transcendence in man, a kind of new God who dispossesses man of his autonomy and of his choices, thus inviting him to make the economy of reflection.

Certainly, since Freud, psychology has largely developed as a specific and important field of knowledge, as a theory and a practice animated by scientific pretensions, with a certain success, and many theorists have distanced themselves from the heritage of the "father". The popularity of this "science" among the general public has, moreover, given rise to a phenomenon that we call psychologism, that is, a tendency to explain human phenomena through psychological explanations, often in an excessive manner. Let's examine how this psychologism can impede reason and reflection using different elements of psychological culture.

CERTAINTY – The expert provides us with a diagnostic about our personal problems. In itself, the news

might not be so pleasant, but it is reassuring and comforting to have some certitude about ourselves. Something that can really “explain” our difficulties. No need to wonder anymore about our being and self-reflect. The problem is officially named, so we know for sure, we have an impression of control. The erudite jargon of the expert strongly incites this type of certitude. And the diagnosis becomes for the subject a reality, exclusive of any other perspective. And this sense of certainty provided by the expert makes us lose our autonomy, our capacity to think independently. When thinking rather implies self-consciousness, a constant work on oneself, with all the doubts this work can permanently engender.

EXTERNALIZATION – Through this diagnostic, our existential problems do not fall anymore under our responsibility, they become “external”, even though they are inside ourselves, in the sense that they are not under our watch. Therefore, no need to go further, we gave up on our freedom to think and to act. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the American guidebook widely used by

mental health professionals, is an ever increasing work, where everyone can “officially” find himself a disease. It turns out quite handy in order to escape our moral or existential responsibility, even our legal responsibility: after all, we can always be acquitted of our misdeeds by reason of mental defect. Indeed, we are subject to numerous determinisms, it would be an illusion of omnipotence to refuse to see them. Nevertheless, these determinisms cannot be used as pretexts or alibi, we are always to a certain extent free in our dealing with them, without denying them. A pathology can explain behaviors without justifying them.

IDENTITY – Strangely enough, the patient establishes an identity with this diagnosis, he does not have to think or challenge himself anymore, he can even brag about his disease. We can allow ourselves to marinate and hide in it, momentarily escaping from our ambitions and high expectations. We become “special” through our disease, we don’t need to accomplish anything else.

COMPLACENCY – Once we have a “disease” explaining our strange behavior or our shortcomings,

we can be satisfied and feel justified. Psychology commonly uses predefined schemes or syndromes in order to apply them to particular cases: Oedipus complex, Stockholm syndrome, pyramid of needs, anal phase, etc. It explains all behaviors through these reductionist frameworks, a form of complacency, since it prevents an analysis of one's behavior grounded in reason and free will. We don't have to confront ourselves with our own freedom, our being is fixed and determined, there is no need to rearticulate our own existence. The patient defines himself as a victim, he is powerless, therefore there is no need to take any initiative and be alive intellectually. And if there is any criticism, the subject can deflect it on the disease, the same way we would do it with a horoscope determining our future. We could call this an acquired helplessness.

We also encounter a type of self-fulfilling prophecy to explain our behavior, a strong form of bad faith. We become prone to believe that an inappropriate behavior is therefore justified and appropriate. And we allow our "sacred" moods to determine our behavior, complacently abandoning any authenticity and challenge, for ourselves and others. Comparatively, psychological

practice is often like a massage, rather passive, when thinking is rather a type of gymnastics, active, stimulating and challenging.

An explanation through psychology tries to assign singular causes to the behavior of an individual, implying that in order to understand this person, or to know him, you need to exhaustively know the details of his intimacy, his suffering and narrative. And of course, such knowledge will end up justifying everything. It implies as well that practically no one is ever legitimate to make a judgment on a person, since "we are all different, all special". This "singularism", this prohibition of judgment of others, generates a bad faith attitude aimed at diluting one's responsibility towards one's own actions in life. The extreme subjectivity of the psychologism matrix allows us to ignore or discredit any criticism or external confrontation. "I am sorry you feel this way", "This just triggers you", "Get over it", are examples of formulations that are used to avoid any real dialogue. It implies that there is no possibility of truth, reason or objectivity, all encounters are reducible to personal reactions, so that we don't have to take on the other's remarks.

EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS – Most psychological practices focus on the subjective dimension more than on reason. Already because patients are first of all considered to be suffering from some emotional issues. And because those emotions are viewed as the core of the human psyche, for example as the consequence of previous traumas. As well, reason is either a suspicious “entity”, as it is in psychoanalysis, an artificial and illusory construction, either patients are not considered capable of reason, they have to be dealt with like children that suffer too much to be able to engage in a rational process. Feelings and emotions tend to be glorified, they are sufficient cause for everything, for some people they even become the “essence” of their existence. The psychology adepts put them in the forefront as the most important motivations and criteria of their mental scheme, therefore avoiding any challenge posed for example by basic common sense. A symptom of this behavior is the common confusion between pain and suffering. When people take for incontestable the perception of their inner sensations, they deny their own freedom: the possibility to suffer or not suffer from a given pain, a power to decide provided by reason. It

is not so much a question of denying pain, which remains a useful indicator of our state of being, and it is necessary to accept suffering in order to be fulfilled. In addition, one can wrongly take responsibility for one's own pain, which, moreover, increases the suffering. This type of biased mechanism would be contrary to reason, the irony of an irrational rationalism.

EGOCENTRISM – The adept of psychology tend to be quite centered on himself, on his problems, on his feelings, on his aches, on his worries, on his childhood and self-narration, on his family, etc. This tends to provide a quite reduced horizon of preoccupation, and it makes one blind to larger issues, to others and to the world, except when the subject feels directly concerned or affected. Ideals, such as reason, justice, humanity, truth or beauty remain outside of his mental scope. He is too busy with his immediate self to engage in such lofty contemplations. The attitude and behavior of others are therefore judged according to the effect it has on “me”; the implicit rule is that I should not feel uncomfortable, I should protect myself, when discomfort and destabilization are a fundamental element of lively

thinking. In such a scheme, we mainly hope to be understood and accepted. There is no other truth than “my truth”, a very relativistic and weak perspective. That is how the psychology adept can easily become a narcissistic monster: the only acceptable rule is “his” rule, and he is truly “sincere” on the issue. His “needs” are little gods, which have to be satisfied.

RIGIDITY – Since psychology is supposed to be a science, it does not problematize so much its postulates and presuppositions, for example it defines identified pathologies exclusively in a negative way and not for example as an existential incentive. As well, patients, because of their pain and their desire to find “efficient” solutions, easily fall into the trap of “good and bad”, a rigid and primitive axiology. Thus there is not much room for problematization or for transvaluation. The philosophical principle according to which any hypothesis or value can be criticized, because it is by definition limited and based on arbitrary paradigms, does not apply in the psychological scheme. As well, psychological reasons sound compelling: “I can impose my condition on another, since I take as unquestionable the feelings

I am experiencing”. One cannot argue with feelings, there is full control and credibility. In opposition to thinking, with ideas, when one can argue, oppose, criticize and change his mind.

REDUCTIONISM - Each psychological theory tends to reduce mental reality to some fixed and limited phenomenon. The most obvious example is Freud, with his concept of libido, the sexual drive, which is supposed to account for most of our actions and existential issues. These concepts often make sense, but the attempts to explain everything through a given concept are quite reductionist and adverse to a broader and more perspectivist thinking. Already, the mere postulate of “curing” people is a given choice on our relation to existence, viewing the subject as a pathological entity, defined by preestablished norms, and not as a free, legitimate and self-determined individual. Other examples of Freud’s reductionism can be the ignorance of social and cultural influences on behavior and personality, as well as a negative view of human nature, which later theorists will criticize, bringing in turn their own favorite concepts. Jung with the collective unconscious

and archetypes. Adler with the complex of inferiority. Eric Berne (Transactional analysis) which shifted the attention from internal psychological issues to the dynamics contained in people's interactions, the "real" path for solving emotional problems. Unlike in thinking, where any concepts can be used and replaced by others, compared with them or used simultaneously, without any pretension to any exclusivity.

Nuance

First of all we have to specify that the "problem" of nuance, the reference to this concept in dialogues and thought, is not an anthropological invariant, it is very culturally determined. It is mainly found in cultures where philosophical education and thought are more common, for example in France, Italy or Spain, but not so much in the USA or China for example, which are more pragmatic societies.

Thus the term nuance is used a lot in some contexts, especially among those who have intellectual pretensions. And like all trivialized terms, it ends up losing its meaning, which is even betrayed. Its origin is the Latin word *nubes*, which means "cloud". From there,

its meaning changes to "shadow", i.e. a slight variation in the shade of objects, without actually changing the color, or the intermediate gradations between two hues. Thus the term indicates different degrees of intensity, the slight variations of sensory perception, whether for perfumes, flavors, musical tones or other sensations. From there, by metaphorical sliding, the term comes to designate a subtlety of meaning, the slight descriptive difference between two entities, between two ideas, two feelings or two emotions. Nevertheless, we must not forget that these are distinctions, that is to say fine distinctions between things of the same nature, the observation of an almost imperceptible trace, a hint of difference. This can be seen in the painter's color chart, where one struggles to choose between minute differences in color. The Italian word for nuance is *sfumatura*. It comes from *fumo* (smoke), and it is the action of "producing smoke". At the same time, in this semantic family, we find Leonardo da Vinci's *sfumato*, a very particular painting technique, which precisely blurs the contours and melts the shadows like in a smoke, in order to produce a relief effect, without really changing the content. What we are trying to show is that nu-

ance is a matter of detail, a very interesting concern from an aesthetic point of view, but one that for the mind can imply drowning in the indistinct, in the insignificant, in the accessory, in the ornamental. Aristotle invites us on this point to distinguish between the accidental, or secondary, and the essential, or fundamental. But the nuance is more a question of detail. This is what we encounter, for example, with those people who love semantic debates or subtleties that allow them to avoid the real issue, to escape, to dodge, to go round and round and to practice sleight of hand. They will say "I don't like this word very much", "It is not exactly like this", "I would put it another way", etc., while neglecting more substantial issues. Under the guise of precision and formalism, they forget what is important, the substantial tensions of thought, which are drawn in broad strokes, which do not care so much about approximations and details. The German conductor Furtwangler was very critical of precision in music, writing that it was opposed to the poetry that is the essence of musical poetry.

