

Wisdoms of Humanity

Buddhism, Paganism, and Christianity

Daniel Dubuisson

Translated by Seth Cherney



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Wisdoms of Humanity

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And if one were to ask me what I consider the importance of this last factor in particular, my response will only be, after having finished consciously reflecting on it, that this importance is very great.
Max Weber

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INTRODUCTION

Life on earth is quite difficult, you know. One is attacked from all sides, and danger follows our steps. (Words of a Nahuatl shaman recorded by Michel Duquesnoy)

And it did not please heaven that I live among those of the fifth race, nor that I died earlier, nor that I was born later. For the iron race is now. They will not cease to suffer labours and misery during the day, nor to be consumed by the distresses that the gods will send them. At least they will find some goods mixed in with their evils. (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 175–79)

A painful lot was created for every man, and a heavy yoke is upon the sons of Adam, from the day they come forth from their mother's womb until the day they return to the mother of all. (Sirach 40:1)

Vita misera est, mors incerta est. (Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, VI, 11, 19)

The days here below are short and evil, full of grief and distress. Man is defiled here by many sins, running after many passions, shaken by thousands of fears, burdened with thousands of worries, carried to and fro by curiosity, seduced by a mass of vanities, surrounded by errors, broken by labours, oppressed by temptations, irritated by pleasures, and tortured by poverty. (Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, III, 48, 2)

THE OBJECT OF WISDOMS

You, the reader should be aware right way that the one of whom we will unceasingly speak on these pages is in some way you, if you will kindly pay some small attention to what is happening in you right now, as you read these lines. This simple and routine experience, of reading, clearly engages numerous processes (visual, psychocognitive, neurophysiological, affective, mental,...) that are undoubtedly varied and complex, and whose unity and cooperation are guaranteed by the necessary presence of an administrator that controls the process and gathers its results. This is the consciousness, as a watching and reflexive administrator of the 'I'. Although it is not at this moment aware of everything that is occurring in your 'body' and your 'spirit', according to the terms of an outdated dualism, it is nonetheless lucid and active, and by this presence it is you alone who are also there, at this moment, present to yourself and to the world. Thus one habitually, and correctly, says, 'I read', and not, 'Numerous physiological, nervous, intellectual, and mental processes are currently unfolding in this biological system, and with their intimate cooperation, there is an attempt to decode a linguistic expression.' Such a formula is laughable, simply because it dissociates the multifunctional process of reading from the synthetic conscience of the reader.

This subjective appropriation appears to be indisputable. Could one come up with another that would be more certain, more obvious? It is surely you, and you alone, who is reading right now, and all the activities that depend on this act only occur in you, and initially are of interest only to you. Besides, this time spent reading belongs only to you, and it is you yourself who will remember it as well, perhaps even until your death.

Is this enormous and immediately experienced evidence truly unified? Is it, in other words, so clear and indisputable as we have just said? One will undoubtedly respond in the affirmative if one is satisfied with this spontaneous and superficial impression, similar to all of those that make up the daily bread of our existence. But it is also possible to not rest with this first, assuring impression, for example, by asking, what is this interior 'I', this consciousness that is presently reading? And how could I ever know what I am outside of it, since

I may even be something that is distant from it? Has it always been immutably there in the same reassuring form? Or does it change? Is it solid and stable, or does it constantly risk being deformed, being disturbed, or deteriorating? What is it made of? On what does it nourish itself, on which sensations and thoughts? On what is it founded? Is it maintained like a dynamic process, or does it belong to a fixed structure? How did it come to be, if it did? Does it exist outside of 'actualizing' processes, such as, in our example, that of attentive reading? And, in this case, does it change, does it lessen, or does it always remain the same?

If one inserts such uncertainties into the heart of this reflection on what is at once the ultimate and central element of human personality, another perspective immediately imposes itself, bringing its own set of interrogations with it that are no less troubling. Is the principle of this consciousness the same in all people? Has this principle always been the same, or has it varied throughout history? Further, what relations, if any, does it have with all or part of the group of the individual beliefs, customs, and practices that make up a culture? Is there a series of profound functional affinities between the zones of my most intimate or personal 'I' and these cultural aspects that are more specifically dedicated to its constitution and preservation?

Is not our consciousness, to which our perception and perhaps even the substance of our 'I' is reduced, an ever fragile conquest and a never-ending task whose result remains forever uncertain? Painful trials of existence, bodily sufferings, affections of the 'soul', and the prospect of death help maintain, and even aggravate, this interior fragility. In this case, we would have to admit that both the ancient Western and Oriental wisdoms that seek primarily detachment, self-mastery, serenity, *apatheia*, and ataraxy undoubtedly understood that the unity and cohesion of the 'I' were strengthened by these abilities, but that they were nonetheless provisionally acquired, only by certain individuals, and on the condition of submitting oneself to difficult effort that would seem even more unbearable to us today.

The question here will then primarily regard the interior person, our 'I' and our consciousness, situated in the heart of our self. The sometimes indirect clarifications that we will borrow from these ancient disciplines and schools of wisdom will only serve the purpose of manifesting these aspects better.

One can understand that these questions are curiously ambivalent due to the small amount of discomfort that they provoke. On the one

hand, they are something with which we are, or believe ourselves to be, completely familiar. What is there, for each of us, that is closer, more tangible, more obvious than our 'I', since this 'I' (without completely giving way to the tautology on which common sense thrives) is nothing but our self? Now, we have an immediate awareness of this 'myself', which is confirmed and maintained by the firm perception of our body in the world. How else would it be possible to stretch our awareness to the point that it becomes aware of itself, in some way the awareness of the awareness of our self, something that would presuppose an immediately superior administrator?

From another perspective, in reading these lines, you might feel at least something like a worry or an irritation. Certainly, you are there, at this moment, present to yourself, as real as the world that surrounds you. Nonetheless, can you forget the fact that yesterday—as well as the day before or a month ago—after some completely ordinary problems, this certitude seemed less clear, as if your 'I', suddenly less confident, had become vulnerable? Have you not sometimes thought, with a bit of fear, that these minor alterations could, by remaining and aggravating themselves, provoke a collapse or break up of your personality? Does not insufficient sleep or a glass of alcohol too many sometimes suffice for a deterioration of this vital certitude? Do not these alterations, with their continual and painful manifestations, require us to adopt a more nuanced perspective?

To the common and so reassuring vision of a human subject endowed with a firm and solid 'I' whose sovereign consciousness delineates its reassuring silhouette,¹ it is perhaps time to oppose, first of all from the psychological perspective, the alterations and modifications

¹ Must one specify that this appeasing image is itself a cultural fact, and the result of a slow historical process whose primary function is to provide an ideal to the disoriented consciousnesses that we so often possess? One could obviously find, in other civilizations, other images that are just as ideal, and no less indispensable. Alterity and the inalienable part of the other, far from only concerning the exoticism of humanity's uses and customs, extend to the most intimate fibres of one's existence. If the consciousness and consistency of the 'I' are never definitively acquired, definitively constituted, if they depend on a daily basis on the conditions of our life, which include the never-ending dialogue that they maintain with the elements of our culture, should one not consider them as well as the product of history, and not only of their personal history? A person does not exist, but rather continually becomes, and a person only exists on this precarious and uncertain condition. In this regard, a person is doubly determined by history. First of all, as common sense complacently repeats, insofar as a person is the actor whose ideas, values, and beliefs have never stopped evolving and modifying throughout time; but also, and perhaps more essentially, insofar as a person

of consciousness that never stop menacing the unity and coherence of this same 'I'. One can add to this, in the anthropological perspective, the instability, malleability, and fragility that are constitutive of individuals, who are henceforth considered entities to be constructed and preserved, and no longer autonomous individuals that are each endowed a priori with a solid core that would avoid or transcend history. To these one could finally add, in the historical perspective, the various 'techniques' (of the body, the spirit, the breath, the soul...) that every culture has patiently elaborated into its 'wisdoms', in order to fight against the threats of entropy and disintegration. There is no decisive reason that would require us to recognize anything but a constitutive and immutable fact of humanity and its cultures in this three-fold observation.

We will begin by dispelling this in the first part, by turning to an error that undoubtedly contributes to minimizing the importance of the question that we treat here. Although it is all too easy to observe that our ordinary mental life is the seat of disturbances that trouble our consciousness and alter our personality, there is a strong philosophical trend (which is symbolized by the names of Descartes and Kant, and which as continued in various forms until today) that grants perfect consistency and stability to the subject. To this, one can immediately oppose the refined analyses of Pierre Janet and Ernesto de Martino, the discerning remarks of Marcel Proust, and the original reflections of David Hume. We will complete them by recalling some of the arguments that found the Buddhist anthropology that inspired Claude Lévi-Strauss in his definition of the *naked man*. In regard to this prestigious school of Oriental thought, we must firmly remind ourselves that there is no decisive reason nor any epistemological requirement that would require a reflection on humanity to base itself exclusively on philosophical ideas that were developed in the West. The West obviously does not enjoy the exorbitant privilege of being the only one to speak of humanity, or to claim to have its exact definition. What others have said on this subject merits our complete attention, and also corrects certain opinionated tendencies that prompt us to consider that the human person necessarily coincides with what we Westerners have said and thought

is, in what is most intimate to his or her being, a place that history works on: a person is a subject engaged in history as well as a subject constituted by history.

of it. This deep-seated tendency definitively constrains the discussion to our own limits, something that clearly will never suffice to make them either objective or infallible.

These opposing points of view, which were conceived by European philosophy, psychology, ethnography, literature, or even some of the more daring constructions of Indian thought, should alert us and lead us to not consider the questions on the consistency of the 'I' and the unity of consciousness as solved or secondary. They have been the object of different conclusions, that have opened up a corresponding number of different perspectives. One could undoubtedly consider, for example, that the Cartesian and Buddhist systems are those that have left the two least compatible conceptions. But which model does one use to compare their respective ontologies? And what anthropologist (besides Lévi-Strauss) would dare to recognize the minimal intellectual debt to the Enlightened One?

In the second part, after having evoked some of these pagan or Oriental wisdoms (Stoicism, Buddhism, yoga) at the beginning in order to better understand their respective mental 'techniques', we will compare them to the spiritual exercises that Western Christianity developed in the classical period, in relation to its 'new' concept of the individual soul. We will quickly leave its theological version, particularly the Thomistic aspect, behind, in order to show that, outside of these educated rationalizations that are reserved to a certain kind of speculative work, this Christian soul metamorphosed following a path parallel to that of modern individualism. It was the object, if one allows us the neologism, of an intense *psychologization*, by gathering around it the group of personal experiences that we today globally attribute to our affective and mental life. This Christian culture, centred on the soul as an indispensable intangible reference and foundation, transformed into a culture of interior life. In turn, it was founded on a body of so-called spiritual techniques, which were, however, first of all practical and efficacious. Thus, in examining and analysing these spiritual techniques,² we

² This examination will concern texts that could only be addressed to a cultivated public. This is one of the limits of this study, that nonetheless reconnects to a well-known historical and sociological situation. This 'concern with self', insofar as the search for an interiority whose grain becomes ever more refined, was in the beginning that of the 'virtuosos', mystics and religious, and certain members of the privileged classes. It will nonetheless be possible, in the third part, to show that popular wisdoms were also concerned with reinforcing and conserving the unity of the person.

will never lose sight of their most obvious pragmatic objective: to discipline, unify, order, and calm interior life which, without them, would remain subject to continual troubles and disturbances. It is thus under the guise of Christian myth (the existence of an all-powerful God, the sanctification of the body, the immortality of the soul, expectation of a supernatural afterlife, the retribution of merit...) that this profound metamorphosis, which never had anything but extremely human causes, took place. This will be confirmed by the examination of some principal works from the period of *devotio moderna* (including *The Imitation of Christ*, composed circa 1420) until the French Revolution. This fruitful period saw the flourishing of the 'century of the saints' as well as some of the major works of European spirituality and mysticism (Ruysbroeck, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Saint Teresa of Ávila, Saint John of the Cross, and Saint Francis de Sales).

Since the soul, while conserving its ideal status as immortal spiritual principle, also became the nucleus of a certain type of mental life that was more and more individualized, it gathered around itself, so to speak, the majority of difficulties and problems that emerge with interior life as a whole. It became a luminous nucleus. This gloss and displacement of an intellectual concept at the heart of psychological life could not but be slow and gradual. These displacements, however, could not occur except through the parallel development of modern individualism, which they undoubtedly helped to develop and reinforce. In this regard, the reference points of traditional chronology which situate the appearance of this phenomenon at the Renaissance (Montaigne's egotism, Protestant reform and ethics, the practice of confession and the examination of conscience, pietism, neo-Stoicism,³ and the development of both the critical mindset and introspection) also apply here.⁴ One can say that the soul, or rather its psychologization, was one of the most efficacious mechanisms in support of this evolution, or that this evolution used, as it was undoubtedly as much cause as effect.

Around this soul, this immaterial and unreal point (which could have simply remained an impersonal poetic chimera), and undoubtedly because it possessed these two invaluable characteristics, the

³ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 159.

⁴ See Mino Bergamo, *L'Anatomie de l'âme (de François de Sales à Fénelon)* (Grenoble: J. Million, 1994), p. 15.

modern Western version of individual interiority was established. It is there, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (which certainly does not mean that things had not begun before nor that they did not continue after) that an important (undoubtedly the most essential) part of 'our' interior space was constructed and modelled.

One will likewise see that the relation to God, and God Himself, underwent a similar evolution. It is because this relation was lived in the form of a passionate and exclusive love that it also contributed to forming and enriching this original type of interior life. God was further clothed with a personality endowed with 'psychological' characteristics, for which one vainly sought theological justification. To the completely theoretical transcendence of God was added, without denying this first, an even more explicit and visible human dimension in the person of Jesus Christ.

After having reflected on the perspective of humanity (part 1) and that of pagan and Christian wisdom together with their mental 'techniques' (part 2), we will then develop part 3 from the perspective of cultures, by formulating a hypothesis about them: Could they, endowed with this infallible instinct that is so often fitting for collective creations, not have had or continue to have as their primary preoccupation (partly without our awareness) the constitution and preservation of the human person, of human interior integrity and harmony? Did they not develop techniques (of the soul, the spirit, the body) for this that, under their stoic allure, were perfected throughout the centuries?

We will not hesitate here to speak of the wisdom, and even the profound wisdom, of cultures. For these, regardless of what has been said, had an extremely elevated sense of humanity, of our measure, our needs, our weaknesses, and our failures. They all worked towards this end without rest. This is why they all resemble each other so much, while remaining so dissimilar. This preoccupation that they had, and never ceased having, appears to us as more essential, and undoubtedly more ancient, than those habitually called 'religious'. Despite the importance of concepts and facts that normally belong to the domain of high spirituality, the 'religious' will not appear as a necessary explanation nor as a fundamental category.⁵ We rather state that it is insofar

⁵ We have shown, in *The Western Construction of Religion, Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), that the pretensions of

as the religious itself is a historical creation, a particular cultural formation, that Christianity necessarily had to interest itself in the resolution of the problems that this 'interior life' poses. Further, are the techniques that it develops for this end similar, functionally similar, to those that one observes elsewhere, and in particular in atheistic or agnostic wisdoms? Its own wisdom is inspired by the same presuppositions about both the intrinsic fragility of the person and the sufferings that are inherent to the human condition. These analyses will prompt us to recognize in the elements that compose this remarkable cultural whole something much greater than a fortuitous and happy encounter. This can already be seen simply by considering their admirable complementarity and great efficacy. The Christian soul and its techniques cannot be seen as the approximate result of an ingenious *bricolage*. This whole is undoubtedly made possible by something deeper and more premeditated, from this famous 'wisdom of cultures'. It is because Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: 'We feel that even if all of the possible scientific questions found their response, the problems of our life would not have even been lightly touched',⁶ that we would dare to add after him today that these 'problems of life' have been their principal preoccupation. If nothing hinders applying the famous Proustian principle of multiple ends⁷ to human societies, one must then make the effort to recognize that human cultures had to, among other perhaps less prestigious objectives, attempt to find solutions for these 'problems of life'. Among the first of these problems is what we have just evoked, and to which we will refer here with expressions like 'spiritual exercises', 'disciplines of interior life', or 'techniques of the soul'.

The elements that we have considered indispensable to reunite, in order to illustrate this unusual manner of looking at culture, come from known domains that are even familiar to some. On the other hand, the configuration in which they will be presented here will be more original, because it intertwines psychological facts from com-

this religious domain to speak in the name of humanity were themselves an indigenous creation, proper to Western Christianity, and more specifically to the modern history of religions that reinterpreted so many ancient theological prejudices in its own favour.

⁶ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Eng. tr. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) VI, 52.

⁷ Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1954), t. I, p. 938.

pletely ordinary experience (and to which all will be able to, for this reason, refer without difficulty) and certain considerations about the human person and the human condition that come from the great wisdoms. One will see that these two domains, one trivial, the other prestigious, far from being unaware of each other, have never stopped dialogue and collaboration. This is why, we repeat, the techniques and exercises that interest us later gain nothing by being called religious, something that is usually done by following a banal prejudice by which all these techniques (asceticism, contemplation, meditation, etc.) are 'spiritual', and thus based in the 'religious'. At the price of a small separation that breaks this impeccable circle that is closed on itself, we will instead look at these various exercises as indispensable auxiliary 'techniques' that were thought up by the wisdoms in order to offer their followers the means for mastering, disciplining, ordering, and unifying their interior life. The human person, living in this world, is certainly the first and only who is concerned by these stoic techniques: asceticism or at least frugality, detachment, disciplined lifestyle, firm belief, moral rectitude, examination of conscience, solitary meditation, concentration exercises, contemplation, silent prayer.... The fundamentally anthropological vocation of the wisdoms will then appear to be undeniable and absolutely decisive in their definition.

This last point will require an extremely precise clarification, because the human sciences have taken up the habit, at least since Émile Durkheim, of neglecting this intimate and personal dimension, as if it were as detestable as its object. They instead accentuate humanity's collective representations, mentalities, conceptions, or beliefs, which were rehabilitated, and then analysed and interpreted. There has been an effort to understand their genesis and the reason for their existence, always from this impersonal perspective, however. This has been done so much and so well that the studies on these aspects finished by occupying the domain of the human sciences, but in doing this, they wound up neglecting and forgetting the person itself. Through economizing, prudence, and conformism, these sciences have preferred to place the question of the human person between parentheses and act as if the person exists as a certainty, endowed with a number of stable intellectual capabilities, first among which one finds this deep-seated tendency to live anonymous and collective representations. They did not choose to ask what the human person is in final analysis, if it is in fact endowed with a solid internal organization, and, if not, how it engages to preserve the unity and coherence of its 'I':

The simple imagined that the large dimensions of social phenomena are an excellent occasion to penetrate further into the human soul. They should instead understand that it is in descending into the depths of an individuality that they might have a chance to understand these phenomena.⁸

The human sciences thus (consoling) often neglect the most interior dimensions of the human person. They have preferred to recognize in them an assembly that is secondary in any case, because it is subjective and also subordinated to the various elements that enter into the constitution of any hierarchized social organization. This organization is considered as the most essential fact and thus as what is its own end.

As we will show, this last view is as inaccurate as it is incomplete, which is another way of saying that individuals always have a more vital task to accomplish (the construction and preservation of their 'I') in service of which they enrol their cultural creations. These cultural creations will prove here to have a greater, more encompassing role than what is habitually granted such creations when they are reduced to the simple rank of contingent superstructures. Sociologists would undoubtedly reject admission of such a preeminence of cultural facts. This awareness would require them to recognize that society (its hierarchical organization, its statutes, its powers, etc.) do not represent the supreme and ultimate authority that encompasses the totality of human activities and preoccupations. For it is only on the condition of ruling everything, of subsuming the totality of human activities and of not referring to anything but itself that the 'social' of the sociologists has the chance, in their eyes, of remaining ontologically pure. For who would deny, for example, that the multiple criteria that any of us habitually maintains in order to define our own 'social situation' (name, descendance, function, status, prestige, powers, convictions, ethos or lifestyle, etc.) at the same time contribute a considerable part of our identity, and that this in turn intervenes in the process that culminates in the possibility of self-awareness? Now, the dangerous situations that self-awareness must confront and to which it must adequately respond come from the very nature, itself precarious and unstable, of our 'I'. The requirement, for any individual, to possess a personal identity does not, then, concern only 'social existence';

⁸ Ibid., t. 2, p. 330.

behind this social existence, and undoubtedly more essential than it, is the very possibility of a 'life', that is, of an individual destiny.

Thus, with unquestionable constancy and obstinacy, the human sciences (poorly named under the circumstances) have almost always turned away from the human person, as if they were afraid to confront the unending interrogations that arise from its singular condition. They have preferred to focus on the study of wholes or groups that cover them, consolingly abandoning everything that concerns the individual's interior life, which is considered too unstable, subjective, and 'sentimental'. This is why the study of these interior experiences returned, without conflict or opposition, to the global conceptions of mental life, such as Freudian or Jungian theories. From this comes the incomparable success of these two theories. Their hegemony on this 'interior' realm has become exclusive and incontestable. This does not make their views any less restricted. One can remark that, for example, when confronted with the violence of the impulses of desire, Freudian *doxa*, admittedly obsessed by its principle of pleasure, imagined everything except that one can attempt to discipline them. Important ancient Western and Oriental civilizations have, however, built upon this ideal of detachment and complete self-mastery to form a means of affirming the liberty, or better, the liberation⁹ of the person. This represents an irreducible difference of perspective—two manners of envisaging the person that are more ignorant of each other than in confrontation. One will thus not be surprised to discover, as the path progresses, that it will often be possible to economize on reference to one of these vast contemporary theories of the unconscious, while we will instead rehabilitate the concepts of will and effort.

This shift in orientation and perspective is perhaps called to modify the habitual understanding of the expression of 'human sciences', to finally take it literally.

The retracing of the history of a certain form of consciousness, a certain manner of conceiving and constructing our 'interior' life, remains a difficult task, since what is in play, self-awareness, is an 'object' that comes from a domain for which it would be proper to invent something similar to the humanities. It is also a difficult task in the sense that this 'object', although it is so evanescent and hard to understand,

⁹ 'My bonds were broken', (Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, IX, 1, 1).

is no less historical because of this. Already immersed in a temporality that disorients and frightens us, we cannot find any support except in our fragile and ephemeral cultural creations. It is, however, in this pathetic observation that the only destiny to which we can lay claim appears.

PART ONE

CERTITUDE OR FUTILITY?

For the person is not a simple and unique state, a primitive fact, an immediate datum: It is mediated, constructed, and complex. It is not an immutable category, co-eternal to man—it is a function that has been elaborated in various manners throughout history and that continues to be elaborated before our eyes.... The unity of the person is never complete or initial; where it exists, it is the result of effort. The history of its contents is varied; they are not all as old as each other, and their characteristics have changed much. (Ignace Meyerson, *Problèmes de la personne*, p. 8)

Now, among these ideas that are in me, other than that which allows me to see myself, for which there can be no difficulty here, there is another that represents a God, others corporeal and inanimate objects, others angels, others animals, and others, finally, other men like myself. (René Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques*, p. 109)

The absolute unity of the 'I' is a metaphysical conclusion, perhaps true, but which must correspond to facts and not impose itself on them. (Pierre Janet, *L'automatisme psychologique*, p. 26)

CHAPTER ONE

A FRAGILE AND UNCERTAIN 'I'

If we are indifferent for a moment to the conventional criteria that have been lazily repeated in the programs of academic institutions, we could divide the human sciences into two major categories. First of all, there are the less numerous ones that study great figures (conquerors, legislators, scholars, mystics...) and the individual creations that testify to exceptional genius. Among these are such things as the monuments of thought or the masterpieces of literature and art. Then there are the social sciences which, on the other hand, consider people only insofar as they belong to large, anonymous, and collective wholes. This dichotomy, which opposes solitary genius to the anonymous group, undoubtedly conserves an old elitist reflex that conditions many others: full and complete personality only belongs to exceptional beings; for all others, it is enough to belong to a collective entity in which they melt together and disappear insofar as individual consciousnesses. The first have talent and ideas, while the others remain stuck in the beliefs and prejudices of their group—they are prisoners of mechanisms that control and subjugate them.

On this perspective, which organizes so many aspects of intellectual life from the interior, there is much that could be said. For example, one could say that it too is the effect of an ingrained prejudice. This is why we accept it without reacting that much. One could also say that the decisive criteria for establishing its most fundamental distinction are nothing but the products of thought. But this is not what we will reproach in first place.

For this opposition in fact has two other disadvantages. By founding themselves on it, the human sciences avoid a critical question: in what, for the geniuses and for the most mundane citizens, does the nature of their individual being, their 'I', consist? In rejecting out of hand an entire realm of observation that is disdainfully considered trivial—the interior life of the most ordinary person—they evade any interrogation of the ultimate nature of the 'I' by evoking the expedient pretext that this is a question that is difficult and unsolvable,

and thus metaphysical. Now this last sentence is always equivalent to a definitive condemnation without room for appeal. They neglect the attentive examination of our interior lives in name of an opposite prejudice: The extreme banality and weak subjectivity of our daily existence is unworthy of scientific study. Is there not in any case a certain popular psychology that takes responsibility for and describes the tribulations of inner states?¹ We, as real individuals, considered under the aspect of interiority and the consistency of our 'I', would thus be doubly neglected, both because we pose a metaphysical problem for science and because of the banality of our *pathos* and mediocre emotions.

In contrast to these two attitudes, should one affirm that the question on what we actually are, on the reality of our 'I', is not at all metaphysical or inaccessible? Has it not, in the past under so many skies, unceasingly occupied the best minds (and that is a highly important fact), who would never engage with it except with the preoccupation of discovering and specifying the techniques capable of assuring its stability? Has anyone ever demonstrated that the observation of our inner states finishes only in the discovery of trivial elements? Would it not rather manifest significant elements that, far from any paradox, perhaps constitute the most direct access to human reality?

It is then these two maligned questions, one considered a priori as contemptible because it is too trivial, and the other as unobservable because too metaphysical, that we will unite and examine here.

From the moment that we give a bit of continuous and slightly rigorous attention to the examination of our mental life, to what constitutes its harmony, we note that its homoeostasis, its tendency to stability, is never assured, and that it is instead continuously in danger. What threatens it at almost every instant can be considered as an impressive

¹ On this division of knowledge that seems to have been formalized throughout the twentieth century, see our *The Western Construction of Religion*, pp. 179–83. Science studies prestigious works and collective productions. On the other hand, literature, whether popular or not, and arts that are appreciated by the consumer (music, cinema) deal with the mediocre or sentimental (i.e. psychological) aspects of personal dramas. It is thus not surprising that a person often turns from science to seek the reflections or echoes of his or her most intimate preoccupations in these lesser genres. What major research programs focus on our passions and emotions?

number of oscillations, modifications, troubles, and disturbances that are more or less profound:

O monks, said the Buddha, what one calls consciousness, thought, or spirit appears and disappears day and night in perpetual change. As a monkey, frolicking in a forest or the woods, grasps a branch and then lets it go and grasps another, so does what is called consciousness, thought, or spirit appear and disappear day and night in perpetual change.²

These agitations and troubles reveal the deep nature of our 'I', because they are not content with superficially affecting the latter like a breeze that ripples the surface of the water. They belong to its more authentic depths. The eminently superior faculty of the individual consciousness is nonetheless based in this unstable and fragile foundation. This quest is as exhausting as it is precarious, where thousands of occasions of daily life become for it possible causes of agitation or alteration. Nothing, not even our organic life, presents such a vulnerability and instability. Humanity's great originality also appears to be its most frail part. We must unceasingly confront, resist, pick ourselves up, and gather ourselves in order to avoid separating, decomposing, or collapsing.

Consciousness should ideally possess the stability by which we would avoid undergoing incessant wavering; the sovereignty that would leave us independent of any other authority; the lucidity that would permit us to serenely evaluate without misjudging the nature of a danger or obstacle; the unity and synthetic capacity that would keep us from splitting up or forgetting ourselves; and the calm that would protect us from the incessant flux of emotional agitation.

This ideal state, however, which would see the most crystalline degree of consciousness (of self and of the world) coincide with the highest degree of the 'I's consistency, frequently fails and leaves a 'subject' breathlessly 'faltering in his humanity'.³

² *Samyutta Nikaya*, II, p. 95, quoted and translated by L. Silburn, *Le Bouddhisme* (Paris: Fayard), 1977, p. 40.

³ Expression of H. Ey quoted by Alain Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d'être soi: Dépression et société* (Paris: Odile Jacob), 1998, p. 37.

For various phenomena alter the affections or mood,⁴ insofar as the most general disposition of sensibility and emotions,⁵ at the same time as this tranquil lucidity—without, however, ever leaving interior harmony completely unharmed. The state of consciousness, of mood, of sensibility, and that of the 'I' are domains that communicate, but, unlike communicating vessels, when one is troubled, the others are likewise disturbed.

These phenomena, often distressing and painful, that alter the consciousness or mood, are numerous, and each of them reveals, at the same time that various bodily weaknesses manifest themselves, the fundamental instability and the vulnerability of our 'I'. Every event of life is capable of giving rise to a number of them. Some are almost commonplace, so frequent and familiar they are to everyone. Together, they compose the storyline of our days: inattention, boredom, acedia, nervous tensions and crises, distractions, agitation, exacerbation, irritability, overwork, being overcome, cognitive distress, aggressiveness, sorrow, passing depression, lethargy, moments of perplexity, cyclothymia, discouragement, lack of energy or vitality, inhibitions, forgetting and 'holes in one's memory', repeated complaints, widespread weaknesses, persistent fatigue, lassitude, torpor, passing confusions, sleep troubles, excessive emotionality, disagreeable impressions, instability, gloomy moods, feelings of inferiority or mediocrity, frustrations, dark thoughts, moral wounds, abdication, or intellectual disorders. Many of these passing troubles engender, accompany, or follow what we

⁴ 'Whether one refers to psychoanalysis or organicism, affection is always something more corporeal, more animal, than reason. It is both more ancient in the species' history and more unconscious in all senses of the term, it arises from man's inferior functions, those he has in common with other mammals. It is the condition of the living being. Further, affective syndromes are found in most mental pathologies, and among the defensive psychoneuroses, as with schizophrenia' (ibid., p. 63). Ehrenberg specifies on p. 87, while quoting J. Delay, *Études de psychologie médicale* (Paris: PUF, 1953), p. 72: 'Mood is this fundamental affective disposition, enriched with all of the emotional and instinctive realities, that gives each of the states of our soul an agreeable or disagreeable tone, and oscillates between the two extreme poles of pleasure and pain. In the measure that one opposes, in mental life, a thymic domain that contains the affections to a noetic domain that contains representations, mood is the most basic and general thymic phenomenon'. See also note 20 p. 127.

⁵ 'Extraordinary movement that agitates the body or the spirit, and troubles its temperament or well-being' (Furetière), quoted by Pascale d'Arcy in René Descartes, *Les Passions de l'âme* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1996), p. 117. Joy, excitement, surprise, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, disdain, and shame are generally included among them.

perceptively call a persistent weakness or 'weariness with life' as pernicious as sadness or melancholy.

Others, only slightly less common, are somewhat less harmless and provoke even more unpleasant disturbances, to the point of being tangible alterations of our manner of being present to the world and our own life: neurasthenia; morbid tendencies; emotional traumata; psychosomatic illnesses; symptoms of hysteria; melancholic states; beginning of depression or despair; entrenchment; various phobias; unhealthy obsessions; hypochondria; compulsive disorders; fears; anger; frights; uncontrollable crises of despair or violence; feelings of distress, devastation, or exhaustion; emotions of abandonment, stifling oppression, anxiety, dread, passionate frenzies⁶ and overpowering desires; pessimism; distaste for life; general disinterest; suicidal ideas; and self-disdain.

There are others that are far deeper disorders, which destroy the normal activity of the consciousness and undermine the very structures of the personality: chronic depression, serious addictions, schizophrenia, obsessive or hysterical neuroses, manic-depressive psychoses, or melancholy.

We do not need to establish the symptomatology of these problems, and even less do we need to attempt a precise mapping of their aetiologies. More important for us are their numerosity, their depth, and their frequency in individual lives, as well as their full effects. Beyond moral suffering and fatigue, which are always present and weighty, their other immediate consequences are known.⁷ Disorientation, the weakening or even the disorganization of the 'I' that can reach the point of a lasting collapse of the personality, which breaks down or is dislocated. There are cenesthetic imbalances and disorders that threaten the intellectual faculties and analytical capacities to the point

⁶ From the ancient Medea (see Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica*, Song III) to the pathetic heroine of Jean Racine, their damaging effects, bearers of plagues, troubles, and disorders, have been denounced many time in the West. Today, on the other hand, in what is perhaps an imprudent reversal, our period seems determined to give the passions a positive evaluation, or even to exalt them.

⁷ Certain moments of drunkenness, trance, or frenzy, whether ritualized or not, immediately and even more profoundly modify the state of our consciousness insofar as they manage to break the tie, which is more fragile than one thinks, that subordinates the other psychological and instinctive functions to this self-consciousness. Likewise, the effects of hypnosis and suggestion, which can provoke profound somnambulatory states (note 16 p. 46), confirm in their own way that spectacular modifications can affect what we would nonetheless believe to be the enduring substance of our 'I'.

that, once again, we are overcome by our emotional and instinctual reactions. An exaggerated sense of permeability in regard to the exterior world moves along similar lines, as if the personality no longer constituted a sufficiently elevated and solid rampart. This is also the case with the fragility of the subject that leads to general sentiments of defeat, of internal ruptures (feelings of 'brokenness'), or of dissolution or dissipation, as if one were without any stable and solid nucleus.

We should repeat that, for most of these, we are dealing with highly frequent disorders. And who would deny that, through their repetition and aggravation, they are capable of profoundly deteriorating our personality—sometimes in an irreversible manner? In various degrees, the spirit that suffers these states and reflects on them produces its own sombre interrogations, and, almost always, new concerns, which themselves will shake the already fragile 'I' a little more.

These dangers are no less serious for the group. Individuals who are incapable of mastering their emotions, their affective reactions, or their passions (the beginnings of violence, ambition, excessiveness or hubris, cruelty, hate, or disordered love), represent a permanent threat to their kind. How many ancient and modern myths have described characters who are 'the prey' of their anger and their insane desires?⁸ It has always been understood that these excessive characters, due to the fascination that they engendered, and above all due to the contagious folly that they were capable of introducing into society, risked overturning it. Such collective overturnings almost mechanically produce similar damages to individual consciousnesses.⁹

⁸ 'The curse of one ruled by his appetites is that he can never be satisfied; he is dragged ever onward. The desiring element, Plato says, is "by nature insatiable"' (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 116).

⁹ These perturbations are still found in our times, even while the large majority of us enjoy conditions of tranquillity, liberty, and comforts that were previously unknown. The imposing dangers, the proximity of the savage world, the unleashing of violence, the great ancestral fears (deadly epidemics and weather, endemic famines, violent death) have practically disappeared from our societies. Expensive systems of protection, insurance, and security are tasked with always protecting us. Judicial arbitrariness and material misery have also been largely eliminated, at least in our clement latitudes. These conditions could almost cause us to forget that for a long time the human condition was more precarious than that of today, and that we were always exposed to serious dangers. Likewise, we are no longer able to imagine what sufferings our ancestors had to undergo before the discoveries of modern pharmacopeia. We can also note that we have proven explanations for a great number of phenomena (the origin of the world and of man, natural phenomena, social mechanisms, medicine, human history, etc.). Never has there been so little ignorance and uncertainty

In order to prevent and limit the disastrous consequences of these alterations and interior troubles, sometimes equally catastrophic for individuals and for those around them, all known cultures have invented efficacious systems of education, and, even more requiring than them, wisdoms (or models of disciplined life), which we will analyse later. Before reaching that point, however, they first had to reinforce, among all individuals, self-knowledge, or the sense of their own identity. For this, they always used two complimentary means that we will examine immediately, since they are inserted into the same general problematic.

COSMOGRAPHIC FORMATION

The first of these means consists in the insertion of individual existences into the heart of interlaced networks of reassuring coordinates and reference points. These do more than calm us, since they contribute to defining our identity and sustaining its continuance, that is, to giving a fullness and a more stable consistency to our 'I'. These reticulate systems appear in *all* the domains of our existence: established social ties and statuses; educational principles; recognized descentance and family names; family, affective, and professional models; lifestyles; recognized and accepted moral values; common beliefs,¹⁰ shared knowledge, and prejudices; unchangeable rules and manners of life; or rigid and constraining rules—through subjugation to which we belong to various groups, predictable academic and professional paths, family geography, traditions of every kind (whether they be from family, rooted in our most routine daily experiences, or from more distant events), ceremonies and customs of all sorts, recurring holidays and rituals, etc. These countless 'points' and 'ties' furnish us with dozens and probably even hundreds of references (in space, life, time, and the world). They bring a greater consistency and a precision to the contours of our 'I'. They become as many interior supporting aspects and exterior signs of recognition for it. Thanks to them, we recognize ourselves and are

regarding the universe that surrounds us. This increase in our knowledge should not be placed on the same level as the 'cognitive distress' mentioned above, because the latter is the result of our inability to understand others' changing and unpredictable behaviour.

¹⁰ On the implications of the fundamental mechanism of belief, see below, the paragraph corresponding to note 3 p. 122.

recognized by others. In this manner, they limit the vacuity and contingency of our existence. What is there of us outside of them?

Likewise, the totality of our daily routines, of our stereotypical relationships with one another, of the identical places that we frequent according to often unvarying criteria, of our family activities, of schedules that are repeated day after day, create for each of us a universe full of familiar and reassuring references. Work, effort, responsibilities, ambitions, and obligations complete this totality in which, it appears, everything is formulated in order to leave no 'holes', no tear in the thread of our existence. On the contrary, anything unfamiliar, any change that is both sudden and unexpected, provokes a strong sense of anxiety.¹¹ Our time, our spirit, our lives appear to be always 'occupied', submitted to countless tasks and obligations. As for so-called free time, we generally attempt to fill it with new activities that are no less absorbing, as if we primarily fear this eventual silent and solitary face-to-face moment with ourselves. Each one of these countless elements, from the most vital to the most trivial, is invariably found with a proper measure, a norm, a correct evaluation; something that permits us to coordinate it with others, which are submitted to the same principles. It is as if these 'systems of organized and coordinated activities' (Malinowski), in forming an incredibly organized world, seem intent on never leaving us alone or with nothing to do. The meticulous ordering of our lives subordinates the smallest of our gestures to its rule.

We have elsewhere¹² reserved the name of 'cosmographic formations' for these ordered universes, made of the interlacing of all conceivable types of orders, signifying by this expression that they integrate all the elements, both material and invisible, of a given culture, and that they are achieved in the establishment of ordered 'worlds', of singular universes. It is in such worlds that we live.

It is undoubtedly from this that is derived our instinctive aversion to and anxiety before the brutal changes, the malfunctions, and the disorders that bring incertitudes in which we obscurely have the presentiment that a threat to our person is hidden. For these countless frameworks and references, in whose traceries is inscribed the time and space of our existences and our lives, are first of all indispensable

¹¹ See Michel Hulin, *La Mystique sauvage* (Paris: PUF, 1993), pp. 80–1.

¹² *The Western Construction of Religion*, pp. 195–213.

to this 'I', to its constitution and its preservation. Imagine what we would resemble, in what a pitiful state we would be, if all these signs and references, that so efficaciously contribute to the affirmation and preservation of our identity, were brusquely taken from us.

POETIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Along with these indispensable objective references, one must grant the greatest importance to humanity's *poietic* activity, for we always live, never live except, at the centre of our texts, whether these texts are familiar or but poorly known, trivial or formal, fragmentary or exhaustive, short or unending; we recompose all those texts within ourselves and around ourselves, along with those of others, so that they run together and are mixed. For it is there, at the heart of life, of the ordinary existence of every individual, that is awakened the *textual function*,¹³ which is essential for understanding this individual and the numerous mechanisms that are in command of the individual's mental life.

Let us think, to begin, of the fundamental role that texts have in the progressive construction and the preservation of our own individuality. Against what perpetually threatens individuality (death, folly, arbitrariness), against the risks of entropy, of disintegration, of disorder that assail our sickly person that is so difficult to acquire, each of us opposes these verbal constructions—whether they are derisory or baroque, dogmatic or opportunist—that, against all evidence, give meaning to our 'I', a destiny when it is not immortality. For they do not only help us to outsmart contingency, impermanence, or insignificance, since they actively participate in this way in the very

¹³ The following paragraphs are inspired, with some modifications, from chapter 3 of our *Anthropologie poétique: Esquisses pour une anthropologie du texte* (Louvain la Neuve: Peeters, 1996), 32–42. See also Daniel C. Dennett, *La Conscience expliquée* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1993), pp. 516–20 and 529–34, where he speaks of the 'I' as the 'narrative centre of gravity'. It is this cognitive-narrative structure that would engender and sustain self-consciousness. In this case, 'your existence depends on the persistence of this narration (which is close to *A Thousand and One Nights*, except for one, unique account), which could *theoretically* survive numerous changes of *medium* indefinitely, (in principle) be as easily teleported as the evening paper, and stocked indefinitely as pure and simple information' (ibid., pp. 533–4). We will see below, in note 21 p. 64 that Kant had a similar hypothesis that dissociated the memory's life from its individual substrate.

constitution of our personality and the belief in its perpetuity: their metaphysical and cosmographic vocation has always been to correlate their indispensable role in the genesis, edification, and consolidation of human personality.

Not only is the notion, the idea, or the philosophical concept of person (in their European or Western sense) to be considered a derivation of the text in its homogeneity, but also the consciousness that each of us (no matter where we are from) has of ourselves, insofar as being a fragile presence to the world, as well as, so to speak, of this proper 'myself', this singular and original 'I' that we each consider ourselves to be. How could a person, in any culture, see or think of him- or herself other than with the help of his or her own texts and those of others that he or she continually retextualizes? If it is by the individual's texts, and those texts alone, that this same person manages to create gods, imaginary worlds, in the existence of which there is no difficulty to believe since they seem so indispensable, how much more necessary, although sometimes easier, must be the constitution, by the same means, of a person's own 'I', of a person's identity?

One probably touches a critical point for any anthropological study that is first of all interested in a person as he or she naturally acts, and which consequently attempts to understand how a person manages to make him- or herself as that person believes he or she is. Like the world, of which we will only ever know textualized versions, our own 'I' depends on the stories that we create about it and to which we continually refer. This is a group, often fragmented in the beginning, of texts that we continually reorganize and retextualize in order to convince and assure ourselves that we really exist in a consistent and continuous manner¹⁴ and not, as Buddhist anthropology has affirmed from its inception, as an anarchic succession of desire, states of consciousness, acts, and dreams, etc.

This is undoubtedly why any *epoché*, any interruption, or any suspension of textualizing activity is impossible and inconceivable. *Textual function*, even if it often repeats itself, does not, on the other hand, have any pause or interruption.¹⁵ The constitution and preservation of

¹⁴ This is why we unceasingly substitute the proliferation of events that preceded the *hic et nunc* by 'histories', which are themselves capable of fusing into *one* history—that of our life.

¹⁵ Not even the strictest mental and intellectual disciplines could not allow us to leave our texts, or even to interrupt their flux, or suppress their presence. On the other

the person thus require the never-ending action of this *textual function*, without which our own 'I' would break down and be dispersed in insignificant fragments.

The expression of 'self-image' is undoubtedly improper in this regard, for what we possess of ourselves is probably not an image, but rather a group of texts that allow us to orient ourselves, to find ourselves and to look at ourselves. The awareness that we have of ourselves is not only visual (made of images) but textual. Finally, through this *textual competence*, which allows us to develop text and then to 'reread' ourselves, and by this textualizable material that is itself made of countless heterogeneous fragments, we weave ourselves by mixing and stitching ourselves into the plot of our own texts. The world, our word, and ourselves thus tend to be inextricably intertwined and entangled. Only a brutal tear or a slow fraying can unveil to us a silent and indifferent world that our concentrated efforts had heretofore filled with narratives and scenes.

If the text erects a sort of metaphysical screen between the world and us, by superimposing its own system of references, it is, however, to us that it grants its most important benefits, by giving each of these uncertain and provisory 'I's homogeneous unity and duration. Without it, in which one should perhaps see 'a secret, partial, tangible, and true manner of resisting death, of the long desperate and daily resistance to the fragmentary and successive death as it is inserted into the duration of our life' (Proust), without the dynamic unity of our 'I', this living nucleus in which we believe, we are no longer more than an anonymous and empty place.

Is any individual anything but what he or she believes, thinks, or imagines him- or herself to be? And is this conviction rooted elsewhere

hand, our conception of text and the function that it presupposes has an additional advantage, one that Western thought has always considered with a bit of disdain, because it is a practical advantage that, even worse, concerns our interior life. Each of us is free to attempt to analyse the mental and intellectual operations tied to the composition of a text, and in particular to attempt to analyse the ultimate operations that culminate in the textualization of verbal material that was initially amorphous. Each of us can apply ourselves to isolate and recognize the difficulties, frustrations, and worries tied to these operations that we encounters as much as the goals we pursue (usually unknown to ourselves). Could not this new intellectual discipline offer a solid foundation for a solid form of nominalist introspection, stripped of all simplistic ontology and all naive belief? Could it not also permit one to reach a certain psychological and existential truth? Could it not give critics, and this word is used in its most noble sense, an additional possibility to unmask credulity, illusion, and artifice?

than in the individual's own texts (regardless of the latter's originality)? Whatever the situations that preceded them may be, it is the texts that will define this person, in constructing and confirming an empirical identity for him or her. The sense of existing (insofar as a person with an identity, insofar as unique individual, insofar as element of a whole, insofar as soul or spirit—the nuances that ethnographic studies would inevitably introduce are not important here), of being this identifiable thing behind a name, one's own, implies, for each of us, that our own life can be grasped at every moment as a singular whole—whether that whole is a destiny, a history, a social function, the expression of a spiritual substance or of an idea is also unimportant for the moment. Only texts, our texts, can lead us to this vital certitude. They appear to us as the indispensable elements that should be integrated into the part of psychology that would have the edification and preservation of the person as its object.

Thanks to our *textual memory*, which is progressively enriched, thanks to the *textual function*, that never stops work on this immaterial patrimony, thanks also to our capacities as readers of texts, we as individuals construct a world for ourselves, that is, the universe in which we place our being, our name, and our activities. In the same way, we elaborate the (textual) consciousness of our own personality, the subtle substance of which our individuality is made. This cosmography and this consciousness are nothing other than the retrospective effect that our own texts produce in our spirit and, in a not always lesser measure, in others' spirits. Each of us, at best a continuous and always fragile composite construction, always believes that we truly exists in our internal forum, while we are perhaps nothing more than the ethereal point around which we textual edifices gravitate.

In affirming that human psychology, that the consciousness that we have of ourselves—in short, of this 'I'—also depends on the metaphysical devices of texts, *poetic anthropology* is not satisfied by recognizing another existential link, by noting another local connection, since it is the precariousness of the 'I' that it rediscovers and confirms. What is all too often considered as the substance of the 'I', the inalterable and immutable nucleus that would radiate from the deepest depths of the person, is then nothing more than an effect, a necessary dream that is provoked and maintained by the *textual function*. It is the 'that for which' presupposed by all coherence and ordering. If we inhabit the empirical world, it is only in our texts, in the worlds of our texts, that the materials necessary for the consciousness of our 'I's are forged.

Fundamentally, each of our lives is also a *poietic* experience and construction.

In this situation, one will admit that each of us has a continually pressing and never-ending task before him- or herself which is the constitution and conservation of his or her own individuality, whose realization is accomplished through the composition of new texts. Only these offer us the possibility to think of ourselves as a particular entity ('I am so and so'), situated in this place, in this or that moment of our history, following this path ('I am doing this or that') in this universe, or in this vision of the local or cosmic world. The isotropic rupture that any deterioration of the *textual function* would provoke is undoubtedly the greatest peril that we, instinctively, seek to avoid, since it would lead to our own break up and then our rapid dissolution.

The individual who speaks or thinks, and who composes a text to this end, rarely attempts to express formal structures, impeccable conceptual constructions that philosophers or specialists of the human sciences will enjoy. More mundanely, in accomplishing these tasks, the individual deals with all the problems of his or her life every day, or attempts to do this happily. One should never lose sight of the fact that *textualization* is a permanent existential activity, one of every individual who acts in this world and is condemned to create or maintain his or her own universe every day. It is understood, as with any symbolic activity, that this appears to first of all respond to particular needs and to seek more immediate scopes, but one should not neglect its general and permanent influence, which permits its user to preserve the relative stability of his or her own identity by requiring the individual to unendingly repeat or re-actualize the terms of his or her own ontology.

Confronted, in the greatest and most desperate disorder, with our solitary destiny, with the impermanence and multiplicity of beings and things, with accidental death that does not achieve anything but destroys everything, with the folly that threatens our own person that was so difficult to acquire, and with the arbitrariness that would even deny us our existence, we and our 'I' cannot oppose anything other than our textual compositions in which we find reasons for being, for believing, and for hoping. And what do we do that is not thanks to them? They help us to create an ordered and reassuring world that is reserved to ourselves. They transform the discontinuous and chaotic series of events into linear narratives or reassuring destinies. They transform death into heroic apotheoses or beatific eternities. They raise

and reinforce the dikes that separate us from madness. Thanks to them again, we discover reasons for giving our life, our existence, and our person a place in this world and in its history. In brief, thanks to our texts, we are plucked out of silent nothingness.

Before this situation, there is probably no alternative other than the following: (1) What we say, do, and think is always carried and directed by a global, cosmographic textual project, that conserves certain constant characteristics through its thousands of possible manifestations. In this case, this vast textual project should be studied for itself so that the results of its study can provide the indispensable materials for the foundation of a true *poetic anthropology*, which could in turn serve as an introduction to anthropology as a whole. (2) What we say, do, and think has nothing to do with this type of general project. In this case, however, on what basis and within which structures will one locate the possibility of founding a true *anthropology*, if this is not by deciding a priori to exclude our very selves, as revealed by our textual compositions?

If our *textual competence* appears so astonishing, it is because it authorizes by endorsing, so to speak, dialogue and expression, and it disposes, beforehand, of a diversified and modular material, as one would say today. Constituted by countless memories of texts that represent as many narrative and argumentative schemata, general opinions, cosmographic models, familiar topographies, value tables, and praxeological networks (manners of doing things, uses, ways of using things), this disparate material permits us to *com-pose* our own texts in turn, in which, certainly, we will insert our own name, or will attempt to do so. Thanks to this name, we possess the key that opens the universe of text to ourselves, which demands (much more than authorizing, since this deals with our very existence) that our uncertain and mortal personage be transmuted into a coherent and durable textual being.

The totality of texts that each of us conserves in our memory, that we unceasingly rework and re-actualize with prudence, represents something like our own world, that in which we live the only conscious life that we have. Could one even apply the term of *consciousness* to something that was not immediately directed by a text, that was not founded in a verbal whole? Is this not to say that our consciousness always textualizes what it grasps? This textualized mental universe is confused with reality in our eyes—both our reality and that of the world that surrounds us. One can start from this confusion, which

is inexplicable if one does not account for our innate disposition to see and live 'in texts', in order to understand that we cannot abstract from this *textual memory* any more than we can do without it. For each of us, our life, our self, and the world are always presented in the form of a text, or, if one prefers, the world and ourselves only really exist in our texts, because they alone permit us to interpret them. No nontextual reality enduringly exists for us, while on the other hand there are numerous objects, beings, and worlds that have nothing but textual existence.

Thus the individual is ultimately nothing other than what he or she says (can say, meditate, write, think, confess, believe, declare, swear...), but this saying, which is often so mundane, and almost always naive, is itself usually nothing but a patchwork made of bits, of borrowed pieces, of memories, of ignorances, of fragments, of tatters that are sewn and re sewn to form a whole that is often nothing more than the imperfect and rough copy of an outstanding model. The original work, that is, text in the normal and noble sense of the term, is simply more uniform, better polished, better educated, and less broken. In brief, its textualization is better done, sometimes to the point of appearing definitive and unrepeatable.

These are, however, rare and exceptional examples. If one would occupy oneself with transcribing the texts that each of us carries in him- or herself, those that help us compose our personal and often provisory cosmography, we would probably discover an astonishing amount of platitudes, banalities, and repetitions.¹⁶ Originality is certainly what is least often and least ardently sought after here. To the series of decisive constraints that every textual composition imposes are added all the influences on which the texts of the *corpus* depend. As individuals, we can no more avoid composing our texts than we can avoid dipping, for this, into the treasure that every community screens and patiently transmits to its members.

The totality of social situations (and perhaps even the totality of existential configurations) is, for each human group endowed with a tradition and a common usage of the world, known, classed, and archived in

¹⁶ Their mutual contradictions perhaps are not a serious obstacle because it is always easy to compose another, or even a 'last' text. In the worst case, it is almost always possible to completely 'rename' a cosmography: to make a Christian one from a Marxist one, or the inverse. Further, won't we always be able to think of the text that will exonerate us in our own eyes?

texts, from which undoubtedly arises this perpetual impression, which is unnerving or reassuring in different cases, of the *déjà vu*, the *déjà lu*. There is a textual paradigm that corresponds to each of these typical situations (seduction, the welcoming of an associate or family member, paternal admonition, meeting an unknown person, the narration of a funny or dramatic story, the burial of someone who has died, the celebration of a family holiday or a public ceremony, an order given to a subordinate, etc.): myths of origins or examples that are precedents, the play on variants (dramatic, fictional, trivial, formal...), memorable pages, funny pastiches, academic examples, etc.

Further, the ritualization and routinization of existence, of all human activity, and of life in general, as well as the multiplication of the points and links that were just evoked, betray an aspiration to order and coherence that is comparable on all points to that which preoccupies textual organization. All these factors of order, in completing each other, in reflecting each other, sometimes in superimposing on each other, and in articulating themselves in various manners, comfort us with the certitude that our life and the world that surround us are actually as we say they are, that they are ordered and readable as our texts. In order to avoid a probable misunderstanding, we should specify that a tragic, absurd, and despairing vision of the world and life is not, therefore, any less satisfying. This is true if only because it must be *uniformly* tragic and despairing, and because this result is subordinate to the composition of a text, which alone is capable of producing this exclusive effect. A truly absurd vision should be incomprehensible, constructed without common sense—without text—but it then seems to be the work of a madman. This is why the metaphysical theories or visions of this type are always the most protective and radical in their manner of expounding and imposing their text: for the hypothesis of an ontologically absurd world, there must necessarily correspond (since it is in fact itself that describes and creates it as such) a monochromatic text that suggests nothing but this sentiment from beginning to end. The smallest crack in its tragic or desperate isotropy would open the door to laughter, doubt, or dreaming to infiltrate, and immediately give back hope in a different or less implacable world to the reader, and thus to ruin the beautiful verbal edifice.

We often oppose nothing to the impeccable construction of *corpus* texts but our summary sketches of cosmography, of ordinary and mediocre syncretism where the fragments of our favourite texts come

together. Their scientific value, the refinement and richness of their details, the subtlety of their construction, and the validity of their adequateness to the real in fact are not that important and undoubtedly even represent factors that are for the most part serenely neglected. *Textual function* can make do with the most ordinary and rustic of materials, and thus does not need such a luxury, rigour, or originality in order to get to work. Its primary requirement is one of order, coherence, and unity. These requirements, however, do not require anything extravagant in regard to the value or originality of the materials that they work on. It is easy to imagine a global cosmography of the world that would include a few summary affirmations, since its credibility, pertinence, and its capability to elicit belief in itself will have their essential cause, not in its precise adequateness for the multitude of facts, but in the capacity of imposing its coherence on the spirit that will have created it. However, we never compose texts except those we are capable of understanding and that respond to our own experience of the world. This is why the most unpolished cosmographies elicit unconditional adherence. For they do not refer to the world as it is, but to the cognitive and intellectual capacities of us who have conceived them. They thus never risk perceiving their contradictions or inadequacies.

We compose texts, and we observe every day that people compose them, by using rudimentary, disjointed, and easily accessible materials. Texts often also represent nothing more than a clever craftlike construction. The *metaphysical* value and efficacy of a text undoubtedly reside less in its luxuriance than in its simplicity. Is this not easily transposable and paraphrasable? A schematic or summary form, a simple sketch, even though its contours are not very firmly traced, is sufficient for most consciousnesses. All of these texts, made of fragments taken from the corpus of common prejudices and banal opinions of trivial points of view that individuals of the same group exchange with and borrow from each other, ultimately only retain what is necessary to this individual or group: ordinary texts for lives that are no less so.

But those lives that are our lives, and which, because they are textualized and inserted in other texts (for example, political, historical, or 'religious'), transfigure their futility and banality by acquiring a form and reason for being that are superior. There is probably nothing more necessary to individuals than this metamorphosis that occurs in their texts, and by which they, their lives, and their existence become

intelligible by taking their place in small cosmographies, themselves inserted into others that are greater and more erudite, and will pull them out of unbearable insignificance.

Which texts can say me? Or, to acquiesce once to the Heideggerian play on words, what texts can be me? And who am I (or what am I) outside of those that cause me to be this something or this someone in whose existence I have accustomed myself to believe in by composing and reading it? Which texts (and one must understand the precise significance of this fascinating aporia) can dictate (and not only say) who I am? Undoubtedly far too many, we fear. Among these stand out the learned texts contained in the ('religious', juridical, political, psychological, philosophical...) corpora, and of which we are, and we should never forget this, the only subject and the only reason for their existence. Most of them say us well before we are born and we know them. And they say us, not to describe and recognize us in our singularity, which does not pre-exist them anyway, but to mix us into their order. We are in these texts because more often than not we do not receive being except by them and by those that we compose thanks to them. How many among us would dare to adventure outside of these texts to become something unheard of? And how would we understand ourselves in order to undo the texts that have made us what we have become?

Thus, according to the case, we are a mother, a writer, a lover, a pope, a neurotic, or a customs officer... But these complex roles (tasks, obligations, intentions, responsibilities, attitudes, bearings, lifestyles, gestures, words, moods), as well as the corresponding existential situations and configurations, obviously cannot be invented by us every day, nor reinvented by each of us. They are inspired by those that tolerate and organize our collective cosmography, constituted by a larger or smaller group of texts that are 'religious', political, fictional, mythological, and ideological. This is a vast living *corpus* in which each of us draws, at every moment, according to our position and needs. And it is beginning with this group, through the work of synthesis that our *textual function* operates in search of coherence and readability, that our own texts are elaborated (undoubtedly within very strict limits, however), which are then called on to direct our own consciousness of father, monk, or soldier... For this, it is enough for us to adopt, while adapting them as little as possible, the texts that are offered to us by the group to which we belong. It is enough for us to slide into these ready-made cosmographies, which will give us much more easily the

sense of existing, as they themselves define these local ontologies and the rules of their gift.

The result of this work is thus achieved, but in fact always provisionally, in the texts that we compose in order to recognize ourselves in this or that role. Thus, by this textualizing effort, which is also an unprecedented effort of rationalization, this particular function, activity, or role comes to exist and connect with others that, with them, exhaust our definition while fulfilling the incarnation of the corpora in our lives and existences. From the perspective of our own ontogenesis, where are we (and, affirmatively, in what ways are we) different from these various textualizations that are capable of being inscribed in a cosmography? All of these operations take place from beginning to end under the dictation and in imitation of the text of the corpus—we are usually not (and are not conscious of being) anything but what the corpus permits us to be: tolerated signs because we are spontaneously inserted into our own texts.

Beginning from all of these public texts, our own texts extend their teaching and doctrine in us. Whatever they are, the texts that we create or that we adopt constitute us in the same way. The value judgement that we would be tempted to make in favour of the more original does not change the nature or outcome of the process. Whether they are the fruit of relentless labour or that of a timid or lazy borrowing, our texts nonetheless say us, and our only true being is perhaps nowhere but in this saying, in this indispensable word.

In these conditions, one better understands what pushes us to unceasingly compose our texts. They permit us to readjust our *global vision* of the world in function of all the new elements and events that come to us, while concomitantly re-actualizing the textual consciousness that we have of ourselves (or the inverse, since it is as easy for us to modify our personal cosmography in function of a re-examination of our own situation, which will have been immediately textualized). Is there any need to note that any incompatibility, any profound disharmony that arises within these series of texts, for example, making their adjustment within a larger, more inclusive text impossible, will be translated in nervousness and anxiety, or, at the extreme, in the deterioration of the personality?

Do not these two great human activities, the cosmographic and the poetic, engage us, *a contrario*, to see something wretched in this 'I'—something that nervousness, affliction, and deterioration, independent

of the conditions of material existence, permanently threaten, and which we must constantly resist?

On the other hand, we have already noted that consciousness, mood, sensibility, and the 'I' appear to be mutually determined by one another. Behind these four terms, as well as the habitual conventions that they imply, it is perhaps better to recognize not so much the existence of four distinct and immutable entities as that of one unique cluster of interlaced phenomena. Whatever the word is that one chooses to designate it (person, 'I', consciousness), it refers to an active process,¹⁷ a complex synthesis, and not a monolithic or inalterable substrate. More than elsewhere, one must distrust the illusion created by linguistic expression.¹⁸ Affirming that the 'I' or the consciousness is affected by this or that disturbance, itself provoked by this or that event, is a clumsy and misleading convention, because it implies that this 'I' pre-exists this disturbance and will also survive it. The 'I' and consciousness are, however, nothing but the superior or terminal parts of a multiform and fragile process. The 'I', understood as a stable and enduring entity to which consciousness would bring the reinforcements of its unified perceptions and its reflexive capaci-

¹⁷ 'The person is not a state that one expects at the end of a certain development or maturation. It is not the brick by brick construction of a building. It is a dynamic process that progresses, beyond the contradictions that continually challenge the movement of the process and the person's existence. This process always transcends the structures it builds, and whose permanence give the individual his singularity, but that are incapable by themselves of assuring his consistency and unity. If the process lost its dynamism, and the movement stopped, the structures would fracture, and the personality's consistency would explode. Then the contradictions, which are dynamically fruitful for the subject's creative activity, become statically irreconcilable and unsustainable. Anxiety is not only the reflection, i.e., the consequence, of the subject's inefficacy, it is the immediate experience of this inefficacy, the only experience that henceforth remains possible for the subject, that of the disorientation in which he objectifies himself, as he is no longer capable of objectifying himself in his product, because he is no longer capable of satisfying his needs through his affirmation, the domination of external reality insofar as appropriation of this reality, and by his contribution to a larger whole that conditions, psychologically more than socially, his inclusion in this whole. The subject turns an action to himself, into himself, by which creation then becomes destruction and the annihilation of his person's unity' (R. Angelergues, 'La Dépersonnalisation', in I. Meyerson [ed.], *Problèmes de la personne* [Paris: Mouton, 1973], pp. 449–50).

¹⁸ See Pierre Janet, *L'Automatisme psychologique: Essai de psychologie expérimentale sur les formes inférieures de l'activité humaine*, 10th ed. (Paris: F. Alcan, 1930), p. 42: 'It is above all here that I observe the defectiveness of language and its natural and necessary forms which, all having the imprint of the "I" and the human person, are no longer applicable there where the "I" is not'.

ties, is undoubtedly nothing but an illusion that is as indispensable as it is deceptive. There is undoubtedly a certain naivety in maintaining that one can attain an authentic 'I'—at best, one attempts to preserve an 'I' that is more or less stable and that is not overly vulnerable.

It also seems undebatable that this uninterrupted process develops on the foundations of an instinctive and organic life, and that it continuously affects intellectual life.

Finally, it is clear that this manner of understanding the problem of the 'I', by modifying our normal perception of what is radically *individual*, and suggesting to us that a person is perhaps not endowed with an 'I' that is so inalienable as one would like to think, shakes the plans with which the human sciences are built. This is why, instead of speaking of certitude (as our intellectual and humanist tradition, always quite idealist when speaking of humanity, would have it), that is, that each person is endowed a priori with a firm and indivisible nucleus, we instead will admit that the primary facts that best define the 'I'—which is eventually affected by various troubles that can lead to more or less serious disturbances—are of such a nature as to place this ontological optimism in doubt.¹⁹

It is thus the totality of our metaphysical interrogations and our anthropological investigations that must be reconsidered on new foundations. For the fragility, instability, vulnerability, impermanence, heterogeneity (of ideas, notions, sensations, desires, moods, affections...) do more than characterize this 'I' as other more common predicates do, since these 'qualities' appear to belong to its deepest nature. In these conditions, it becomes interesting to study the techniques and disciplines that we have invented and perfected in order to preserve, at any cost, the precarious unity and fragile duration of the 'I', by helping to control and master all the disturbances that are likely to weaken it.

The person is as much a worthy anthropological, some will say 'metaphysical', question (does an ephemeral aggregate constitute a being?) as it is a challenge to our capacity to understand the techniques and wisdoms that cultures have invented and developed in order to keep it upright.

¹⁹ Let us ask ourselves, e.g. which 'I' (or part of the 'I') responds to the question: who suffers? Is it not suffering itself at this moment? And what of the one who subsists outside this suffering?

CHAPTER TWO

A LABILE CONSCIOUSNESS

There is an unexpected encounter here between a great writer of the French language, Marcel Proust, perhaps the greatest of the twentieth century, a remarkable psychologist, Pierre Janet, who has been unjustly relegated to specialist bibliographies due to the success of Freudian psychoanalysis, and an Italian ethnologist, Ernesto de Martino, who was as fascinated by psychic theories as by the mental universe of magical worlds. Why join them together here? Certainly, one will say, Janet mentioned Proust's work,¹ and was himself often cited by de Martino in *The Magical World*.² One should, however, primarily note that this unexpected encounter is explained less by a happy or lucky coincidence than by the fact that it reveals that these three men have similar preoccupations. With this, the encounter, which was apparently recommended by nothing a priori, and some will even consider to be unexpected or absurd, reveals its profound meaning. Janet, as Proust around the same period, and as de Martino a little later, was interested in the (uncertain, fragile, or, as de Martino will refer to it, labile) nature of human personality. Beyond the detailed treatments that the literature requires here, experimental psychology in one place, or ethnographic studies in another, a common perspective arises, one that is close to the interrogation that is central in this book. This identical topos, despite, we repeat, the undebatable differences that one will need to record and take note of, permits us to consider these three thinkers as irreplaceable witnesses. They form, outside of the conventions that prefer to keep separated literature, psychology, and ethnography, something that strongly resembles an original intellectual trend.

In Proust's eyes, it is known, what is questioned is at once the unity and permanence of the 'I'. It is difficult to conceive its unity, because

¹ *L'Évolution psychologique de la personnalité* (Paris: A. Chahine, 1929), pp. 524–5.

² *Le Monde magique*, postface by Silvia Mancini, Fr. tr. Marc Baudoux, 2nd ed. (Paris: Sanofi-Synthélabo, 1999), originally published as *Il Mondo magico: Prolegomena a una storia del magismo* (1948), s.v. 'Proust'.

distinct states follow each other in it, which would seem rather to belong to so many different and successive 'T's:

And in this way it is around Guermantes that I learned to distinguish these states that follow one another in me during certain periods, and go so far as sharing each day, one coming to chase the other with the punctuality of a fever. They are contiguous, but also so exterior from one another, so lacking a means of communication between them, that I can no longer understand, or even represent to myself, in one, what I desired, or feared, or accomplished in the other....

I became aware of my own transformations by confronting them with the identity of things. One nonetheless becomes accustomed to them as to persons, and when, all at once, one remembers the different signification that they had, and then when they had lost all signification, the events that were very different than those of today that framed them, the diversity of acts played on the same set, among the same glass libraries, the change in the heart and in life that this diversity implies, still seems to have grown through the immutable permanence of the decoration, reinforced by the unity of the place....

...and thus, at every moment, there was one of the countless and humble 'T's that make us that was still ignorant of Albertine's departure, and whom it was still necessary to inform. It was necessary—something crueller than if they had been strangers and had not borrowed my sensibility for suffering—to announce the misfortune that came to all these beings, to all these 'T's who did not yet know it. It was necessary that each of them in turn heard for the first time: 'Albertine asked for her bags'... 'Albertine is gone'.³

³ Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. I, p. 183; vol. II, p. 1126; vol. III, p. 430. Angelergues, *La Dépersonnalisation*, pp. 437–8, opportunely quotes a passage from Amiel's *Journal* that is worth remembering here:

What eternal coming and going is my interior life! What instability of tastes, momentums, attractions, and repulsions!... Your reflection does not conclude, because it is comfortable quarrelling and disputing with itself; You lack the general who orders, and the judge who decides.... *Analysis is dangerous if it dominates the synthetic capacities*.... It is this danger that menaces you.

You lose the unity of life, power, action, and the unity of the 'I'. You are legion, division, analysis, reflection, you are synonymity and dialectics, and your weakness stems from this. The passion for everything, the abuse of critics, and the distrust of the first movement, of the first idea, of the first word, explain the point that you have reached....

I am here in this eternal observatory of oneself with all my defaults: Illusion, discouragement, need for sympathy, incompleteness; with my habit of watching myself going on, feeling, and living, with my growing incapability of practical action, with my psychological tendencies....

I can simplify myself without limits, forgetting my environment, my epoch, and make myself from another time. I can forget this or that sense, make myself blind, even make myself inferior to man, animals, or plants.

Even the most entrenched of our emotions are not one or immutable, but they rather also belong to a succession, to an uninterrupted series of emotional states:

For what we believe to be our love or our jealousy is not one continuous, indivisible emotion. They are composed of an infinity of successive loves, of different and ephemeral jealousies, which through their uninterrupted multitude, however, give the impression of continuity, and the illusion of unity.⁴

These are trying changes that make so precious and indispensable the familiar habits, beings, and environments that we worry so much will become distant or disappear, taking with them the shreds of our broken up and destroyed 'I':

Perhaps this fear that I had—and so many others have—of sleeping in an unknown room, perhaps this fear is nothing but the most humble, obscure, organic, almost unconscious form of this great desperate refusal that opposes the things that make up the best of our present life to what we mentally clothed ourselves with of our acceptance of the formula of a better future in which they do not appear—a refusal that was at the root of the horror that the thought of my parents dying one day made me feel, that the necessities of life could make me live far from Gilberte, or simply that I would settle in a place where I would never see my friends again. This refusal was also at the root of the difficulty I had of thinking of my own death, or of a survival like what Bergotte promised to men in his books, in which I could not bring my memories, my defects, or my character, which did not surrender to the idea of no longer existing, and wanted for me neither nothingness, nor an eternity where they would not exist.⁵

I must make an effort to come to myself, to affirm myself, and to personalize myself. . . . Everything tempts me, attracts me, polarizes me, transforms me, and temporarily alienates me from my personality which, volatile, expansive, and centrifugal like the ether, always tends to lose itself in endless space, or inversely to condense its extension into an insignificant point.

I cannot find any words for what I feel. There is a profound recollection in myself, I hear my heart beat, and my life pass by. It seems that I have become a statue on the banks of the river of time, that I participate in some mystery from which I will exit either old or ageless. . . . I feel anonymous and impersonal, with my eyes staring like a dead man, my spirit is vague or universal like nothingness or the absolute; I am in suspension, *I am as if I were not*. . . . This state is neither contemplation, nor stupor, it is neither painful, nor joyous, nor sad; it is outside of any particular sentiment, like it is outside of any finite thought.

I have the inconstancy of a fluid, of a vapour, of a cloud, and everything is easily changed in me, i.e., everything is erased like the waves on the surface of the sea.

⁴ Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. II, p. 372.

⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 670.