One of the fashionable symptoms of this "nuanced" thinking, more widespread in different cultures, is the

criticism of binary thinking, conceived as primary, reductive, simplistic, primitive, even outrageous. However, the great stakes of the thought are articulated through binary schemes. For example the opposition between essence and existence, being and non-being, finite and infinite, subject and object, reason and passion, etc. And the capacity to reduce the diversity of phenomena in order to grasp them through the matrix of these oppositions represents a crucial skill of analysis and synthesis, difficult indeed, instead of getting lost in the infinite list of singular phenomena and their minute differences. Of course, it is not a question of denying the complexity of phenomena, when parameters, influences, criteria and perspectives overlap and intermingle. But the ability to reduce a process to its strict minimum, to understand the fundamental tension that animates a phenomenon, to grasp the unity in diversity, remains one of the main challenges of reflection. Thus Einstein wanted to identify the first principle of physical reality, the principle of principles, and the opposition between relativistic and quantum theory remains the great challenge of contemporary physics. In fact, it seems to us that the option of an infinite or indefinite multiplicity,

a youthful fascination against which Plato warns us, is a post-modern prejudice against the principle of categorical judgment. Indeed, when it comes to judging, on a practical or cognitive level, we are often confronted with a dual situation that obliges us to make a decision, failing which we remain powerless. And in order to grasp a problem, we must reduce it to the most limited set of categories possible, which is obscured or annihilated by the scattered concern for nuance.

It is an often heard cliché, in the four corners of the world: "In life, it is never black or white, there is a lot of gray", this or an equivalent, so many formulations that pretend to be deep and wise. Nevertheless, it is true that one can use in a ridiculous way the binarity, for example in the classic rigid or paranoid scheme "you are with me or against me", or other exclusive meaningless alternatives. One can indeed regret the too clear-cut, even crude opinions, the extremist, radical, splitting and cleaving positions, in private and public comments, for example in politics, where one likes to be scandalized by the actions and words of his "opponents". Many fights and wars are started in such a way.

A certain dialectical process also allows us to overcome the opposites through a synthetic moment, but as Hegel explains it to us, that cannot be carried out without the rigorous assumption of two clearly opposite theses. The "grey" would only refer to the indeterminate, to the vague, to the inconsistent, therefore not to thought. According to him, to think is to take a risk, it is to firmly engage on a clear idea, that is to say a proposition which affirms something and denies its opposite, so that a real work can then be carried out. Then it is necessary to deconstruct or to go beyond what has been affirmed. To lose oneself in the nuances, to want at all costs to detail, attenuate, graduate or relativize, emasculates and sterilizes the thinking, makes it lose an indispensable robustness. Ideas must "resist", otherwise they lack consistency. Obviously, we are far from the delicacy of aesthetics, from the finesse of the wit, from the refined subtleties, we are in the raw analysis, the square articulations, the sharp contours, and the details have interest only if they refer to some universality, to the substantial, and not to a semantic concern, or to a subtle matter of gradation, intensity, perception, elegance or taste. Otherwise the nuance serves as a screen

to the disengagement, to the artistic vagueness, to the exercise of style, in short, a refusal to think. We have to establish in priority an architecture, and not examine a palette of colors. We need to consider content, not appearance or terminology. We need sense, that is, both a clear meaning and a direction, not a semantic field. When we express ourselves, we need to be understood, so that a real dialogue can take place, thus allowing for a critique that would otherwise be impossible to develop. It is not a question of watering down, complicating or dissolving, but at the very least of refining, in order to make the subject more relevant, more profound, more adequate, more true, more forceful.

Clear question and clear answer, as Socrates proposes, which for him is the very model of the exercise of reason, whether it be a dialogue with oneself or with others. And let's not heap up words, circumstances, an anthology of terms, which looks too much like rhetoric, whose aim is to manipulate or confuse the interlocutor rather than to make him think, or even to evade a real purpose. "Beautiful minds" love these half-truths that allow them to remain in the shadow of the allusive and the slippery, thus fleeing from any vigorous dialogue.

Nuance is thus used as a way of not making a statement, of not committing oneself, of not answering, of fleeing one's responsibilities. In his proposal of "provisional morality", Descartes invites us, in order to "advance", to propose "an imperfect morality that one can follow by provision while one does not yet know a better one." It is thus a question of committing oneself to a clear path, even if it means modifying it at a later time, which for the moment implies clearly saying "no" to other paths or proposals. Moreover, for him, clarity is synonymous with truth. We are not in Proust's house, where the subtle range of perceptions, memories and feelings is described to our heart's content, which will be appreciated by the literate who love language even more than thought, those who enjoy "fine speeches".

Let us look at the issue of nuance from another angle. One of the problems of referring to nuance is the obsessive fixation on terms, we attribute too much importance to them, hence a certain rigidity, among other things because we overload their connotation. We no longer play with words, we become very serious, too serious with them. One can oppose such an attitude with the freedom represented by the play of polysemy,

or the metaphorical shift, what can be called the poetic dimension of language. This is the reason why the Chinese Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi favors what he calls "goblet words" as a tool for thought. For him, these are the words that in turn, like a round bottomed unstable cup, fill up and spill over, that allow and favor the play of the mind, the mental fluidity, the non-fixation. The explicit rule is to take the terms lightly while paying close attention to them, a bit like the "floating attention" of psychoanalysts. Thus he appreciates absurdities, contradictions and paradoxes, exaggerations and outrages, which are above all endowed with a performative power, which surprise the interlocutor, which provoke reflection by liberating the mind from its routines and expectations. These goblet words "adapt and follow the fluctuating nature of the world and thus reach a state of harmony," he writes. This clearly reflects the soteriological and therapeutic purpose of the Zhuangzi philosophy, accommodating the mind to the changes of all things, to the shifts of meaning and perspective. This is so because everything exists in a relational web and is constantly undergoing transformations that deprive things of any identity of its own, which allows

us to remain in the fundamental and indistinct axis of the dao. To conclude, let us quote a sentence from Nietzsche that seems appropriate. "It seems that all great things, in order to imprint themselves on the heart of humanity with eternal demands, must first travel the earth in the form of grimacing, formidable and terrifying caricatures."

Subjectivism

In the present text, we do not address the emotional or sentimental aspect of subjectivism, since we already addressed those issues in the parts titled "psychologism" and "sentimentalism". We primarily deal here with "cognitive subjectivism", i.e. a knowledge or a thinking grounded exclusively on the subject.

A popular view or expression in our postmodern world is that everything is subjective, everything depends on a specific subject, in opposition to the possibility of some objective knowledge. To the extent we accept it, such a vision short-circuits the possibility of challenging one's opinion or theory. We have to accept whatever a person is saying, since that is his personal opinion, he believes it, and you can oppose his personal

opinion only with your own mere personal opinion, which by definition does not have any more value or legitimacy than his. In dialogues thus defined, a typical self-defense or counterargument is simply to retort to any objection: “But that is your own opinion”, a reply which is supposed to put an end to the discussion and definitely nail your interlocutor. Therefore, a priori no argument has the power to sway someone and make him change his mind. Arguments become secondary, they mainly have a rhetorical function, or are offered just for the sake of a discussion, to share or exchange opinions.

Subjectivism, as we understand it, since this type of concept can have different interpretations, is the fact that the subject is sacralized, in the sense that he reigns as supreme entity of an individual’s world, when the individual becomes an end in itself for himself. Nevertheless, we should accept that some philosophical theories, often based as always on some uncontrolled or unconscious way of being, set the subject as the centerpiece of reality. Major breakthroughs or creative innovations in philosophical thinking have been thus produced, as we can see in Augustine, Descartes, Kant, Sartre and others.

For example the metaphysical experience of Descartes, his revelation of "I think therefore I am" as a grounding evidence, or the "Copernican revolution" of Kant: it is not up to our knowledge to regulate itself on the objects, it is the objects which must regulate themselves on our knowledge or our concepts in order to become objects of knowledge. For our main point here is to identify how an excessive or dogmatic perception of the subject, or an inadequate relation to it, can hinder rigorous thinking, for example in some form of reductionism or crude mental activity.

This is the case for example with what we call "lazy relativism". Relativism can be a philosophical doctrine, where one defends coherently the principle that everything depends on the subject, his desires, feelings and thoughts, as we see for example in the sophist opponents of Socrates. But "lazy relativism" is the complacent attitude that is satisfied with entertaining mere opinions, in a rather impulsive and thoughtless way. Such individuals will then spurt out whatever comes to their mind, without any distance or critical thinking, satisfied with their own petty production simply because they feel that is what they think or believe at

that moment. A dialogue will never for them represent a challenge, the opportunity to rethink their own thoughts, they will simply and compulsively protect and defend their “baby” like a mother would do. Often they will be characterized by a lack of depth and the recourse to utter bad faith, since reason or truth is not an issue for them. In general, they do not engage in any research in the grounding or legitimacy of their opinions, they are not interested in the thinking process.

A second problem is the reductionism of such an attitude, in the sense that reality is defined primarily and exclusively through one’s own self. In a way, this subjectivist thinking can be qualified as an egocentrism, since the only subject that is deemed relevant or interesting is the “ego”: the “me”, that cannot be checked or examined by comparing it to other “me”. Of course, again, we can understand that someone sees his own self as the primary or even the unique concern of his existence, but if this prohibits him from any interest in “otherness”, even though his otherness is considered accessory or secondary, he actually blinds himself from reality, grossly limiting his thinking capacity. Already

because willy-nilly this otherness affects our personal reality. Singularities never stand out on their own, they necessarily interact with other singularities. Thus we see and understand ourselves better through the perspective of this otherness, for example by comparing our own self to other selves, or by setting our existence in its contextual or broader reality. By ignoring otherness, we risk falling into some form of “cognitive autism”.