In this case, the idea of survival in any hereafter appears absurd and almost laughable:

We passionately desire that there is another life where we would be like what we are here below. But we do not reflect on the fact that, even without reaching this other life, in this one, after a few years, we are unfaithful to what we were, to what we wanted to immortally remain.... One dreams often of paradise, or rather of a number of paradises in succession, but they are all, long before one dies, lost paradises, where one would feel lost.⁶

At the heart of the Proustian psychology founded on intermittence and modification, one would but vainly seek a permanent substrate, an unchangeable 'I'. For what one is tempted to invoke under this label (a name, a worldly or bourgeois *habitus*, a certain kind of sensibility, various vices, ingrained habits) never represents more than a cluster of elements that are joined by chance (or history), itself subject to numerous changes, and in any case condemned to disappear. If one takes from the Proustian hero what is due to his environment, his epoch, his passions, and his habits—nothing will remain. What he pursues today is completed in removing what he was before, and what he will never find again. Only literary work, which is nourished by this evanescent material in order to transform it into a lasting monument, can make a claim of immutability and immortality. Its realization also appears as the highest form of symbolic exchange: it transforms the lifetime of the current 'I', while sacrificing it, into a written text that will itself perhaps survive eternally.

Janet's domain was neither that of a moralist nor that of a philosopher. What his clinician's eye observed and patiently analysed, however, merited the full attention of philosophers and anthropologists. Far from being obvious and self-evident, for him, 'the absolute unity of the "I" is a metaphysical conclusion', because 'the idea of the "I" is in fact a highly complicated psychological phenomenon, which includes the memories of past actions, the notion of our situation, our powers, our body, our very name, which, unifying all of these scattered ideas, has an important role in knowledge of the personality'.⁷

⁶ Ibid., vol. II, p. 859.

⁷ Janet, *L'Automatisme psychologique*, pp. 26 and 39.

The 'I', according to Janet, far from being a given fact, something already there, something massively present like an unchangeable substance or an intangible structure, instead appears as a complex, polymorphic phenomenon, with numerous causes and ramifications. This abundant process is happily sustained through the activity of reflective consciousness. It is this that assures the synthesis of what is diverse, makes its unity, and favours its assimilation into what never ends becoming a particular personality. One should thus not transfer the unity and permanence that are lacking in the 'I' to the consciousness, because 'psychology already finds an organization and synthesis in all the elements of the consciousness that it can reach'.⁸ Nonetheless, it is by this unceasing activity that 'at each moment of life the new combinations that are unceasingly required to maintain oneself in balance with the changes of one's environment'⁹ are realized.

The inevitably precarious balance of the 'I'¹⁰ is thus inserted into a permanent dynamic process in which a great number of phenomena converge (heredity, sensations, memories, thoughts...) whose synthesis (of which there are obviously varying degrees)¹¹ is realized with more or less success by this parallel process of consciousness, which is no less dynamic. The unity of this 'I' thus never appears except retrospectively: 'unity and systematization appear to us to be the term and not the beginning of thought'.¹² When, however, under the influence of one of the countless causes of change mentioned above,¹³ the scope of this consciousness shrinks, its capacities of synthesis weaken, and the paths by which the personality carries out the assimilation of these given facts, then the 'I', the upper level of personal and reflective consciousness, which is no longer moved by its own internal dynamic, is susceptible to breaking down and disintegrating. It is this state of

⁸ Ibid., p. 484.

⁹ Ibid., p. 487.

¹⁰ 'This judgement, this idea of the personality, must undergo analogous modifications, and vary in the same subject following the changes of sensations and memories' (ibid., p. 117).

¹¹ Ibid., p. 484.

¹² Ibid., p. 3. One could hardly be a worse Cartesian.

¹³ These are all the more frequent and difficult to avoid since, for Janet, as for Claude Bernard, pathological states, or their seeds, are already present in healthy states. There is no solution of continuity between the two states, but rather a continuous series that imperceptibly leads from one to the other. Ibid., p. 33.

weakness or impotency,¹⁴ where the individual ceases being capable 'of reunifying, condensing its psychological phenomena, of *assimilating* them' that Janet calls, in an analogy to the state of physiological misery, 'psychological misery'.¹⁵

The various degrees of deterioration caused by this consummation of vital forces of the 'I', of its synthetic capacities, and its tendencies to unity dispose it to somnambulistic states,¹⁶ suggestion, and in a more general way, the phenomena of automatisms that submerge personal existence and substitute themselves for it.¹⁷ Above all, however, various modifications of the personality correspond to these states, which can themselves, as if by crystallization, engender various ephemeral and unstable forms,¹⁸ as well as numerous varieties of mental break up¹⁹ that in turn favour obsessions, hallucinations,²⁰ possessions,²¹ hysterias,²² anaesthetic states, and multiple existences (for example, the doubling of personality).

Neither given facts nor definitively acquired, the consciousness and the 'I' are, for Janet, nothing but always provisory and precarious constructions. They are also a particular type of functions and mechanisms that contradict the reassuring idea of a subject that pre-exists its history in some way or another.

¹⁴ Janet's psychology is a psychology of deficit, and not, as Freud's is, a psychology of conflict and culpability. On this point, see Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d'être soi*, pp. 52–60.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 454.

¹⁶ 'An abnormal state in which a new form of psychological existence develops, with sensations, images, and memories proper to it, and which in some cases can continue on a secondary level after waking, and continue underneath the first level of more ordinary existence' (ibid., p. 448). Thanks to the history of somnambulism presented by Bertrand Méheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité*, 2 vols. (Paris: Sanofi-Synthélabo, 1999), one can see that the current, which began with Puységur at the end of the eighteenth century, had intuited and explored 'other potentialities of psyche' (p. 114) that were finally forgotten by modern psychological science and common opinion, which are both careful to 'protect' a certain image of man (p. 454). It is not sure that our period, which is nonetheless weighed down by so many moral sufferings, is better able to challenge this traditional and reassuring image.

¹⁷ Janet, *L'Automatisme psychologique*, p. 365.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 366–7.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 428, 435, and 458.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 435 and 442.

²² Ibid., pp. 446–9.

It is in regard to this vast set of problems that de Martino's reflection was oriented.²³

Although his principal works were translated into French beginning in the sixties, de Martino appears to have remained at the periphery of French ethnological tradition, where it is true that socialism and intellectualism excluded that scholars grant, as was the case in the Forties, a decisive role to interior existential dramas that are lived by individuals.

There is considerable theoretical and philosophical ambition in *The Magical World*, published in 1948, and one should be on guard against confusing it with numerous monographs that treat, without much imagination, the habitual common areas regarding the catastrophic reputation of magic, which, we remember, is rooted in the debates and polemics that opposed pagan and Christian thinkers in the first centuries of our era.²⁴ At the same time, however, in *The Magical World*, de Martino inserts concepts ('metapsychics', 'paranormal phenomenology') that are so unfamiliar, and frankly so straightforward and suspect that their very mention always risks eliciting serious reservations.²⁵ This disturbing and original book must nonetheless be calmly studied without forgetting that, beyond these controversial aspects regarding the reality of paranormal phenomena,²⁶ its incomparable merit is that

²³ The following text was published for the first time in a slightly different form in *Gradhiva*, 28 (2000), pp. 114–17. We thank the editors who have allowed its reproduction here.

²⁴ See, e.g. Lactantius, *The Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, XXIII, 1–9; Origen, *Against Celsus*, II, 51 and VIII, 60–61; Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, X, 16; Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, VIII, 9, etc. These 'Christian' prejudices were then taken up by Enlightenment thinkers in their more global criticisms of superstitions, e.g. Condillac, *Traité des systèmes* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 48–9.

²⁵ On this tenacious prejudice, see de Martino, *Le Monde magique*, Fr. tr. Marc Baudoux, 2nd edition (Paris: Sanofi-Synthélabo, 1999), pp. 216 and 278.

²⁶ For Giordana Charuty, 'L'Ethnologue et le citoyen', *Gradhiva*, 26 (1999), pp. 96–7, de Martino's interest in the metapsychic stopped after the publication of *The Magical World*, i.e. after his adherence to the Communist Party (1949) and his choice of an ethnography engaged with the poorest of southern Italy. This is contested before the fact by Mancini (postface for *Le Monde magique*, pp. 292–4 and 546–54), who does not see a definitive renunciation in this evolution, but the response to 'new political emergencies'. One can point out that, in 1956, de Martino repeated his complaints with the official ethnographic tradition (Tylor, Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl), which 'tendentiously neglects the problem of the reality of paranormal phenomenology...but this presumption is contradicted by the fact that so-called paranormal phenomena exist' ('Histoire des religions et parapsychologie', *La Tour Saint Jacques*, 6–7 [1956], pp. 98 and 99). That a communist intellectual can be interested in paranormal psychology and have pessimistic considerations about the precariousness of the 'I', represents,

of placing the existential situation of primitive humans, condemned to conquering and preserving the unity of their interior being, at the centre of its reflections.

For, according to de Martino's central thesis, in its beginnings, the magical world, as an incomparable historical creation, represents a capital and unique moment of the development of human consciousness. In this step, the presence of humans in the world, their individuality (*in-dividuum*), and the mental unity of their 'I' are not yet guaranteed and assured²⁷—and this presence encounters uncountable difficulties. The specific cultural forms (myths and rituals) work at the resolution of this drama, destined in particular to give a greater coherence and continuity to the elements aggregated in this strange composition that is a human person. De Martino's thought thus develops around three interrelated themes: the historicism, the drama of presence, and the (meta)psychological functions of cultural creations.

De Martino's historicism ultimately appears so radical that it surpasses current cultural relativism to instead reach the observation of true ontological differences. Two 'historical worlds' can be contemporaneous while metaphysically separated from one another, because their relationships to the world and existence, their respective *ethos*, appear fundamentally distinct, while for most of us only ideas or parallel representations differ. Said in another way, for us, for example, the phenomena of hyperesthesia are deceptive and illusory, even if we admit that people believe in their existence in some places. For de Martino, on the contrary, that these phenomena do not (or no longer!) exist in our modern life does not only mean that they were not real elsewhere, but above all that their existential posture regarding the corresponding modes of being in the world are not the same. This historicism is thus absolute in the sense that these are not only ideas or beliefs of subjects who perceive the world here as different in this or that universe, but, as it were, a person's entire interior being. This is why de Martino refuses the possibility, for the European analyst,

for most of us, even more than a contradiction, but a difficult-to-imagine aporia. Likewise, this tension, undoubtedly inscribed within the heart of his work, makes a precise understanding of his intellectual evolution more difficult to understand, which moves from *The Magical World* to *The Land of Remorse*, from philosophical anthropology to concrete ethnography.

²⁷ De Martino frequently uses the word 'lability' for this.

of significant study of exotic ethnography.²⁸ His conceptualization of alterity thus exceeds the normal theoretical limits of 'our' 'indigenous' anthropological field. This is another manner of reminding ourselves that the anthropological field is also culturally constructed, and that the conception of humanity that it tacitly implies most often relates, and in so many aspects, to the humanist and theological-philosophical tradition that preceded and shaped it.²⁹

Now, in this magical world a drama unfolds, that of the individual's presence to him- or herself and to the world, as Mancini summarizes:

the preservation of presence constitutes, in magical civilizations, a vital and irrepressible necessity. Before any intellectual and practical activity, and as a necessary condition for it, presence is identified to this mental substrate or 'elementary sense of self', which is situated at the existential root of cultural life, and assures its development.... Integrated cultural life supposes the stability of presence that assures the person's mental unity, and, by this, the possibility of an objectification of the world and a constructive relationship with it.³⁰

The stakes of this existential drama would thus be nothing less than the conquest or restoration of an autonomous 'I' that is confronted with many threats of regression and dissolution:

Among these are the sentiment of being moved or possessed, or 'invaded' by the world, the crumbling of the barrier between the 'I' and the world, the sensation of de-realization and foreignness, the compulsive imitation of others or of natural phenomena, blockage of the will in catatonic stupor, fragmentation of existential unity into a plurality of simultaneous or successive mental existences, etc.³¹

One should also note, among these haunting threats that are always there and never beaten, that of death, before which presence 'does not manage to maintain itself' and 'perceives this risk through the representation and the experience of the cadaver that steals, sucks, attracts, infects, and returns as a ghost'.³²

²⁸ See Carlo Severi, 'Une pensée inachevée: L'Utopie anthropologique de Ernesto de Martino', *Gradhiva*, 26 (1999), p. 103.

²⁹ We have treated this problem in our *Anthropologie poétique*, 8–10 and in *The Western Construction of Religion*, pp. 177–86. See also Évelyne Fewzner, *L'Homme coupable: La Folie et la faute en Occident* (Toulouse: Privat, 1992).

³⁰ Mancini, postface for *Le Monde magique*, pp. 448–9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 539.

³² De Martino, *Le Monde magique*, p. 104; 'Notes de voyage', *Gradhiva*, 26 (1999), pp. 66–7; and Severi, 'Une pensée inachevée', p. 103.

It is incontestable that, for many, the words of 'paranormal phenomenology' and 'metapsychics' evoke nothing but obscure and culpable inclinations. For many French readers, who are spiritual sons of Fontenelle and Voltaire, these words should not even appear within a scientific debate. Tylor, Mauss and Hubert,³³ Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl, and many others have not, however, sealed the fate of magic once for all: are they illusions, confusions, pseudoscience,³⁴ or hoaxes?

Let us nonetheless listen to what de Martino tells us.³⁵ If, in his eyes, most of these 'magical powers' are real,³⁶ they are not so except in the realm of the magical world, that is, in an original existential situation where, as we have seen, the presence of a person to him- or herself and the world is still labile—but where, at the same time, this constitutive fragility exacerbates various states of the human psyche (such as altered or dissociated states of consciousness)³⁷ that are themselves likely to expand sensorial perceptions to favour various hallucinations and hypnotic capacities. In this sense, according to Mancini, de Martino 'probably met up with the general orientation of psychic research, which came from magnetic theories that were based on the idea that human psyche presents itself as a malleable, bubbling reality, disposed to extraordinary and highly varied manifestations and faculties'.³⁸

One can note an oddity or paradox about this: despite severe warnings by Wittgenstein,³⁹ for example, contemporary science frequently grants, without batting an eye, its label to Freudian mythology, although this science remains fairly distant from later psychological

³³ 'Magic is a living, unformed, inorganic mass whose composing parts do not have fixed place nor function,' Marcel Mauss, 'Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie' (1902–1903), in *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: PUF, 1973), p. 81.

³⁴ 'Thus, instead of opposing magic and science, it would be better to place them in parallel, like two modes of knowledge that are unequal in both theoretical and practical results..., but not in the mental operations that both of them presuppose, and that differ less in their nature than in the types of phenomena that they focus on,' Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962), p. 21.

³⁵ On this poorly known and moving terrain, Mancini's help is indispensable here, postface for *Le Monde magique*, pp. 372–474.

³⁶ De Martino, *Le Monde magique*, pp. 55–6, 59, 63, and especially 168.

³⁷ It is in this regard that de Martino often quotes Pierre Janet's *L'Automatisme psychologique*.

³⁸ Mancini, postface for *Le Monde magique*, p. 380. See also Méheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité*.

³⁹ See J. Bouveresse, *Philosophie, mythologie et pseudo-science: Wittgenstein lecteur de Freud* (Combas: L'Éclat, 1991).

models, considering them less scientific. (But by what criteria?) The relations of the human sciences (history, sociology, anthropology...) to the principal psychic theories are usually without any serious scientific basis, and rarely surpass the stage of dominant prejudices. Among these prejudices, one obviously finds that which interests us here, relative to the perennial endurance of a human person who is a priori endowed with a foundation and structure that are relatively stable, as found in the occidental model or ideal.

This existential configuration, dominated by the dramas that unfold therein, concomitantly elicits, according to de Martino, the creation of original cultural forms that have their primary scope in establishing or restoring⁴⁰ the psychic unity and stability of the person. In particular, the mythical-ritual structures associated with the beliefs in souls,⁴¹ spirits,⁴² and the hereafter,⁴³ whose operating value and signification are established by tradition, become irreplaceable auxiliaries for us in our struggle against the threats of dissolution: it is thus by the bias of our cultural creations that we preserve or (re)acquire ourselves. Their 'meaning', which can be infinitely paraphrased, is thus much less essential than the delineation of their fundamental psychological functions. In the same way, if one wishes to illustrate this thesis by an example to which we will return at length, the Christian soul is not only an idea or concept in whose existence people believed, on which they built an imaginary anthropology and to whose theological definition they

⁴⁰ The word 'redemption' or the verb 'to redeem' as used by de Martino do not seem optimal to us, in the sense that they imply, by the attraction of the Christian model, a moral mechanism with a soteriological finality.

⁴¹ That is, beyond its possible cultural expressions, 'your existence insofar as presence' (de Martino, *Le Monde magique*, p. 99).

⁴² These spirits, which in fact are 'unmastered psychic realities' (de Martino, *Le Monde magique*, p. 123), exist, as angels existed for the medieval consciousness. On this basis, we (and science with us) can no longer understand them as such, because, for us, these are no longer more than ideas or representations. Their psychological dimension eludes us, and it is there—except on the thought that we could re-actualize 'their spiritual dimension in our current consciousness' to 'make us ideally contemporary to these distant worlds' (Mancini, postface for *Le Monde magique*, p. 367)—which is the obvious theoretical limit of this 'absolute historicism'.

⁴³ 'being's resistance to the world to the dissolution of the engendered world, in first place, the representation and the experience of a dangerous "hereafter" of things and events... and, in second place, the representation and experience of a pragmatic, ritual order, that allows to explore, express, and master this hereafter (to stop the process of dissolution, and rehabilitate the objectivity that is in crisis, and thus to maintain the order of the world with a specific design),' (de Martino, *Le Monde magique*, pp. 151–2).

consecrated countless treatises. More mundanely, this soul was also (and it is perhaps here that its essential cultural contribution is found) the immaterial nucleus around which was edified—with the help of rules of life, introspective practices, and mental disciplines—the Christian's unity of consciousness. In order to remain faithful to de Martino's spirit, however, one should also add that the psychological experience of the Christian soul by a mystic, for example, Saint John of the Cross, belongs to a form of life into which we can no longer penetrate. It has become largely inaccessible to us.

Beyond the simultaneously embarrassing and troubling questions that this original approach to 'magical powers' awakens, one should not neglect the fascinating hypothesis that it raises at the same time—that mental organization, the structures of a person's consciousness and personality, are not tied into a mechanism that is innate, given, defined, and established once for all. On the contrary, at the heart of the magical world, their malleability is inserted into two great movements that confer to them their characteristic physiognomy: one is dramatic, marked by the crisis that the presence submitted to multiple threats of dissolution, while the other is optimistic, maintained by the effort of restoration that cultural creations support.

The imposing and fascinating perspective opened by de Martino is based, unquestionably, on some easy presuppositions that helped him to refine the schema.

He undoubtedly exaggerates, and at the same time idealizes, the opposition, which is mentioned many times, between the labile personality of magical universes and that 'of a decisive and guaranteed I am here' that characterizes our own being in the world.⁴⁴ In *The End of the World (La Fine del mondo)*,⁴⁵ de Martino will considerably attenuate the extension of this opposition, something already presaged in a note on page 165 of *Le Monde magique*, in which he indicated that the 'archaic realities' of the magical world can still strike the modern individual, especially in periods of crisis which, by the tensions that they provoke, are inclined to break him or her. This last specification unambiguously confirms that de Martino's understanding of the word 'magic' refers to the tragic and archaic experience of the interior per-

⁴⁴ De Martino, *Le Monde magique*, pp. 98, 102, 152, 164–6, 205–6, and especially 263. See also Mancini, postface for *Le Monde magique*, pp. 536–7 and 541–2 for the rectifications that de Martino will later make to his definition of presence.

⁴⁵ Posthumous work, Turin: Einaudi, 1977.

son, far more than to any crude science dedicated to controlling the forces of nature.

Likewise, he treats various psychic facts (telepathy, clairvoyance, autosuggestion, paranomia, hyperesthesia, predictions, telekinesis, extrasensory perceptions, healings, bewitchments, trials by ordeal, altered states of consciousness...) without distinction that would undoubtedly merit that one reserve differential analyses for them, which would themselves be submitted to rigorous protocols and diagnostics, so that one could integrate them into a global theory.

Finally, he offers neither the conceptual tools nor the methods that would permit him to surpass the major epistemological paradox contained in his vision of absolute historicism, which in some way condemns science to almost powerlessly contemplate the aporias that it has discovered.⁴⁶

On the other hand, by daring to place the historical dramas of individuals confronted with the edification and preservation of their own personal integrity, of their most intimate 'I', at the centre of primitive societies; by according a superior function to cultural formations;⁴⁷ and by refusing, in the name of the psychological malleability of the human being, the reassuring Cartesian conception of an immutable human subject, *The Magical World* does not only modify our vision of magic, but it invites us, while doing this, to contemplate some metaphysical limits of anthropological thought where one encounters, clearly not the belief in some mysterious hereafter, but the individual's unceasing conquest of uncertain humanity.

⁴⁶ Even if, at the same time, this attitude allows us to discover 'the historical limit' that overshadows our own scientific prejudices and 'the circumscribed character of our humanity' (ibid., p. 278).

⁴⁷ We find it also, symmetrically if one will, in our own 'cultural presumption, which raises our historical manner of being present in the world to a metaphysical dignity' (ibid., p. 263).

CHAPTER THREE

THE PURE CONSCIOUSNESS OF PHILOSOPHERS

It is true that the conceptions just evoked are neither the most frequently cited nor the ones most often commented upon. Nonetheless, the question that they persistently raise about the intrinsic consistency of the 'I' cannot but remind us, by contrast, of the theses of two philosophers that perhaps best summarize the dominant orientation of the Western position: Descartes and Kant. This is a 'cultural' position before a philosophical one, although it seems unique once it is compared to those conceived by the three thinkers whose central theses I have just summarized. The contributions of these two philosophers, in fact, gather the majority of presuppositions that found a philosophy of subject that tends to obstinately deny the unstable and precarious characteristics of the 'I' and the consciousness. Its interest also resides in the fact that its profound conviction, deeper than the particular arguments that found this or that of its expressions, inspires (and is undoubtedly inspired by) the anthropological conception that has developed in the wake of the progress of modern individualism. The development of the latter clearly could not be inspired by a global conception of 'person' that would have denied it the support of an unshakable *sui generis* principle.

Considered with a bit of distance, with the indispensable distance without which all anthropological reflection quickly falls into the oversensitive and reassuring comforts of ethnocentric prejudices, one sees that this classical philosophy proceeds by using radical means and logical (or rhetorical) devices. This was undoubtedly the price it had to pay in order to promote a subject that is metaphysically pure.

We unhesitatingly qualify these means as 'radical' in the sense that they consist in stripping individuals of the undoubtedly disparate group of traits that define and constitute them. All of the determinations that one takes from their environment, their period, their education, their history, and their life are erased and forgotten. It is, however, these factors that, essentially, make individuals what they are, and what they never are except provisionally! What is there outside of them that permits a more or less successful synthesis? This last hypothesis has not, however, been frequently raised, and the questions that

should be attached to it have not been asked. It is true that Western metaphysics is dominated by a nostalgia for essence (Plato) and Being (Parmenides). It is thus in this initial choice, in its powerful cultural fetish, that one should undoubtedly seek the most obvious origin of the project of an unshakable 'I' and a pure consciousness in individuals, even if one must amputate them from their humanity to do it.

In this perspective, the 'I' that corresponds to the *I think* does not manifest any particular physical characteristic (age, sex, environment, complexion). Neither does it owe anything to the pulsing life that animates it, the tormented history it has lived, or the multifaceted society that surrounds it, as if its singular being did nothing but develop the virtualities of an essence that nothing affects, because it is under and outside of everything. With one's interaction with others, one also does not gain anything essential that could influence or modify them. This a traveller without baggage who comes from nowhere and awaits nothing. There is no station to receive passengers, and no train will leave it. There is no evolution or change that concerns it. Living only in the present that disembodied and purely spiritual beings would know if they existed, the individual only borrows, parsimoniously, from the world that which fits the individual's noetic activities. No cultural traits come to cheer up this abstraction. This is thus a global and systematic process of erasing the real world, of placing the human person in a natural state aside.

Despite this considerable effort designed to suppress any carnal thickness, any historical or existential depth in the individual,¹ and to deny any inherent complexity of human nature, in order to substitute it with a double that is as immutable as ethereal—reality itself rises up.

¹ Cartesian dualism does not align the individual with his or her body, and *cogito* is clearly not a *cogitamus*; on this point, see David Le Breton, *Anthropologie du corps et modernité*, 2nd ed. (Paris: PUF, 2001), p. 58. Whatever one may say, Freudian anthropology, by placing the accent as it did on the individual's culpability and the painful conflicts that result from this, remained fundamentally the heir of this Western vision. By introducing obscure forces, culpable impulses (something already done by Christianity), and unconscious mechanisms into a person's psyche, it tarnished its purity, veiled its transparency, and shook its (good) consciousness—but it did not question the primacy of a consistent subject who, whether one wants or not, despite all the vices it went through, remained at the centre of the human reality. This explains a large part of its success among a public that was primarily worried, not with ascetic detachment and wisdom, but with egotistical well-being.

It is here at this point that the logical devices noted above intervene. One can rather call it a device, since it alone organizes and dominates the whole. This device, which has considerable rhetorical advantages, consists in organizing human reality according to dualities where one of the terms is systematically affected by a negative exposure that relegates the corresponding realm to a (very!) inferior level. This process can be artificial and even simplistic, while its efficacy and results remain impressive, since it introduces, into the interior of a complex, unstable, and ephemeral being, a unique principal that contains in itself the promise, even the certitude, of an immutable reality that avoids all determination.

On one hand there are soul, spirit, and thought associated to one or another of the terms in the prestigious list that follows: constant, unchangeable, pure, eternal, immortal, or superior. On the other hand, clumsy and heavy, there are body, the material world, and sensible diversity, which for their part refer to opacity, multiplicity, and death.

Such dualities luckily hold the certitude of unsolvable difficulties at the precise point where the two antagonistic (and ontologically) opposed 'elements'—the soul and the body, spirit and matter—must encounter or touch each other. They must necessarily do this, however. Who would dare to deny this? Pascale d'Arcy did a fine job summarizing the insurmountable contradictions and the aporias that Cartesian dualism must confront:

The problem is found on three levels. From an ontological perspective, it is inconceivable that a material action of an object on a body that is also material can produce any sort of effect on the immaterial soul. Second, one cannot understand how a pure spirit could have a part tied, not only to sensibility, but to the passions, which are characterized by their irrationality. Finally, if it is true that sensibility, or whatever has its place among animals, is independent of any mental faculty, what relationship can be found between the agitation of animal spirits and the ideas of the soul?²

Curiously, these contradictions and aporias do not seem to have definitively discredited Cartesian dualistic prejudice, as if, fundamentally, our intellectual culture has chosen to untiringly comment on these

² René Descartes, Introduction to *Les Passions de l'âme* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1996), pp. 16–7.

difficulties instead of questioning the artificial principle (the soul, as a *res cogitans*, separated from the body) from which they derive. It is, however, true that, in doing this, such a question would have at the same time questioned the unshakable reality of the subject that this principle was tasked with enduringly founding, and the opening to the transcendent that the latter guaranteed it.

One could also propose already that the active man of Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*,³ which is so close to us in more than one aspect, only shares rare affinities with the transcendental subject of the *Critique*. This had wisely proposed, regarding the relations of the sensible with the intelligible, that 'a third thing' was necessary, the 'transcendental schema', that is consistent, on one hand, with the categories, and on the other, with phenomena—said in another way, it is on one hand intellectual, and on the other, sensible. This is, however, 'a hidden art in the depths of the human soul, whose true operations we are hardly likely to ever divine from nature and down unveiled before our eyes'.⁴ The mysterious faculties of schematism could not offer more than an enigmatic rhetorical solution, because the problem they attempted to resolve was based on a highly contestable apriorism.

This tension, which is more visible in Descartes than Kant, whose primary dualism (transcendent subject/empirical human being) had a heuristic value before being frequently reinterpreted in a metaphysical sense, is quite revealing. To save the absolute unity of the 'I' (and to avoid confronting the painful perspectives that its questioning entailed), Descartes divided the person into two parts. The first, whether it is called 'spiritual' or 'pure', is free of all complexity and avoids any form of historicity. It is clearly in it that the 'I' resides. One can then endow the other part, the body, with the passions and sensations, that is, diversity and movement. However, despite all the unsolvable contradictions that this artificial and unbalanced vision elicited that are so manifestly contrary to experience, this conceptualization imposed itself. This is something that we certainly need to try to understand.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed. Robert P. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Eng. tr. Paul Gruyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 272–3.

Let us begin, in the *Metaphysical Meditations*, from Descartes' conclusion, in order to then better trace his itinerary:

And whatever may be (or better, certainly [is], as I will shortly state), I have a body to which I am tightly joined; nonetheless, because on one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am only a thing that thinks, and is not extended, and on the other I have a distinct idea of the body, insofar as it is only an extended thing, and does not think at all, it is certain that this 'I', i.e., my soul, by which I am what I am, is entirely and truly distinct from my body, and that it can be or exist without it.⁵

In highly clever manner, Cartesian doubt, which prepares this distant conclusion, does not regard the intimate nature of the 'I', nor (explicitly and at first) its existence itself, but that of the body:

I thus suppose that everything I see is false, I believe that nothing has ever existed of what lying memory represents, I have no senses at all; body, figure, extension, movement, and place are chimeras. What will then be true? Only one thing can be: There is nothing certain.⁶

This is a powerful doubt, but one that is also quite prudently circumscribed, because it only fits for the duration of the experience.⁷ It is above all a highly misleading or artificial doubt. Descartes never stops saying 'I' throughout his meditations, while granting this 'I' the power of solving this interrogation, of which it is, however, the central issue! Paraphrasing the celebrated paradox of Epimenides the Cretan or Willard O. Quine's koan,⁸ one could argue against Descartes that what one doubts should not be, in any logical and good methodology, the subject of the enunciation of this doubt. In the deep problems of personality, it is precisely this affirmation that becomes impossible, or that no longer refers to a known identity. There is nothing of this in Descartes. Neither is there a moment when he thinks of a sort of impersonal 'it' *thinks*, which, similar to the indifferent *logos* of the myths of Lévi-Strauss,⁹

⁵ René Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques* (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 1990), p. 222.

⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

⁷ Ibid., p. 44–5.

⁸ See F. J. Varela, 'Le Cercle créatif', in Paul Watzlawick (ed.), *L'Invention de la réalité: Contributions au constructivisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), p. 333.

⁹ 'We thus do not claim to show how men think in myths, but how myths think themselves in men without their knowledge. . . . Myths think *between each other*' (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le cuit* [vol. I of *Mythologiques*] [Paris: Plon, 1964], p. 20). To better understand the Lévi-Straussian ontological vacuity of Buddhist

would think (of itself) in him without his own awareness. Finally, this doubt never regards language itself, including its imprecisions and traps. One can doubt everything, but not the fact that there is nonetheless a perfect adequacy between words, ideas, and things; a fortiori, when, like Descartes, one attributes an absolute value to indigenous cultural notions, one that is transhistorical to the point of considering them as innate,¹⁰ and while one is, like him, filled with cognitive optimism.¹¹ Thus, having, with a few strokes, discharged the only question that he left forever undecided and perplexed (what is, definitively, profound and real nature of this 'I' to which I hypothetically attribute a certain form of existence?), Descartes, basing himself *exclusively* on the conscious and reflected experience of this exercise of doubt, can affirm, thereby recovering the certitude about the existence of his 'I':

But I persuaded myself that there was nothing at all in the world, neither heaven, nor earth, nor spirits, nor body; did I then also convince myself that I was not? But no! I myself was, in any case, if I had persuaded myself of something. But there is I don't know what kind of liar, who is totally powerful and totally sly, who always fools me with all his skill. There is then no doubt that I also exist, if he fools me; and however much he might fool me, he will make me so nothing that I will not think that I am something. In this way, with everything weighed and reweighed, one must ultimately propose that this statement, I am, I exist, me—every time that I say it or mentally conceive it—is necessarily true. But I do not yet know with sufficient understanding what this 'I' is, what I am, I who presently of all necessity am.¹²

And from this certitude, it will be easy for him to move to the following celebrated conclusion, according to which it is 'one thing that thinks', that is, 'one thing that doubts, that knows, that affirms, that denies, that wills, that does not want, that also imagines, and that feels'.¹³ Descartes attributes a perfect continuity to this being that thinks, whose exercise

inspiration, refer to our *Twentieth Century Mythologies* (London: Equinox, 2006), pp. 161–79, as well as to the next chapter.

¹⁰ 'And consequently there is a big difference between false suppositions of this kind and the true ideas that are innate in me, the first and foremost of which is the idea of God' (Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques*, pp. 189–91).

¹¹ 'but henceforth I know that I cannot be wrong about that which I have a transparent understanding of' (ibid., p. 199).

¹² Ibid., pp. 51 and 53.

¹³ Ibid., p. 63. Descartes specifies, a little further on (p. 65), in regard to this term: 'I myself am finally the same who feels, i.e. who perceives corporeal things *as if* through the intermediary of the senses'. (Italics mine.) What provokes this sensation is perhaps an illusion, but not the consciousness of myself insofar as I feel it.

of faculties leads him to admit that it is ultimately one, and different than the body:

In fact, to begin, I note here that there is a great difference between the spirit and the body, in that the body is by nature always divisible, while the spirit is itself absolutely indivisible. For, in truth, when I consider it, i.e., myself insofar as I am only one thing that thinks, I cannot distinguish any parts in me: I am a thing that is entirely one and complete, I have this understanding.... On the contrary, I cannot think of any corporeal or extended thing without it being easy for me to divide it into parts in thought, and without me having thereby an understanding of its divisible character. This remark alone is enough to teach me that the spirit is completely different from the body, if I did not know that enough from elsewhere.¹⁴

It is not important for us here to recall how Descartes, after the first results, will attempt to prove the existence of God. On the other hand, it is not useless to summarize the outline of his intellectual structure. Descartes was not able to establish, not so much the existence of the subject as that of its unity and continuity, except at the price of separating it from 'its' body, of eliminating all affection and any type of alteration from it, of depriving it of any psychosomatic complexity, of isolating it from its historical-cultural environment, and of reducing its various aptitudes or capacities to the noetic function alone. In this sense, Cartesian thought represents one of these great delirious moments in which metaphysical speculation breaks all the prudent ties that could have attached it to this world, and takes off alone on the quest for a subject that is not real. The 'I' of the Cartesian subject does not have any fractures, and suffers no defect or imbalance. Nor does any weakness that could alter its integrity threaten it. Its structure is as rigid and continuous as that of God (at least as Descartes conceives of the latter: unique, simple, and perfect). It is a pure mock-up constructed in a metaphysical laboratory. It apparently possesses, to the highest degree, this stable, lucid, calm, and unified consciousness that we evoked above as an inhuman ideal.

In the eyes of a certain historical and comparative approach of indigenous anthropological theories, the demonstration of Descartes should be placed among those that attempted to grant a conceptual status to archaic (a spiritual and noetic principle that is fundamentally

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 245 and 247.

different from the body) and theological (known existence of a transcendent divinity) representations, but one can also see the pressing concern to construct, by isolation from everything that surrounds him or her, a subject that is tasked with representing a certain disembodied ideal of the human person.

One cannot make oneself ridiculous and reproach Kant for having attempted to define *a priori* what in human beings would pre-exist their experience of the sensible world, and would, because of this, found for him the possibility of transforming these experiences into knowledge. He could have related this transcendental position¹⁵ to an impersonal mechanism in which no reflection regarding the unity and consistency of the 'I' was implicated. However, and again, unlike what Lévi-Strauss will affirm two centuries later,¹⁶ far from having it exist in only this manner, Kant founds the only possibility of reaching an immutable 'I' on this disposition. It is in this purely intellectual act, where, in fact, no affection or trouble penetrates, that this genesis occurs. Henceforth, it is difficult to attribute anything but a heuristic and methodological value to the Kantian transcendental, because it founds the possibility of discovering the unity of a very real 'I'. The epistemological scope of the transcendental subject is thus not indifferent to the ontological destiny of the empirical subject, even if Kant recognizes that we cannot have more than an imperfect knowledge of ourselves, because we never manage to know 'our own subject only as appearance, and not what it is in itself'.¹⁷

The linking of diverse representations cannot, according to Kant, come from the senses and impose itself on our spirit by them alone. This linking is an act of the understanding. It assures the synthesis or unifies it:

¹⁵ 'Qualifies a knowledge that concerns, not objects, but our *a priori* concepts of objects, our way of knowing objects insofar as it is possible *a priori*. The transcendental designates an *a priori* use of knowledge, which explains the possibility of a necessary submission of objects to pure concepts, as well as an application of these concepts to objects. ... Only an *empirical use* of these concepts is then legitimate, while any *transcendental use*, which goes beyond the limits of possible experience, must be rejected. Transcendental thus qualifies a certain non-empirical use of pure concepts, and becomes synonymous with transcendent' (Jean-Marie Vaysse, *Le Vocabulaire de Kant* [Paris: Ellipses, 1998], pp. 60–1). See Kant, *Critique*, p. 129.

¹⁶ See note 9 p. 59 above.

¹⁷ Kant, *Critique*, p. 259.

Combination does not lie in the objects, however, and cannot as it were be borrowed from them through perception and by that means first taken up into the understanding, but is rather only an operation of the understanding, which is itself nothing further than the faculty of combining *a priori* and bringing the manifold of given representations under the unity of apperception.¹⁸

This purely cognitive operation, however, one that could have remained such indefinitely, is made by Kant to be the place of something far more essential. First of all, of a deduction in which there is already a fairly robust form of self-consciousness:

yet it [this principle of the necessary unity of apperception] declares as necessary a synthesis of the manifold given in an intuition, without which that thoroughgoing identity of self-consciousness could not be thought.¹⁹

And then of an experience (we should not forget that understanding is an operation that unfolds in time!) that certainly always refers to the transcendental subject that pre-exists it, in the sense that this subject will, *a priori*, orient this experience, but which at the same time discovers an 'I' to which is immediately, and always *a priori*, granted a group of decisive qualities. They extend well beyond the realm of pure cognition, since it would be hard to maintain that they do not concern the individuals themselves:

I am therefore conscious of the identical self in regard to the manifold of the representations that are given to me in an intuition because I call them all together *my* representations, which constitute *one*. But that is as much as to say that I am conscious *a priori* of their necessary synthesis.²⁰

It is easy for Kant to then add, in false modesty, that his analysis 'says nothing more than that all *my* representations in any given intuition must stand under the condition under which alone I can ascribe them to the identical self as *my* representations, and thus can grasp them together, as synthetically combined in apperception, through the general expression *I think*'. What he says is so major that one can question

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 248.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 248, to which one must add (p. 249): 'Consequently the unity of consciousness is that which alone constitutes the relationship of representations to an object, thus their objective validity, and consequently is that which makes them into cognitions and on which even the possibility of understanding rests'.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 248.

it, because, if the transcendental unity of the cognitive process were acquired, this result would say nothing certain as to the nature and perpetuity of the hypothetical 'I' that accompanies this process.²¹

It is also true that Kant, well into this highly difficult passage of the *Critique* that has numerous tensions running through it,²² mentions and underscores the proper limits to apply in order to not make his analyses affirm more than they can demonstrate. Thus, for example, he specifies again that the transcendental unity of apperception must be distinguished from 'the subjective unity of consciousness, which is a determination of inner sense, through which that manifold of intuition is empirically given for such a combination'.²³ This heuristic distinction is, however, again in some sense minimized, as if Kant feared that one might find arguments for a purely and exclusively noetic unity from this distinction, which had, as we just noted, eventually permitted the reduction of the ontological consistency of the 'I' to a mock-up of an impersonal *res cogitans*. This is why he hurries to specify:

All representations have a necessary relationship to a *possible* empirical consciousness: for if they did not have this, and if it were entirely impossible to become conscious of them, that would be as much as to say that they did not exist at all. All empirical consciousness, however, has a necessary relationship to a transcendental consciousness (preceding all particular experience), namely the consciousness of myself, as original apperception. It is therefore absolutely necessary that in my cognition all

²¹ Ibid., pp. 249–50. This is something that Kant himself notes in the celebrated *Critique of the Third Paralogism*: 'The identity of the consciousness of Myself in different times is therefore only a formal condition of my thoughts and their connection, but it does not prove at all the numerical identity of my subject, in which—despite the logical identity of the I—a change can go on that does not allow it to keep its identity; and this even though all the while the identical-sounding "I" is assigned to it, which in every other state, even in the replacement of the subject, still keeps in view the thought of the previous subject, and thus could pass it along to the following one' (ibid., p. 423).

²² See Kant, *Anthropologie du point de vue pragmatique*, ed. and tr. Alain Renaut (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 2001), pp. 11–29. For this refined interpreter, the Kantian critique 'of the metaphysical subject' of Descartes could not have left anything more than a 'transcendental subject', i.e. a 'pure structure', while it instead ended, at the price of a debatable paralogism, in the certitude of an *I am*: 'the transcendental subject does not become directly aware of himself, but of the reflection of his activity in time, in a form that is *like an existence* (an *I am*), because there is an integration of the categorical structure (as a synthetic activity according to the categories) in an intuition (internal sense), and this on the occasion of a sensation. From this the perception of an *I am* is constituted, which is noted as another phenomenon, a *subject-phenomenon* so to speak, which is distinct from the *object-phenomenon* in view of which this second phenomenon is constructed' (p. 26).

²³ Kant, *Critique*, p. 250.

consciousness belong to one consciousness (of myself)... The synthetic proposition that every different *empirical consciousness* must be combined into a single self-consciousness is the absolutely first and synthetic principle of our thinking in general. But it should not go unnoticed that the mere representation *I* in relation to all the others (the collective unity of which it makes possible) is the transcendental consciousness. Now it does not matter here whether this representation be clear (empirical consciousness) or obscure, even whether it be actual; but the possibility of the logical form of all cognition necessarily rests on the relationship to this apperception as a faculty.²⁴

The transcendental and unifying activity of the consciousness appears as a priori necessary; the consciousness, in time, of this consciousness, itself refers to a consciousness (or a 'perception') of our existence (whether it is clear or not, whether it exists or not), that *de facto* takes the place of primary realization, for, without it, our empirical consciousnesses would never be distinguished from the complex of our representation, and the transcendental unity of the subject would ultimately never have the occasion to surpass the pure and impersonal realm (something that, eliminating at the same time the very possibility of an ethics, would make the existence of God quite uncertain). The diversity of representations is nullified by the unifying action of the understanding, which a priori has the capability of realizing this synthesis. The understanding, despite (or rather: because) of its transcendental status, would be incapable by itself of imagining any 'I', if there were not 'the consciousness of myself insofar as originating apperception' which is not manifest except in experience.

From this point, everything unfolds as if the limits of the understanding and the even greater imperfections of the internal senses, far from being cumulative and rendering impossible all synthesis and affirmation regarding the existence of an 'absolute identity of self-consciousness', reciprocally cancelled each other, and, instead becoming complementary, they raised themselves up for the greater glory of the latter:

But now I want to become conscious of myself only as thinking; I put to one side how my proper self is given in intuition, and then it could be a mere appearance that I think, but not insofar as I think; in the consciousness of myself in mere thinking I am the being itself, about which, however, nothing yet is thereby given to me for thinking.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., p. 237.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 456.

One can say that Kant did not draw all the conclusions that he had the right to develop from the results of his critique of the metaphysical subject, which would have inevitably led him to reduce the individual's consistency to a simple appearance. We just saw instead the degree of subterfuge he employed to rehabilitate it. Thus, he could not base, on this fragile foundation, the possibility of an empirical psychology that would never surpass the uncertain and fragile limits of a 'metaphysics of subjectivity'.²⁶ On the other hand, it was possible 'to displace the look towards this exterior dimension, so to speak, of psychics (thus coming from external senses) that furnishes us with "signifying behaviours", or, if one prefers, towards the domain of the senses'.²⁷ This will be the object of anthropology.

Kant's reflection could not protect the (certainly fragilized) unity and perpetuity of the subject except on the condition of first making a detour by its pure and disembodied double. This implicitly reveals that it was difficult to reach the same result beginning with the 'man on the street'. Further, the results of the metaphysical inquiry that were used by Kant while he occupied himself with this challenge in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, are simplified and schematized:

The fact that the human being can have the 'I' in his representation raises him infinitely above all other beings living on the earth. Because of this he is a *person*, and by virtue of the unity of consciousness through all changes that happen to [in] him, [he is] one and the same person. . . . This [difference from animals] holds even when he cannot yet say 'I', because he still has it in thoughts, *just as all languages must think it when they speak in the first person, even if they do not have a special word to express this concept of 'I'. For this faculty (namely to think) is understanding.*²⁸

Far from the dialectical subtleties of the *Critique* and the mortal dangers that were induced by the *Critique of the Third Paralogism*,²⁹ this last text expresses and summarizes very well one of the great Western certitudes, if not the greatest (and certainly the most indispensable). Ordinary anthropology, like the anthropology at the base of the human sciences, is inspired by common sense. Both are always inspired by this first conviction, which is the paradigm of all of our reflections on humanity. Accepting it will do nothing more than confirm this convic-

²⁶ See Renaut, introduction to *Critique*, pp. 29–33.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁸ Kant, *Anthropology*, p. 15.

²⁹ See above, note 21 p. 64.

tion a little more. To refuse it is to take the risk of condemning oneself to understand how, despite everything, the person is constituted. It is, however, sometimes fruitful to take the less lazy choice.

Kant did not take this risk. Thus, for example, he did not deal with the examination of mental problems except as accidents that only affect reason, the 'faculty of knowing'. Underneath light mental perturbations (hypochondria, mood swings, melancholic dreaming, and delirious discourse provoked by fever) extends the unknown realm of madness, to which Kant is particularly severe and indifferent:

It is difficult to bring a systematic division into what is essential and incurable disorder. It is also of little use to occupy oneself with it, because all methods of cure in this respect must turn out to be fruitless, since the powers of the subject do not cooperate (as is the case with bodily diseases), and yet the goal can only be attained through his own use of understanding. Although anthropology here can only be indirectly pragmatic, namely only command omissions, nevertheless it still requires at least an attempt at a general outline of this most profound degradation of humanity, *which still is attributable to nature*. One can divide derangement in general into the *tumultuous*, the *methodical*, and the *systematic*.³⁰

These troubles strike the individual, transporting him or her out of the *sensorium commune*, but do not properly belong to the individual—no more than affection and mood belong to the structure of personality itself.

These considerations, on principle, conserve the immutable form of the 'I' and the consciousness. One recognizes that it is susceptible to be affected by troubles and failures, but these, absolutely, do not come from its nature itself, nor do they reflect its organization or exercise. Unlike what Janet will do a century later, Kant never envisages that the constitution of the 'I' can be the result of a complex historical process, itself subject to numerous heterogeneous factors, and that it gives birth to an individual consciousness that will never be definitively assured in its being.

Intrinsic movement and diversity are foreign to both the Cartesian and Kantian perspectives. Whether they speak of subject, of consciousness, of the 'I', or of the understandingly, they never do this

³⁰ Kant, *Anthropology*, pp. 166–7. Italics mine. The loss of all sense (*amentia*) corresponds to the first, delirium (*insania*) to the second, and insanity (*vesania*) to the third.

except by situating it on an abstract, autonomous, and transcendent level, in such a way that its recognition alone is sufficient to negate its constitutive history (or becoming), radical heterogeneity, opacity, and fragility—and to eliminate any jurisdiction they may have over a person.

Jean-Paul Sartre will remain faithful to this idealistic ‘metaphysical’ program (simplicity, autonomy, exclusive presence to self) when he writes about consciousness that:

For the same reasons, it is impossible to assign a consciousness a motivation other than itself. Otherwise, one would need to think that consciousness, insofar as it is an effect, is unconscious (of) itself. It would be necessary that, in some way, it is without being aware (of) being. We would fall into that too frequent illusion that makes consciousness a semi-consciousness or a passivity. But consciousness is consciousness from one side to the other. It cannot thus be limited by anything except itself.

Taking fairly precisely the opposite of the psychologist that had instead underscored the dynamic, unstable, and synthetic characteristics of the multiform process that reaches consciousness, Sartre denies being able to recognize in it any idea of becoming or activity where itself would be the object:

This determination of the consciousness by itself should not be conceived as a genesis, as a becoming, since it would be necessary to suppose that the consciousness is anterior to its own existence. Nor should one conceive of this creation of self as an act. Otherwise consciousness would effectively be consciousness (of) self as act, something that it is not. Consciousness is a fullness of existence, and this determination of self by self is an essential characteristic.³¹

Beyond this radical opposition that comes from two radically different manners of considering the human subject—empirical for Janet, disembodied and atemporal for the philosopher—let us not forget that one of the essential questions, to which all cultures without exception had to respond, is raised here. This question thus does not belong properly to Western philosophy of the classical period. In its origin, it belongs to the common heritage of humanity.

³¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 22.

CHAPTER FOUR

IMPERMANENCE AND VACUITY

Comparing contemporary texts that were composed in the West to ancient, even archaic, texts obviously risks the well-known error of anachronism. Nonetheless, could one not accept that, in India and in the West of antiquity and the modern era, certain reflections and speculations could have converged towards similar conclusions, simply because they are inspired from the same constants and experiences? Lévi-Strauss did not hesitate to bring them together, by attributing an exemplary role to Buddhism, whose teaching, according to him, has universal significance:

Men have made three great religious attempts to free themselves from the persecution of the dead, the malice of the hereafter, and the dread of magic. Separated by intervals of approximately half a millennium, they conceived successively Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. It is striking that each stage, far from marking a progress of the preceding one, witnesses rather to a retreat. There is no hereafter for Buddhism, everything is reduced to a radical criticism, the likes of which humanity would never again show itself able, at the end of which the wise man reaches a rejection of the sense of things and beings: It is a discipline that abolishes the universe, and that abolishes itself as a religion. Falling again to fear, Christianity re-established the other world...¹

This passage can be surprising, since this aspect of Lévi-Strauss's thought has too often been misunderstood, and it is further not often that a Western philosopher elevates Buddhist thought to such a height. Because they are instructive for our scope, we will come back to the reasons that led the author of *Tristes tropiques* to recognize in Buddhism the definition of the human person that is most conformed to his structural anthropology. The latter, we should not forget, should not be reduced to a highly formal method of analysing symbolic productions (myths, works of art...), since it claims to offer the first principles of a general anthropology.

¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955), p. 522.

Any attempt to approach or summarize Buddhist 'thought' (the expression itself is significant) should pay attention to not avoiding an aspect that is essential to it, and that actually is not part of the noetic activity that we westerners always unduly privilege.

Western philosophy in fact seems to have long forgotten the sense of its origins, or rather, the determining orientation of its original vocation. This forgetfulness is witnessed to today by the complete indifference that it shows in regard to anything that might resemble the elaboration of a practical wisdom, which would permit people to live better (or less badly) by helping them to overcome their fears and evils. It also rejects, with a haughty disdain, anything that, while pretending to be 'philosophical', would not be first of all and primarily a speculative effort. The retrospective look that it turns towards its own history reinforces this attitude, because it only retains those concepts and texts that it unceasingly comments upon! It seems to have become indifferent for some time to the cries of so many people plunged into a life that so often disorients and weighs on them—and even more to the idea of finding them personal responses and proposing practical solutions to them. For quite some time, philosophy has stopped responding to their nervous expectations. The current success of 'psychotherapists' and 'gurus' stems from this.

On the contrary, ancient philosophy first of all focused on helping individuals (or at least some of them...) by transforming them, who, in its eyes, never ceased their state of unrest, fear, and evasion. It aimed to be wisdom (*sophia*), that is, existential choices, domination of desires, disciplines or rules of life (frugality, chastity, detachment, silence...), self-control or mastery, and exercises in concentration and meditation:

Meditate then on all of these teachings as if by second nature day and night, both alone and with a companion like yourself. In this way you will not feel troubled in sleep or awake, but you will live like a god among men.

For the man who lives in immortal goods lives as if mortality is nothing.²

Both of these should permit individuals to confront real or imaginary evils (the latter, for example, the fear of the gods, being no less harm-

² Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, § 124, 135, in Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

ful) that strike them, and to acquire in this way this particular form of impassibility and detachment that guarantees and strengthens interior serenity. The wise³ are free, because neither things nor beings have any sway over them. Freed of the bonds that had hindered and held them back earlier, they experience the inexpressible well-being, the apathy, that is comparable to that of the gods.

On this note, the profound differences that one can note (and that have been adopted!) between the conceptions of the principal ancient schools (those of the Pythagoreans, the Epicureans, the Stoics, the sceptics, and even the Aristotelians)⁴ are undeniable, but they should not cause one to forget the common orientation that inspires them (and which has been more often than not forgotten and neglected!), that is, that their various cosmological arguments served to justify a mode of life that was destined for the wise alone. Speculation was at the service of this practical wisdom, because it was the search for the latter that inspired research and reflection. Nothing was more foreign to the spirit of this ancient philosophy than an intellectual construction, however impeccable it might have been, that had its end in itself. Today, however, one hardly dares to ask what such a work might be 'useful' for, since it is admitted that such a utilitarian preoccupation reflects a narrow and petty mind. It would thus seem ridiculous in our time period to ask what wisdom tied Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, or Heidegger to their contemporaries—and how much more to try and understand through what credentials their lives were those of exemplary wise men! It is also true that those whom one calls and who today call themselves 'philosophers' are for the most part 'professors', that is, functionaries. And this role obviously never reaches the level of 'an exemplary human experience'.⁵

Dispossessed of all practical finality, philosophy has become distanced from people's real worries and ordinary existence. This evolution has obviously been reinforced by the scholarization and institutionalization of philosophical teaching, which no longer cares at all for the life of those who hear it.

One should perhaps place the responsibility for this strange and profound metamorphosis with Christianity, which deviated from the

³ See note 9 p. 13

⁴ On the last group, see Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 123–44.

⁵ Jacques Bouveresse, quoted by Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* 391.

vocation of ancient philosophy. Did it not contribute to amputating the latter from its essential dimension, to then immediately monopolize it? Under the name of 'religion', it at the same time subordinated it to a spiritual and soteriological perspective that implied that people should lead a virtuous life here below, free of vices and sins. Did not the search for salvation in the hereafter replace the search for wisdom in this world?

This is why the use of the word 'religion' or its corresponding adjective in reference to Buddhism, and a fortiori when one considers only its primitive conceptions, can do nothing but engender misunderstandings. In the end, it would be more precise to see a sort of doctor in the Buddha, who would occupy himself with the existential well-being and the mental health of those like himself. Like the doctor, he establishes a diagnostic, itself based on the knowledge of the nature of things, and proposes a remedy that the patient can tolerate. It would not be good if the latter was, as is habitually said 'worse than the evil', nor that it prove to be inefficacious instead. No supernatural fact nor any theology intervenes in this observation. The teachings of Buddha are firmly situated in this world here, and their interlocutors are beings of flesh and blood, like ourselves.

Like ancient philosophies, Buddhism, because it is above all an investigation of the individual and the individual's condition with an intellectual depth that is rarely equalled, presents itself as an efficacious remedy to the mortal evils that attack individuals, as to those that are self-inflicted by the pursuit of false goals. Here again, and this is perhaps a wisdom, the solution consists, not in attempting to change the world, but in changing oneself. To this end, a path to follow is proposed to everyone, one that is often long and difficult. At the end of the voyage, it is the individual who will be transformed. From the pedagogical point of view alone, this method elicits no criticisms, because the length and grade of the path will be chosen in function of the traveller's capacities. This is something Saint Bernard will also understand a few centuries later, when he will decide to soften the rules of life for his disciples.

One can note that this Buddhist wisdom, like many others, is rooted in an implacable observation. Any attachment, any tie, whatever the object, the pleasure it elicits, or even the altruistic sentiment that animates it, inevitably does not engender anything but worries, fears, and suffering:

Let no man ever cling to what is pleasant, or to what is unpleasant. Not to see what is pleasant is pain, and it is pain to see what is unpleasant.

Let, therefore, no man love anything; loss of the beloved is evil. Those who love nothing, and hate nothing, have no fetters.

From pleasure comes grief, from pleasure comes fear; he who is free from pleasure knows neither grief nor fear.

From affection comes grief, from affection comes fear; he who is free from affection knows neither grief nor fear.

From lust⁶ comes grief, from lust comes fear; he who is free from lust knows neither grief nor fear.

From love comes grief, from love comes fear; he who is free from love knows neither grief nor fear.

From greed comes grief, from greed comes fear; he who is free from greed knows neither grief nor fear.⁷

‘Thirst’ (*trṣṇā*) is the traditional term that encapsulates all the voracities, all the passions (of defeating, of possessing, of destroying, or simply of living), and all the forms of attachment that result from them without fail:

The thirst of a thoughtless man grows like a creeper; he runs from life to life, like a monkey seeking fruit in the forest.

Whosoever this fierce poisonous thirst overcomes, in this world, his suffering increases like the abounding *Bīraṇa* grass....

If a man is tossed about by doubts, full of strong passions, and yearning only for what is delightful, his thirst will grow more and more, and he will indeed make his fetters strong.⁸

Passions that trouble the spirit lead individuals astray, abuse them, and frighten them. Self-awareness and ‘egotistical’ sentiment are born, supporting themselves and developing on individuals’ passions. In a perpetual movement, the unsatisfied desires that they leave in their wake, the failures that they elicit, the anxieties that they give birth to, in turn give rise to other blindnesses and new sufferings:

Whatever one intends to do and whatever one projects and whatever one occupies oneself with, it is on this that consciousness is supported to establish itself.

⁶ This is Locke’s famous ‘uneasiness of desire’, an expression that is quoted and commented on by Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 169–70.

⁷ *The Dhammapada*, tr. Friedrich Max Müller, *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. X (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1881), § 210–16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, § 334–5, 349.

Because it has found a support, consciousness subsists, and, subsisting and developing, there is tension. Because there is tension, there is a 'tendency towards', a going and coming—and because of this, there is birth, old age, and death in the future, as well as worry, lamentation, anxiety, pain, and despair. This is how this entire mass of pain arises.⁹

In order to destroy this ardent thirst, a person must strike at the root itself, that is, annihilate the process of desire. For this, there is only one difficult and austere path, that engages all the techniques of mastery of all the levels of interior life (control of the senses, of the body, of the imagination, of affections and emotions; discipline of a rigorous life; permanent vigilance and attention...):

By rousing himself, by earnestness, by restraint and control, the wise man may make for himself an island which no flood can overwhelm.¹⁰

This type of teaching appears to be inspired by a patient and detailed observation of what Christianity will later call the human soul. These observations do not proceed from abstract and unverifiable theories. On the contrary, they seem to attempt to never stray from the average human condition. Every person should be able to recognize him- or herself in it. This teaching is addressed to everyone! One would be wrong, however, to see something like the fundamental weakness of a rustic wisdom that is incapable of advanced speculation in this simplicity, in this sustained attention to the most ordinary behaviours. In fact, this apparent lack of conceptual ambition¹¹ is in agreement with the penetrating care to not create superfluous and gratuitous notions that would in turn engender new sources of illusions and attachments:

The Tathāgata sees what must be seen, but does not create conceptions about what is seen, is not seen, or must be seen; nor about him who sees, nor about things that are understood, known....

One achieves liberty of heart without the sign by paying no attention to the sign, and by focusing all of one's attention on the domain of the non-sign. One thus enters into the samādhi without sign, and dwells there.¹²

⁹ Silburn, *Le Bouddhisme*, pp. 47–8 (excerpts from *Samyutta Nikāya* II, pp. 64 and 67).

¹⁰ *Dhammapada*, § 25. See also § 323, 326–7, 348, 362, 368, and 397.

¹¹ Buddhism will quickly develop an incomparably subtle and refined metaphysics and logic.

¹² Silburn, *Le Bouddhisme*, 36 (excerpts from *Anguttara Nikāya* II, 25) and 65 (excerpts from *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 297). *Tathāgata* is one of the surnames of the Enlightened One, the Buddha—The One who came thus, or He who has *come* to see

The final goal of this difficult discipline, which is supported by various requiring 'techniques' (meditations, contemplations, concentrations) thus appears to be to progressively eliminate (a) all the causes of troubles or perturbations by resolutely distancing the individual from the world and its temptations,¹³ (b) these troubles themselves (which imply a permanent control on the effect of sensations on mood, as well as a mastery of various processes, usually tied to these processes, that tend to dissipate or alter the consciousness by giving rise to 'representations' therein), and (c) the personal, 'superficial' structure that is progressively built on false foundations.

For this 'I', this sense of the 'I', and the appropriation by the ego of anything that lives, feels, and conceives are not, according to the Buddhist optic, primary facts that would pre-exist one's experience of the world. They instead belong to a process of 'conditioned production' (*pratītyasamutpāda*) in which the individual entity appears to never cease constructing and reinforcing itself, while in fact continually alienating the individual ever more. In reality, nothing exists absolutely under this process, no substance gives the individual any permanent and stable base. Beyond as well, nothing, no immortal spiritual principle, survives.

The 'I', the natural paradox of the 'I', is thus situated at the heart of Buddhist meditation on the human person—whose breadth and originality are in no way inferior to the most elaborate conceptions of occidental philosophical tradition.

The central argument¹⁴ of Buddhist philosophy resides in what one calls, in a completely conventional fashion, the 'triple characteristics' of things. They are painful (*duḥkha*) because they are ephemeral (*anitya*); they are thus also empty or stripped of 'self' (*anātmyalakṣaṇa*), that is, of any immutable and permanent substrate. One must understand all that is as 'painful', precisely because it is never manifested except as ephemeral—it is imperfect, unsatisfying, and mediocre. Nothing subsists or remains, neither here nor elsewhere. By nature, everything

things *thus*, i.e. as they are—while the word *samādhi* designates a particular form of concentration of the spirit.

¹³ We should note here that the problem is more ethical than moral: for the wise person, succumbing to temptation is less a fault than a demonstration of weakness.

¹⁴ We include here, in order to develop the passage regarding the Lévi-Straussian conception of person and ontology, some paragraphs from our *Twentieth Century Mythologies*, pp. 161–70.

appears then disappears, subject to change¹⁵ and degradation. A person, that is, the complex and provisory reality that we designate by this word, is in no way an exception, since he or she does not have a privileged status. Composed like all other things, a person is the result of five disparate aggregates¹⁶ (of matter, perceptions, sensations, six kinds of consciousness, and mental compositions or fabrications) in which one would but vainly seek a stable substrate, an incorruptible element that escapes this uninterrupted flux that is unendingly nourished by *tṛṣṇā*, which carries away everything and retains nothing. This is one of the most renowned teachings in *The* (three famous) *Questions of King Milinda* (*Milindapañha*).¹⁷

¹⁵ This perennial theme is also frequent in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* (see below, notes 26 and 28 p. 107). Other examples can be found in Bernard Ducourant, *Sentences et proverbes de la sagesse chinoise* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1990).

¹⁶ See *Dhammapada*, § 277–9, p. 104; Walpola Rahula, *L'Enseignement du Bouddha d'après les textes les plus anciens* (Paris: Seuil, 1961), pp. 75–93; Silburn, *Le Bouddhisme*, pp. 40–2; André Bareau, *Les Religions de l'Inde* (Paris: Payot, 1966), pp. 46–55.

¹⁷ *The Questions of King Milinda*, Eng. tr. Friedrich Max Müller, *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. XXXV (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), II, 1:

Now Milinda the king went up to where the venerable Nāgasena was, and addressed him with the greetings and compliments of friendship and courtesy, and took his seat respectfully apart. And Nāgasena reciprocated his courtesy, so that the heart of the king was propitiated.

And Milinda began by asking, 'How is your Reverence known, and what, Sir, is your name?'

'I am known as Nāgasena, O king, and it is by that name that my brethren in the faith address me. But although parents, O king, give such a name as Nāgasena, or Sūrasena, or Virasena, or Sihasena, yet this, Sire,—Nāgasena and so on—is only a generally understood term, a designation in common use. For there is no permanent individuality (no soul) involved in the matter.'

Then Milinda called upon the Yonakas and the brethren to witness: 'This Nāgasena says there is no permanent individuality (no soul) implied in his name. Is it now even possible to approve him in that?' And turning to Nāgasena, he said: 'If, most reverend Nāgasena, there be no permanent individuality (no soul) involved in the matter, who is it, pray, who gives to you members of the Order your robes and food and lodging and necessities for the sick? Who is it who enjoys such things when given? Who is it who lives a life of righteousness? Who is it who devotes himself to meditation? Who is it who attains to the goal of the Excellent Way, to the Nirvāna of Arahatsip? And who is it who destroys living creatures? Who is it who takes what is not his own? Who is it who lives an evil life of worldly lusts, who speaks lies, who drinks strong drink, who (in a word) commits any one of the five sins which work out their bitter fruit even in this life? If that be so there is neither merit nor demerit; there is neither doer nor causer of good or evil deeds; there is neither fruit nor result of good or evil Karma. If, most reverend Nāgasena, we are to think that were a man to kill you there would be no murder, then it follows that there are no real masters or teachers in your Order, and that your ordinations are void. You tell me that your

brethren in the Order are in the habit of addressing you as Nāgasena. Now what is that Nāgasena? Do you mean to say that the hair is Nāgasena?

'I don't say that, great king.'

'Or the hairs on the body, perhaps?'

'Certainly not.'

'Or is it the nails, the teeth, the skin, the flesh, the nerves, the bones, the marrow, the kidneys, the heart, the liver, the abdomen, the spleen, the lungs, the larger intestines, the lower intestines, the stomach, the faeces, the bile, the phlegm, the pus, the blood, the sweat, the fat, the tears, the serum, the saliva, the mucus, the oil that lubricates the joints, the urine, or the brain, or any or all of these, that is Nāgasena?'

And to each of these he answered no.

'Is it the outward form then (Rūpa) that is Nāgasena, or the sensations (Vedanā), or the ideas (Saññā), or the confections (the constituent elements of character, Samkhārā), or the consciousness (Vigñāna), that is Nāgasena?'

And to each of these also he answered no.

'Then is it all these Skandhas [aggregate] combined that are Nāgasena?'

'No! great king.'

'But is there anything outside the five Skandhas that is Nāgasena?'

And still he answered no.

'Then thus, ask as I may, I can discover no Nāgasena. Nāgasena is a mere empty sound. Who then is the Nāgasena that we see before us? It is a falsehood that your reverence has spoken, an untruth!'

And the venerable Nāgasena said to Milinda the king: 'You, Sire, have been brought up in great luxury, as befits your noble birth. If you were to walk this dry weather on the hot and sandy ground, trampling under foot the gritty, gravelly grains of the hard sand, your feet would hurt you. And as your body would be in pain, your mind would be disturbed, and you would experience a sense of bodily suffering. How then did you come, on foot, or in a chariot?'

'I did not come, Sir, on foot. I came in a carriage.'

'Then if you came, Sire, in a carriage, explain to me what that is. Is it the pole that is the chariot?'

'I did not say that.'

'Is it the axle that is the chariot?'

'Certainly not.'

'Is it the wheels, or the framework, or the ropes, or the yoke, or the spokes of the wheels, or the goad, that are the chariot?'

And to all these he still answered no.

'Then is it all these parts of it that are the chariot?'

'No, Sir.'

'But is there anything outside them that is the chariot?'

And still he answered no.

'Then thus, ask as I may, I can discover no chariot. Chariot is a mere empty sound. What then is the chariot you say you came in? It is a falsehood that your Majesty has spoken, an untruth! There is no such thing as a chariot! You are king over all India, a mighty monarch. Of whom then are you afraid that you speak untruth?' And he called upon the Yonakas and the brethren to witness, saying: 'Milinda the king here has said that he came by carriage. But when asked in that case to explain what the carriage was, he is unable to establish what he averred. Is it, forsooth, possible to approve him in that?'

When he had thus spoken the five hundred Yonakas shouted their applause, and said to the king: 'Now let your Majesty get out of that if you can?'

And Milinda the king replied to Nāgasena, and said: 'I have spoken no untruth, reverend Sir. It is on account of its having all these things—the pole,

Psychic life (the realm of mental compositions or fabrications, *samskāra*, the fifth aggregate) illustrates this process. There as well, numerous varied conditionings lead to multiple unstable composed things: ideas, memories, dreams, desires, opinions, plans, and representations to which people identify themselves by making them their own, and by building their interior sentiment, the consciousness of their own individuality, on them. It is precisely this process that one must interrupt, because it leads to the false (and always painful and definitive) illusion of a substantial 'I' that leads people astray by insatiable desires:

On the occasion of sensation, the arhat [or one who has attained Enlightenment] perceives sensation, he knows that there is neither 'I', nor vision, nor seen object, but the cooperation of three coordinated phenomena—although they are naturally isolated—i.e., knowledge, the eye, and sensible form. At the moment of sensation, the ignorant one conceives of an 'I' before an object that he desires or rejects, and this disdain delivers him to desire, which further bogs him down in error. With the arhat, on the other hand, sensation produces neither desire nor attachment.¹⁸

It is undoubtedly because we never stop sensing this terrible truth that, strongly turning away from it, we never stop reinventing the soul. We believe it is an impregnable refuge that is untouched by time, corruption, or death. But by attributing the permanence of eternity to this last, do we not create the most fatal of illusions for ourselves? Because of it and the unreasonable beliefs that it engenders, do we not expose ourselves to never seeing things 'as they are' (*yathābhūta*) one day?

and the axle, the wheels, and the framework, the ropes, the yoke, the spokes, and the goad—that it comes under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of "chariot".⁹

'Very good! Your Majesty has rightly grasped the meaning of 'chariot.' And just even so it is on account of all those things you questioned me about—the thirty-two kinds of organic matter in a human body, and the five constituent elements of being—that I come under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of "Nāgasena".⁹

See also Jean Naudou, *Le Bouddha* (Paris: Samogy, 1973), p. 186 (excerpts from *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 137–89): 'O monks, you want to possess something permanent, stable, never-ending, not subject to change, and that would last like something that is eternal. But where do you see a possession of this kind? I see none. You want to have control over the notion of self, in such a way that it does not produce chagrin, nor pain, nor suffering, nor lamentation, nor despair. But where do you see such a grip? I see none.'

¹⁸ Silburn, *Le Bouddhisme*, 36 (excerpts from *Samyutta Nikāya* III, 96).

That is, as difficult, ephemeral, conditioned, composed, and without any permanent principle (whether one calls it 'self', 'being', 'spirit', or 'soul'). In the eyes of Buddhism, however, if a solution exists, it can only be in the totally individual capacity of contemplating, understanding, and accepting universal emptiness. Suffering and fear of suffering will end on the condition of having destroyed thirst—the thirst for existing, and the thirst for immortality in particular. The individual accepts things the way they are (*tathatā*—that they are thus, composed, without duration, or any immutable foundational principle) and thus the inanity of 'his' or 'her' 'I'.

Nirvāṇa, far from being a paradisiacal place or state, represents the end, extinguishment, for this individual, in order to be freed of the sentiment of 'I', of various processes (affective, psychological, and intellectual) which, nourished by incessant new desires, maintain this cruel and useless illusion. *Nirvāṇa* is nothing other than 'the extinguishment of desire, the extinguishment of hate, the extinguishment of illusion'.¹⁹ This positive conception of emptiness does not imply anything tragic or that is the source of anxiety, since these epithets witness to an anterior stage where the true nature of ego is still misunderstood. It should not be confused with nothingness either, something that presupposes a nostalgia for a fullness, that of Being. Buddhist emptiness instead claims to surpass this false opposition (Being/nothingness), which is the fruit of the visceral attachment to our person, to institute the individual at the heart of this peaceful vision where nothing occurs any more, nothing troubles this calm that is conformed to the (absolutely empty!) essence of things.