A third problem is the absence of any transcendental reality, be it in the form of universality, causality, regulatory principles, or even transcendence itself. We here use the term transcendental in the kantian sense of something that necessarily or probably conditions the possibility or the existence of some entity, the most obvious example being the concept of cause, since all that exists comes to existence through some cause or conditions, be it material, ideational, circumstantial, teleological, etc. Again, even if we think that our own person can be conceived as the center of reality, the only presence that we are concerned with, this should not stop us from examining the conditions of possibilities of such presence. A simple example is when we say “I am” or “I

exist”, this necessitates from the standpoint of rigorous thinking to examine what is the meaning of the different concepts utilized, like “I”, “to exist”, “to be”, or examine that produced such a reality. Be it cognitive or ontological, we should investigate the presuppositions implied in such expressions, or at least be interested or curious about them. Any denial or oblivion of such a quest can be called a denial of thinking.

A fourth problem is the denial of objectivity, even though unconsciously we nevertheless use such criteria for producing and determining our judgments. The underlying problem is that the term “objective” is often not well understood. It is periodically confused with other concepts such as “truth” or “certainty”, when they are rather distinct, even though some specific relations can be proposed to link them together. Let us put forward, for the purpose of clarification, some criteria of objectivity that are necessarily used by every one when we want to think or produce judgments. They are “observation”, “experimentation”, “common knowledge”, “argumentation” and “common sense”. These are the most easy and usual ways by which we check the limits of a statement, how we justify it or validate

its content. And when our own “subjective” idea goes against all of these criteria, we will be suspicious about it or even refuse it, as we notice in the scientific process, where those criteria are commonly used in order to legitimize a hypothesis. Thus, denying the usage of these checking procedures means to amputate the thinking process from major operations that guarantee the quality and rigor of its activity, independently of the conclusion we arrive at, even in fine, we decide to ignore those verifications. The main remaining issue is consciousness and nurturing the life of the mind, not the idea of arriving at any kind of final certainty.

Let us here mention the famous sentence of Protagoras, the Greek sophist, that Plato criticizes severely: "Man is the measure of all things". The latter sees in this statement the source of a problematic relativism. By stating the principle that nothing exists independently of the one who perceives it, it excludes that there is any objective reality, external to the subject, thus only perceptions remain as a reliable form of existence. Nevertheless, such an idea can also be interpreted as the affirmation of an anthropocentrism, where man's representation of the world is dictated by his own na-

ture, which could be called a collective subjectivism that could also be conceived as an outline of objectivity.

In the recent « New Age » spiritual context, we notice a new angle on subjectivism. There is now a popular trend of considering that everything that happens around a subject is the result of the actions and the way of thinking of that subject. For example, if one happens to be in an accident, it means that his world vision has led him to it, because he was aggressive to other people or else, and now the reality is responding to his actions. It is mostly the result of spreading of oriental practices, through the idea of karma. There is even a concept of “karmic management” which means that whatever happens to you is an outcome of your previous actions, “seeds” that you planted. In this system others don’t really exist as independent entities, the world is a mere projection, a virtual installation, a hologram. While this perspective can free a subject from a victim position, make him more proactive, since he decides what happens to him, it as well makes him deaf to the outside world. In a way he denies its existence, he feels omnipotent, creating his own reality. This vision as well makes one indifferent to social or cultural processes: if there

is a war somewhere, you cannot do anything for the people who happen to be in the midst of it, because they led themselves there through their actions. Each subject is then on their own, creating their reality that solely depends on them.

Thus, during this practice that we call philosophical consultation, where the philosopher should play a Socratic role of interpellation and questioning of a subject, we invite the practitioner to take a non-subject position. That is to say, he must avoid anything that might be subjective, or bracket his nature as a subject, whether it be his thoughts, feelings, presuppositions, knowledge, existential anchoring, etc., a posture somewhat similar to the "epoche" of the ancient Greece Stoics or Skeptics, which can be defined as the suspension of all judgment. This suspension can be understood in a radical sense, as a state of permanent doubt which prevents one from asserting anything, or as what allows the emergence of a clear and rational thought. This is possible insofar as one avoids any a priori determination in order to let reason operate freely, without ideological or emotional hindrances linked to the existence of a specific and limited subject. One could say that it is a question

of producing an ephemeral and contextual scale of values produced by a subject detached from itself.

Zhuangzi proposes something similar which he calls "fasting of the mind". It is described as: "Unify your will! Do not listen with your ears, but with your intellect. No, do not listen with your intellect, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the intellect stops with ideas, but the mind is empty, it is always waiting. The Way (Dao) gathers only in emptiness. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind." Thus, in these various formulations, the issue is the de-subjectivizing of the subject, making the subject a non-subject, in order to let him have access to that which is beyond it, whether it be reason or some other nobler and more substantial power, and to make him more capable of listening, of clarifying, of understanding. And by thus transforming his own self, the practitioner can invite his interlocutor to do the same.

Strangely enough, this detachment of the subject from itself allows the individual to accept his own self, without self-denial or self-justification. Through the process of de-coinciding with himself, because of the distance engendered, one is less concerned with his appear-

ance, his limits and the judgment of others. The subject can then freely, authentically and straightforwardly say what he has to say, decide what he wants to decide, do what he wants to do, bearing in mind the possibility of modifying his speech and actions, through remembering the fundamental freedom which characterizes its relation to the being. In other words, to accept oneself as a subject, one should be capable of de-subjectivizing himself.

Morality

Morality, or ethics (we will not really distinguish between them in this text), is one of the important branches of philosophical activity. On the ontological level, it raises the question of good and evil, on the practical level, it raises the question of what to do and what not to do, personally, collectively or universally. It is clear that this type of concern is both useful and necessary, in order to guide our existence. Morality invites us to surpass ourselves, to aim for an ideal. Nevertheless, despite this, for various reasons that we will try to clarify, moral concern, or should we rather say moralism, often hinders the work of reflection, the operation of

reason. Moralism generally refers to an attitude, belief or approach that gives excessive importance to ethical issues, often to the detriment of other considerations, such as rationality, reality or tolerance.

Here are some of the motives why we mention morality in our list of resistances to the exercise of thinking.

RIGIDITY

Morals, or moral principles, are often rigid, their formulations are categorical, modeled on the biblical Ten Commandments. We define what is right or wrong, and we have to comply with the rule. This good and this evil easily become absolutes that should not be transgressed. We are not supposed to problematize the nature of good and evil, or to transvaluate the regulating principles that are postulated. Once this good and this evil are articulated, we should conform to it, conceptually and practically, we should not engage in a critical process. Good and evil oppose each other frontally, they do not mix, nor tolerate an intermediary; certainly, there will always be transgressions, because these ideal principles cannot be applied unconditionally, but these transgressions will be either criticized or ignored.

As an example of an alternative to this rigid scheme, the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi proposes a certain "availability", which invites us to perceive and judge everything without rules or presuppositions. He promotes the Dao, the principle of principles, as our only guide, that which makes everything act the way it acts, what may be called a naturalistic maxim. This can be compared to the logos of the Greek tradition, a constitutive reason of being, of thought and existence, a reality that is both ontological and psychic. Strangely, despite the absence of a formal principle, there still exists a morality, of a transcendent nature, because it cannot be articulated as rules of a "positive" nature, that is to say, specified, immediately recognizable and applicable. But the human being generally prefers the latter, he has the impression of better managing better when specific instructions are provided.

DOGMATISM

Often without explicitly admitting it, the holders of morality claim to apply it universally and impose it on everyone, without exception. Any other vision is considered either insignificant or dangerous, whether

it is the morality of virtue or the utilitarian morality, which both tend to impose their precepts or their judgments. So one is not interested in another perspective unless wishing to fight it, and in both cases, one does not really seek to investigate and understand different paradigms. In general, the moralist is an activist and can easily be aggressive about the values that animate him. One can also mention ethics, which some people oppose to morality, as being more conventional and which can be restricted to a specific group, but it seems to us that the problem does not change: one should not question or problematize the "doctrine" in its foundations. In a way, moral pluralism or moral relativism can be considered as an absence of morality. Thus morality promotes a partial or truncated vision of reality and thought. Let us propose again the perspective of Zhuangzi, who explains to us that if man were to abandon his habit of systematically qualifying things as good or bad, desirable or undesirable, then evils, which are the product of intentional actions and charged with very human values, would disappear. The natural evils that nevertheless exist would no longer be considered as evils, but as an unavoidable part of the

course of life, which would allow us to evaluate reality in a clearer and more composed way.

OBSESSION

The principle of "good and evil", the moral obligation that follows from it, has a rather hypnotic effect on the human mind. Once this scheme is integrated, it can easily become obsessive and pervert the whole of the reflection, deviating it behind this specific axiology, sometimes in a forced way. Thus morality can take precedence over aesthetic, epistemological, existential, psychological considerations, etc. The feeling of guilt is moreover one of the most characteristic forms of this obsession, on a personal level, which can modify our way of thinking about a subject or another and even prohibit certain perspectives. And some thinkers, like the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, make ethics a meta-philosophy, that is to say, it takes precedence over the whole of thought and determines it.

CONFORMISM

Morality is often conformist, it originates from tradition, religion, culture, political order or various estab-

lished social patterns, whether it is to form good citizens or "healthy" people who function in the community in a way considered responsible and respectful. Certainly, there can be a more personal morality, or a "heroic" morality, as in Antigone, Socrates or Christ, that is to say a morality that goes against the established codes, which will therefore be more radical and risky. The "moral hero" is ready to risk his existence to ensure the nobility of his soul. This morality is not compulsory, it is free and voluntary, but it is much more rare. The one who acts in this way will either be an outcast, banished from society, or a model for the others, who will follow him or try to imitate him.

It is this conformity that makes the French philosopher Blaise Pascal say that "True morality mocks morality, that is, the morality of judgment mocks the morality of the mind which is without rules." What he calls "rulelessness" is precisely the rejection of established forms, the appeal to something more singular and authentic as corresponding to true morality. The moral principle of the Roman philosopher Augustine is a good example of such a personal morality. He writes: "Love and do what you will". This makes thinking

much freer. For Zhuangzi, "great virtue is not virtuous".