In our eyes, which are tired by twenty centuries of macabre meditation on the cruel passion of Christ, on the redemptive value of suffering, and on the idea of 'the impossible innocence of man that is rooted in dogma of original sin',²⁰ the posture that Buddhism adopts surprises us by these two original characteristics.

Morals, and the idea of sin, fault, and culpability that go with them, are not situated at the centre of Buddhism's structure. This is clearly not because Buddhism is ignorant of the benefits of virtue, but more precisely because morality does not represent anything more than one

¹⁹ Rahula, *L'Enseignement du Bouddha*, p. 59 (excerpts from *Samyutta Nikāya* IV); i.e. three major causes (*rāga*, *dveṣa*, and *moha*) of illusions and attachments.

²⁰ G. Lanteri-Laura, in *L'Homme coupable: La Folie et la faute en Occident*, by Évelyne Fewzner (Toulouse: Private, 1992), 12.

of the elements, together with mental discipline and wisdom properly speaking (correct thought and understanding),²¹ that can help the wise free themselves from the ties that hold them captive (and unhappy) in this world. In this regard, this or that evil action is, if one will, both reprehensible and harmful. Because it is a misdeed towards others, it de facto expresses an indisputable form of attachment and blindness provoked by greed, hate, or ignorance. The property of such a wisdom perhaps consists in establishing all the (mental, psychic, affective, intellectual, moral...) components of the individual on the same level, thus avoiding any hypertrophy of one of them, and under the same calm control, because each of them is equally capable of harming it. The acquisition of interior peace and detachment by the individual cannot be done except at the price of this global re-evaluation of all of his or her former values.

Despite its famous proclamation: 'everything is suffering', Buddhism is thus not a pessimistic philosophy that abandons itself to morbidly enjoying the specification of human turpitudes. In this it possesses, along with other wisdoms, a heroic attitude that is fundamentally optimistic and definitive. The observation regarding the human condition, 'life is suffering', is without qualification. Once this diagnosis has been established, however, the accentuation is once and for all placed on the unshakable resolution that will permit the wise person to escape this hell. The goal is optimistic, even if it coincides with the definitive extinction of the 'I', or *nirvāṇa*!²²

Lévi-Strauss neglected this practical teaching of Buddhism in his work, to retain only the central lesson regarding the person's emptiness:

The consistency of the 'I', which is a major preoccupation of all of Western philosophy, does not withstand its continuous application to the same object that completely invades it and impregnates it with the lived sensation of its unreality. For this little bit of reality that he still dares to claim is that of a singularity, in the sense that astronomers give the term: the place of a space and the moment of a time that are relative to one another, where have occurred, are occurring, or will occur events whose density, itself also relative to other events that are no less real but are more dispersed, permit to approximately circumscribe it—inasmuch

²¹ See Rahula, *L'Enseignement du Bouddha*, p. 73.

²² One cannot help but note the paradox that it has been personalities with exceptional careers, exceptional individuals, who have preached the thesis of the 'I's futility!

as this bundle of events that have passed, are current, or are probable does not exist as a substrate, but only in that things occur, and in that, although there arises elsewhere a countless number of these things, that are interlaced, and usually one does not know from where.²³

This metaphysical, decisive, and radical choice is opposed to both Freudian psychoanalysis and Sartre's existentialism. What does Lévi-Strauss criticize in them? To the one and the other, with a remarkable consistency that can be observed from one end of his work to the other (that is, from *Tristes Tropiques* to *The Naked Man*), he criticizes their giving a central place to a thousand eventualities of existence—along with their impact on consciousness—as well as their reintroduction of a subject with them, that is certainly stripped of its prestigious humanist attributes, but that remains just as capricious and invading. This is true to the point of retaining and absorbing all the resources of a certain philosophical reflection that is all too happy to find the untiring means of nourishing and flattering its narcissism:

This promotion of personal problems to the rank of philosophical problems overly risks reaching a sort of fluffy metaphysics that is excusable on the level of didactic procedure, but that is quite dangerous if it should permit to prevaricate with a mission that is assigned to philosophy until science is strong enough to replace it—i.e., to understand being in relation to itself, and not at all in relation to me. Instead of abolishing metaphysics, phenomenology and existentialism²⁴ introduced two methods of finding alibis for it.²⁵

The criticism that he makes of psychoanalysis and the Freudian conception of the human being is similar. For Lévi-Strauss, the surpassing of individual and particular situations and points of view is indispensable. What is first and essential for him is, at any rate, not historical individuals and the traumatic events they have lived, but the impersonal structure into which the latter is inserted. This and its study are, then, alone what is important because they represent the only paths on which science can commit with any hope of success.

²³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L'Homme nu* (vol. IV of *Mythologiques*) (Paris: Plon, 1971), p. 559.

²⁴ "This auto-admirative enterprise where, not without naïvety, contemporary man closes himself into a conversation with himself, and falls in ecstasy before himself" (ibid., p. 572).

²⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, p. 77.

If Lévi-Strauss borrowed from Buddhism its ontology founded in emptiness, it is then because it fit his conception of the 'structural' person, the anonymous and mortal singularity that is simply the recipient of a spirit that is as naked and impersonal as the individual is. There is then a moralist in Lévi-Strauss, but one that has requirements. Beyond the rules that found all forms of social life, and more essential than them, Lévi-Strauss insists on the necessity (for a person, and even more for the wise person) of disengaging from an 'I' that is constantly accompanied by its noisy retinue of states of the soul.

Further, as Lévi-Strauss himself said, any anthropology should not be more than an 'entropology'. Beyond 'the undefinable greatness of beginnings',²⁶ the unique moment where structure possessed an absolute fullness, the preoccupations of the 'I' and history introduced corrupting germs.

It is only in the acceptance of this lucid face-to-face encounter with the futility of the world and him- or herself that a person can hope to discover and understand the only interesting aspect: their common and reciprocal intelligibility. If, in the world of Lévi-Strauss, there is no place for Being, for any type of positive ontology, it is known that there is a place, on the other hand, for order (that is, matter for thought, reflection...) and for writing *Mythologies*.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 424.

CHAPTER FIVE

UNFINISHED HUMANITY

Individuals, like the larger groups to which they belong, possess two capacities that are as indispensable as they are complimentary. These permit them on one hand to blind themselves, to not see what literally ‘stare them in face’, and on the other, opposite, hand, to unshakably believe in the existence of beings or objects whose existence, in the manner that these multiform beliefs give them, is far from established.

These two capacities are never as necessary as when one evokes the personal ‘I’. Everything unfolds as if, before this problem, we refused to take experimental facts that anyone can verify into account, to hasten towards the deceiving evidence. In an essential text for our topic, one from which we will now extract some of the more important passages, David Hume¹ begins by evoking this prejudice that is so tenacious and ingrained that most of the time it does not seem to elicit any reservations:

There are some philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our *self*; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. The strongest sensation, the most violent passion, say they, instead of distracting us from this view, only fix it the more intensely, and make us consider their influence on self either by their pain or pleasure. To attempt a farther proof of this were to weaken its evidence; since no proof can be derived from any fact, of which we are so intimately conscious; nor is there any thing, of which we can be certain, if we doubt of this.

The three important terms are prominent here: continuity (‘continuity’), identity, and simplicity. To the ‘I’, as it is usually conceived, we a priori attribute duration,² immutability (it subsists and remains the same), and a uniform consistency comprised of itself, and itself alone—as if it were composed of a unique substance. This vision is reassuring,

¹ David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, I, iv, 6 (‘Personal Identity’).

² It is impossible to forget Aristotle’s famous warning in this regard: ‘for they all [living beings] yearn for this [eternity], and they act for this when they act according to nature’ (*On the Soul*, 415b.1–2).

and this quality alone would be enough to explain its success. To the question, who am I? that is, what was I then, and what will I be tomorrow? the response seems to go without saying: I am 'fundamentally' the same today as I was, and will be. Somewhere, in the heart of our most intimate being, below the countless ups and downs that punctuate our lives, something subsists that cannot be modified or altered. Cannot one speak of this as a visceral and instinctive belief? It thus seems superfluous to ask what the being is of those who, for example, speak of their soul as the most essential thing inserted in them—because their discourse will do nothing but lyrically exalt this primary conviction.

In any case, in this domain as in many others, the characteristics that are retained (continuity, identity, and simplicity) are of a meta-physical nature, and meet up with our principal intellectual, and even scientific, prejudices, as if they have been contaminated. In a general manner, our reasonings, particularly those that are applied to the origin of things or the nature of beings, actually turn fairly spontaneously towards explanations that have uniform, identical, and simple causes intervene. At least we evoke them first, and we only abandon them with the most sincere regrets, when facts stubbornly contradict us. Our preferences are for incorruptible principles, substances, individuals, uni-verses, a-toms, intangible dogmas, orthodoxies, structures, systems, laws, absolutes, transcendence, the One, the unique God.... In the reasons for our preferences, it would undoubtedly be inexact to only retain aesthetic factors, although we are probably sensitive to the fact that the first causes which we maintain further possess an immediately intelligible form. On the contrary, we hesitate to give plasticity, diversity, change, heterogeneity, flexibility, 'play', malleability, nuances, ambivalence, etc., which are figures of mixture, impurity, and instability, principal roles in our explanations.

Is not our logic, that is, the deepest zones where these *principles* are developed, where their aesthetic is formed, the victim of a sort of Parmenidean complex? In any case, it appears to have been conceived for a world populated with immutable beings that are animated by harmonious movements.³ Despite countless transformations, variations, influences, and metamorphoses that are both known and unknown, we persist in considering these, not as comprising part of things themselves, but rather as accidents that cause light alterations on their sur-

³ The influence of the canonical model of monotheistic theology is probably decisive here.

face. Thus we obstinately continue to speak of the human individual, and to attribute immutable qualities or dispositions to him or her, although we know very well today that what we designate by this term is the result of a complex evolutionary process that has been going on for many millions of years, and that has seen numerous unpredictable adaptations and mutations.⁴

It is as if it were finally admitted, but only in a tacit manner—if not without our knowledge—that what is best established from what we could know (in the small part that we might accept to regard things as they are) would really have nothing to do with what we are, or think (rather, desire) we are. On this topic, we give ourselves over to, as Hume regrets, what ‘we are so intimately conscious’, but that, for this reason alone, ‘no proof can be derived’.

Hume in fact adds, as a rather involuntary disciple of the Buddha, that, to grasp this ‘I’, to feel its presence, to actualize one’s awareness of it, we cannot but support ourselves on our impressions (moods, sensations, sentiments, notions...). These are, however, numerous, unstable, changing, and ephemeral:

It must be some one impression, that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, through the whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time.

In fact, all that one can attempt to grasp is these impressions, and not an ‘I’ that is independent from them or, even more improbably, that pre-exists them. They alone reveal it to me, but insofar, and only insofar that it is this ‘sensible plating’:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.

⁴ This construction is based on a very simple rhetorical process that consists in substituting the historical and cultural factors in which the individual was built by an ideal group of fundamental characteristics that transform a person into an immutable essence.

From these first reflections, Hume develops an extremely modern vision, that is 'cinematographic' and not pictorial,⁵ of the impressions that occur in us in succession, immersed in a mental flux that substitutes the irenic image of an immutable 'T':

...I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement....nor is there any single power of the soul,⁶ which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment. The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different; whatever natural propensity we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity.

In this situation, the awaited question inevitably arises:

What then gives us so great a propensity to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possessed of an invariable and uninterrupted existence through the whole course of our lives?

Hume's response, which is a little deceiving, and in any case too short, can be broken into two points:

[a.] But though these two ideas of identity, and a succession of related objects be in themselves perfectly distinct, and even contrary, yet it is certain, that in our common way of thinking they are generally confounded with each other. That action of the imagination, by which we consider the uninterrupted and invariable object, and that by which we reflect on the succession of related objects, are almost the same to the feeling, nor is there much more effort of thought required in the latter case than in the former....However at one instant we may consider the related succession as variable or interrupted, we are sure the next to ascribe to it a perfect identity, and regard it as enviable and uninterrupted. Our propensity to this mistake is so great from the resemblance above-mentioned, that we fall into it before we are aware; and though we incessantly correct ourselves by reflection, and return to a more accurate method of thinking, yet we cannot long sustain our philosophy, or take off this bias from the imagination.

⁵ See J. Bouveresse, *Wittgenstein: La Rime et la raison. Science, éthique et esthétique* (Paris: Minuit, 1973), pp. 45–6. One could just as well say that it is Buddhist!

⁶ See Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Kant, Descartes...and, for an overview, Bergamo, *L'Anatomie de l'âme*.

[b.] In order to justify to ourselves this absurdity, we often feign some new and unintelligible principle, that connects the objects together, and prevents their interruption or variation. Thus we feign the continued existence of the perceptions of our senses, to remove the interruption: and run into the notion of a soul, and self, and substance, to disguise the variation.... though we are not able fully to satisfy ourselves in that particular, nor find any thing invariable and uninterrupted to justify our notion of identity.

Hume's analysis of each of these points is insufficient. The 'action of the imagination' by which 'identity, and a succession of related objects' are confounded, as well as the fakes that we invent to abuse ourselves, are not the only facts that one must invoke, nor should they be invoked only in this rudimentary manner.

Regarding the first point (a), one should add at least the two following remarks. This act of the imagination is itself underpinned, undoubtedly in a more essential manner than Hume admitted, by the activity of the memory.⁷ From what we remember, what we spontaneously refer to the same person, that is, our 'I', we easily enough move on to the idea or impression that this 'myself' is identical from one end to the other. There is a paradox there that is as interesting to note as to observe. While the successive events that occur in our life imperceptibly and permanently modify the composite that we in fact are, we have the tendency⁸ to consider them as incidents which show that an 'I' lives and also exists outside of them. We have already had the occasion to state that this ingrained conviction is undoubtedly vital. Because of this, retrospectively, we project onto our successive 'I's (like Proust) or onto our 'I' that is in perpetual gestation (according to Janet's reading), what our current 'I' recalls—something that nonetheless has never stopped being modified. Our memories are not inert and fixed in an eternal present. They metamorphose, are schematized, and are coloured according to the state of our successive 'I's.

⁷ Hume sees and recognizes nothing other than an intellectual activity there: 'memory does not so much produce as discover personal identity, by shewing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions,' (*A Treatise on Human Nature*, I, iv, 6) that permits us to grasp 'that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person' (ibid.). However, as Kant will later demonstrate, if the continuity of this intellectual activity was also acquired, 'it [would] not prove the numerical identity of my subject at all' (see above, note 21 p. 64). In some way, thought could conserve itself, and with it, this type of purely intellectual memory, without thereby demonstrating that a unique 'I' remains associated with them.

⁸ This is a completely irrepressible tendency.

On the other hand, we need to also introduce a distinction that will probably never be as precise and clear as one would hope, but it is not impossible to think that this relative imprecision paradoxically contributes to the idea of a solid and enduring 'I'. We said above that each individual possesses a particular identity that is composed of elements taken from social life (a name, a descentance, a status, functions, various obligations, a lifestyle, a group of rights and powers, familiar spatio-temporal references, etc.) that do not vary (or vary but little) and almost always have an enduring or permanent character.⁹ Some of them even accompany us throughout our existence, and even survive beyond our death! Although they are exterior and unfamiliar at the beginning of our mental life, it would be dangerous and even ridiculous to claim that these networks of intertwined elements do not enter into the perception that we have (and thus into the constitution) of our 'I'. Just as it is difficult to imagine what the 'I' resembles without the impressions that have struck it, of the memories that have enriched it, and the various experiences that have formed it, so too does one but with difficulty conceptualize the type of analysis that would permit the detachment of the 'I' from all these accretions that have been added to it and have adjusted to one another, to contemplate the 'I' in its supposed original purity, or in its improbable essence. Does not one more frequently observe the opposite situation, that is, people whose personality seems to be identified with them? This complex synthesis, which is realized in the crucible and course of our life, is not realized in a mechanical and uniform manner. It is necessary for all of these countless and unexpected elements that can be included to be made of choices, negotiated in compromises, established in hierarchies, added to with the most ancient of items, developed from links, fit together with reasonings and ideas, raised with dikes, and imagined in fiction. This is another manner of once again recognizing the decisive place in the construction and preservation of our 'I's that is maintained by the textual function—by the composition of texts that say us. It is this unending and multiform work that culminates in (the activity of) the consciousness,¹⁰ and thus which is also not something immutable, like

⁹ One observes daily that the brutal disappearance or simple modification of one of them is capable of eliciting serious troubles.

¹⁰ See above, notes 17 and 18 p. 38 as well as the corresponding passage. This is why Hume rightly only sees a 'fictitious identity' in the identity 'which we attribute to the human mind' (*A Treatise on Human Nature* I, iv, 6), while Janet spoke of a

an imperturbable mirror or an unchangeable nucleus that would pre-exist its own dynamism. It is preferable to conceive it as a dynamic realization that is destined to synthesize all the 'occurrences' that reach it, and that is oriented towards only one end: the equilibrium and harmony of the 'I'.

The second point (b) that Hume evokes is also insufficiently developed. The notions that people invent¹¹ in order to give a greater consistency to the 'objects' that they designate (soul, 'I', substance) incontestably exist in this form, and the role of imitation that Hume attributes to them, as a faithful heir of Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke, seems undeniable, and today nobody would truly contest its validity.

This, however, only represents the final and most visible part of a vast group of cultural mechanisms that are infinitely more complex and rich than Hume's remark would have it. Numerous cultural elements (norms, ideas, values, ideals, bodily techniques, mental disciplines, etc.) enter into the composition of every individual (whether a Catholic Breton of the seventeenth century, a Tibetan monk, or an Aztec king) by following and supporting a long and quite profound process of education. They do not, however, only procure an original conception of the world and cognitive schemas for this individual, because their incorporation and internalization provide the materials (composure, courage, sense of honour, ethical responsibilities, sexual morals, lifestyle, etc.) from which the framework of the individual's interior personality will be assembled.

Another impressive group is the one that culminated, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, in the Christian concept of the soul, which we will treat shortly in an unusual optic—since the properly metaphysical or theological aspects are not those that will be most important to us. Beyond them, and perhaps definitively more essential than them, the 'mental' techniques that they presupposed or provoked will occupy us. For these are inserted into a larger, undoubtedly universal, anthropological context,¹² in which, despite appearances,

'metaphysical conclusion'. Hume adds, I, iv, 6, 'that the understanding never observes any real connexion among objects, and that even the union of cause and effect, when strictly examined, resolves itself into a customary association of ideas. For from thence it evidently follows, that identity is nothing really belonging to these different perceptions, and uniting them together; but is merely a quality, which we attribute to them, because of the union of their ideas in the imagination, when we reflect upon them.'

¹¹ '*Fingunt simul creduntque*' (Tacitus, *Annals*, V, 10).

¹² The comparisons thus become legitimate again.

so-called religious aspirations, which are oriented towards one form or another of immortality, count less than the disciplinary instruments that were perfected in order to give various 'organs' of interior life (consciousness, mood, affectivity) the capacities or abilities (detachment, self-mastery, invulnerability, moral strength) that aim to preserve the stability of the corresponding personality in this world.

It will thus be a study that brings down to earth, that gives the individual a group of practical means that one does not normally consider in the West except in subordinating them to perspectives that open them to the hereafter. In this sense, the radical choices that have been theorized by spiritual directors and the precepts that have been continuously taken up in works of spirituality paradoxically encounter one of the clearest paths for approaching and understanding the very real problems that the mastery of interior life poses to the individual. Since these efficacious means, these 'techniques' are themselves inseparable from everything a culture could have conceived of this same individual and of the individual's intimate being, the image of this intimate being will also unfold before us.

PART TWO

CHRISTIAN TECHNIQUES OF THE SOUL

There are three things that I would like men to think of in themselves. These three are far different than that Trinity, but where, I would say, they can exercise and prove themselves, and feel that they are far. I speak of these three: to be, to know, and to will. For I am, I know, and I will: I know, and I will; and I know I am, and that I will; and I will to be, and to know. (Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, XIII, 11)

Human Nature is the only science of man; and yet has been hitherto the most neglected. (David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, I, iv, 7)

When I was a corporal, this is how I taught the utility of exercise in close order, four of us marching in step. I refused to march in step and to place myself in rank, and to march in two by four lines, and I made the squad pass between the two trees of the courtyard. Then they marched on one another. They became aware that what they had to do was not so stupid. (Marcel Mauss, *Les Techniques du corps*, p. 384)

CHAPTER SIX

TECHNIQUES OF THE BODY AND SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

One obviously cannot speak of the soul and its techniques without first evoking the body and 'techniques of the body'. This is both to honour the work of Marcel Mauss which carries this title and has become famous,¹ and to underscore our debt to him, as well as to note the facts that will permit us to then better distinguish what is specific to the 'techniques of the soul' that are examined a little later.

When one rereads Mauss's short essay today, his somewhat naive observations taken from the most ordinary daily life are clearly striking, while his common sense remarks and his conclusions have become recognized facts over time. It is unfortunately impossible to transport our spirit to the beginning of the 1930s, to have it taste the delicious pleasure of a reading that would discover this new and original thesis. This thesis, which has since been taken up and developed many times, can be expressed in a few words: At the end of a more or less rigorous education, our body (that is, our manner of acting and moving, the uses we make of it, the skilled feats that we patiently inculcate into it, the cares that we bestow on it, and the pleasure we derive from our body, the training we impose on it, the efforts or sufferings that we teach it to bear...) winds up belonging to another level than that of nature. Every culture (and sometimes, in a given society, every restricted group) forms the human body in its own way. It develops this or that capability, sometimes to the point of prodigy, and neglects some other one.

This is why, throughout his discovery, Mauss repeatedly offers observations and remarks. Here one walks or swims in such a way; there in another. Here women give birth like this; there like that. Here the young child learns this hand trick; there that other one, etc.

This short catalogue of differences, which is always amusing to flip through, should not have us lose sight of the essential aspect, which is

¹ *Journal de psychologie*, 32/3-4 (1936); reprinted in *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: PUF, 1989), pp. 363-86.

quite important here. With this test, the ‘ancient’ body (that of theologians or Cartesian philosophers, who relegated it to the sensible and material world in order to better exalt the spirituality and immortality of the soul) and the ‘modern’ body (that of scientific biology and medicine) saw the appearance of a new colleague, the ‘culturalized’ body. We discovered that the body, which up to that point had quintessentially represented nature, and which appeared submitted, for this reason alone, to its appetites, had in some way within itself a cultural form that, in a highly Aristotelian fashion, disciplined and modelled it. It would, however, be just as precise to say that, with Mauss, the human sciences took hold of and penetrated the body. At the expense of theology and biology, they extended their empire over lands that until then had seemed to have nothing to do with them. In brief, thanks to Mauss, the status of the body was modified, and it became a cultural realization. It developed, moved, acted, and reproduced according to the proven recipes and constraining rules that each tradition imposed on it. The ideals and values of each human group inhabited and fashioned it. It is clearly to education that one must impute the creation of this corporeal *habitus* or *hexis* ‘there where one ordinarily sees only the soul and its faculties of repetition’.²

Before examining an aspect that, *a priori*, seems secondary in Mauss’s study (we can call it the stoicism present in bodily techniques or disciplines), but that closely interests the present study, a few remarks are requisite.

First of all, it can be said that the body Mauss considers (and the word ‘techniques’ that is explicitly tied to it in this regard) is generally situated on the side of the instrument, the tool. Individuals everywhere must learn how to use it. They simply do this while making choices, perfecting some of its capabilities, and neglecting other capacities which, while showing the ‘brand’ of each culture, also express its adaptation and its various material constraints: the body of a breeder or warrior living in the African savannah will develop other competencies than that of Breton farmer.

One will then note, directly extending what precedes, that Mauss, by focusing on only this instrumental aspect, neglected the vast domain of the representations that are associated with the body. Each society makes a general theory for itself of the body’s organs, its fluids, of

² Ibid., p. 369.

the life that animates it, of the seat of its moral or intellectual faculties, of its moods (whether good or bad), of the illnesses or troubles that menace it, and of the 'passions' that lead it astray. Almost always as artificial as imaginary, this theory nonetheless has a central role in the economy of symbolic devices of which it is known that they establish (justify, illustrate...) the entirety of social distinctions and cultural practices. The body (which is scarified, cared for, loses weight, is perfumed, disciplined, lacerated, deformed, sacrificed, tortured, possessed, devoured, exposed, stoned, cosmeticized, clothed, made to suffer...) manifests, in the form of readable marks, *all* the signs that permit one to discern the origin, status, and identity of its owner. No other 'place' or 'object' manifests so many characteristics. It is as if, for the natives that we all are, our world were read as an 'open book'. We culturally live both our bodies and their sufferings or pleasures, just as what we are (or believe to be) is manifested by the dispositions or marks that are inscribed in and on our bodies.

One should finally note that the 'society' whose influence Mauss rightly underscores is, in his eyes, a uniform whole that is homogeneous and encompassing. Said in another way, this society abstracts from the relationships of power and domination, and from the conflicts or struggles that can make it inhumane or bloody it. This 'unanimist'³ conception is humanist and does not want to see that societies are also places where people oppress and humiliate their kind.

It is by keeping these last remarks present that one can best understand the path that has been followed since Mauss, and that the recent publication of *La Production du corps*⁴ summarizes fairly well.

For Godelier, these visible corporeal signs simultaneously imprint social order on the 'most intimate subjectivity', while defining the cultural, and thus impersonal, form of all personal interiority!⁵ However, this social order that is embodied in individuals, that 'is inscribed

³ One can find the same voluntaristic optimism in the contemporary work of Jules Romain.

⁴ A collective work edited by Maurice Godelier and Michel Panoff (who also wrote the introduction together, pp. xi–xxv), (Amsterdam: Éd. des archives contemporaines, 1998). Godelier's contribution, 'Corps, parenté, pouvoir(s) chez les Baruya de Nouvelle-Guinée', is on pp. 1–38.

⁵ This apparent contradiction is considerably alleviated if one will remember that cultural 'realities' are assimilated gradually, day after day, and within the crucible of an existence, a personal history, that can easily extend over many decades. Their incorporation and internalization are thus co-extensive to the slow movement by which newborns constitute themselves as individuals.

in the intimacy of each one', is truly an order, that is, an implacable system that distinguishes and hierarchizes. These distinctions (of sex, rank, wealth, status...) and with them, all the symbolic powers⁶ that they represent, are inscribed in and on the body. If Mauss's society is good and kind, the one conceived by Godelier primarily aims to maintain the inequalities and differences that found it! Henceforth, the control one has of the body is only one of the means, even if the most necessary and efficacious, that permits the justification and preservation of these differences.

Whatever the outcome of this debate on the nature of socio-cosmic orders that are inscribed in the human body and the more or less mechanical or flexible character of this inscription, the question is raised as to what relations are imprinted in man when he undergoes them. It appears that there are two types of such relations. On one hand there are relations of appropriation, because a new human being, a child, is already, before his birth, appropriated by the adults and groups who claim to have rights and responsibilities in his regard as his parents. On the other hand, the relations of subordination and domination are justified by the fact that the child is a boy or a girl, an elder or a younger member. And these relations of subordination are not only an aspect of the functioning of familial relations. There are also political, economic, and religious subordinations that can exist among individuals from the fact that they belong to different castes or clans. All of this marks the body, and it is for this reason that the control of the body and its appropriation is an issue in all societies.⁷

The position that Godelier defends is inserted into a perspective that could be called 'ultra-sociological', but in a different sense than Mauss's. The only dominant point here is that every social, solemn, or ritualized phenomenon primarily, if not exclusively, responds to the necessity to conserve the corresponding order as it is. However, this order only exists through its differences, hierarchies, and inequalities, which are themselves sanctioned by a certain distribution of powers and privileges. A particular status corresponds to each sign (acquired attitude of the body) that is inscribed in or on the body. Consequently, it permits, beyond the 'reading' of the body, its 'naturalization'—by objectifying it in what is for individuals simultaneously their most sen-

⁶ For these are not only signs or images that would only be metaphorical statements, but are powers that *really* (ibid., p. 17) cause what is expressed in rituals to come about.

⁷ Ibid., p. xix.

sitive (or hypersensitive), their most carnal (skin, sperm, or menstrual blood), and their most intimate (self-consciousness) aspects. By thus internalizing the structures of the existing order, and by symbolically extending it into every aspect of bodily life, this 'production of the body' sanctions, in an apparently incontestable manner, the 'production' of all the differences. The hierarchies and distinctions that are present in the 'social body' are symbolically reflected in and on individual bodies.

This intriguing conception seems less imprecise than incomplete to us, although it certainly aims to be definitive. This type of sociological analysis of ethnographic facts, which is exclusively founded on interpretive notions and programs that are taken from a Marxist-style sociology, can obviously never discover more than the explanations that are conformed to the latter.⁸ This truism will seem useless to many, since it is pedestrian and too obvious. Is not its impeccable expression in Godelier's reasoning nonetheless apparent? In order to exit the sociological circle in which he encloses us, one must remember there is a fundamental ambivalence in every fact and every series of human facts, which permits them to be something other than a simple social fact or series of social facts that would be subordinated for this reason, according to the old Marxist *doxa*, to the political and economical maintenance of the existing, iniquitous, order. For this order, however implacable and brutal that it can be sometimes, however important it may be for the continuance of certain inequalities and injustices, is also only one of the elements of a more complex and vast order that is situated on another level, which Borges undoubtedly thought of when he wrote: 'in the same disorder which, when repeated, would become an order: The Order'. This ultimate order, which encompasses both metaphysical questions and the inventory of the differences of the 'social order', is that of culture. It is made of the intertwining of all the types of order: economic, symbolic, artistic, juridical, poetical, and technical orders.... It offers every individual a rich system of essential coordinates and references. One should never lose sight of the Promethean task that every 'cosmographic formation'⁹ accomplishes. By the systematic organization of all the aspects of our lives,

⁸ In summary: A society only has value and only lives by the differences in status (powers, wealth, prestige...)—thus its various systems of symbolic expression (objects, rituals, myths, narrations, corporeal signs...) will impress them everywhere possible.

⁹ See note 12 p. 26.

it contributes to found and perpetuate a non-negligible part of our personal identities. This 'cosmographic function' transcends the ordinary, and particularly the Marxist, sense of the word 'social', because it refers to humans themselves, the entirety of their 'problems of life', and not only to the elements (wealth, status, power) that define their social positions. Without attempting to force admission that every social order culminates in this highly unique area of personal life (something sociologists would always refuse to do anyway, because 'social' facts cannot explain anything but other 'social' facts), can we at least recognize that the definition of these facts is not exhausted in the sociological area alone?

An individual, any individual, whatever the number of criteria (age, sex, wealth, status, power, prestige) that define him or her on the social level, also exists, mundanely, as a person whose 'days here below are short and evil, full of pain and worry' as all wisdoms have incessantly repeated, whether they were ancient, Christian, or Oriental. A person is thus condemned to confront specific situations or dramas that obviously do not come from the social domain alone, or that are even completely foreign to it. A simple example can help us understand how a fact, that corresponds to one of a person's—every person's—most radical existential situations, cannot find a satisfying response except in a grand cultural and cosmographic framework that social engineering alone had no reason to even think of. Funeral rites have particular characteristics in every known society. The characteristics of each of the elements that constitutes them is explained, and often easily, by interrogating the knowledge that we have of it. Does that suffice to make death and its funerary 'treatment', even if one added to them all the beliefs and representations that are always associated with them, an exclusively social phenomenon—or even worse, a biological fact disguised as a social fact!? One could say the same of sickness, madness, misfortune, and all the plagues that strike humanity. The dramas that we continually confront, and that menace our personal integrity, everywhere and from all time receive a wise 'cultural' treatment that partially transforms them by stripping them as much as possible of their most destructive and scandalous aspects. What is implicated here is something quite different than the maintaining of social order. Funerals, which are solemn and miserable, in their way reflect the status of the dead (and they will bury the differences that separate them), but they primarily represent the 'cultural' response to the corrosive

enigma of death, which in principle is not of a social nature. We here meet de Martino's idea¹⁰ according to which cultural creations (and particularly mythical-ritual structures) must be also considered as formulated responses to the traumatizing experiences that are capable of weakening or altering our precarious individualities. The Marxist-style criticism thus errs in only giving superstructures the care of reinforcing and 'ideologically' justifying the phenomena that one can observe on the level of infrastructures. They can obviously do this, either deliberately or incidentally, but they also, and perhaps primarily, do something else. It is thus that ritualized celebrations, while frequently hypostasizing various aspects of social order, *further* possess the calming faculty of giving a perfect order to the fragments of our lives that we consecrate to them. This supplement is neither anecdotal nor accidental, nor is it obviously 'social' in principle, because the elimination of anything unexpected corresponds to a sentiment of distress or anxiety that belongs properly to humanity, and that is undoubtedly inherent to our situation in the world.

It would therefore be imprudent to oppose the social order (hierarchy of status, inequality of wealth, division of power) and the cultural order as if they were two different domains. Both of them never stop inextricably interpenetrating each other: Every 'social' fact is 'treated' by culture (for example, in symbolic terms) which every cultural fact is capable of being socially 're-expressed'. The social order is simply its end in itself, and only its symbolic treatment allows it to integrate the cultural order, whose creations, which are infinitely more ambitious, contribute to the construction of vast 'cosmographic formations'. The bodies that Godelier describes do not simply and symbolically express the social order in which they live. For this symbolic transubstantiation, by pulling them out of the world of nature, transforms them, and makes them capable of integrating the cultural order that has the answers, if not the solutions, to the problems of death, madness, misfortune, and illness. These are not—let us repeat—social problems, but rather dramatic events in every human existence.

We can now return to Mauss and his famous essay, since it finishes with some invaluable considerations. They are partially unexpected,

¹⁰ See notes 40–43 p. 51.

because, from his techniques of the body, which are primarily maintained due to their efficacy or practical characteristics, Mauss draws an important lesson:

I believe that the fundamental education of all of these techniques consists in making the body adapt to its use. For example, the *great tests of stoicism*, etc., that constitute the initiation into the greater part of humanity, have the goal of teaching composure, resistance, seriousness, presence, dignity, etc....

I believe that this entire notion of education of races that are self-selective in view of a determined outcome is one of the fundamental moments of history itself: the education of looking, the education of walking—to climb, to descend, to run. It is in the case of *the education of composure* in particular that it consists. This is primarily a mechanism of the limiting and inhibition of disordered movements. This limitation then allows a coordinated response, that goes off in the direction that is chosen. *This resistance to overpowering emotional agitation is something in social and mental life.*¹¹

The three expressions that we have highlighted are particularly interesting. From a rather instrumental understanding of the body, Mauss moves without transition to the personality, and the control of what can affect or trouble it. The training and hardening of the body no longer have their goal in making it faster, resistant, or skilled, but in creating new mental capacities (composure, presence, control of affections or moods, resistance to fear, moral endurance, sense of dignity, etc.) that allow the one who will have acquired them to master fear, and all forms of it. The words ‘emotional agitation’ and ‘emotion’¹² perhaps make one laugh today, because they seem to refer only to light impressions that are almost agreeable. One would almost seek them out. One can respond that it is not what Mauss was thinking of. The ‘great tests of stoicism’, ‘the education of composure’, and the ‘resistance to overpowering emotional agitation’ would seem like disproportionate measures if the goal were to circumscribe rather pleasant sensations. What Mauss was probably thinking of is instead situated on the level of the stupor and fear that are capable, as is any sudden and brutal shock, of shaking the personality to the point of touching ‘the elementary sense of self’.¹³ Education, through the requiring techniques of the body that

¹¹ Mauss, *Les Techniques du corps*, p. 385.

¹² See notes 4 and 5 p. 22.

¹³ See note 30 p. 49.

will itself be subjected to the difficult tests of initiation, attempts to strengthen the character and toughen the spirit to develop the heroic virtue, that will permit the enduring individual to confront the perils of existence in conditions that are not as bad.¹⁴ Nor is it possible to invoke here all the (military, athletic, or artistic) disciplines that are inspired to this day by this archaic model, and which also offer a rigorous training that is often laborious and always voluntaristic, with the hope of acquiring superior skills. In this context, the soldier of an elite regiment, the high-level athlete, and the star dancer often speak the same language.

These 'stoic' virtues (composure, self-control, lack of fear, constancy of mood, endurance, insensitivity...), that Mauss's techniques of the body should serve first of all to acquire, obviously remind us of those that all the ancient philosophical schools (and not only the Stoic school *stricto sensu*) attempted to acquire.¹⁵ They were thus all schools of effective wisdom, oriented towards practical ends, and not simply cenacles dedicated to gratuitous contemplation, even if, obviously, all instruction of this kind was supported by an often highly elaborate cosmology. On this last point there is not the least exception either. These schools always offered a grand structure and a cosmic justification for considerations regarding the fundamental nature of human personality.

The spiritual exercises that were taught and practised in these ancient schools was nonetheless inserted into a particular intellectual framework, which was dominated by a disenchanted and rather pessimistic vision of human existence, even when their cosmology (as with the Stoics) offered a fundamentally providential backdrop. Ancient wisdom was in no way nourished by soothing and altruistic discourses. It is more easily envisaged as fleeing the crowd and the world. In its eyes, humans, who are weighed down by worries and evils, the victims of desires and passions that gnaw at them and lead them astray, who are divided among numerous duties, endlessly running from one point to another, desiring a thousand things and never acquiring any of them stably, they see the prime of their lives inexorably flow past them, and

¹⁴ Is it necessary to specify that our age has forgotten these practices and this wisdom that begin by the famous and magnificent: 'Hold yourself upright!?' We are aware of the disastrous consequences, on the other hand.

¹⁵ See note 4 p. 71

are unsatisfied and uneasy.¹⁶ Opposite to this picture, more lucid than implacable, the wise individual opinionatedly seeks to build, in respect to himself and his own existence, a posture of distance, detachment, impassibility, liberty, and acquiescence.¹⁷ In all cases, this entails refusing our concupiscent and insatiable part and reducing all the causes of error or attachment in our spirit that are brought along with our passions¹⁸ and affections in order to acquire a perfect mastery of ourselves, to depend on nothing but ourselves,¹⁹ to serenely accept the setbacks of destiny or the whims of fortune, and, to reach this, to isolate and forge a robust disposition in oneself. Once they have been acquired in regard to ourselves, these qualities will serve without wavering in regard to the world and other people.

The techniques that are called upon to help the wise individual to acquire them have been detailed by Hadot.²⁰ Next to the expected prescriptions that are intended as much to toughen the spirit as to submit the body²¹ (adopt a frugal diet, choose various abstinences,

¹⁶ This observation is similar to that made by the Buddha at about the same time. Some schools or periods have been able, in both India and in the West, to take pleasure in certain macabre visions, which Baudelaire curiously recalls in *A Cadaver* ('And yet you will be like this garbage, | Like this horrible infection, | Star of my eyes, Sun of my nature, | You, my angel and my passion!'), and can be found in this passage of *Maitri Upanishad*: 'Sir, in this ill-smelling, unsubstantial body, which is a conglomerate of bone, skin, muscle, marrow, flesh, semen, blood, mucus, tears, rheum, faeces, urine, wind, bile, and phlegm, what is the good of enjoyment of desires? In this body, which is afflicted with desire, anger, covetousness, delusion, fear, despondency, envy, separation from the desirable, union with the undesirable, hunger, thirst, senility, death, disease, sorrow, and the like, what is the good of enjoyment of desires?' (I, 3, in *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, Eng. tr. Robert Ernest Hume [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921], p. 413), or this other one, by the poet Śāntideva, quoted by Jean Naudou, *Le Bouddha* (Paris: Samogy, 1973), p. 213: 'This face that was discreetly lowered, and that one struggled to lift, that a veil hid from the eyes that had already seen it, as well as from those that had still not seen it; the vultures, who pitied your pain, now take care to unveil it.'

¹⁷ Like Marcus Aurelius: 'It is not at all fitting for men to become angry with things. For they obviously do not care at all' (*Meditations*, VII, 38).

¹⁸ See notes 4, 5 and 6 pp. 22–23. We should not forget that, during twenty centuries, from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, they were at the heart of Western philosophical and medical anthropology.

¹⁹ It is thus not the case of saying or claiming to be free, but of finding the path that allows one to free oneself (see note 9 p. 13) from all the weights and ties that are created by our appetites (the equivalent of the Buddhist *tṛṣṇā* can already be found here). To be free of all subjugation is also the goal of the author of *The Imitation of Christ*, III, 38, 1.

²⁰ Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* pp. 276–352.

²¹ In other words, to 'checkmate the flesh', as Saint Francis de Sales will say much later, in his *Introduction to the Devout Life* [*Introduction à la vie dévote*] (Paris: Seuil, 1962), p. 189.

endure painful and uncomfortable situations, distance oneself from the world, avoid leisure and trivialities...), one finds various 'spiritual exercises' that have a common denominator in increased attention and vigilance. For this, so that 'the philosopher is perfectly conscious at every instant of what he is and what he does',²² he must concentrate all his attention on himself, unceasingly meditate on the precepts of wisdoms, and engage in vigilant examinations of conscience. We can willingly admit with Hadot that the 'I', through this Spartan regimen, 'refuses to be mixed with its desires and appetites, and takes its distance in relation to the objects of its desire, while becoming aware of its power to detach itself from them'. The individual 'thus rises from this and that partial view point to a universal perspective, whether it is that of nature or that of the spirit'.²³ One must, however, immediately add that these disciplines, *first of all* and *primarily*, permit this 'I' to acquire a solid foundation and a less weak constitution. The fragility and instability with which Proust, Janet, and de Martino characterized the 'I' are, if not conquered, at least reduced as much as possible by these exercises. We should not commit the error of believing that these 'spiritual exercises' belonged only to the ethereal domain of an intangible spirituality. What is fundamentally in question with them is something far more concrete and immediate. To understand why these requiring and austere choices were made, and not other, less difficult ones, one needs only to invoke the 'pessimist'²⁴ conception of human existence that was just recalled, while admitting that this conception was the result of an attentive, uncompromising observation of humanity itself, its weaknesses, and its mortal condition. All of these exercises are subordinated to life in this world. In the end, one cannot imagine a more lucid and pragmatic attitude. Each element of ordinary human existence (nourishment, sexuality, sleep, breathing, desires, affective ties...) is examined and evaluated in function of the damages it is capable of causing if its use was not submitted to a strict rule. These wisdoms are in no way nourished by illusions. None of them has a place for easiness, nor envisages an easily attainable well-being. They are lucid, unflinchingly lucid, and they know that the alternative offered to an individual hardly leaves him another choice than that between effort or suffering. Such a discourse would be

²² Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* p. 295.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

²⁴ Or 'unmercifully lucid', if one wishes.

unthinkable today, because it does not begin a priori from the rights of the individual (an expression that, on the metaphysical level that these wisdoms are situated, perhaps no longer has much sense), but from the difficult obligations that encumber people because of their own constitution, so much that they desire to eliminate their most painful aspects.

These general themes were, let us repeat it, universally common to all branches of ancient philosophy, despite this or that particular nuance or accentuation placed on one of them. On the other hand, it was during the first two centuries of our era that one perhaps best observes the manifestations of an evolution that tends to also grant an ever larger place to what Michel Foucault called 'self-interest',²⁵ which was characterized (something the expression does not immediately manifest) by a more rigorous morals (austerities, renunciations, abstinences, examinations of conscience), a greater attention to oneself, an increased importance of rules of conduct, and, more generally, by 'work' on oneself whose goal is to attain a mastery over the impulses and desires that are elicited by haunting images (*phantasiai*). This culminates in an 'ethics of self-mastery'. The individual's acquired knowledge of his own constitutive weakness is ever more lived as a personal or individual consciousness that is internalized and extends into this new and unexplored domain. But the conquest of this interior space, which is dug and excavated by solitary introspection, is accompanied by the inevitable, and in some way predictable, discovery that this 'I' is vulnerable and ephemeral:

How does everything disappear quickly—the bodies in the world themselves, and, in the long term, the memories of what all sensible things are, and particularly those that pleasure makes attractive, suffering makes formidable, or vanity makes memorable! It belongs to the rational faculty to establish how vulgar, disdainful, filthy, corruptible, and lifeless they are....

Always completely perceive how ephemeral and valueless human things are; today, a bit of mucus, tomorrow, a mummy or ashes. This small moment of time—pass through it conforming yourself to nature, start from a good mood, as a ripe olive falls, and blesses him who bore it, and thanks the tree that made it grow....

²⁵ Refer to *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. III, *Le Souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984) and *L'Herméneutique du sujet* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2001).

Remember then that the composed thing that you are will have to disintegrate, your breath is either extinguished or goes to be transported elsewhere....

Contemplate human things, which are smoke and nothingness, in this way unceasingly—primarily if you also remember that once a being has been transformed, it will not last for the infinity of time.²⁶

A dramatic tension arises from this observation (the better I know myself, the more I discover myself as transitory and alone) that Christianity will inherit, and that it will resolve, like Saint Augustine, by introducing the caring and eternal divine fullness into this anxious and ephemeral solitude: ‘for You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in You’ (*et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te*).²⁷ Simply from the perspective of the history of individual psychology, one can perhaps say that Christianity found and contributed a previously unknown solution for a real problem that had been discovered by others long before it. This reason alone would be sufficient to explain its success and its enduring influence on Western people.

This Stoic lucidity, whose accentuations of the pitiful are at times found in Buddhist clairvoyance, is intransigent in regard to all the deceiving vanities that we pursue, but that cannot enduringly calm the anxiety that gnaws at us:

Life’s length is thus short, the corner of earth on which one lives is small, the longest fame in history is brief; it depends on the succession of small men who will die very quickly, and who know neither themselves nor those who are long dead....

So many illustrious men have already been forgotten! So many men who have celebrated them have disappeared in the same way....

The moment when you will have forgotten everything is near, and when everyone will have forgotten you, is close.²⁸

²⁶ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, II, 12; IV, 48; VIII, 25; and X, 31 (excerpts). This idea of a ‘composite’ ‘I’, which is thus capable of division or dispersion, is both quite close to the central intuition of Buddhism (see notes 16 and 17 p. 76 and the corresponding paragraph) and radically contrary to the conception of the Cartesian subject. The main difference is on the speculative level, because, for Buddhism, the person is only an ephemeral aggregate without being, while for the Stoics, it is destined to disperse after death and melt into the Great Everything that had engendered it.

²⁷ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 1.

²⁸ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, III, 10 (excerpts); VII, 6; and VII, 21.

Life is short, our joys themselves are fleeting and inconsistent because ‘they do not rest on solid reasons, and the trivialities that give rise to them cause them troubles themselves’.²⁹ At any rate, the same author adds, ‘we are too weak to endure everything; we bear neither work nor pleasure for much time, nor ourselves, nor anything at all’.³⁰

This mindset, we just remarked, is not so distant from the general orientation of Buddhism as we summarized it above, where we invoked its anthropology³¹—something one cannot reproach it. Further, one finds here and there the same preoccupations at the beginning, and the same exercises that are oriented, through the acquisition of an enhanced mastery of oneself, to freeing the consciousness of the illusions that hold it captive, and which, above all, lead to never-ending frustrations and sufferings. Buddhism simply developed the analysis of the underlying mental processes far further, and also developed a more systematic group of consistent techniques and procedures for this end.

The primary characteristic of human life corresponds to the fourth and final noble truth pronounced by the Buddha. It and the three that proceed it in some way represent the quintessence and summary of ancient Buddhism’s fundamental teaching. The first truth regards the universality of pain; the second truth reveals the origin of this universal suffering—it is *tṛṣṇā*, thirst; and the third diagnoses that the end of pain comes through the extinguishing of thirst. Logically, the fourth truth describes the path that leads to this extinguishing:

This path that leads to the disappearance of suffering is not a path of rites, magical practices, asceticism, nor of intellectual research: It is a path of assent, of measure, and above all of spiritual realizations.³²

The eightfold path concerns the purity of vision, intention, word, activity, means of subsistence, effort, vigilance, and *samādhi*.³³

It is a middle path between two extremes in three ways³⁴—whether it is between voluptuous pleasures and painful asceticism, or again between two

²⁹ Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life*, XVII, 3 (excerpts).

³⁰ Seneca, *On the Tranquillity of the Soul*, II, 15 (excerpts).

³¹ See the chapter titled *Impermanence and Vacuity* above.

³² One could not define wisdom, any wisdom, better.

³³ One may prefer the following translations: correct view or opinion (*samyagdr̥ṣṭi*), correct mental representation (*samyaksamkalpa*), correct word (*samyagvāc*), correct activity (*samyakkarmānta*), correct means of subsistence (*samyagājīva*), correct effort (*samyagvyāyāma*), correct attention or memory (*samyaksmr̥ti*), and correct concentration (*samyaksamādhi*); see Bareau, *Les Religions de l’Inde*, pp. 41–2.

³⁴ We will often find this theme of the happy medium, of proper measure, of the refined equilibrium that characterizes all wisdoms, even to the time Saint Francis de

opposed conceptions of annihilation and eternal existence, or whether it is lastly the path of purely mystical emptiness between tension and laxity.³⁵

Correct word, activity, and means of existence are terms that are self-explanatory, because they designate a type of virtuous and honest conduct. Correct vision and mental representation suppose something far more profound than these two expressions do not manifest. By 'correct vision' one should understand the capacity to see 'things as they are', that is, stripped of all that our passions (covetousness, hate, fear, and error) add to them, and in which we absorb and lose ourselves—thus becoming their plaything. To understand what correct 'mental representation' is, one must remember that *samkalpa* refers to plans, to intention or the will, that is, to the interior process that precedes the act. In the triad of correct effort, attention, and concentration, each term represents a progress, a deeper development, in relation to the previous one. If 'correct effort' can only refer to the will and perseverance that are indispensable for every undertaking, even when, as is the case here, it is oriented toward interior life, 'correct attention' implies an enhanced vigilance that tends to have us become aware of each of our mental movements or states. These various choices, dispositions, and exercises, which have numerous traits that resemble those one can find in Stoicism, culminate in the practice of 'correct concentration' (*samādhi*), which is a generic term that:

can be applied to the entirety of mental discipline, although, in Buddhist vocabulary, it more precisely designates a determined category of exercises where thought fixes and establishes itself in a state free of all agitation and all dialectical reflection. The goals of these exercises is the dissolving of the empirical vision of the world, and they also finish by the acquisition of 'powers', such as levitation or reading of others' thoughts, which are in fact in contradiction with the laws that govern the empirical world.

The description of the different branches of this mental training is complex, and even confused. It distinguishes, along with positions of the mind (*samādhi*): meditations (*dhyāna*), contemplations (*samāpatti*), mental productions (*bhāvanā*), liberations (*vimokṣa*), domains of mastery (*abhihāvāyatana*), and dispositions of affectivity and of activity. It is not necessary to present a description of these various techniques; further, the interpretations of various schools do not agree.

Sales. See also, for China, Ducourant, *Sentences et proverbes de la sagesse chinoise*, and note 20 p. 229.

³⁵ Silburn, *Le Bouddhisme*, pp. 49–50.

The preparatory exercises for mental training are, before the classic displays, a first manifestation of yoga: There are respiratory exercises, and then exercises of visual attention fixed on a luminous point, such as a stick of incense, a bowl of water, or a coloured stain—until a persistent image that remains even when one looks away is made.

The most clearly described meditation is that called *dhyāna*: This Sanskrit word, whose Pāli equivalent is *jhāna*, became in Chinese *tch'an-na*, and then *tch'an*, in Japanese becoming *zen*. But the meaning of the word was subtly inflected in these languages. There are four *dhyāna*. From the first stage, surpassing the solicitations of the senses, and also rejecting the bad mental dispositions such as doubt and laziness, the intellect is fully awakened and lucid, and one touches joy and happiness. The second stage consists in interrupting the exercise of the discursive faculties of reasoning and reflection. Doubled thought leaves its place for a united thought. The following stage detaches itself from joy to reach a blessed indifference, but one that is always fully conscious. Finally, in the fourth, beatitude itself disappears, and concentrated attention (*smṛti*) reaches perfect purity and lucidity. From this moment, the religious has surpassed the stages where the gods of the world of forms dove into paradise. From this point, all formal or material notion, all duality is surpassed. One progresses from ineffable experience to ineffable experience, up to an absence of perception, and by this contemplation (*samāpatti*) without conscious content, the saint already brushes *nirvāṇa* in this world.³⁶

These Stoic and Buddhist disciplines of the body and the spirit, which do not support themselves on the body (for example, on breathing) except to better succeed in controlling mental activity with its many factors and manifestations (sensations, desires, emotions, imaginations, reflections, representations, projections...), also recall the prescriptions that one finds in yoga. The ones, like the others, are undoubtedly heirs to very ancient speculations that one can reasonably date around the end of prehistory.

The texts that systematize the teachings of yoga are, as is often the case in India, much later. It remains that 'classical' yoga, the one described in the *Yoga-sūtras* of Patañjali—which is the best known and undoubtedly the oldest—presents the most radical system ever conceived in respect to a discipline that aims to master the entirety of mental and intellectual processes. It is no longer only detachment and impassibility that are sought here in order to preserve something like

³⁶ Naudou, *Le Bouddha*, pp. 212–13. See also Rahula, *L'Enseignement du Bouddha*, pp. 71–2; Bareau, *Les Religions de l'Inde*, p. 54; and Silburn, *Le Bouddhisme*, pp. 52–5 respectively.

the deep 'I' from all illusion and painful trouble, but the complete and totally impersonal isolation of those who, having managed to separate themselves from the world and to suppress the sentiment of self, dwell in this perfect impassibility.

The object of yoga, defined from the second aphorism of the text of Patañjali, cannot be clearer in this regard—it is the stopping, the suppression, the cessation (*nirodha*) of all mental (*citta*) activity, agitation, or transformation (*vṛtti*). But one must know that this *citta* gathers at once the spirit, the attention, reason, and self-consciousness,³⁷ and that its modifications have five possible origins (correct reasoning, error [incorrect thought or knowledge], the imagination, sleep, and memory)³⁸ which are themselves conditioned by five unfavourable factors (ignorance, desire or passion, hate or distaste, the will to live, and self-attachment) which are as many causes of sufferings. By detachment (*vairāgya*, derived from *rāga*: 'passion') and exercise (*abhyāsa*), it is possible to reach this *nirodha*, this suppression of any kind of mental activity. Then the 'witness', the pure consciousness that is stripped of every personal attribute, dwells in itself. Otherwise, the perception of this delicate centre³⁹ escapes the subject whose cloudy or confused consciousness is mixed with the imitations or illusions engendered by the *vṛtti*. It is thus the totality of mental, affective, and intellectual processes that one should interrupt. For this, holding back and discipline,⁴⁰ the choice of 'comfortable' postures, and the mastery of respiratory rhythm are indispensable prerequisites. Spiritual exercises follow for the emancipation of sensorial activity (*pratyāhāra*, or the retraction of the senses into themselves), concentration (*dhāraṇā*, or the fixing of the *citta* on one point), and absorption (*dhyaṇa*, in which only this exclusive attention enduringly exists) that led to different types of *samādhi*. At this final stage, the act of consciousness, and consciousness itself—insofar as an individualizing and subjective process—are freed of all content, and even of all dynamism. One has attained the cessation (*nirodha*) of the *cittavṛtti*.

³⁷ According to M. N. Dvivedi, *The Yoga-sūtras of Patañjali* (Delhi, 1980), p. 2.

³⁸ Which is based on the four preceding ones.

³⁹ The concept of the soul is too marked by Christian anthropology to be used without risk of confusion in this context. One can at least see what distinguishes yoga, the orthodox Brahmanic system, from Buddhism, which denies the existence of such a substrate or nucleus.

⁴⁰ Abstain from killing, stealing, fornicating, lying, and being greedy, while practising purification, serenity, asceticism, abandonment to the Lord, and study (of the means of deliverance).

Primitive techniques of the body, ancient spiritual exercises, Stoic morals, Buddhist wisdom, yoga disciplines... Until now these various levels have been mutually ignorant, and have also never been reunited in the project of a common inquiry. Normally each of them has been studied for itself, by specialists (ethnographers, philologists, classicists, Orientalists) from disciplines that did not attempt to communicate with each other, and even less to define a common research program. These institutional inertias that are all too well known, tied down by the weight of intellectual routines, did not favour the discovery of new objects of study. Despite these obstacles, the facts that have been thus far brought together have shown to have certain affinities that are based in similar, if not identical, preoccupations. It is further only by a terminological abuse that one classifies them among the 'religious' phenomena. For they regard neither divinities, nor the hereafter, nor beliefs, nor dogmas, nor rituals!

This is sufficient for us to gather and unite them to attempt to demonstrate their common inclusion in the world of human wisdoms.

Historians will all at least agree to affirm, from the outset and rightfully, that there are numerous irreducible differences between these systems or schools: There are considerable deviations between their reference worlds, cosmogonic or anthropological conceptions, or views on death. Thus, to take but one example, from only one civilization, the Epicurean, Stoic, and Pythagorean theses regarding the origin of the world and the profound nature of the universe, and their conceptions of the soul, are different. There is no reason to even debate this point. Likewise, one will be able to compare a cenacle of Stoic philosophers and a community of Buddhist adherents only with infinite prudence.

But one will perhaps have also noticed that these differences, although considerable, did not exhaust their object, so that they did not threaten what is essential there. Along with them, there is an extensive part that includes so many points of contact that it is best to present it in list form:

a. All of these philosophical 'wisdoms' proceed like a healthy medical process. In the beginning, they were perhaps heirs of older speculations regarding the health of the body and interior well-being.⁴¹ Their

⁴¹ A famous passage (86.b) from Plato's *Timaeus* begins by this warning: 'This is how bodily sicknesses arise. This is how those of the soul arise from our corporeal dispositions.'

starting point always consists in a lucid finding or observation regarding the state of humanity and its situation in the world; this is followed by diagnosis that in turn leads to a remedy. This aspect is particularly explicit in the case of Buddhism.

b. It is then difficult to not consider these processes to be in principle empirical and practical, because their primary object is always humanity's existential situation, and the personal resources that the individual is capable of mobilizing to improve or preserve his or her current state. They are deliberately and immediately situated in this world here, and their efficacy can only be evaluated from here below. This is another way of saying that wisdoms are as far as possible from the attitudes (whether one calls them 'religious' or 'magical') that presuppose the intervention of supernatural 'powers'. Faith, prayers, rites, or acts of adoration directed to some mysterious divinity are absent. Trances, ecstasies, raptures, and prodigies are as well. Nothing wonderful intervenes, nor does any miracle. It is undoubtedly for this reason that we still manage to read and understand their precepts today. For these, which are the fruit of an attentive observation and a 'sympathetic' attitude, address our condition as humans in what is most fundamental to it, that is, what is most universal.

c. All of them, although in varying degrees, consider the individual's ordinary existence with considerable lucidity, without adding any sort of embellishments or mawkish considerations. At best, they say, this existence is nothing but a fragile and transitory good, and at worst, a succession of frustrations, delusions, and sufferings. Nor are they at all deluded as to people's capabilities to easily conquer their weaknesses; which is why their 'program', if it is not always as implacable and inhuman as that of the *Yoga-sūtras*, is always quite rigorous and complete (rules of life, hygiene, and conduct, mastery of the body and the imagination, control of affections and emotions), and it includes all the dimensions (mental, affective, physical) of individual life.⁴²

d. These recipes and techniques are always robustly voluntaristic.⁴³ Their lucidity never falls into pessimism and discouragement. Their morals, which are in the end rather heroic, are founded on effort,

⁴² Nonetheless, as has been noted (note 34 p. 108), the same moderation and the same condemnation of excessive asceticism characterize the Buddha's statements regarding 'the middle path', the Stoics' sense of measure and temperance, and, e.g. the Salesian condemnation of 'ecstasies or raptures' (Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 119).

⁴³ See note 22 p. 80.

patience, and perseverance. Nothing is more contrary to this brave ethos than the idea of a miracle! This is also true of the idea that what they promise is easily accessible and promised to everyone.⁴⁴

e. Finally, and foremost, all of them aim for a group of benefits (calm, quiet, serenity, detachment, lucidity) that work together to purify and fortify the consciousness,⁴⁵ to dominate the affections, to restrain insatiable appetites, to calm the mental agitation aroused by devouring desires, haunting images, and fertile imaginations. This then regards the totality of processes that enter into the deployment and development of interior life. As we have just recalled, obtainment of these advantages is subordinated to the application of a severe program that implies at once highly strict rules of life that aim ‘to checkmate the flesh’ (frugal diet, solitude, various austerities), an ethics that is primarily characterized by detachment from worldly things, bodily exercises such as those involving breathing, and daily practices that permit a disciplined mental life (constant attention, concentration, heightened vigilance, frequent examinations of conscience, recollection, meditation). In daily existence, the body and spirit are simultaneously concerned with these disciplines of life that leave nothing—no emotion, no sensation—outside of their vigilant control. All of this is in view of a perfect self-mastery, a *sine qua non* condition, even though quite spartan, of happiness according to the wise individual.

These are fundamental and remarkable points of agreement. They concern, in a perfectly coherent manner, the lucid look on the human condition, the ‘diagnosis’ that this observation without compromises implicates, the various exercises and practices that are prescribed to individuals who wish to escape their miserable condition, and even more notably, their immediate goals. These culminate in the acquisition of a sort of impassibility and detachment concerning the worldly personality and a superficial ‘I’ that are considered as the unstable and

⁴⁴ Our democratic ideals and values encounter their limits there, for how could one consider something that evidently can only occur or be acquired through difficult personal effort to be a right?

⁴⁵ This allows one, e.g. to see ‘things as they are’. For the Buddha: ‘Through perfect wisdom, the mystic sees all *dhammas* [or factors of existence] as they are—whether they are things, sentiments, perceptions, tendencies, or states of consciousness, he has the certitude: “This is not I, I am not that, this is not a Self”’ (Silburn, *Le Bouddhisme*, p. 66, *Majjhima Nikāya*, III, 19); Marcus Aurelius responds: ‘Erase your imaginations by saying to yourself: it actually depends on me for there to be no evil, or desire, or any trouble whatsoever in this soul, but to see things as they are, using them according to their value. Think on this power that is in your nature’ (*Meditations*, VIII, 29).

fragile place that all too many ingrained forces or tendencies (greed, covetousness, desires, impulses, fantasies, fears, aversions...) continually threaten.

All of these wisdoms, which today would undoubtedly be considered very austere and almost heroic, appear as energetic responses to a problem that people have never been able to be ignorant of, since it has always manifested itself through recurring problems that unfold within them. These wisdoms illustrate, although in a pragmatic and voluntaristic manner, the conception of Hume and Janet, just as they bring a supplementary confirmation to de Martino's theses regarding the labile 'I' and the drama of presence. They also touch Mauss's intuition that was undoubtedly right to consider the 'resistance to overpowering emotional agitation' as one of the great tasks that humanity is confronted with, while one tends to only view its material and scientific progresses as decisive. It is clearly more difficult to appreciate the pertinence and efficacy of these precepts today, since our diagnoses and remedies⁴⁶ regarding the person's confusions have forgotten so much of these ancient lessons—although nothing stops us from thinking that they could still offer adequate solutions in many cases. Reading the newspaper brings many confirmations every day: traumata, sentiments of insecurity, collective psychoses, anxieties that apparently affect a large number of people who seem completely destitute and impotent. Likewise, public services⁴⁷ institution of 'psychological support centres' as soon as a dramatic event occurs demonstrates on one hand that our contemporaries' capacity to resist 'emotional agitation' is at a very low level, and, on the other hand, that unlike old traditional societies, our educational systems have manifestly failed to place the 'great tests of stoicism', ordered towards the fortification of their students' personalities, at the heart of their duties.

⁴⁶ It is clear, as will be verified in the conclusion, that the principles defended by modern psychotherapists would have made the Buddha or Seneca laugh.

⁴⁷ It might appear dangerous to many for the State, through its social services or security measures, to take control of our emotions. Will the day arrive when it takes care of our romantic problems or our mourning of a loved one?

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

To overcome. To endure. To confront. These three verbs with heroic significations, which for this reason alone are strange for our ears, would equally summarize the final ambition of the wisdoms they come from. Defined in this way, in a manner that is as schematic as synthetic, these ambitions are situated on a level of generality and abstraction that is not imprecise in itself, because it explicitly refers to the fundamental challenge that the human condition has always faced, but that lacks the historical context in which each one flourished and the details of the specific techniques that it employed.

If one admits that wise people have had basically the same objectives everywhere, it is nonetheless true that they pursued this goal within very different cultural contexts. This is the type of paradox that one would expect to encounter, and would be surprising if it were not there. The most lucid specialists of the human sciences have always been divided between the desire to affirm similarity under diversity and the opposite one, to deny the underlying unity in name of this same disparity—that is apparently irreducible. The two evils that stem from these antagonistic perspectives are well known: dangerous speculations that aim at improbable universals in one case, and radical relativism in the other. Would it not be more reasonable to avoid this sterile choice, and to affirm that the study of humanity should take both these aspects into account *at once*? On one hand there is a fundamentally identical human condition, which makes the search for practical solutions that are capable of responding to the failures that characterize it a priority; on the other hand, there is in fact a plentiful diversity of institutions and organizations that are intact within their creations. In one place, over the centuries, they sculpted miniature fragments of ivory with an infinite patience, while in another, tens of thousands of men were sacrificed in the construction of colossal works visible from space! Behind this multicoloured palette, another fundamental character, that Mauss was the first to insert at the root of every culture, appears as well:

Every social phenomenon in fact has an essential attribute: Whether it is a symbol, a word, an instrument, or an institution; whether it is even language, or the best realization of science; whether it is the instrument best adapted to the best and most numerous ends, whether it is the most rational, or the most human—it is still arbitrary. All social phenomena are, to some degree, the work of the collective will, and human will refers to a choice between different available options.... The social domain is the domain of modality.¹

Thus, confronted with the contingency that inhabits it and the nothingness that envelops it, every culture arises only by building itself on the arbitrary! This is a terrible paradox that makes culture, according to one's will, either the most admirable or most derisive of things.

After this first paradox, we can consider another that is no less surprising.

Christian civilization, like the Chinese, Egyptian, and Indian civilizations, etc., that had gone before it, constructed immense corpora of knowledge that are greater than monuments of stone. In them, it interested itself in countless aspects of the human person and human life: from the most rustic to the most delicate ones, from the most mundane to the most refined ones, from the most everyday to the most exceptional ones. It dissected, codified, and interpreted them, and finally drew lessons from them to enlighten individuals in respect to what they are and must do in the 'Christian' world that it built at the same time. Nothing in a person's life escaped the powerful methods that it conceived; from the best way to defecate to the interpretation of dreams. Every element of life was subjected to rules, norms, and orthodoxies. It thus does not seem prudent to us to *only* see Machiavellian or Foucaultian mechanisms in it, which would be designed to extend the ramifications of an insatiable power, even to the level of the most individual conduct or attitudes. Other than the fact that this thesis too closely resembles the obstinate anticlericalism of nineteenth-century philosophers who saw the greedy hand of the Church in every 'religious' precept or commandment, it fails to recognize that, despite its eventual errors and excesses, every culture should in principle be considered as the creation of global cosmographic order that aims to offer a universe, or a *unus-versus*, to humanity—a universe in which we can resituate each aspect of our existence, whether it is the most refined or

¹ Quoted by Victor Karady, introduction to *Œuvres* (Paris: Minuit, 1969) vol. I, p. xlvii (excerpt from 'Les civilisations: Éléments et formes', published in 1929).

the most banal. That the civilization that comes from it turns out to be iniquitous or cruel does not invalidate this fundamental vocation. This time again, it is consequently preferable to refuse the choice that would submit us to choose between irenic conception and Machiavellian creation, to instead retain the fundamental ambivalence of every human fact: (cosmic) order engenders (regulatory) order.

Confronted with this ordered prolificity of intertwined signs and senses that Christian civilization has created, it is fitting that we isolate the two great 'nuclei', God and the soul, around which its own conceptions of spiritual life and wisdom have been constructed. Together, these two favoured the creation of an original type of personality and consciousness. We can call it already, in order to be brief, Christian interiority. The methods and exercises that were grafted onto this original creation are undoubtedly more or less original themselves, because we find techniques that had been tested and developed elsewhere, in some cases for quite some time, (asceticism, frugality, solitude, examination of conscience, recollection, concentration and attention exercises, meditation, etc.) in view of the discipline of the 'I'.

If it is true that one would be tempted to admit, for the intellectual history of Christianity, that nature as such hardly interested it, it is true on the other hand that it made individuals, and their interior life in particular, the almost exclusive object of its attention, too often neglecting everything else for this. In this specific and limited sense, one can recognize that Christian civilization was a civilization of individuals, attentive, sometimes to the point of morbid obsession, with the most minute movements of their intimate life. It is also true that this interest, which is already so evident and lively with Saint Augustine, will still develop throughout the two or three centuries that saw the establishment of the structures of modern individualism.

Concerning objects as venerable as God and the soul, any 'explanation by religion' would obviously be inspired by the rational data offered by theologies and dogmas. The respective details of the soul and God would designate a familiar topography where they would encounter each other and enter into dialogue. This conception, which is theologically correct, consequently distinguishes two real and distinct realizations, each of which is endowed with specific characteristics. It is precisely this conventional vision that needs to be preliminarily reconsidered. Our study does not need to respect the principles of the reading pact defined by the text it studies. It is not required to submit to them as one accepts an undebatable *a priori*. A simple example can

help us understand the sense of this rupture, which is not as subtle and turning as one might fear. Anyone would admit that a literary criticism that analyses a novel that presents itself as 'realist' or 'naturalist' is not held to naively admit that what one reads corresponds to an observed reality word for word (or rather word for thing) just because the text claims it does. 'Realistic' novels are as much fiction as science fiction novels. The literary devices are as numerous and as refined. The original work of the critic will in fact consist in finding and analysing these devices in order to describe how they manage to produce their particular effect. The critic's attitude is distinguished from that of credulous or associate readers, who admit on their part, for their greater pleasure, the conventions of the reading pact that enjoins them to consider every description that appears in a novel of the genre as 'realist'. Likewise, the requisite art for the composition of a still life is no less elaborate than that necessary to paint a mythological scene. Further, if this were not the case, anyone could attempt to write a 'realist' novel or paint a still life, because these two genres would represent the first level of the art of painting or writing.

In the same way, the association of *soul* and *God* that one finds in the works of theology or spirituality does not impose itself, in the terms that they establish them, except on those who accept the 'pact of belief' that they prescribe at the same time. Its existence and authority do not extend at all beyond this limit, which circumscribes at once the domain of things in whose existence some believe absolutely. For they only exist for those who are inside this circle of belief. This configuration thus has no other existence than this contractual, relative existence. Only those who believe in it grant it absolute existence, but it is precisely because they believe that they do not believe in the conventional and arbitrary character of the beliefs that found it!