Of course, it is not impossible to think within a doctrinal framework, as we can see in the history of philosophy. Some will moreover affirm, with reason, that willy-nilly it is very difficult to extricate oneself from any paradigm. We can observe, for example, how contemporary Western society, which wants to be free and open, postmodernism ruling, has succeeded in inventing new moral paradigms in order to "guarantee" this open-mindedness. In doing so, a new obligatory morality has been outlined, just as full of "good conscience" and dogmatism as the previous morals that it criticizes in a merciless way, what some call "political correctness", or "philosophical correctness". Thus we periodically arrive at a *punctum saliens*, a crucial and revealing moment, where the moral scheme and the reflexive scheme will collide, when there is a need for the free activity of the thought, necessarily critical, to think the unthinkable. An interesting historical example is that of the Cynic philosophers, whose behavior was the radical antithesis of a "healthy attitude".

ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Morality is anthropocentric, and in this sense it limits the scope of analysis and judgment, centered primarily on human issues. Good and bad are in general not defined as “cosmic” or “natural” issues, they concern exclusively humans, since it is about guiding our actions. Although this is not the case in all moral schemes. For example in China, Confucianism is a humanist philosophy, concerned primarily with human beings, their personal behavior and social interactions, but Daoism defines our actions from the standpoint of the totality of reality, in particular the Dao, the universal constitutive principle, which can as well be called nature, in a wide sense. At the same time, Daoism is commonly perceived as amoral, since it strongly criticizes such fixed moral precepts as advocated by confucianists. A typical example is the issue of violence, often condemned as bad by most moral schemes, when nature is full of violence, an important feature of life. The same thing can be said of sexual activity, often ignored or criticized when it comes to human beings, but freely allowed for animals. Humanity thus becomes a separate reality within real-

ity, making us lose a broader perspective, falsifying the thinking.

CENSORSHIP

Once good and bad are defined, we create obligations: what we should be, what we should do, instead of what we are. This tends to engender a type of wishful thinking, where we deny our own reality, our desires, our limits and our nature. Things have to be in a certain way, they are not acceptable in another way, thus we are bad or others are bad to the extent an individual does not correspond or comply with the established criteria. As a consequence, guilt and shame are common phenomena, even with issues that make no sense from a rational standpoint. And as the Dutch philosopher Spinoza describes it, these “sad passions” inhibit the power of being, and the power of thinking. That is one of the reasons why psychology comes in conflict with morality, since the former has a more naturalistic and less idealistic approach to human functioning and problems. Although this idealism bears an interesting dimension, it commonly entails a rather castrating effect. Although we can oppose to a formal “rational” moral-

ity the idea of a “morality of the heart”, as proposed for example by Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Or the theory of moral sentiments advocated by the Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith. For example his “principle of sympathy”, which designates the affection for others, operating through a logic of mirroring, in which the individual imaginatively reconstructs the experience of another person. Such morality does not abide some obligation, it does not curb our subjectivity, it follows some natural tendency of the subject. We can here oppose Immanuel Kant’s idea that a moral action has to imply an effort, which makes it “counter-natural”. Such presupposition requires a censorship of our existence and our mind, a suspicion towards our own nature, which in spite of the interest of such an attitude can have a perverting and alienating effect. A couple of other significant examples of how morality inhibits reason are how it condemns judgment and curiosity, two crucial aspects of the reflective dynamic. Judgment is hubristic, we give ourselves an illegitimate right, in particular when it comes to judging other individuals. Curiosity is dangerous: one should not explore

reality too much, for fear of dwelling in the obscure, the dangerous, the bad, and be seduced by it.

CONFLICTUAL

Morality, by establishing fixed rules of what can be done and not be done, and attributing a strong merit to its own values, tends to be eristical rather than dialectical: it fosters confrontation rather than dialogue and comparison of ideas. Because of their entrenched convictions, the adepts of such schemes easily become indignant and even worse when their prohibitions are breached. They are emotional, and from their own standpoint their emotions are a priori justified, their anger is even considered holy. They easily presuppose that their end justifies the means, as we often see in human history and in personal behaviors, where self-righteousness is quite frequent, becoming a source of arrogance and conflict. As well, because moral schemes are well defined, they will necessarily confront some other schemes. An interesting example of the issue is how Nietzsche opposes the classic Greek antiquity values of heroism and challenge to the christian values of humility and compassion, until then largely accepted as

hegemonic and unquestionable in the christian world. Although he accepts the idea that different moralities have the “right to exist”, he finds their opposition interesting and useful, a more thoughtful attitude. We could say that the irony of morality, when it criticizes conflict or violence as being “bad”, is itself the source of conflict and violence, through its rejection of otherness. But morality has in general little consideration for irony...

CONDEMNATION

Thinking implies judgment of actions and individuals, others and ourselves, it needs analysis and evaluation, it can bear suspicion and even the stronger action of calling out or accusing someone, but morality easily condemns. The games are done, the case is closed, the deed is unforgivable, the person is bad or evil. We reject or we damn, we acclaim or glorify, there are villains and saints, essentially, irremediably, eternally. Of course, it does not have to be this way, but the nature of morality is very much inclined to those types of conclusions. Condemnation often results in scorn towards people or events: they are not worthy of our attention, we

reject them and ignore them. Thinking about it in an open manner would make us accomplices of the “bad”. Although the glorification of the good inhibits thinking just as much, since there is no room for the devil’s advocate: it would be hubristic and blasphemous.

An interesting example of the issue is presented in the Gospel’s parable of “the adulterous woman”. She has sinned, her life is judged unworthy, she should be killed, furthermore in a violent and humiliating manner. Christ then reminds the vengeful moralists that they are all sinners and thus stops their “finalizing” action. He does not deny the sin of the woman, he is not neutral, he judges her, but he tells her “go and sin no more”. Of course, one might find this injunction ridiculous, first because it is impossible to not sin, since we are all weak sinners, and second, more specifically in relation to this woman, because “As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly”, as is written in the Proverbs. But still, the idea is that nothing is ever “done”, ontologically, psychologically or existentially. Therefore we have to maintain a certain dose of indetermination, which implies existential freedom, and which necessitates the eternal thinking and rethink-

ing of an issue, the constant reevaluation of a posture and of an idea. The definite nature of the condemnation, typical of the moral attitude, inhibits the thinking, since we “already know,” since there is nothing more to think about: we are now satisfied and complacent. Any new information, any contextual change, any internal transformation is considered impossible and uninteresting, not worth examining. Thus, reconciling with “sin”, accepting human finitude and imperfection become unthinkable.

UTILITARIANISM

Unconsciously, morality introduces a form of utilitarianism, which is rather reductive. We generally encounter the residual scheme that we commit good actions because we will be rewarded, and that we avoid bad actions in order to avoid punishment. These rewards and punishments can be of different kinds: social recognition, good conscience, eternal salvation, divine judgment, etc. Such a pattern produces expectations, and discontent if they are not met, a feeling of resentment in the face of a course of action that seems unjust to us, for example when the wicked obtain satisfaction

and seem happy. Such an attitude may seem childish, insofar as reality often does not correspond to our vision of things. We can no longer accept and therefore understand things, because we are withdrawn into our emotional reaction, into our subjectivity. Either we are frustrated, or we want to find explanations at all costs, but these "explanations" are distorted at the base, since they must necessarily fit into an ideological Procrustean bed, into a predetermined utilitarian and calculating scheme. Thus we are deprived of a freedom of thought, we become uncreative, we simply seek to apply our "moral mechanics" on the world and on its dynamics.

INEFFICIENCY

Even though morality has its own economy of salvation, its own utilitarianism, it remains rather ineffective in the concrete. Because of their radical nature, its principles do not conform to the reality of the world and of oneself, morality is not very realistic. Its rules are rather inapplicable in an extensive way. A simple example is the prohibition of lying. For if indeed truthfulness seems a moral obligation, the fact of not deceiving others and oneself, let us admit that it is far from possible

to never lie, nor even desirable. If only to guarantee social peace, which is called "politeness", an attitude considered a sign of good education. We then realize the instability of moral rules, since their application depends on circumstances and intentions, and this instability is an important proof of the inefficiency of moral principles, finally rather unreliable.

Machiavelli advises the ambitious person who wants to obtain or keep political power to forget all moral considerations, because such rules and worries are an obstacle to effective action. According to him, the concern for the "good" is totally at odds with the pursuit and maintenance of power, which is above all a matter of personal and selfish desire. Fear is the surest and most stable means of securing one's hold on society, the desire for survival being the primary motivation of every individual. The only interest of morality, as we often see in politics, is to manufacture image, which helps to convince and manipulate the people, who always remain rather naive, primary and childish. A good example of this is the way politicians almost systematically get indignant about the actions and words of their opponents, a moral veneer that serves their interests by

making their listeners believe that they are the supporters of good, and that the others are on the side of evil. A moral veneer that in fact hides the latent violence of an implacable bias.

There is something sacred in morality, which must not be touched under penalty of being a profaner of these laws erected as a totem. The risk of questioning this statue and its foundations is to disturb public order. And the more fragile this order is, the stronger the appeal to morality is. Social pressure maintains this framework to hold society together and claim some unanimity. Time and habit almost make us forget that it is a human and arbitrary creation, and not a gift from heaven, but we cling like a drowning man to dogmatic certainties. Morality excludes thought from its territory, it is not welcome, it is a risk because it is elusive and unusual, changing reference at any moment. From a more individual point of view, morality is a compass. It indicates what to do and under what circumstances. It ensures an inner balance and we cling to it, we refuse to think about it. Without it, we must experience the emptiness under our feet: no more marked path, it is unbearable. Moral nihilism frightens us, especially for

practical reasons. Thus morality becomes the pretext for not thinking.

Family

The reader may be surprised to find the family as one of the obstacles to thinking, but we seem to encounter this problem regularly. Let us try to identify in what ways and under what forms this can happen. Certainly the family can also be a place where thinking is nurtured and developed, but we realize that too often this is not the case.

Most striking is the opposition between the singular and singularizing act of thinking and the fixed and reductive relationships that characterize family ties. In this sense, the family represents in a condensed and reduced way the relation between the individual willing to think and society at large. The latter operates in general on the principle of the smallest common denominator, that is to say that it invites and even forces the individual to operate on the most banal level. This usually means confining oneself to the obligations, small pleasures and basic rituals of daily life, habits that form and deform the character of individuals. Thus, the person

who wishes to question, analyze and especially criticize, the one who aspires to "big ideas", will undoubtedly be belittled, ignored or repressed in the family cocoon. Simply because he disturbs, because he troubles the established comfort, because he raises problems whose exposure is not welcome. Any group, in order to maintain itself, invites a certain silence on annoying questions, because the issue is to maintain a kind of rather artificial harmony, quite empty and slack, but which offers a feeling of belonging and safety. Certainly, feelings and emotions are a factor of social and relational link, they are cause of attachment, commitment and solidarity, they provide a sort of psychological haven, a consolation, but they are precisely of subjective and primary quality, they do not support the objectification, the challenge and the setting in abyss. Reason somewhat threatens this established order, since the nature and the existence of its links require an absence of distance and reflection, the primacy of an irrational urge. One can find in such gestalt an anesthesia of existential pains, a refuge from the hazards, the pains or the absurdity of the world.

The family can easily become a source of mental fixation, an obsession, mainly through anxiety: we care about the other even more than we care about ourselves, or through fear of losing the control and attachment that we hold so dear. Not to mention the power of guilt, a major source of individual alienation, which can easily be used by some family members as a tool for psychological manipulation. Internal power games generally run through all exchanges, and the family easily becomes a battlefield, often in a latent way, where anger, an expression of powerlessness, spontaneously arises, while unconsciously imposing thought patterns. Thus it naturally inhibits the free creation of personal values.

The pragmatic vision of things, the concern for survival, are relatively hegemonic in the family culture. We are anxious about each other, we want the "good" of each other, we have to weave a bond, it is therefore necessary to be "reasonable", and not fall into the excesses of a disembodied, theoretical or ideal thought, detached from the practical and immediate consequences for the group. The family is agitation and chaos, there is always something happening that needs to be taken care

of, whether it be material, physical or psychological problems. To settle down, to isolate oneself, to refocus on oneself can be perceived as a betrayal. The family is not a place of challenge, one is valued at little cost, considered a full member of an exclusive club only by birthright or marital relationship. One is important by definition, without any effort, even the good-for-nothing of the family that attracts everyone's attention. What is the need to exercise thinking!

The family is often conceived as a fortress, there is "us" on one side, and the "others" on the other, from whom we must protect ourselves, because they do not have our interests at heart, they are mainly concerned with their own. We must hide from them, because "we wash our dirty laundry in the family". In this restricted environment, we can therefore notice a certain xenophobic culture, where the priority is the "well-being" of "our" group, however limited and artificial this ideal may be. None of this invites the thinking to free itself, to envisage great spaces, to escape from its own determinations. Within the family, in the "internal relations" there is a certain obligation of humility, without excluding the tyranny or glorification of one member or

another. The rule is that we must not think of ourselves as "grandiose", we must not be pretentious, after all, we are only a simple member of the family, even if we can be proud of our collective existence, since our family is "very special". The familial myth must be protected at all costs. Boldness is not welcome, we must remember "who we are". No one is "great" when they can be seen in pajamas, sick or tired. Any attempt at hubris will thus be called to order, by a kind of reality principle where one must not "forget me" or "forget us". Zhuangzi uses an interesting parable in this regard. "When the spring that supplies the pond with water dries up, the fish huddle together in the mud. They breathe and slobber on each other to keep a little moisture. It would be better for them if they forgot themselves in large rivers and deep lakes."

Radicalism

An extreme form of dogmatism is the radicalization of thought, or extremism, when a dogma is established as an absolute. When someone is so convinced of his own belief structure that he becomes aggressive toward anyone who ignores or opposes it. "With me or against

me" is the basic structure of such a pattern, which is very common among followers of political, moral or religious canons. Of course, dialogue and reflection become relatively impossible, they are even seen as a threat, since one has to accept the "official message" as it is. Certain themes of popular controversy are thus commonly found in the public space which provoke strong antagonisms, with opposing camps vilifying each other, arguments being put forward only to prove others wrong or to caricature them, rather than to clarify the issues, deepen the understanding of the subject and perceive the limits of each position. Moreover, contrary radical options paradoxically tend to feed their respective rigidities, an instinctive defense mechanism that prohibits the critical and simultaneous examination of the various theses.

Of course, one can defend such a radicality as an alternative to a flabbiness of thought, a lazy relativism, or opposed to a factitious and apathetic neutrality, other forms of resistance to thought. We can also refer to our critique of the dilettante, since radicality implies commitment, a necessary condition for vigorous thinking. Thus we can notice that the resistances to thinking are

polymorphic and dialectic, since diverse opposite attitudes can just as well prohibit the activity of thinking.

Radical thinking is based on a taste for commitment and absolutes, a refusal of the status quo, but it ends up locking itself in its rigidity. It does not question itself because it is often anchored on strong sentiments, such as feelings of injustice, suffering or absurdity, which take up all the space in the mind of the person who experiences it, primarily in an emotional way. The extremist is blinded, he can no longer see anything else, so he clings radically to the ideological scheme with which he identifies. When one buries oneself under one's convictions, it becomes difficult to think. We let ourselves be submerged by an opinion, a vision of the world, so strong and anchored that it is no longer a simple opinion or hypothesis, it becomes a doctrine, a principle, a rule. This belief determines us and becomes our only paradigm, an untouchable perspective, an unshakeable pattern. The problem with such a doctrine is that it is not thought, or at least it is no longer thought. Once it is there, it is not critically analyzed or questioned. It is not problematized, because if one were to lose this conviction, it would feel like losing his own essence, his

own identity. The only way to rethink this doctrine is to make it even more extreme, more radical, unless one becomes exhausted in the long run and weakens its content. The subject becomes fixated, driven by an unshakable faith, which leads, beyond simple disagreements, to conflicts, rebellions, attacks, and even wars in certain broader contexts. Moreover, once one has entered this radical way of thinking, it is very difficult to get out of it. One is no longer able to see differently, the individual does not want to see differently, his existence is determined by his ideology, which he thinks is grandiose and above all is imposed as objective. By not seeing the limits of our scheme, by not recognizing its subjective and arbitrary dimension, by thinking to be in the right and the true, we resist any form of doubt or questioning. Thus, we often feel misunderstood by others; the only ones who understand us and whose thought we legitimize are those who share this conviction, this ideology. On the other hand, one accuses the "others" of not thinking, of being inert or manipulated, of being wrong. In such an ideological group, criticism of the doctrine is generally forbidden: one can only be with "the message" or against it. If one questions "the

message", if he problematizes it, he becomes an enemy. The individual, the group and the message become one. We can take the example of the martyr, who is so convinced that he is ready to die for his cause: rightly or wrongly, there is no such thing as half measures. We can therefore identify a strong resistance to thinking in the context of extremist or radical thought, because once we determine that something cannot not be, there is generally no more room for thought, for detachment and questioning.

Formalism

A passage from the Gospels (Corinthians) warns us against the written word, against the words themselves, as an obstacle to thinking: "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life". In the *Phaedrus*, Plato cautions us as well against the written word, for its fixed and authoritarian side, in opposition to oral dialogue, which is moving and lively, more apt to thinking. Incidentally, for Socrates, the only place worthy of writing is the human soul, because of its divine origin. In legal philosophy, there is an important debate between the "letter of the law" and the "spirit of the law". It concerns

the two ways of conceiving the respect due to the law: either to practice a literal reading, or trying to seize the implicit meaning, i.e. to interpret the text in order to apprehend its intention. By taking an article "literally", there is a risk of not grasping the intention of the authors of the law and therefore of not acting in accordance with their command. Conversely, too much speculation about the spirit of the law may conflict with the text in its original sense, or leave too much room for loose interpretation. Let's take a simple example: there is a law against bigamy. One may conclude from this that it is forbidden to have more than one wife. But a formal reading of the text may claim that it is not forbidden to have three wives, since nothing is said about trigamy.

Here we are again caught between two pitfalls, between Charybdis and Scylla. On the one hand, we have formalism, an attitude that consists in attaching ourselves to the form of things, to their appearance, to their immediate meaning, which is based above all on established codes and conventions. On the other hand, interpretation, the action of explaining the meaning of an object, whether it be a text, an artistic work, an ac-

tion or a phenomenon, by making it say what is not said or given, explicitly and immediately, for example its meaning, its intention, its significance. Indeed, the forms have a reality in themselves, which we must observe, analyze and evaluate, which can be a procedure or a method in itself. But it seems to us that all too often, such an attitude consists in avoiding the work of thinking, which consists, among other things, in taking hold of a content and working on it in order to extract its "substantive marrow", as François Rabelais called it, which implies digging into a text from within. As we see with the law, the fact of interpreting can make us forget the immediate reality of the content, but it seems to us that interpretation touches closely the free activity of thought. While remaining careful not to betray the initial content, which is also part of the exercise of thought, reason is not only creativity but also rigor.

One of the important aspects of the work of interpretation lies in practicing different forms of transposition of a content. The metaphor, which is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is used to indicate something else, an idea, an object or an action, which it does not mention literally, but indirectly or by allusion, by

producing a shift in meaning. The analogy, which is a comparison between one thing and another, usually for the purpose of explanation or clarification. The symbol, when a thing represents or embodies something other than itself, for example a material object that represents an abstract entity. In these different cases, the mind must be alert in order to give meaning to a content by deploying it outside itself, by perceiving it as a simple sign and not as an entity in itself, in order to make this content overflow and amplify it, which exceeds or even transgresses the immediacy of what is given. Such operations make the given content undergo various transformations. Such an exercise makes our vision of the world wider and more flexible.

The work on the context is another interpretative modality, contextualizing or decontextualizing a content, changing its context, in order to examine reversals of meaning, the universalization or expansion of a particular meaning, or the concretization of an abstraction. The subjectivization or appropriation, when one examines the effect of a content on a subject, the relationship to oneself or to others. In a way, this "subjectivization" is part of the reality of this content, the personal mean-

ing it takes on or the feelings it generates in the observer, or its use by a subject or a group: the content then exists as a phenomenon, and not as a reality in itself, isolated. Or the identification of the presuppositions of this content, the recognition of its conditions of possibility, the discovery of the paradigms that underlie it, or the production of hypotheses on the intention that generated its existence, that is to say, speculating on its cause, interpreting its genesis.