Historical study does not then give up its rights, that it should never abdicate or silence, beyond this invisible limit, because this 'pact of belief' and the categories that follow from it do not impose themselves on it. Incredulous, it can thus observe what mental forms and content these two realizations, God and the soul, took; and how they developed thanks to a certain type and a certain style of interior life, which was itself centred around self-awareness. We all think, sense, and admit that we have an interior life, and that it is there that what we live is felt, and there again that we strengthen the sentiment of our 'I' by becoming aware of it. But this complex impression is the result of a long apprenticeship (we are not born with it fully constituted)

and of a long and difficult construction that supposes the existence of stable references, precisely such as those of God and of this soul. It is certainly because Christians build and organize their own interior life in relation to them and to everything that this foundational choice implies in terms of existential commitments, that they acquire the certitude that their soul and God actually exist. It is in fact their own interior reality that they hypostatize when they affirm to believe in their existence. For around each of them a varied group of beliefs, sentiments, ideas, representations, etc. will emerge, that in fact organize the better part of their intellectual and affective life, and that, by their never-ending movements, will literally weave the interior web that is their 'I'.² Thus, in the complex psychological operation that, in the believer's spirit terminates in the enunciation: 'I believe in God', the essential aspect is the mental process that allows the subject to affirm his or her own existence while affirming the existence of another, of God. Here, *credo* replaces *cogito*. The 'I' is singularized and affirmed in the act of believing that must be considered as a particularly efficacious act of autoconsolidation. The most vital and necessary of convictions rests on this profound mechanism, the conviction that concerns the personality's consistency and perenniality of the proper personality of the one who says 'I believe'. Is it surprising at this point if beliefs are often so impregnable and insensitive to rational arguments? Belief (of the type: 'I believe in eternal life') is less a cognitive act, situated somewhere between certitude and ignorance, than an affective and instinctive adherence to a realization that represents, in the believers' eyes, an unshakable, eternal point. True belief never regards ephemeral and fragile beings. It constitutes a conviction that is more absolute

² In the introduction to *The Essence of Christianity*, § 2 (Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, Eng. tr. Marian Evans [New York: Blanchard, 1855]), Ludwig Feuerbach managed to reach an apparently similar conclusion ('Religion, at least the Christian religion, is the expression of *how man relates to himself*, or more correctly, to his *essential being*; but he relates to his essential being *as to another being*. The Divine Being is *nothing other* than the *being of man* himself, or rather, the being of man abstracted from the limits of the individual man or the real, corporeal man, and *objectified*, i.e., *contemplated and worshipped as another being, as a being distinguished from his own*. All *determinations* of the Divine Being are, therefore, *determinations of the being of man*'). However, where he recognized the example of man's alienation by religion, we prefer to see a more mundane mechanism that is designed, despite all the criticisms that can be made of it and all the imperfections it is characterized by, to construct a certain historical type of self-consciousness. In other words, doing away with religion and the false self-consciousness that it imposes would not free individuals from the most fundamental task their own intrinsic lability challenges them with.

the more believers find their own certitude in it. The more an object is considered unshakable, the stronger belief will be, and the more believers will receive an important psychological benefit from it. Our desire to know and our knowledge of the world bow before this other, so human, truth—that robust and deeply rooted beliefs are undoubtedly more indispensable to us than impeccable reasoning, because they lie at the deepest part of ourselves, where the footing of our personality is constructed. Many believe in the existence of simple, and even very summarily defined (‘there’s certainly something!’) ‘truths’, because this poverty in no way affects the intensity of their belief. One can believe in a being that one would be hard pressed to describe in detail in a rigorous manner. On the contrary, the thousands of detailed and supported assertions that are present in the *Summa* of Saint Thomas are in a certain sense unbelievable! They are too numerous and too refined. They require too much intelligence to leave room for visceral belief. Instead, a summary assertion like ‘The good God sees everything!’ if it witnesses to a profound conviction, is capable of orienting and determining the entire affective and intellectual life of an individual.

GOD

This leads us directly to God.³ In no culture other than Christian culture have people reached a similar conception. This proves, not that it is the only receiver of a supernatural revelation, but that each culture fills in the ‘world’ that it constructs with the help of its imagination as it sees fit. ‘Imagination’ does not only connote ‘unreal’ or ‘fanciful’, but also what only belongs to the level of imagination, that is, what, with memory and belief, penetrates the deepest into our personal interior world and nourishes it.

What is this G/god that is neither a simple idea (or collective representation), nor an image of an idealized paternal substitute, nor the transcendental being that is impeccably defined by theologians?

³ Our linguistic usages forbid us from designating the Christian God in the same way that we designate pagan gods (‘Jupiter’, ‘Indra’, or ‘Mars’), because He does not have a proper name. While following this usage, Christian theology (see, e.g. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 13), it goes without saying that our analyses do not give it any other role than that of a psychological reality implicated in the general mechanism of belief.

The objective characteristics that are attributed to God by theologians, did not, in themselves, orient Him to become the central reference of a spirituality of the heart, completely turned towards the deepest recesses⁴ of the individual consciousness. It is easier to imagine them defining the rule of a cosmic divinity that is distant, inaccessible, and almost indifferent to human tribulation.

It is, however, with this same divinity that Christianity, from its origins, undertakes to establish a singular relationship, based in faith and love,⁵ that is, on two attitudes that are rooted and develop in a person's heart or soul.⁶ This orientation characterizes Christian spirituality to the highest level, and does not have even remotely similar equivalents elsewhere. Like every truly original creation, it is based in a fruitful paradox: the Being to which one attributes the most inconceivable transcendence, the highest perfection, and the greatest difference from human nature *is at the same time* the one that penetrates and illuminates the most intimate life of each individual,⁷ of the 'inner person'. Extreme alterity is resolved in a form of proximity and communion whose private character surpasses all the other unions that people can make.

The *Confessions* of Saint Augustine have an irreplaceable role in the history of the formation of Christian personality, and thus of the type of interiority of self-consciousness that was formed within Western culture. With (and thanks to) them, the certitude is established that God—as great, infinite, and powerful as one can conceive of Him—is found, not only near, but in individuals where He resides—in a person's most interior and personal space! In order to better know Him, one must then turn towards and plunge into oneself.

⁴ See, among many other possibilities, Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 285: 'Go to your confessor, open your heart wide, let him see all the folds of your soul well' or J. van Ruysbroeck, 'Deux cantiques spirituels' in *Ruysbroeck: L'Habitation intérieure*, preface by Maurice Maeterlinck (Arfuyen: Orbey, 2000), p. 11: 'Let he who wants to know truth enter within himself and live above the senses; the clearest knowledge begins from the most intimate part'.

⁵ Such as, e.g. the announcement of 1 John 4: 7–5: 13 or Matthew 22: 27–38. This was an attitude that broke with everything that pagan antiquity had previously conceived.

⁶ It is impossible to not use these traditional terms once we attempt to designate the entirety of our interior life, in which affections, sentiments, beliefs, and awareness of the above are closely intermixed. This is another way of saying that the ordinary language of our common psychology is dependent on the categories of Christian anthropology.

⁷ See Ephesians 3: 16–17.

For You were more interior than my most interior part, and higher than my highest part...

He is at the most interior of the heart, but the heart has strayed from Him...

...and there You are in their heart, in the heart of them who confess to You and throw themselves at You, and weep in your bosom after their difficult paths...

I meditated this, and You were present to me; I sighed, and You heard me; I wavered, and You guided me, I walked the wide road of the present age, and [yet] You did not abandon me...

You knew what I suffered, and no man did...

and thus admonished to return myself, I entered into my interior, and You were my guide...

and You cried from afar: 'But truly, I am who I am!' And I listened as one listens in the heart, and it was not straightforward; thus it was easier to doubt that I live than that there was not truth, which is perceived by the intelligence through those things that are made.⁸

Saint Francis de Sales, twelve centuries later, while addressing his beloved Philothea (the soul living in the world), will not place this vital encounter elsewhere: 'Thus bring your spirit into your heart sometimes, where, separated from men, your soul can engage heart to heart with its God',⁹ as all spiritual directors will do after him:

All the glory of the king's daughter comes from within her soul. The Holy Spirit says: men judge according to appearances, God penetrates the depths of the heart. I will thus apply myself to an interior life, to a new life. Make me know, O my God, the emptiness and nothingness of everything else.¹⁰

It is in the individual's depths that the conversion to a new life must occur, and there where it will then blossom. The introspective dimension adopted by Christian anthropology was oriented by this choice, just as it defined the major lines of the type of interiority and consciousness that would come to characterize this anthropology. Further, this insistence that watched over each movement of the soul (a tendency

⁸ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, III, 3; IV, 12; V, 2; VI, 5; VII, 7; VII, 10; VII, 10 (excerpts). These quotes are to be compared to Taylor's remark, *Sources of the Self*, p. 131: 'Augustine's turn towards the self was a turn towards radical reflexivity, and that is what makes the language of inwardness irresistible. The inner light is the one which shines in our presence to ourselves...it illuminates that space where I am present to myself.'

⁹ Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 85.

¹⁰ Anonymous, *L'Âme religieuse élevée à la perfection* [*The Religious Soul Elevated to Perfection by the Exercises of the Interior Life*] (Paris, 1776), p. 16.

that will be reinforced by the examination of conscience before confession) could not but discover the interior abysses, and this discovery in turn could not but open onto the most disturbing of questions, one that has not since stopped haunting Western consciousness: Who are we *really*, beyond, or better, under the public personage that everyone recognizes? And what knowledge can we have of ourselves?

But what am I in this time of my Confessions? And many desire to know this—those who know me, and those who do not know me, because they have heard something from me or about me; but there ear is not against my heart, where I am whatever I am. They want to hear me confess what I am inside, where neither eye, nor ear, nor mind can reach.¹¹

This 'internalization of the absolute' is endowed with numerous essential aspects in the perspective that occupies us here. By their cooperation, they strongly contribute to structuring the entirety of the mental, affective, and intellectual elements that animate the interior life of every Christian. The distinctions or hierarchies that one would be tempted to establish between these three levels (affective, mental, and intellectual) do not have, let us repeat it again, more than an indicative value. In fact, the 'affections'¹² that can trouble the consciousness and rattle the 'I' result from the unceasing interactions between these permeable and unstable zones. The hearing or evocation of a single word (which is consequently perfectly intelligible) can provoke a profound modification of our current mood, and this alteration will eventually lead in turn to a painful sensation, which, when amplified, for example, by old memories of things one has seen or heard, will weaken our capacity to remain present to ourselves and the world a little more. Once again, a dream, the prick of a desire, or an impression based on a recurrent concern that is too sharp will lead to this 'small' passing death. Who could ever manage to correctly evaluate, at every stage, the role of each of the factors that enter into the rattling of our current 'I'?

¹¹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 3. In this sense, the *Confessions* can undoubtedly be considered the bedside book of Christian Europe. It is a work that is truly foundational and inaugural, and which oriented Western sensibility towards introspection, dialogue with oneself, and self-knowledge through oneself.

¹² Hulin, *La Mystique sauvage*, p. 193, opportunely reminds us that 'the term *affectus*—derived from *ad-ficere*: "act upon"—implies the idea of a modification forcibly introduced in a subject who, undoubtedly, was disposed to it, but did not require it'. It is precisely this schema that needs to be corrected by recalling that affections largely arise from ourselves, from our own interior, independent of the force or violence of the external stimulus, and sometimes even without it (see note 4 p. 22).

Of the various aspects regarding 'the internalization of the absolute' just mentioned, the most obvious one is what regards the movement by which an imaginary being, first of all described in the form of a transcendent divinity, is then secured in the heart of the individual by the proven bonds of belief and love. Through this mechanism, which astutely interlaces intellectual reasons with affective appeals, interior life is endowed with a central reference, an immutable pole, that is, a fixed point towards which the Christian can turn in any circumstance. How many authors were content to oppose the creature's affective tumult and intellectual instability to this divine presence, which is reassuring and unshakable?

Thus seeking how I judged, when I judged thus, I discovered the immutable and true eternity of the truth above my changeable spirit.

...for You are always the same as yourself, neither changing nor becoming other from any part or movement...¹³

...you need not trust in frail, changeable men. Christ remains forever, standing firmly with us to the end.¹⁴

This opposition (human instability/divine immutability) is clearly justified by the affirmation of a radical difference in nature. While in humanity 'there is a great variety of faculties and habits, that also produce a great variety of actions, these actions producing an unparalleled multitude of works', 'there is only one most simple and infinite perfection in Him, and there is only one most unique and most pure act in this perfection', for 'God is only One, most sovereignly unique, and most uniquely sovereign perfection, and this perfection is one act that is most purely simple, and most simply pure, which, being nothing other than the divine essence itself, is consequently always permanent and eternal'.¹⁵

What we observe through this process 'of internalization of the absolute' is undoubtedly among the most fascinating psychological mechanisms that one can study. It is nothing less than the transformation of a cultural fixture (of a certain type of divinity that is recognized as such by the human community) into an element of interior life—the most intimate and palpitating that one can think of. This is

¹³ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, VII, 17 and VII, 20 (excerpts).

¹⁴ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, II, 1. Cf. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1906).

¹⁵ Saint Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God* [*Traité de l'amour de Dieu*] (Paris: Seuil, 1995), p. 107.

why the privilege of organizing the entire mental and affective life of the believer around it *alone* is recognized. This ideal is often proposed in any case, and to the religious in particular:

He who searches for anything other than God alone and the salvation of his soul will find nothing but tribulation and suffering.¹⁶

The second [prelude] is to request the grace of God by which, in considering the greatness of his beneficences that He has given me, I completely devote myself to his love, cult, and service.¹⁷

God alone, in everything, everywhere, and always—this is my only desire and only happiness; it is the only one that I desire in this world and for the next. God alone in my spirit to illuminate it, God alone in my heart to possess it, God alone in my actions to sanctify them.¹⁸

This ideal takes an even more radical and absolute turn with mystics, like Saint John of the Cross, who recommends further effort to the faithful: ‘that all his powers, and appetites, and operations, and affections of his soul are engaged with God, so that all the skill and power of his soul no longer serves for anything but this.’¹⁹ In order to reach this, one must devote oneself to a frightening intellectual and mental ascesis, because it requires all affections, all inclinations, and all thoughts to be forever subordinate to this end alone.

This personal and exclusive bond that unites the believer to the only God is above all based on a great myth, that of the love²⁰ that is tasked with uniting the creature to its creator in a reciprocal exchange. This sentiment, which is capable of touching the depths of the human being, is called to orient and mobilize the entirety of the believer’s affective life, whether he or she is a simple devout believer or a great mystic. Could one, however, find something more unstable and changing than

¹⁶ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, I, 17.

¹⁷ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* [*Exercices spirituels*], wk. 4, Contemplation to Gain Love, prel. 2.

¹⁸ *L’Âme religieuse*, p. 51.

¹⁹ Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, bk. 3, ch. 16. See also bk. 1, chs. 5 and 11; bk. 2, ch. 5; and bk. 3, ch. 21.

²⁰ Saint Francis de Sales, *Treatise*, makes love the source of all the passions and affections: ‘Love is the first, and even the principle and origin, of all the passions’ (p. 402); ‘this is why [the latter] are good or evil, vicious or virtuous, depending on whether the love from which they proceed is either good or evil’ (p. 42; see also *Introduction*, p. 170: ‘Love is the first in rank among the passions of the soul. It is the king of all the movements of the heart, it converts everything else to itself, and makes us like what it loves’). By consecrating its purest and most elevated expression to God, one expects that everything that flows from it will follow the same path. Conversion supposes and implies a purification of being.

affective life? Or something more inebriating than love? Something insignificant exalts it; another distracts, traps, or shakes it. The errors of judgement or evaluation that it makes us commit, the images that it brings with it, the passions and deceptions that it provokes, the attachments, deviations, or aversions that it incites, and the senseless desires that it gives rise to, have for centuries been common loci of our indigenous literature and anthropology. Here again, Christianity made a choice that could appear dangerous, and even terribly so, because, instead of distancing the affective life and simply attempting to contain its overflow, it made the daring choice of transforming this tumultuous tide that menaces every person into a pure and total love. One must try to measure the extraordinary discipline and self-mastery that such a project implies, because it supposes that the entirety of the 'affections of the heart' are known, mastered, purified, and finally ordered towards their new master. A constant attention to every movement of this versatile heart, and an unflinching vigilance are both permanently required! All of this clearly has nothing to do with the good conscience that a gesture of charity accomplished from time to time procures. One can better understand the extreme solitude and permanent care that surrounds spiritual authors and spiritual directors in this situation:

a truly interior man who is free from uncontrolled affections, can turn to God at will and rise above himself to enjoy spiritual peace.

When shall I recollect myself entirely in You, so that because of your love I may feel, not myself, but You alone above all sense and measure, in a manner known to none?²¹

...that the love that moves me, and causes me to choose this thing, comes from above, from the love of God.²²

...look at what God does and what you do: you would see his eyes turned towards you, perpetually fixed on you with a look of incomparable love.

...thus those who love God cannot stop thinking of Him, breathing for Him, aspiring to Him, and speaking of Him; and they would engrave, if it were possible, the holy and sacred name of Jesus on the chest of all the people in the world.

²¹ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, II, 1 and III, 2. See also III, 5: 'He [the believer] gives all for all and possesses all in all, because he rests in the one sovereign Good, who is above all things, and from whom every good flows and proceeds.'

²² Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, wk. 2, mod. post. elec., reg. 1.

Remind yourselves that you have devoted your heart to God, and, because your love has been sacrificed for Him, it would be a sacrilege to take away even a drop of it.²³

In the works for the instruction of religious, the exalted tone literally becomes that of the most exclusive *passion*:

Adorable heart! I have only one heart, and it is yours. It will love You, it will love only You, and it will only breath to love You. In my doubts, You will be my light; in my temptations, You will be my strength; in my dangers, You will be my refuge; in my sufferings, You will be my consolation; in everything, You will be my all.²⁴

This love, if it chooses a disembodied object, if it proposes to be 'spiritual', and if it obviously condemns itself to chastity, is no less exalted because of this. The path from exaltation to foolishness or folly is never that long. It is thus not surprising that, at this stage, this unheard-of paradox can degrade into hallucinations and 'deliriums of love'.²⁵ One understands why traditional wisdoms *always* chose, unlike Christianity, the path of detachment and the rupture of all affective ties.

The psychological mechanism that corresponds to this intense effusion will include an essential consequence, without being able to consider it as truly surprising. By being embodied at the centre of the individual's interior life, the Christian God lost (or metamorphosed) some of his august transcendence and his inaccessible alterity. One would be tempted to say that God humanized Himself. This strong implication at the heart of the believer's affective life caused God to acquire a sort of personal density that is undoubtedly different than what the abstract and rational theologies of a Pseudo-Dionysius or a Saint Thomas could have conceived. To speak of God's 'psychology' would seem unfitting, if not scandalous, to many. Did not theologians always labour to preserve the impersonal, ineffable, and incomparable nature of their divinity? One should nonetheless observe that modern Christianity, that of interior spirituality and devotion, by imagining Him with the traits of a jealous lover, of a spouse, of a confidant, of a

²³ Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, pp. 84, 88, and 183.

²⁴ *L'Âme religieuse*, p. 243. See also pp. 19, 119–21, 149, and 242.

²⁵ Pierre Janet's work, *De l'angoisse à l'extase: Études sur les croyances et les sentiments*, vol. I, *Un délire religieux* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1926), especially pp. 518–19, remains one of the indispensable introductions to the study of these pathologies.

helpful interlocutor, of a feared teacher, and even of a crafty 'adversary'²⁶ could not but make Him at the same time a 'psychological' actor of the believer's interior life. Belief in the existence of God evolved towards a particular form, one that was highly sentimental and full of effusions. From this point, to have faith meant sensing the existence of an active and all-powerful presence that was immanent to oneself. This activity manifested itself in the form of various interventions designed to have a role in every believer's mental and personal life. The divinity was tasked with intervening in every consciousness and in every heart. The corresponding conviction is so strong that it can even address itself to each one in particular:

Blessed is the soul who hears the Lord speaking within it, who receives the word of consolation from his lips. Blessed are the ears that catch the accents of divine whispering, and pay no heed to the murmurings of this world!²⁷

Carried by love and faith, internalization developed and deepened together with the individualization of the bond that tied the creature to its Creator. Unlike the known great cosmic, naturalist, or warlike divinities, for example, of Indo-European antiquity, the Christian God transformed into a psychological agent, into a personage of the most intimate and personal interior life. He neglects, tempts, helps, is indignant or offended, is irritated, tests, punishes, etc.—but beforehand and at the same time, He loves with an infinite love.²⁸ These interventions punctuate the spiritual quest of believers who are confronted with their own weaknesses and contradictions. That is why, in a manner that could seem rather paradoxical, Christian anthropology is never as

²⁶ See Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent*, bk. 2, chs. 19 and 20.

²⁷ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, III, 1. At any rate, all possible hermeneutic possibilities have been foreseen, in order to avoid inappropriate exegeses of this 'word' or interpretive conflicts, thus, e.g. Saint Teresa of Ávila states, *The Way of Perfection*, Fr. tr. Fr. Grégoire de Saint-Joseph (Paris: Seuil, 1961), ch. 37: 'It seemed to me that, as this prayer was to be a general one for all, so that each one could ask for his intention and be consoled, as long as we interpret it well, He gave it thus in confusion...'. In regard to the complimentary problems that are posed about the words addressed to gods, see my study, 'Ontogenèse divine et structures énonciatives: La création illocutoire d'Agni dans le Rigveda', *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 211/2 (1994), pp. 225–45.

²⁸ One can find countless examples of such interventions in Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, pp. 98–9, 101, 282, 310; Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent*, bk. 1, ch. 11; bk. 2, chs. 6, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, and 30; bk. 3, ch. 30.; *L'Âme religieuse*, pp. 31, 52–3, 141–2, 155–6, 305, etc.

lucid and close to individuals' existential situation as when it encourages them to turn to God. Saint Augustine and Saint Francis de Sales, to cite but two, were also highly knowledgeable of the human soul. We would say today that they were great psychologists!

It is in relation to this divine guest, who retains the key for humanity, that all the affections (passions, sentiments, emotions, inclinations) will be situated—and all the interior conflicts that the latter will engender. To substitute the chaos of 'suffering', Christian culture attempted to offer, at the same time as the exclusive love of God, the asceticism of renunciation of all earthly passions and all their forms of attachment!

At the price of this unrealistic effort, the countless sacrifices that it implied and the excesses that it could not avoid, a crucial historical event occurred: in the wake of the myth²⁹ of the loving and beloved divinity, the values, conceptions, and spiritual techniques were introduced into individuals that permitted them to institute in themselves the order necessary for the constitution and preservation of their 'I'. By offering them the means to develop themselves according to their principles, they offered individuals the indispensable illusion of being something that was compact and singular—a Christian! This prodigious alchemy was capable of transmuting what could have remained an aggregate of sensations, impressions, representations, and dispersed notions into an indivisible unity, an *in-dividual* endowed with a sufficiently homogeneous consistency for the authorization of the reflexive activity of a clear conscience. An entire culture of interiority was thus progressively constituted at the same time that it embodied itself in humanity! Each of its elements, which regarded this or that aspect of the interior life, was in fact destined to model the latter at the end of a long process of assimilation! In this way, cultural artefacts were converted into psychic facts that in turn required an ever more subtle analysis. At the end of this process, human consciousness and interiority had acquired, in our area, a specifically Christian manner of being. The consciousness of individuals who consider themselves Christian is not a 'secondary' consciousness that may have substituted a pure or transcendental consciousness. It is the very consciousness that Christian culture has fashioned with more or less success in these individuals. Likewise, their interior space has also been constructed by

²⁹ This is one of its most undebatable psychological functions.

metabolizing the conceptual and empirical facts of Christian anthropology. How could these individuals not recognize an incontestable value in it? And how could we not recognize its historical origin and destiny?

So that we could eventually better understand the rules of this essential exchange that occurs between humanity and culture, it was necessary to acquire a better knowledge of the unlikely mechanisms by which a cultural complex manages to introduce itself into each person, to transform itself into a personal structure there!

THE SOUL

Throughout the centuries when this Christian culture of interiority³⁰ was dominant and flourished, the soul did not undergo a metamorphosis less important than that which affected the conceptions of the divinity. Both of them tended in the same direction, that of a 'psychologization' that was ever more developed and exclusive.

As with so many other points that are nonetheless important, the Christian conception of the soul had a long and eventful history, punctuated by unending debates and byzantine compromises.³¹ One should thus avoid delaying the mention of the impeccable order of the Thomistic synthesis in the centuries that preceded it. He defends four theses, clearly essential on the anthropological level, but equally important from the metapsychological perspective that is predominant here: (a) The fundamental unity and identity of the 'I' that (b) presupposes the existence of an underlying substantial principle or reality. This, the soul properly speaking, is simple (since uncomposed), immaterial, and spiritual. It is thus immortal. Through these characteristics, (c), and corresponding to an ancient Platonic tradition, it is radically distinct from the material body. Nonetheless, (d) it has a complex organiza-

³⁰ Bergamo, *L'Anatomie de l'âme*, pp. 15–16 and 31–2, places its apex in the spirituality of the seventeenth century, and especially in the work of Saint Francis de Sales. He adds, on p. 16, that in the same period 'the process of the desacralization of interiority had already irreversibly initiated this process, of which modern man can be considered the final product'.

³¹ It is enough to refer to the studious monographs found in the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*; the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique*, vol. I (Paris: Beauchesne, 1937); and the seven-volume encyclopedia, *Catholicisme: Hier aujourd'hui demain*, vol. I (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1948), s.v. 'âme'.

tion that Aquinas uses to explain how, while being distinct from the body, it 'is united'³² to the latter and, through it, communicates with the external world. It has three levels (vegetative, sensible, and rational), each of which has numerous faculties or powers. On the first level are found the faculties of nourishment, growth, and generation; on the second, the five traditional senses as well as four internal senses (common sense, imagination, the cogitative or estimative, and memory); the rational level gathers the intelligence and the will. We should further specify that to the second degree 'is added a general appetitive power, called the sensitive appetite, that is oriented, in its inclinations, from the perceptions of the cognitive powers. This appetitive power is divided into two particular powers—the irascible and the concupiscible—and it is to these two powers that all the various passions of the human soul must be attributed'.³³ For Saint Thomas, the concupiscible passions include love, hate, desire, aversion, joy, and sadness. Hope, despair, fear, audacity, and anger come instead from the irascible.³⁴ Despite its imposing intrinsic complexity, this surprising construction nonetheless offers the subject of Thomistic anthropology a firm nucleus that is immortal, and transcends its fickle destiny.

In some of the spiritual and mystical treatises from the period of the flourishing of the Christian culture of interiority, these four traditional theses take on to a secondary role. They are no longer the object of detailed demonstrations or even of scholarly commentaries. For this, it is true, it was enough to refer to Saint Thomas. Together with this shift of interest, the vocation, that is, the substance and consistency of the soul, was profoundly modified. This is something critical in the history of Western consciousness. The soul appears ever more clearly as the receptacle of *personal interior life* (at once mental, moral, affective, and intellectual) and self-consciousness in this period. It synthesizes while designating them. The sense of this evolution is easy to discern. In order to limit, if not to avoid, excessive dissipation or parcelling of the personality, the exploration, rather than the discovery, of this interior space required at least that this unique place be preserved, which could serve as a refuge from this luxuriant and often tumultuous life that is punctuated by dramas and crises. For the purely interior and

³² See note 2 p. 57 and Bergamo, *L'Anatomie de l'âme*, pp. 38–9.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁴ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–IIae, pp. 26–48.

particular ‘I’ palpitates. It lives and never stops agitating. This interior life knows no truces or rest,³⁵ even if one only takes into account the incessant impressions received from the senses.³⁶ In this case, the soul cannot hope to enjoy interior peace except after having submitted to spiritual exercises whose impressive collection we will examine shortly. The emotions, questions, temptations, images, and passions never stop assailing and troubling the soul. Despite what theologians affirm concerning its spiritual nature and its otherworldly destiny, it is henceforth identified with what we would call today our own interior life, which is intellectual as well as mental. These two aspects always appear tightly linked, as in the following passage from Saint Teresa of Ávila’s *The Way of Perfection*,³⁷ where the soul becomes the real subject of various action verbs equivalent to ‘to see’, ‘to understand’, ‘to compare’, ‘to evaluate’, ‘to feel’, and ‘to love’. These are verbs that normally refer to a sensible subject, that is, to a human being:

It thus appears to me that, when God has led one soul to the clear knowledge of what the world is, and that it is mundane, and that there is another world, and of the difference between the two, and that one is eternal, and the other is a dream, or what it is to love the Creator or the creature—when this is seen by experience, which is something else than only thinking or believing it, or one sees and feels that one wins with one and loses with the other, and what the Creator is, and what the creature is, and many other things that the Lord teaches to him who wishes to give himself to and be taught by Him in prayer, or to whom-ever his Majesty desires, they love quite differently than those who have not reached this point.

Although the soul is immortal, it is nonetheless in it that all known troubles and affections occur—but it is above all because of it, and the dispositions it has acquired by its mode of life, that they are produced. It is not only a place where these perturbations are manifest, since it is

³⁵ ‘do not trust in your present feeling, for it will soon give way to another. As long as you live you will be subject to changeableness in spite of yourself. You will be happy at one time and sad at another, peaceful and then disturbed, devout and then tepid, sometimes active, and others lazy, sometimes serious, and others playful. But the man who is wise and spiritually instructed stands above these changes’ (Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, III, 33; see also notes 2 p. 21 and 15 p. 76).

³⁶ ‘it is clear that, to manage to perfectly unite oneself with Him in this life through grace and love, one must be darkened to everything that can enter through the eye, and to everything that can be received through hearing, and that can be imagined with the imagination’ (Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent*, bk. 2, ch. 4).

³⁷ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, ch. 7.

it that provokes them, or facilitates their manifestation. A passion, for example, desire of sadness, unfolds *in* the soul, because it is not sufficiently healthy or strong. But it is also it that, in itself, feels bitterness and must seek out 'the means to be delivered from its evil'.³⁸

The intersubjective relation that is to be established between the individual and his or her soul permits the latter to speak of its interior states, to analyse them, and eventually to act on them. The soul intervenes as a mediator in the relationship that subjects have with themselves in their internal forum, while at the same time permitting the objectification and instrumentalization of this 'self' that usually manifests itself in the form of various maladies. A brief example will allow us to understand this type of functional doubling of the personality. Saint Francis de Sales writes: 'sadness is nothing other than the pain of the spirit that comes from the evil that is in us against our will', and then, two lines later, he adds: 'Thus, when the soul senses that it has some evil, it is displeased to have it, and there is sadness.' It is the same individual who *de facto* feels the 'pain of the spirit', becomes aware of the evil in him or her through it, and 'is displeased to have it' and feels sadness.³⁹ However, by taking this detour by the soul and in some way artificially doubling the process that occurs in the consciousness, an originating place and aetiology is attributed to the trouble, while the individual that feels it is offered a manner to act on it, but always by its intermediary: 'and completely incontinent, it [the soul] desires to be done with it, and to have the means to undo this'. This mediation of the soul assures two solutions, one cognitive and another practical (or therapeutic), for the problem of moral suffering. It allows one to rationally treat the troubles that are capable of leading one astray and perturbing the equilibrium of the 'I', which, without this mediation, would have a far greater capacity of harm, because it would be impossible to situate them, and even to simply identify them.

On one hand, this conception of the soul offers every individual a recognized, if not localized,⁴⁰ place where all the impressions it

³⁸ Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 269.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁴⁰ 'think not only that God is in the place that you are, but that He is quite especially in your heart and in the depths of your spirit, which He vivifies and animates with his divine presence, since He is there as the heart of your heart, and the spirit of your spirit. For, like the soul that is in all the body is present in all of its parts, and nonetheless resides in the heart in a special way, so too, God is quite present to everything, yet assists our spirit in a special way' (*ibid.*, p. 70).

can feel converge. On the other hand, however, this nucleus appears extremely vulnerable, because the number and nature of these impressions depend on its state. Yet salvation always depends on the intrinsic quality of this soul:

There are just and perfect souls that are precise, faithful, regular, lacking nothing, that bring zeal, edification, and good example everywhere; but there are also sometimes those who are imperfect, tepid, negligent—let's say it, irregular—who are a source of bad edification for others.⁴¹

The path that leads to salvation is thus singularly steep and long, because it henceforth opens onto this vulnerable and poorly known reality. This reason alone would be enough to justify the zeal with which the mystics endeavoured to better understand and discipline it.

To better understand the extent of this evolution that took place in the classical age, we can remember that Eckhart's (1260–1328) 'interior man',⁴² about a century before *The Imitation of Christ*⁴³ and three centuries before the work of Saint Francis de Sales, was still curiously a man without personal interior life—we say today without any psychological life. This interior man is opposed to the exterior, carnal, and perishable man, following the old Pauline distinction. 'Everything that, although inhering in the soul, is tied and mixed with the flesh and acts in cooperation (that is, corporeally) with each member—eye, ear, hand, etc.—is part of the exterior man.' 'The other man in us is the interior man—him whom Scripture calls a new man, a heavenly man, a young man, a friend, and a noble man.'⁴⁴ The perfecting of this 'spiritual' man passes through six degrees that raise him to God, by successively untying the bonds that hold him to temporal life. This mystical itinerary follows a vertical axis whose two extremities include, on the lower end, rustic matter, and, at the summit, a disembodied life that is free of all idiosyncrasies.

⁴¹ *L'Âme religieuse*, p. 176. See p. 208: 'A proud soul rejects the humiliations of my cross'.

⁴² See the article with the same title in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique*, vol. VIIa, col. 650–74, as well as Bergamo, *L'Anatomie de l'âme*, p. 15, note 9, and André Vauchez, *La Spiritualité du Moyen Âge occidental VIII^e–XIII^e siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), pp. 178–83.

⁴³ In the French edition, these first three books are respectively titled: *Helpful Thoughts to Enter the Interior Life*, *Instruction to Advance in the Interior Life*, and *On the Interior Life*.

⁴⁴ 'On the Noble Man', in *Treatises and Sermons*, Fr. tr. Alain de Libera (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1993), p. 173.

This impersonal, 'vertical', and fundamentally dualistic conception (spirit vs. flesh; corpus vs. anima)⁴⁵ was substituted, three centuries later, by a completely different representation of individuals and their spiritual life. First of all, it is based on a soul that is highly individualized and in which the entire psychological life of the believer is concentrated. The interior person is henceforth the one who struggles in his or her tendencies and the inextricable conflicts that they engender: The flesh, although still kept under close guard as always, no longer represents the only obstacle. Second, the quest for wisdom and salvation is oriented towards the living depths of being, towards its most intimate centre⁴⁶—and no longer towards an abstract transcendence. Third, more weighty than the ties of matter that are nonetheless not forgotten, it is from the heavy interior shackles that individuals must seek to free themselves. After more than a thousand years, the instigation and orientation given by Augustinian anthropology finally discovered the unfathomable and tumultuous place whose existence it had sensed.

The torments that the soul endures, the weaknesses that undermine it, the conflicts that tear at it, and the confusions that overwhelm it are the object of countless anxious considerations and observations, whose reading permits us to understand the so cheerless 'spirit' of this Christian psychology from the classical period. It also allows us to repeat that these troubles have no specifically 'religious' character. From within a 'spiritual' or 'mystical' rhetoric, it is in fact the fundamental instability and fragility of individuals and their interior life that is addressed. On the other hand, it is just as incontestable that these failures are immediately taken up within Christian cosmology, which offers a rational framework within which they are immediately recognized, named, and defined, in order to be combated.

This daring synthesis intertwines empirical facts that come from interior self-experience, and considerations that resituate the first aspects within a grandiose theodicy that is populated with a multitude of significations and symbols. Through this stratagem, each impression that one feels receives a precise sense. Every event of interior

⁴⁵ See Jean-Claude Schmitt, 'Le corps en chrétienté', in Godelier and Panoff (eds.), *La Production du corps*, pp. 339–55.

⁴⁶ Montaigne's 'back-shop that is all ours, completely fresh, in which we establish our true liberty and principal retreat and solitude' (*Essais*, I, 39 [Paris, Seuil, 1967], p. 112), undeniably has a more welcoming atmosphere.

life is capable of being immediately interpreted and resituated in a fully intelligible context that is penetrated by divine grace and love. Individuals make their own a world that is without contingency, and whose providential providence penetrates to the depths of their selves. Is it necessary to add that the psychological gain that results from this symbolic transubstantiation is incalculable? In this situation, belief in the existence of an immortal soul and immortal God first of all permits survival or living here *hic et nunc*.