The forms are movements, which it is a question of seizing in a process and of making work, and not traces frozen from all eternity, emptied of their interior dynamism, what can generate a too scrupulous respect of the forms and the formalities. A recurrent manifestation of this formalism is found in the recourse to logic, in a rigid and exclusive way. Logic has well determined rules, it does not really create new ideas, since it is a question of extending and combining various propositions starting from postulates and according to established rules, which can be called "analytic thinking". Of course, it can generate a "system", or propose quite useful algorithms, determined procedures convenient to use. But it forbids any transgression, inhibits

any superseding, it is not plastic. For example, it forbids the simultaneous use of opposites, thus limiting the breadth and depth of the propositions formulated. Whereas dialectic, which works on the relationships between opposites, is much freer and more playful, and can generate surprising and innovative combinations, produce astonishing concepts and meanings, which can be called "synthetic thinking". In a way, logic is always tautological, and in this sense it inhibits thought.

Formalism is a style or method in art, music, literature, philosophy, science, etc. that pays more attention to the correct rules, arrangement and appearance of things, than to the deeper meaning and feelings. Let's look at some other aspects of formalism that can be problematic for thinking.

As formalism is concerned with formal rules, it can be dominated by the concern for conventions, such as grammar, spelling or syntax, obedience to codes or established canons, for example on the ethical or aesthetic level, while neglecting somewhat the meaning of things and the interest of this meaning.

Formalism maintains a tight relationship with the order of things, it attaches itself to structures, it fixes

reference points, it formulates instructions, it insists on stability and therefore it is somewhat liberticidal and non-creative.

Formalism establishes a "map", a fixed, schematic and abstract representation that forgets the reality of the "territory". The latter, anchored in reality, is more mobile, more indeterminate, more detailed.

Formalism makes its own conventions and own signs a reality in itself, in order to be able to better control things, a useful but limited and often illusory production.

Formalism imposes an authority, a hierarchy, which directs, orders, authorizes and punishes. Error is unacceptable, which arouses an anxiogenic threat that inhibits individual initiative.

Formalism privileges the technique, the planned gestures, which is often abusively called "scientificity", because one could easily oppose a creative science to a fixed technique. Everything must be justified a priori, the unknown is worrying, risk-taking is not encouraged, the unusual or the singular are not welcome, intuition is suspect. Accuracy takes precedence, approximation is reprimanded, even if it is more fluid, more

functional: one must be certain of what is done, everything must be verified. The rule prevails, the paths must be marked out in advance, not traced through the walking.

On the existential level, formalism is alienating, it instrumentalizes the singular, it deprives it of its power of being, since such an event needs its dose of arbitrariness and divergence.

Formalism feeds on algorithms, mechanisms, procedures, techniques, methods, a whole lexical field which implies sequences of determined actions, in opposition to the freedom needed by the mind.

Formalism inhibits the spirit of initiative, and therefore prevents action. It is concerned with preparation and regulation, rather than action, and it encourages procrastination through an excessive concern for perfection. Although some people feel they are acting by preparing for action, by worrying about acting, in an inefficient and impotent manner. The infinite preoccupation with forms indefinitely postpones the specific action.

Formalism makes us fussy, it is interested in details, it obscures the larger vision. It is not interested in the

state of mind of the subject, it wants to define rather than to reflect. It easily falls into the trap of micro-powers, it is tempted by control and censorship. Thus one can understand how this formalism weighs down thought, reduces it, restricts it and can even annihilate it.

Sincerity

Speech is a fundamental aspect of thinking, since its practice forces us to freely articulate and clarify our ideas. Let us then examine the principle of “free speech” and identify the two opposite forms it can take: “sincerity” and “parrhesia”. Freedom, in its most immediate and common sense, is to let oneself go to what can be called the “lower inclinations”, an uncontrolled, banal and primary aspect of the mind, rather emotional. We can derive from this the idea that true freedom is not a slackening, but on the contrary the assumption of necessity, the fact of assuming reality and of working it. Now, sincerity accommodates itself very well to these “low inclinations”, the subject simply coincides with himself, he desires without ulterior motive, he expresses without further thought his feelings and

his needs. And we can oppose to sincerity the practice of parrhesia, defined as the capacity and desire to say the truth, independently of any other considerations, what can be considered more authentic, since grounded in a more objective reality. Thus the parrhesiast imposes to himself and to others the demands of a higher order principle, to say it and to accept it, to abide by it.

We could easily confuse the “sincere” speech and the “parrhesia” speech, since at first sight, both spring naturally from the speaker, without any calculations nor self-restriction. But as what Plato says about the looking alike of the philosopher and the sophist, their resemblance is like the deceptive one between the wolf and the dog. Let us examine what could be those differences.

Sincerity has a strong subjective component, one states what he “truly” feels, but actually he is not preoccupied with truth, such a preoccupation is not even an issue, it does not cross his mind. His “truth” lacks the demand of thinking rigor and self-examination.

In parrhesia, there is a coincidence between belief and truth, in the sense that the concept of truth goes beyond the limits of the subject, since truth largely transcends

the subject and even discredits it. We can say parrhesia is grounded in reason, even if its expression sometimes does not seem reasonable.

Sincerity is egocentric, self-centered, it is merely concerned with itself, its own presence and the expression of itself. The other is present only as a witness, as a receptacle, or as a source of approval and comfort.

Parrhesia takes into consideration the others, the other is even the center of its action. Not by expecting something from him, but just as the horizon one tries to reach, the faraway place where the message should arrive, without really knowing what will happen there. In this sense, the parrhesiast is decentered, he decoincides from himself, both because of the message itself, that does not belong to him, and as an action, since the other is his elusive horizon.

Sincerity is rather determined by circumstances, it speaks to defend itself, to justify itself, to find a place for itself in a given context.

Parrhesia is driven by an inner sense of duty, it is moved by a "call". It must be said, no matter what the context or circumstances are, even when it is totally out of place, out of order and discordant. It is not im-

mediately provoked by someone else, although it can present itself as a response to a general situation. Parrhesia speaks because what it wants to say has to be said, because truth has to come out.

Sincerity is weak, it often speaks just to defend itself, justify and protect itself, it has something to lose, so it is not courageous. Sincerity fears the other, since it expects something specific from this other. Thus it modifies its speech according to the other person's reaction, it easily abandons its initial intent, its "original sincerity", it betrays its own "truth". It gets scared, but is not sincere about it. But it is complacent with its "new feelings", it will cowardly state "I am sorry you feel this way", an empty speech, rather narcissistic. it lacks integrity and authenticity

Parrhesia is moved by courage, it faces danger. It demands the boldness and even the temerity to speak the truth in spite of hazards. It powers through the gales and storms, it keeps its course no matter what, since his self is not as important as the message it carries.

Sincerity fluctuates, it is unstable, in this sense it is not real and substantial, it is fickle. It floats, it goes up and down, it ebbs and flows according to the circumstances,

it is timorous although it believes at the moment in its own words, but it has no real commitment.

Parrhesia has constancy and substance, it is steadfast and resolute. It is grounded on some fundamental principles that provide it with stability and consequence, since it is not determined by context..

Sincerity wants to bond, to establish human relations, which can be more important than the message itself. It wants to be appreciated, to be recognized, to be loved. In this sense it can easily betray itself.

Parrhesia has no cure for human relations, it even alienates others and disrupts social pacts. The value and importance of its message takes precedence over any other consideration.

Sincerity has immediate value, it is self-grounded, as arbitrary as it is. Its legitimacy is to be “felt”, it does not question or criticize itself. The subject bearing it is self-evident, he represents for himself his own end.

Parrhesia holds a “meta posture”, it relates to some transcendent reality. At a certain point the subject bearing it can even become insincere, putting aside its feeling in order for truth to be told. It is authentic, mean-

ing it has integrity on the level of reason, but it is not sincere since it does not respect its own feelings.

In our comparison, we have visibly taken a bias in favor of parrhesia, which seems to us more favorable to the practice of thinking. But we should still say a few words in defense of sincerity in order to problematize our thesis. In human relations, as a constant pattern, parrhesia can end up being quite aggressive and exhausting because of its radicality, quite uncomfortable on a daily basis. The problem with parrhesia is its compulsiveness, its immediacy, the fact that we are blind to others, to their sensibilities, to their needs, we do not care about the consequences on others of our words and actions. For the parrhesiast, life in society is nothing but pretense and hypocrisy, a rather not conducive attitude to free dialogue. When it is true that flexibility, open-mindedness, is a necessary condition for living together in an authentic manner. For the parrhesiast, his belief coincides with truth, an attitude that can turn him into a prophet. Once one thinks he holds the truth, he becomes deaf to all problematization, blind to any criticism: any disagreement becomes impossible. While sincerity establishes mutual trust and

a certain peacefulness where a reasonable dialogue can take place. Sincerity is a rather bonding attitude, since the partners in the exchange allow the expression of each other's weakness and vulnerability, an important dimension of truthful and rational dialogue. It is based on an egalitarian status, where common sharing is important. Sincerity therefore holds an open dimension in the relation, when parrhesia is rather closed and rigid, since it denies the subject, its nature and its limits, while carrying the weight of a power imbalance. With sincerity, one offers himself to the other as a concrete person, not as a teacher or a prophet, but as a human being, a relation which can propose a more inviting dialogue, allowing a multiplicity of perspectives.

Scepticism

The reader may be surprised that we mention skepticism as an obstacle to thinking, since skepticism is considered a philosophical school, with some names attached to it, such as Pyrrho of Elis, an ancient Greek philosopher considered the founder of this school. We will nevertheless distinguish between philosophi-

cal skepticism and natural skepticism, which we can call intuitive or banal.

First of all, a few words about philosophical skepticism. It can be radical, as in Pyrrho or Hume, or partial, conditional, relative, as in Kant or Montaigne. Ancient skepticism was conceptualized by a series of "tropes", which can be considered as the categories of doubt, the arguments that the mind can invoke against its own truthfulness. Here are some of them. The "Not more", not more this rather than that, which implies a position or a desire for balance of thought between several reasonings. The "Maybe, maybe not", which expresses a non-assertion about the existence of things. The "Suspension of assent" or "Suspension of judgment", which expresses the absence of conviction or position in a controversy, the opposing arguments having equal force. The principle of "indeterminacy", which prevents us from defining something precisely. The principle of "elusiveness", which states that nothing is really comprehensible. The principle of "equality of arguments", since any argument can be opposed by another argument. But we must remember that this approach is not gratuitous, it has a eudaimonic purpose, like other Hel-

lenistic schools of philosophy, for example Stoicism and Epicureanism. It is about reaching ataraxia, the peace of mind, through a certain detachment, a certain equanimity. For this school, the "dogmatists", those who "affirm", that is to say all the opponents of the skeptics, claim an access to the truth, which makes them worried, simply because they do not know how to abstain from judging and therefore fear mistakes. The skeptic therefore invites the subject to "hold back", or to practice the art of dismantling ideas, especially their own.

Let us mention in passing the "Trilemma of Agrippa" (skeptical philosopher) renamed later "Trilemma of Münchhausen", which exposes the impossibility of establishing an absolute truth about anything because any attempt to found knowledge on a solid basis inevitably falls into one of the three following pitfalls. Regression to infinity, since each argument justifying a knowledge must in turn be justified, and this to infinity. Logical circularity, which tries to justify a thesis by using implicitly its own premises, supporting it in a tautological way. Transcendent rupture, referring to an argument from authority or *ex cathedra*, which appeals to a principle superior to the truth one wishes to demonstrate, a

belief which then cannot be criticized in any way. It can be a revealed truth, a belief, or a scientific axiomatic.

Radical skepticism was not followed to any large extent by later philosophers, but we do come across partial forms of skepticism, particularly with regard to religious dogma, especially during the Enlightenment period, when the historical reversal from thinking based on religion to thinking based on reason took place. More specifically, Kant decreed the impossibility of access to the object of knowledge itself, making us dependent on subjectivity and appearance, which played an important role in the derealization of knowledge. In this, he was inspired by the English philosopher David Hume, an empiricist and skeptic, who argued for example that inductive reasoning and belief in causality cannot be rationally justified. According to him, these patterns of thought result solely from custom and mental habit. We can therefore only claim to hold beliefs that are more or less well-founded; nothing can be asserted as certain.

Let us now take a look at the thinking of the "great destroyer" of skepticism, Hegel, who tried to re-establish the legitimacy of a quest for truth, through the discov-

ery of the rules that govern reality. First, it can be argued that even skeptics need to put forward certain principles or ideas in order to move forward, if only the arguments of logic or confidence in our ability to reason, even when articulating propositions that are fundamentally unverifiable. Without such risk-taking, without risking uncertainty, we nip in the bud any attempt at reflection, an extreme prudence for which we pay dearly. Before declaring something to be unknowable, we must be able to know a minimum amount about it. To postulate the frontier of the unknowable is to move beyond it.

Already, what prevents us from postulating the original unity of reality, rather than its fragmentation? What prevents us from taking for granted the coherence between subject and object? What interests us is the fruitfulness of the principle, not its certainty. The multiplicity of phenomena and appearances cannot in fact prohibit the postulate of unity and coherence. The fact that truth propositions are necessarily contextual does not in itself imply that they contradict and prohibit each other, by a simple effort of dialectical thinking. The problem only arises if we deliberately opt for a

truncated and partial schema, not if we approach things from a more complete reality, which takes in the diversity of perspectives, which remains open to the emergence of new insights, and thereby attempts to grasp an invariant to this fleeting and changing multiplicity. This position incidentally characterizes the work of science, more satisfying to the mind than a decree of the impossibility of knowledge. Dialectics does not forbid the demonstration of the limits of any particular knowledge - quite the contrary - but it does forbid the prohibition of thinking. In this way, thinking bets on trust, at the acceptable risk of lack, error and betrayal. Why should we accept the Kantian postulate, which invites us to start from a subject in search of personal truth, rather than the ancient postulate of a primordial cosmos that transcends subject and object? Even if our age takes for granted the hegemony of the self-centered subject. So it is not a question of opposing doubt and certainty, which are just two sides of the same coin, just like truth and falsity, since every idea is in fact incomplete, inadequate as Spinoza would say. Thought is the synthesis of all trial and error. Mistrust cannot be the starting point of thought, nor its driving force.

"The fear of the mistake is the first mistake," writes Hegel. We must plunge into thought with complete confidence; there will always be time to distrust, when the time comes, if this distrust has a reason to exist. This is what Descartes advocates, contrasting methodical, reasonable and reasoned doubt with hyperbolic, systematic and psychological doubt. Initial confidence in immediate sensory perception will even be the necessary condition for subsequent measured doubt: doubt can only be applied to certainty, a commitment that must therefore be primary and radical. Subjectivity will then discover itself as incompleteness, and not as error, i.e. it will still maintain a certain self-confidence. Doubt will then only be a means of access to truth, and not a state of powerlessness of thought, which is what skepticism declares to be, impotent and sterile. Truth thus presents itself as a demand for totalization, openness and the acceptance of infinite diversity, and not as complacency settled in some specific opinion. Appearance, the superficial, the partial, is only a problem if it becomes its own end or its own limit, if it doesn't provide a springboard for thought to soar and progress,

if it closes itself off to any emergence, any obstacle, any objection.

Intellectual availability invites us to accept the instability and fragility of the world and the thinking subject, without abandoning the perspective of the coherence and substantial unity of things. We accept without batting an eyelid the temporary inadequacy of our knowledge, without abandoning our joyful quest for meaning, from relative truth to relative truth, maintaining and surpassing each of these perspectives. The false is false only if we believe it to be true, if we fail to perceive its lack, otherwise it simply offers another perspective, for in the absolute, everything is true, by virtue of its mere existence. The true is in fact constructed from bits and pieces of the false, and is considered true by virtue of its momentary operativity. Whereas the true is waiting to be recognized as false by the continuous operation of reason. It is difficult to presuppose that consciousness will never again be disturbed by any contradiction, for example the simultaneity of true and false, yet it is this confidence that is demanded of us.

Skepticism, which declares the impossibility of knowing, is based on the presupposition of knowledge com-

posed of absolute certainties, which is rightly declared to be impossible. Confidence in thought is restored if we no longer demand such impossibilities of it. Moreover, the rejection of falsehood, the fear of falsehood, engenders a certain dogmatism, a mental rigidity. Alas, we no longer venture down hazardous paths! The being is emasculated, deprived of its power to emerge, quickly bridled and reduced to nothing. How can we claim objectivity if subjectivity does not express itself, how can we rid it of its narrowness if it does not articulate itself authentically? The concern for rigor, the fear of error, forbidding all plasticity. Thus the skeptical subject refrains from asserting, without seeing that he is in fact the mediation of the object to itself. He makes himself the alpha and omega of reality. He ignores the dialectical relationship between himself and the world, he does not perceive himself in a horizon of fundamental indistinction, in the unity of being, he takes himself as a certain evidence, in search of impossible certainties. The thinking subject is nothing but an infinite series of reversals between the true and the false, with ephemeral values, yet without avoiding the perspective of an absolute that alone gives meaning to the relative, even

though in itself it is of little interest. Why do we need to know all the details of the world? Why is it useful or interesting to know the exact number of tree leaves in the forest? Thought finds its usefulness in its operativity, as a tool for appropriating oneself and the world, and not as a claim to total and certain knowledge. So the dogma of "we can't know", which in fact means "we can't know everything" or "we're never certain", is not a promising and fertile posture. Science becomes impossible, since any of its propositions always remains an approximation, awaiting for some further development.

Doubt is then put back in its rightful place, as a controlled tool, and not erected as a radical and omnipotent posture, an attitude that easily becomes lazy and complacent, since it spares us all work, effort and risk-taking, or operates as a relentless censorship that seeks to silence any thought initiative with gratuitous, even dishonest, pessimism. Let's accept the idea that the subject and his thought are elaborated together, through a reflexive process, in a performative manner, instead of taking the subject itself for granted, postponing the knowledge of the thing in itself to the Greek calends.

Doubtless, the skeptic is not sufficiently suspicious of himself, while at the same time prohibiting himself from existing by an excess of prudence. As a result, thought dares not articulate itself, and therefore cannot progress, and the subject annihilates itself, making the unfolding of being impossible. All roads lead to truth, for those who are willing to walk them.

We've dealt with philosophical skepticism, but the most common form of this thought pattern is what we call natural, intuitive or psychological skepticism. For as soon as we think or assert anything, all sorts of objections can arise, almost automatically, likely to scuttle whatever comes to mind. So the temptation is great to forbid any statement, or to erase it as soon as it has been uttered. And if we ourselves don't practice this automatic censorship of our own speech, there will always be someone who will cheerfully take on the task. Strangely enough, doubt, which could be a motor for reflection, is then transformed into an absolute, eradicating all possibility of free cogitation and annihilating any attempt to construct or elaborate a reflection. A state of generalized skepticism invades and paralyzes us. Here, the trap of relativism lurks, sending us back

to "personal opinion", or "all ideas are equal", which restrict our commitment to the articulation of vigorous thought, since every idea will be devalued from the outset. Any path will be invalidated in principle, under the guise of "respect for all ideas". The conclusion is that "truth does not exist", or its corollary, "to each his own", which effectively nullifies any attempt at reflection. More immediately, we no longer dare to speak or write, since the author in us is deprived of any authority. Sometimes, however, some people attribute value to the established, recognized authorities, that elitist club of experts to which they do not belong. They may therefore seek out the company of the "greats", to admire them, in order to fill their own hollowness. Their skepticism applies above all to themselves, as a self-negation of the thinking subject. They cower in unpleasant comfort, forbidding themselves to produce any ideas at all. All risk becomes forbidden, a risk that would be the key to true peace of mind. Only the spirit that ventures forth and thus fulfills itself is nourished in a substantial and real way. As we've seen, it's no longer a question of truth and falsehood - the skeptic's

obsession - but of the simple, invigorating exercise of thought.

Of course, to be fair, we can also make room for what Anglo-Saxons commonly refer to as "healthy skepticism", as up to now we have been describing "unhealthy skepticism". Interestingly, the notion of "healthy skepticism" has no precise definition. It's one of those phenomena that we are supposed to recognize immediately when we encounter it, a kind of self-evident fact. On the one hand, there is naïve, uncritical acceptance, dogmatism; on the other, radical skepticism or hyper-critical cynicism, with healthy skepticism in the middle, like a good-natured wisdom that knows how to keep things in perspective, neither too much this nor too much that. This can be seen as the hallmark of a pragmatism or utilitarianism that seeks above all a certain functionality for thought, while avoiding any radicalism. This "golden mean" scheme may indeed offer a kind of solution to the problem of skepticism, giving pride of place to a kind of well-tempered common sense. However, we may find it somewhat boring, just as we may find it a convenient guide to everyday life.

To conclude, let's retrace the intellectual trajectory of Hume, skeptic par excellence, an interesting case in point. At the end of his quest, he comes to embrace the idea that skepticism is an incurable and devastating disease of the soul, albeit a natural and fatal one, and one that grows with the passage of time. He comes to a deep despair, a dark melancholy. "I begin to imagine myself in the most deplorable condition that can be conceived, enveloped in the blackest darkness, and totally deprived of the use of my limbs and faculties." He "solves" the problem by abandoning reason, "incapable of dispersing its clouds", by returning to what he calls "nature". "Nature itself suffices and cures me of this melancholy and philosophical delirium, either by the relaxation of this disposition of mind, or by some distraction and vivid impression of my senses, which erases all these chimeras. I dine, play a game of backgammon, converse and rejoice with my friends." As we propose, skepticism, in his view, defeats the thinking process, totally devaluing the joyful impulse of thought.

Possession

The feeling of possession, whether it be of ideas, people, objects, or identity, can be a profound obstacle to thinking. Thus, when we feel we own an idea, we become attached to it emotionally. It is no longer just a thought, it is “ours”, it is an integral part of our self, and is therefore endowed with a specific value. This attachment inhibits the ability to question, revise, or abandon the idea, it becomes a form of certainty, a psychological and cognitive retention, which is the reason why many people feel “obliged” to defend their opinions, as some kind of moral, emotional or existential imperative. Thinking requires flexibility, while possession demands a certain rigidity, by preservation, by security, an attachment to certainty.

Possession breeds fear, fear that what is “mine” could be “stolen”, invalidated, criticized, ignored or even lost, a phobia of disappearance or destruction. This preoccupation creates defensiveness, obsession. As a result, rather than being open to contradiction, self-correction and modification, the thinker becomes a guardian, his thinking turns into justification, a protection mechanism. This anxiety generates as well an urge to express

ourselves, a compulsion to speak before “our” idea is forever forgotten.

To possess is to identify, “I”, “me”, “my” and “mine” tend to come together. When a person uses “my” in front of any object, starting with “my opinion”, they are often signalling that their identity is at stake.. Any attack on the object or the idea feels like a personal attack. Thinking then becomes emotionally charged and self-protective, not a search for truth or authenticity. They cannot decoincede a specific idea or property and their identity, as there is no “free space” in the act of possession. The best example is found in the expression "my child," a possessive pronoun that seems to justify everything, replacing any rational argument.

Ownership engenders stagnation. Once we possess an answer, we stop seeking better ones. The feeling of having “arrived”, the fascination with our “secretion”, prevents the dynamism of thought. Possession interrupts the dialectic process, the self-reflexive movement, the continuous process of mind, and turns thinking into dogma. In the same fashion, the process is halted by an inhibition of dialogue, as possession isolates. Dialogue requires shared space, open exchange, mutual

vulnerability, when possession individualises, encloses, and defends. The person who "owns" knowledge rarely listens, as he already "owns" the truth. He can even be accused of attempting to colonise the other, as the desire to possess extends beyond ideas to persons: we want to obtain the other's agreement, recognition, loyalty, and even love. This colonising tendency corrupts thinking by subordinating truth to domination.

Possession fosters a sense of moral superiority. The possessor believes not only that they detain something which makes them better, but that they have earned it, they deserve it, they are entitled. They even sacralise their property, as a form of symbolic self-survival. This moralisation easily leads to arrogance, a belief that others are ignorant or unworthy, and thus shuts down curiosity and genuine engagement, although it can take a "soft" form of arrogance, condescension, through the use of knowledge or rhetoric. Thinking is then instrumentalized: when thought becomes a tool to protect possession, whether of status, ideology, or belonging, it ceases to question itself, it becomes a weapon, not an inquiry.

To possess is to freeze, when thinking is mobile, temporal, transitional. Possession aims to stabilize, to maintain the status quo, it wants to conserve things as they are. The thinker becomes a curator of the past rather than an explorer of the present and the future. It wants an immobility in time. Feeling that one possesses the truth is a safeguard against the torments of uncertainty. Nevertheless, true thinking thrives in the interplay of possibilities. It asks, doubts, and reconsiders, it can abandon and relinquish. Possession ends that process prematurely, in favour of a forced control, it provides an illusion of mastery.

The notion of “mine” functions as a rhetorical shield, often used to shut down inquiry or deflect critique. Coupled with the modern obsession with “boundaries”, those boundaries defining my “little kingdom”, the private area where I cannot be challenged, where absolute respect is required. It creates a sacred zone beyond questioning, where no further dialogue is permitted. Saying “it’s my decision” or “it’s personal” ends the conversation by appealing not to reason but to privacy. When an argument feels weak or desire unjustifiable, possession masks vulnerability with authority. It replaces justifi-

cation with a deed of ownership, turning subjectivity into a final verdict. In this way, “mine” becomes the last refuge of thought avoiding itself.

Possession, contrary to the common illusion, far from empowering us turns us into the “possessed”. The more we own, the more we are owned, not by others, but by things themselves that we claim to possess. As Zhuangzi warns, we become “things for things”: servants disguised as masters. Our attention bends toward maintenance, protection, fear of loss, comparison, status. In this state, thought no longer flows, it calcifies, trapped in function and fixation. True thinking requires detachment, not as renunciation, but as an inner freedom, the only true sovereignty. Possession corrodes this freedom by tethering the mind to the external, making us confuse accumulation with understanding.

Therefore, possession is about control, while thinking is about exploration. Where one seeks to keep, the other seeks to play and understand. The feeling of possession is thus not merely a distraction, it is the antithesis of thought. Thinking and creativity require mental space, but those who are eager to possess cling to objects and saturate their psyche, like a cluttered house.

Thinking, what for?

This was a list of reasons why we are reluctant to take the time to exercise our thinking. Each person will recognize his own symptom, or symptoms, if he takes the time to think about it and work on it. But of course, we will always encounter someone that will innocently object that he does not see the necessity of developing such thinking skills, in view of the fact that it is a challenging and tedious task. Thus, in the guise of a conclusion, since we have nevertheless to accept such a challenge, let us give some reasons why developing our mental capacities seems useful and necessary. Let us explain why developing our thinking capacities is crucial for numerous aspects of personal growth and societal development. In a way, it seems ludicrous that we have to produce such an apology, but at the same time it provides an occasion to rethink the obvious, and therefore clarify it.

16 REASONS

There are numerous reasons why thinking skills are important to develop.

PROBLEM SOLVING: Enhanced thinking skills enable us to solve complex problems more effectively, whether in our personal lives, our jobs, or in broader societal contexts.

DECISION MAKING: Improved critical thinking leads to better decision-making, as we are able to evaluate options and consequences more thoroughly and make choices based on sound reasoning.

CREATIVITY: The development of thinking capacities fosters creativity, which is essential not just in artistic fields, but in scientific innovation, personal life and professional activities.

PLASTICITY : Thinking practice implies the capacity to problematize, to look at issues and ideas from different perspectives, in order to avoid rigidity of the mind and not get stuck in fixed schemes.

LEARNING EFFICIENCY: Sharpened thinking abilities help us learn new information more quickly, understand it better, and integrate it more effectively with what we already know.

COMMUNICATION: Clear and logical thinking enhances our ability to communicate effectively, articulate our ideas more precisely and consciously, and better understand the perspectives of others.

ADAPTABILITY: In an ever-changing world, the ability to think critically and adapt one's thoughts to new information or situations is a key component of resilience and adaptability.

INFORMATION ANALYSIS: With the vast amount of information available today, the ability to analyze and critically evaluate this information is essential to distinguish between what is credible and what is not, what is useful and what is not.

SELF-REFLECTION: Thinking skills help us to reflect on our own beliefs, values, and behaviors, leading to personal growth and self-improvement. This allows

us to reconcile with ourselves, and grapple better with the meaning of our life.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: Informed and reflective thinking is critical for active and responsible civic participation. It enables individuals to engage more efficiently with societal issues and contribute to the democratic process.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION: Effective thinking helps to de-escalate conflicts by enabling individuals to approach disagreements rationally and empathetically, working towards mutually beneficial solutions.

PEACE OF MIND: The practice of thinking allows us to evaluate problems and issues more peacefully, to examine events more rationally, which prevents us from unnecessary dramatization and suffering. This capacity to relativize difficulties empowers us, rendering us more stable and equanimous.

JOY: Thinking is joyful, in opposition to worrying. The former is free, deliberate and productive, while the latter is anxious, compulsive and sterile, a strong pro-

clivity in many people. Reason fosters a lively mental state, preserving us from falling in some type of painful routine, in repetitive mental patterns.

BEAUTY: There is a powerful aesthetic dimension in the usage and contemplation of reason. We can find more significance or resonance in daily events, we can better appreciate the multifarious facets of reality, and it provides us with an access to transcendence, to the sublime.

FREEDOM: Our thinking power is our primary access to freedom, since we deliberately determine our own mental state, deciding the way we look at world events and our own existence, in opposition to falling into the psychological trap of powerlessness and victimhood.

DECENTERING: There is a strong egocentric instinct in the human mind. Reflexive activity enables us to take distance from ourselves, from our patterns and beliefs, by considering multiple perspectives, opening up to the outside world and turning towards others.

CONSCIOUSNESS: Thinking allows us to be more aware of the reality of the world, of others and ourselves, to evaluate more adequately the available information on all subjects, without being too affected by diverse emotional or cognitive bias. Overall, developing our thinking capacities equips us with the tools to navigate the complexities of modern life, to continue learning and growing, to live peacefully and to contribute positively to society. But we should be aware that very often, for many people, the reflective activity is not a priority, for a variety of reasons already mentioned.