What does this Christian soul not do? What does it not experience? One can schematically distinguish here: (a) the intellectual faculties that it uses in its deliberations; (b) the affections it feels that wound it, lead it astray, or torment it; and (c) the moral attitudes it can adopt.

a. The soul's intellectual capacities are so great that they sometimes push it to dangerous reasonings. The example can be traced back to Saint Augustine:

And since my soul [*anima mea*] did not dare to take displeasure in my God, it denied that anything that displeased it was yours. It was thus that it went into the opinion of two substances, but it did not rest, and spoke as if foreignly. And thus retuning, it made itself a god that is spread throughout the infinite space of all places, and it thought this god was You, and it held it in its heart, and it became anew the temple of its idols that are abominations to You.⁴⁷

Saint Francis de Sales, for his part, willingly admits⁴⁸ that the soul has an understanding that knows many things, among which there is the visible world, but also that there are angels, a paradise, a sovereign God.... It is, however, in the context of the implementation of spiritual techniques that these intellectual faculties will manifest themselves most brilliantly. Most imply choices, evaluations, and deliberations at the beginning, and are extended by exercises such as meditation, which are supported by the understanding, because they are first of all ordered to the removal of all frivolous preoccupations. We will return to this shortly.

b. It is obviously in regard to this second point that spiritual authors contribute the most significantly. They all evoke the temptations to which it is exposed,⁴⁹ the scruples that 'beat it down and discourage

⁴⁷ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, VII, 14 (excerpts). The 'theory of two substances' refers to the Manichean heresy.

⁴⁸ Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 304.

⁴⁹ *L'Âme religieuse*, p. 241; Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent*, bk. 3, ch. 18.

it',⁵⁰ its fears,⁵¹ its sufferings, its griefs, and its anxieties.⁵² Nonetheless, as Mauss⁵³ would have undoubtedly noted, nothing menaces it more frequently and certainly than the affections and emotions⁵⁴ that shake it, or the passions⁵⁵ that lead it astray. It is not without consequence to note that contemporary psychology associates emotions to the palaeo-cortical structures or the limbic system, that is, to the most primitive zones that have remained in the development of the species. They also cause neuro-vegetative and muscular reactions that are as irrepresible as they are contagious. It is tempting to recognize the sudden and brutal eruption of our most archaic 'animal' into superior consciousness in them. For their part, the passions, from the time of high antiquity—and insofar as they did not stop signifying passivity, suffering, chaos, and obscurity—represent the exact, pathological antithesis to luminous, ordered consciousness. They both discover, then, under the policed individual, tumultuous forces that are difficult to master, and that are, for this reason alone, capable of submerging or possessing him or her. For these same reasons, they impose themselves on the body as well (fear makes it tremble, sadness weighs it down), as the passions of the soul also do:

But one can even better name them emotions of the soul, not only because this term can be attributed to all the changes that occur in it, i.e., to all the various thoughts that occur to it, but also particularly because, of all the types of thought that it can have, there are no other ones that agitate and shake it as much as these passions.⁵⁶

Passions and emotions are capable of shaking individuals, of leading them astray, of obscuring their consciousness, or disfiguring them (properly...and figuratively—one can think of hate or anger) to the point of literally dispossessing people of themselves. It is principally in regard to passions and emotions, in order to make them inoffensive, that the techniques of spiritual exercises will be created:

⁵⁰ *L'Âme religieuse*, p. 160, at the same time that they 'disturb and trouble the spirit', 'agitate and torment the heart', and 'alter the peace of the conscience'.

⁵¹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way*, ch. 22.

⁵² Saint John of the Cross, *The Obscure Night*, bk. 2, chs. 5 and 6.

⁵³ See note 11 p. 102.

⁵⁴ See notes 4–5 p. 22 and 12 p. 125.

⁵⁵ See note 2 p. 57.

⁵⁶ Descartes, *Les Passions de l'âme*, art. 28 (excerpt). Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, II, 6, 2, speaks of 'disordered movements of the soul'.

Finally, what affections impede our heart? What passions possess it? In what is it principally dysfunctional? For, through passions of the soul one recognizes its state, by touching them one after another. Like a lute player who plucks all the strings, and tunes those he finds in discord by tightening or loosening them; so too, after having touched the love, hate, desire, fear, hope, sadness and joy of our soul, if we find them discordant to the tune we would like to play, which is the glory of God, we can tune them, through his grace and the counsel of our spiritual director.⁵⁷

The soul conceived in this manner winds up having so many personal and anthropomorphic aspects that one winds up using expressions in its regard that should only legitimately be employed for individuals themselves. Saint John of the Cross thus speaks of the ‘abandonment of its spirit’ (this is the ‘spirit’ of the soul!), of its incapacity ‘to raise its affections and mind to God’ or ‘to attend to...temporal things or affairs’⁵⁸ while his devout companion in sanctity evokes its ‘physical suffering’!⁵⁹ One would have loved to ask Saint Teresa of Ávila, what is the ‘physical suffering of the soul’? And how can one then represent its nature as well as the nature of the bonds that tie it to the body? Such metaphors or expressions reveal in their own way the new synthesis that, in the classical period, took place within the Christian conception of the soul: it became a sort of homunculus that condenses the various aspects of the interior life and personality of each person—the individual substrate on which the final version of Christian anthropology was erected.

c. As a moral agent, the soul has, like all consciousness, the capacity to forget itself, to pardon, to feel charitable sentiments, or to practice virtues.⁶⁰ But it is certainly in its quality of ‘repentant sinner’ that it primarily retains our attention, because the union with God presupposes that it is purified ‘of all its stains’.⁶¹ This is true until its final transfiguration, which will seize it in the agony on the threshold of death:

⁵⁷ Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 303.

⁵⁸ Saint John of the Cross, *The Obscure Night*, bk. 2, chs. 6 and 8.

⁵⁹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way*, ch. 7: ‘la muerte de acá no la tienen en nada’, etc.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 36.

⁶¹ *L’Âme religieuse*, p. 99.

When I will be in the oppressions of my agony and the anguish of death,

When the last sighs of my heart will press my soul to leave my body, accept them as coming from a holy impatience to go towards You,

When my soul will leave this world forever on the tips of my lips, and will leave my body pale, cold, and lifeless, accept the destruction of my being as a homage that I desire to offer to Your Majesty:

Finally, when my soul will appear before You alone, and will see the brilliance of your glory for the first time, do not reject it from before your face.⁶²

Let us forget historical analysis for a moment, and recognize in this beautiful text the poignant witness to the triumph of culture over death by the transfiguration of death through myth. Beyond the controversies about the ultimate nature of 'religious' facts or the existence of God, let us instead ask ourselves, how many patient and enduring efforts, carried out from one century to the next, were necessary before reaching this unimaginable result: to look at one's own death with calm and serenity?

Before final remarks on the Christian techniques of the soul, let us reread, as a preamble, this quotation from *Introduction to the Devout Life*. We first of all encounter the aspect, now familiar to us, of humanity's fundamental instability,⁶³ and its remedy, the search for a

⁶² Ibid., p. 272.

⁶³ Another shorter and more recent example allows us to complete this first point that Saint Francis de Sales evokes. The article 'temptation' in the *Dictionnaire de la vie spirituelle* (Paris: Cerf, 2001), p. 1109, opens with this lucid remark: 'Temptation manifests that man can reach a serious moral and spiritual failure, including personal and social fragmentation. Individuals, like nations, can be tempted to follow auto-destructive policies. Both of them are subject to the temptation of acting in an unreasonable and irresponsible manner. Temptations evoke the darkest side of man: the potentialities, which are present in each of us, of unlimited egocentricity, pride, and presumption, of unmerciful ambition, of dishonesty and falsity, the potentialities of hate, hostility, and abuse of others through persuasion or force. These are latent virtualities, hidden under a variety of externally virtuous behaviours and apparently authentic values, or attitudes founded on respectable motivations. Temptation can be latent, but it is never absent. It can be combated, but never completely destroyed. The Christian must always pray to not fall to temptation. Christian life is a perpetual confrontation and surpassing, because one is tempted to seriously fail one's obligations to God and neighbour, responsibilities without which authentically human life cannot exist on any level. Temptation is opposed to the effort to lay bare the falsity of certain ideas, beliefs, affections, desires, images, and theses, and to recognize what all these things truly are before God.'

tranquillity that could but with difficulty not remind us of the teachings of Seneca.⁶⁴

God sustains the being of this world in a perpetual vicissitude, by which day always changes to night, spring into summer, summer into autumn, autumn into winter, and winter into spring, and one day never perfectly resembles another: There are cloudy days, rainy days, dry days, windy days—There is a variety that gives this universe a great beauty. It is the same with man, who is, according to the saying of the ancients, a ‘summary of the world’. For he is never in the same state, and his life flows on this earth like the waters, moving with tides and waves in a perpetual diversity of movements, which sometimes lift him in hope, sometimes bring him down with fear, sometimes move him right by consolation, sometimes to the left by affliction, and never is even one of his days, or even one of his hours, entirely the same as another.

This lucid passage reminds us of the teaching given by all of the wisdoms evoked up to this point.⁶⁵ This observation, which founds the important development to follow, has no ‘religious’ element, nor anything specifically Christian!

This is a great warning: We must labour to have a continual and inviolable equality of the heart within such a great inequality of accidents; and even if everything turns and changes in a variety of ways around us, we must remain constantly unmoving to always look, tend, and aspire to our God.

Despite the popularity of this theme and its central position in Christian anthropology and morality, the diagnosis that it leads to concerns far more than only this ethical component. To ‘fall to temptation’ is not only a fault or a sin. More fundamentally, this weakness expresses that of the ‘I’. This is why it can lead to the ‘fragmentation’ of the personality. Greed, desires, and appetites are not only obstacles on the path to an irreproachable life. Excesses and the disorders that they can cause menace the integrity of whoever abandons him- or herself to them, whether that person is Christian or atheist.

⁶⁴ From the point of view adopted here, it is important to note some fundamental, transcultural similarities regarding the most general conception possible of human life; but it is also legitimate to seek how these two thinkers (one Stoic, the other Christian) are distinct, as Carole Talon-Hugon proposes in ‘Affectivité stoïcienne, affectivité salésienne’, in Pierre-François Moreau (ed.), *Le Stoïcisme au XVI^e et au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), pp. 175–88.

⁶⁵ Such as that Seneca develops in his famous passage *On the Tranquillity of the Soul*, II, 10: ‘From this comes sadness and languishing, a thousand fluctuations of an uncertain mind, [souls] that have suspended an inchoate hope, and remain in deplorable sadness’. Saint John of the Cross specifies this for his part in ch. 5 of *The Ascent*, bk. 3, titled ‘On the Third Harm that Comes to the Soul, through the Distinct Natural Knowledge of the Memory’.

There are two remarkable things here. On one hand, the observation that the essential events unfold within a person, in his or her interior forum, whose instability reminds us of that of nature. On the other, to attain 'a continual and inviolable equality of the heart', one must stop the agitation that troubles it, and, for this, constrain it to remain calm, looking⁶⁶ towards God. Before the fundamental instability that agitates the heart in a world in perpetual revolution, God appears as the only fixed and immutable point of reference.⁶⁷ It is consequently clear that the place and role attributed to the divinity are functionally defined by the preceding analysis, and not by any theological or 'religious' apriorism that may have inspired this analysis. One should then invert the usual sense of explanation, and admit that the choice of epithets given to God (unique, eternal, immutable) is determined by the initial diagnosis of humanity's existential situation. And not the reverse. Many other unshakable points could be likewise explained in this way, because what is important is that they allow one to use the will, to fix one's attention exclusively on them, and in the end to forget everything else. These 'techniques' are, in principle, indifferent to any theology, and are only valuable due to their efficacy. This lesson of wisdom is taken up and developed in senses that immediately follow on it, and use an ancient and banal metaphor. But this time it is the soul that represents this inconstant and painful interior life ('not only around us' but 'in us'):

Whatever path the ship decides to take, whether it sails to the West or East, to the South or the North, whatever wind it is that takes it, its marine compass will never point anywhere but to its beautiful star and the pole. If everything is jumbled so that there is no up or down—I do not say only around us, but I say in us, i.e., if our soul is sad, joyous, sweet, bitter, peaceful, troubled, clear, in the dark, in temptations, resting, in agreement, in disgust, dry, or tender, whether the sun burns it or dew refreshes it, ah! It nonetheless is necessary that the point of our heart, our spirit, our superior will that is our compass, forever and always incessantly looks at and perpetually tends towards the love of God its Creator, its Saviour, and its only and greatest good. *Whether we*

⁶⁶ This 'anthropomorphism' of the heart (already in Saint Augustine, see *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique*, t. VIIa [Paris: Beauchesne, 1969], col. 657), similar to that of the soul, is justified by what precedes. This expression can be found in Ephesians 1: 18.

⁶⁷ See Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, IV, 5: 'Do... You dwell in yourself, while we are enveloped in trials?' or IV, 12, 18: 'If souls please you, love them in God, for they are changeable, and are stabilized when fixed in Him', etc.

live or die says the Apostle, *if we are God's, who will separate us from the love and charity of God?* No, nothing will ever separate us from this love: neither *tribulation*, nor *anxiety*, nor *death*, nor *life*, nor present suffering, nor the fear of *future* accidents, not the artifices of evil spirits, *nor the heights* of the constellations, *nor the depths* of afflictions, nor tenderness, nor dryness *should ever* separate us from this holy *charity*, which is founded in *Jesus Christ*.

It is still necessary that the choice to turn to God is *incessantly* and *perpetually* accompanied by a firm and unshakable resolution. This point is essential to all spiritual directors, and frequently comes up. Training of the will is in itself a healthy exercise, because it contributes to the discipline and coordination of the mental processes by orienting them towards an exclusive object and subjecting them to a unique movement. Once again, God is only a pretext here, one that is certainly indispensable, but in the sense that any exercise of this kind requires a fixed and permanent point on which to focus one's attention. The same result could be obtained by using any support or 'object', even if it were mundane or insignificant, because the rigorous exercise of the will is what is definitively decisive and efficacious:

This so absolute resolution to never abandon God nor leave his sweet love is a counterweight to our souls, to hold them is holy equality through the inequality of various moments that the condition of this life brings to it. For, like bees, surprised by wind in the countryside, grab rocks to be able to balance in the air and to not be so easily carried away at the mercy of the storm, so our soul, having energetically embraced the precious love of its God, remains constant amidst the inconstancy and vicissitude of consolations and afflictions that are spiritual or temporal, exterior or interior.⁶⁸

It is important to see how Saint Francis de Sales' reasoning is Christianized as it progresses, and how it astutely intertwines considerations and recipes from immemorial wisdoms and typically Christian notions. One must see how, in doing this, he clothes an analysis whose starting point is a lucid gaze on the fragile human condition with Christian theology. This mix of typically Christian perspectives, general conclusions taken from lucid observation of the human condition, and of 'recipes' that, before him, long before him, other schools had

⁶⁸ Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, pp. 274–6.

recommended and practised, perhaps constitutes the primary contribution of this Salesian spirituality and, through it, of Christian spirituality. It was difficult, in respect to the two last points, to manifest a true originality, given how immemorial and tested the lessons they summarize are.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DISCIPLINES OF INTERIOR LIFE

The group of spiritual exercises defined in the classical age forms a rigorous system that appears as much more coherent to the superficial observer as it appears to be completely subordinated to the myth of the unique divinity. On the level of immediate and most apparent causality, this divinity alone founds the existence and justifies the choice of each element in the system: resolution, mediation, rejection of the world, etc. all refer to the exclusive desire of pleasing God, to then approach Him in order to finally be united to Him. This divinity occupies the centre of this group, and distributes the same fervour to all of it. By this fact alone, his absolute transcendence is completely confirmed.¹ The fundamentally centripetal organization gives exceptional unity, order, and homogeneity to this system and its architecture. It places us before one of the most powerful and perfect creations of Christian civilization, a true spiritual cathedral. Any individual who accepts its principles and follows its precepts, which are as austere as they are requiring, transforms his or her profound being and reorganizes his or her personality while placing it at the heart of a universe without any contingency.

There is, however, another functional and human coherence that underpins this mythical-theological consistency. The remarkable preoccupation with efficacy that manifests this underlying level reveals

¹ This form of transcendence clarifies the signification of the enigmatic paragraph VI, 41 of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*: 'The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value. If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie in the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental. It must lie outside the world.' It is impossible to not cite Kant on this, *Critique*, Eng. tr. Meiklejohn, p. 368: (the concepts of reality, of substance, of causality, and even those of necessary existence) 'may, accordingly, be employed to explain the possibility of things in the world of sense, but they are utterly inadequate to explain the possibility of the universe itself considered as a whole; because in this case the ground of explanation must lie out of and beyond the world, and cannot, therefore, be an object of possible experience.'

a different origin and orientation.² This is first of all because it is based in a precise knowledge of our human nature, its weaknesses, and in particular its aim. It is then, quite logically, because it concerns individuals in this world, in their own lives, which is always portrayed in the most sombre tones.³ Finally, and above all, because it does not use anything but practical means (exercises, techniques, and disciplines) that are based in the body, the spirit, and the heart, in order to give any person who devotes him- or herself to it a remodelled personality that is more robust and perfectly self-controlled, a *sine qua non* condition for every other supernatural pursuit (salvation, contemplation of the divinity, or mystical union).

In a very general manner, the collaboration of these two levels (mythical-theological and functional) that analysis distinguishes here, but that are never dissociated in reality, is always an indispensable condition. The first level without the second would have remained one fiction among many, without any root in consciousnesses and bodies. Symmetrically, the second without the support of the first would never have had, in and of itself, the cosmological caution that is capable of raising its elements and conferring a transcendent, 'Christian' vocation on them. The simultaneous belief in the existence of God, in the necessity to raise oneself to Him, and in the efficacy of spiritual exercises is also the indispensable psychological 'binder' that can intertwine the elements coming from these two domains.⁴

The functional level also appears consistent if one considers only the means or techniques that are employed for its immediate efficacy.

² See Mauss, *Œuvres*, p. 386: 'I believe that there is precisely, even at the root of our [Western or Christian] mystical states, bodily techniques that have not been studied, and which have been studied perfectly in China and India since very ancient periods.'

³ 'Alas! What sort of life is this, from which troubles and miseries are never absent, and is full of traps and enemies? For when one is freed of a trouble or temptation, another comes. Even while one fights a first conflict, others begin unexpectedly. How is it possible to love a life that is so full of bitterness, and subject to so many evils and calamities? How can it even be called life, when it engenders so many sufferings and deaths?' Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, III, 20. This is the famous theme of the 'valley of tears' that inundates humanity with evils that trouble and afflict it (IV, 2).

⁴ This hypothesis does not weaken the idea that there can be different levels and degrees of belief, nor that these can vary according to the circumstances! Modality, nuance, and plasticity characterize the act of believing, which gives rise to its impressive capacity of morphogenesis, the creation of countless forms.

This efficacious system leaves nothing to chance or approximation. It neglects no part of the human being as our native anthropology summarizes by the words: heart (or affectivity), body (or sensuality), and spirit or soul (intellectuality and will). It is the whole of the 'real', 'living' individual that is dealt with *hic et nunc* by these exercises. Their ambition is global, because it aims at nothing less than a complete reform of the individual.

In order to avoid betraying the intelligence and rigorous order, one must follow the path that, from stage to stage, follows their *progress*. This last theme is of critical importance. This order is not only rational or common sense (resolution precedes detachment, which itself, for example, prepares for meditation). In a highly reflected manner, these exercises are methodologically developed in the same time that they thus contribute to organize: the unformed and contingent substance of the *time to come* is transformed. The imposed order and stipulated rule give it a foreseeable and expected design. The most perfect and concise example of this 'planning' is clearly offered by the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius, which last for four weeks and leave no 'down time' within this perfectly planned temporal block. On the other hand, from one level to the next, these exercises are ordered to progressively lift the faithful or religious individual to an ever more spiritual life, that is, detached from the vanities⁵ of this world—vanities (riches, honours, desires...) in which all spiritual people see only captivating illusions and occasions to bog themselves down.

A general presentation of this program could not neglect the following stages:

- Rupture and Change of Life
- Resolutions
- Renunciation
- Exercises:
 - Discipline of the Body and Senses
 - Discipline of the Heart and Character
 - Discipline of the Spirit

⁵ Ibid., I, 1, 3–4. See also Christian Heck, *L'Échelle céleste: Une histoire de la quête du ciel* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1999).

Rupture and Change of Life

Every solemn ritual, every initiation, every exceptional time symbolically opens by an inaugural event to mark the rupture that will henceforth distinguish the before and after. Without it and its discriminating presence, confusion and lack of clarity would dominate. In the same way, entry into life, or into more spiritual life, is marked by the abandonment of 'daily habit' (Weber) and the adoption of a new style of life that is inevitably more austere and structured. This courageous choice will galvanize the courage of novices, simple devout persons, or religious, and will help them to make their own the precepts that they will henceforth follow, and that are obviously conformed to the requirements of this new existence. To be Christian, Buddhist, Pythagorean, or communist first of all consists in leading a life conformed to the corresponding ideals after having adopted them. Nobody can lastingly lead such an existence without being internally transformed him- or herself. On this point, one cannot but admire the practical common sense and lucidity of the wisdoms. For them, only a rule of life followed day after day, and even hour after hour, is capable of profoundly modifying and reorganizing the personality.⁶ The methodologically applied discipline to dominate the body, and at the same time takes hold of the very matter of daily life to model it, is the best, even the only, propaedeutic of the spiritual life. All duplicity and hypocrisy aside, it is (please pardon the truism) in living as a Christian that one becomes Christian, that is, that one attempts to realize a certain human ideal in oneself. On this point, and those that will follow, Christian spirituality corresponds to the proven principles that the wisdoms had finalized long beforehand:

The habit and tonsure are of little use; it is the change of life and the complete mortification of the passions that make the true religious.⁷

These are my holy resolutions, oh my God! And the new plan of life that I resolve to follow henceforth.⁸

It could well be, dear Philothea, than numerous uprisings will occur in your interior in front of this change of life.⁹

⁶ All the monastic rules, without exception, were inspired by this teaching; see *Règles des moines Pacôme, Augustin, Benoît, François d'Assise, Carmel* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).

⁷ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, I, 17.

⁸ *L'Âme religieuse*, p. 235.

⁹ Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 252.

Resolutions

This chapter reminds us of another truth that our epoch will not like to hear at all. At the foundation of any project that engages an existential choice, an inflexible will¹⁰ appears to be indispensable. Here, it also regulates the orientation of one's entire life, and, because of this, must be reaffirmed at every moment, in every circumstance, and especially when attention relaxes or temptation arises. Let us not forget that the exercise of the will (a superior faculty of the soul according to Saint Thomas!) presupposes a powerful interior tension that, ideally, mobilizes the entire personality and alone makes it capable of reaching its goal. This fortification is erected (or one attempts to erect it!) as an impenetrable rampart before invading passions and emotions, which rise from the most obscure zones of being:

Each day, we must renew our resolution and inspire ourselves to fervour, as if our conversion had only begun today.... The firmness of our resolution is the measure of our progress, and great attention is required of him who desires to advance. If he who forms the strongest resolutions often becomes lax, what will become of him who only rarely makes them, or only makes weak ones?¹¹

In converting to my kindly and merciful God, I desire, propose, deliberate, and irrevocable resolve to serve and love Him now and eternally.¹²

¹⁰ 'Constant, resolved, prompt, and active' Saint Francis de Sales said, *ibid.*, p. 277. On this Salesian conception of the will, see also Bergamo, *L'Anatomie de l'âme*, pp. 77–82. He specifies (p. 82): 'Within the appetitive power (the will) whose movements refer to intellectual knowledge, he thus distinguishes two different powers (inferior and superior will) according to whether the movements of the will attach to one or the other of the domains into which intellectual knowledge is divided', i.e. according to whether or not they depend on the sensitive faculties. For Descartes, on the contrary, the 'actions of the soul' are 'all our will, because we sense that they come directly from our soul, and seem to depend on it alone' (*Les Passions de l'âme*, art. 17). But they join each other in affirming that the will has unlimited power: 'And on all these people with sensual passions, the will continues to reign, rejecting their suggestions, repelling their attacks, stopping their effects, and at least, in the end, strongly refusing its consent to them, without which they cannot harm it, and by whose refusal they remain vanquished, and even, in time, beaten down, weakened, skinny, suppressed, and, if not completely dead, at least deadened or mortified', Saint Francis de Sales, *Treatise*, p. 39. Descartes would not have denied this passage, *Les Passions de l'âme*, art. 50: 'and even those who have the weakest souls could acquire a completely absolute rule over their passion is one was industrious enough in training and guiding them'. Let us remember, in order to measure the significance of certain evolutions, that the *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* of J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, 3rd ed. (Paris: PUF, 2002), does not even have an entry for the word 'will'!

¹¹ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, I, 19.

¹² Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 57. See also pp. 256–7, 275, 277, 303, 308, and 311–12.

Renunciation

Resolutions concerning renunciation are among the most frequently cited ones. Renunciation to (all) temporal goods is the indispensable condition for the conquest of interior liberty and the acquisition of a detached or distant perspective. Renunciation is situated at the source and heart of spiritual life, because it conditions all further developments. The world, whose countless objects excite desires, flatter vanities, nourish cupidities, and keep the passions alive, turns individuals away from the care they should take of their interior lives. There again, Christian spirituality takes from ancient wisdoms what is one of their most lucid prescriptions. These exterior objects, which encourage the senses and self-love, will never be anything other than ephemeral goods. The joys they elicit hardly last at all. By pursuing them, an individual never gathers anything but worries and dissatisfactions.¹³ As soon as a person has grasped one, he or she engages, they affirm, to seek out another. There is never rest or repose, because the individual is never satisfied. And where will the individual find a refuge from death, which will take their enjoyment from him or her forever? Like a metaphysical simpleton, the paradoxical strategy that the wise adopt consists in choosing to liberate themselves of things, before destiny takes control or another constrains them to depend on things. Thus, they can no longer affect the wise. They dissociate themselves from their desires, through an effort to oppose the seductions of the world with an extremely firm refusal. In *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis works on this level of desires that turn individuals away from themselves, that is, from their souls and from God. His objective is no less universal for this:

We would enjoy much peace if we did not concern ourselves with what others say and do, and of what is no concern of ours.

How can a man who meddles in affairs that are not his own, who seeks strange distractions, and who is little or seldom inwardly recollected, live long in peace?

Blessed are the simple of heart for they shall enjoy peace in abundance.

¹³ Among countless witnesses, see Seneca, *On the Tranquillity of the Soul*, VIII, 1 and X, 7; *On the Happy Life*, VI–VII. *The Dhammapada*, § 186, specifies that ‘he who knows that lusts have a short taste and cause pain, he is wise’.

Why did some of the saints reach such a high degree of virtue and contemplation?

Because they tried to entirely mortify all earthly desires in themselves, and thus they were able to attach themselves to God with all their heart, and to freely concentrate their innermost thoughts.

We are too occupied with our own passions, and too taken up with passing things.

Rarely do we completely conquer even one vice, and we are not inflamed with the desire to improve ourselves day by day; hence, we remain cold and indifferent.

If we mortified our bodies perfectly and allowed no distractions to enter our minds, we could appreciate divine things and experience something of heavenly contemplation.

The greatest obstacle, indeed, the only obstacle, is that we are not free from passions and cupidities, and we make no effort to follow the perfect way of the saints.¹⁴

The Buddha went even further in this path of renunciation by adding that one must also untie the bonds engendered by imagination, memory, and notions (ideas, opinions, conceptions...) that we create in every circumstance about ourselves, the world, death, etc. To take a vow of poverty, for example, is insufficient, because this choice does not automatically suppress the sentiments of vanity and egoism. Significantly, pride is the sin par excellence of the ascetic. It is even the characteristic that distinguishes the ascetic from the wise person!

Saint John of the Cross, like Buddha, also breaks through to this later level because he adds to the usual renunciations:

no affection for creatures, nor for temporality, nor for (its) effective attention; by which I mean that it will not fail to be quite attached because of the imperfection that its powers in their operations have *per se*. For this reason it is better to learn to keep the powers in silence and quiet, so that God speaks.¹⁵

This, then, refers to the ultimate, most spiritual, levels of the soul itself, which must be divested of all the marks that could, by any bias whatsoever (memory, imagination, knowledge), dirty it and make it a captive in this world. At the end of the eighteenth century, 'religious people' do not propose a path for themselves that is any less difficult:

¹⁴ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, I, 11, 1–3. See also I, 22, 3; II, 12, 1; III, 1, 2: 'Dismiss all passing things and seek the eternal'; and III, 12, 5.

¹⁵ Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent*, bk. 3, ch. 2.

Renunciation to your views, your projects, and your own judgement: This is for the spirit. Renunciation to your desires, your affections, your tastes, and your dislikes: This is for the heart. Renunciation to your comforts, your conveniences, your sensualities, your delicacies, and your satisfactions: This is for the senses. When your heart will be more generous, you will enter into an even more perfect path. [This includes] renunciation to your own will, to your vivacity, to your sensibility, and to your natural activity; for, do not forget, it is within yourself that this great work of renunciation must take place. There is even renunciation to the tastes, consolations, and sensible sweetness that one sometimes feels in my service [it is Christ who speaks], for fear of attaching yourself to them and to nourish your egoism, which is so opposed to my holy love. This is the extent of the renunciation that I expect from you, if you sincerely wish to be completely given to Me.¹⁶

Such a renunciation of self, of one's own individuality, of everything that makes a being what it is, cannot be made by the will alone, however intransigent it may be. It must be sustained and helped. In order to reach this state of renunciation and remain there, those who seek the devout or mystical life must submit themselves daily to an unmerciful discipline, which itself has a number of characteristics that depend on the 'organ' that is being aimed at. It is in this path that the exercises, which largely aim to discipline and submit the body, the heart, and the spirit to the will, intervene.

Exercises

Discipline of the Body and Senses

As was the case in other cultures beforehand, the senses and the flesh represented, to the eyes of these old spiritual directors and intransigent spiritual masters, the enemy par excellence. Were they not the surest and most efficacious vectors of dissolution and corruption? Further, does not the most innocent solicitation of the senses distract the soul? Does not all pleasure turn the creature away from God?

If you wish to make progress in virtue, live in the fear of God, do not look for too much freedom, discipline your senses, and avoid empty silliness.¹⁷

So then, the first thing we have to do is to pluck out the love of this body from us...

¹⁶ *L'Âme religieuse*, pp. 60–1.

¹⁷ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, I, 21.

...because from the many times that we go ahead doing this little by little ['mocking' the body], with the favour of the Lord, we will be mistresses over it. For to conquer such an enemy is a great benefit for passing through the battle of this life.¹⁸

It is, however, clearly with Saint John of the Cross that this asceticism of the senses will find its most radical expression, because the great mystic sought to plunge the soul into a 'dark night' by detaching it from all contact, even if purely intellectual, with the exterior world:

From this, if it [the soul] rejects and denies what it can receive through the senses, we can say that it is as if obscure and empty; since, as it appears from what has been said, light cannot naturally enter it by other paths than those that have been stated [the senses]. Therefore, although it is true that it cannot cease hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching, this no more bothers nor hampers the soul, if it denies and rejects it, than if it did not see nor hear, etc.¹⁹

Everything the West, for more than twenty centuries, from Plato to the Catharists, from the Gnostics to the Fathers of the Church, from Pseudo-Dionysius to Saint Bernard, had untiringly repeated in order to censure the flesh is achieved in a definitive condemnation without appeal, which has lastingly marked the Western consciousness:

Oh! How much we deceive ourselves through the disordered love we have for our flesh.²⁰

A daily penance imposed on us by Jesus Christ is the mortification of our senses, the abnegation of ourselves, the crucifying of our flesh and body—This is the cross that the Saviour wants us to carry, if we wish to be among his disciples.²¹

Devout persons must thus be perpetually on guard to avoid the complicity that inevitable temptation is capable of giving rise to in their souls:

Thus, whatever temptations arise, and whatever enjoyment follows, as long as your will refuses to consent, not only to temptation, but also to enjoyment, do not worry at all, because God is in no way offended by it.²²

¹⁸ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way*, chs. 10 and 11.

¹⁹ Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent*, bk. 1, ch. 3. See also bk. 3, chs. 1 and 2.

²⁰ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, I, 24.

²¹ *L'Âme religieuse*, p. 211.

²² Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 259. Wise and lucid, the author adds (p. 193): 'it is clearly good to mortify the flesh, but is above all necessary to purify our affections well and refresh our hearts'.

In this new existence, it is, however, equally important that devout individuals impose a severe 'regimen' on themselves. Saint Francis de Sales, who nonetheless declares himself in favour of a moderate path ('We are extremely exposed to temptations when our body is too well fed, and when it is too worn out'),²³ still recognizes that 'fasting and work curb and bring down the flesh'.²⁴ In fact, 'to hold the sensual appetite and the body subject to the spirit'²⁵ constitutes in his eyes, as with those like him, not only an enviable object, but an indispensable one.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola did not have his delicateness, and was in favour of a far more draconian regimen that was as far as possible from ordinary life. Thus he recommended that individuals do away with as much food and comfort of sleep as possible.²⁶ He defends a severe protocol for the use of the 'discipline' that is also far from the moderate use recommended by Saint Francis de Sales. The choice of exercises is not longer only dictated by preoccupation of 'curbing' the flesh, since pain itself is sought out, one could almost add, for itself. Suffering is erected as the supreme goal of spiritual life:

giving it [the flesh] sensible pain, which is given by wearing haircloth or cords or iron chains next to the flesh, by scourging or wounding oneself, and by other kinds of austerity. What appears most suitable in all of this is that the pain should be sensible in the flesh and not enter within the bones, so that it give pain and not illness. This is why one scourges oneself with thin cords, which give pain exteriorly, rather than in another way which could cause notable illness within.²⁷

The shadow of the cross wound up obscuring the preoccupation for measure that was so constant with Buddhist and Stoic thinkers. One does not only pursue self-control and liberation from worldly and sensual bonds, but the complete annihilation of the individual in suffering. We will return, in the next chapter, to this essential and unhealthy reorientation that is so characteristic of the darkest face of Christian spirituality.

²³ Ibid., p. 190. He specifies (p. 191): 'A continual moderate sobriety is better than violent abstinences done at different times and mixed with laxity'.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 190.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 189.

²⁶ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, wk. 1, way 1.

²⁷ Ibid., wk. 1, way 3, n. unic.

Discipline of the Heart and Character

Once the body has been emaciated and the senses have been dominated, it is time to work on everything that depends on the sensitive and thymic part of the soul. It is the most unstable part, and in the beginning also the most vulnerable, but it is also the most recalcitrant. It is the seat of emotions, sensations, appetites, and passions. We willingly associate temperament, mood, character traits, and ingrained tendencies—in brief, this vast and tumultuous domain that in our time has become the sinecure of ‘psychotherapists’:

and we often lose sight and knowledge of our own heart in the infinite diversity of movements by which it turns in so many ways and so quickly that one cannot discern its tracks [its paths].²⁸

In this domain, the only efficacious technique that the men of the seventeenth century thought of is precisely opposed to those that are promoted today, because in the end it attempts to oppose our nature and tendencies as firmly as possible, as is recommended to do with ingrained passions:

take up a way of life that is completely contrary to them in thoughts, words, and works.²⁹

Just as the radical change of one’s way of life should permit one to detach oneself from temporal goods, the reform here is to fortify any lack of firmness, to rectify if not eradicate dangerous inclinations, to disdain captivating seductions, and to suppress, in short, any kind of complicity in regard to oneself. No concession is made for the little narcissistic and frivolous ego that is continually swayed according to its changing whims and desires. Like an athlete who forges a durable body by imposing a severe training without concessions, the devout person seeks, through the uninterrupted practice of this psychological ‘training’, to clothe him- or herself with a vigorous and resolved ‘I’: it must become invulnerable. Let us follow Saint Francis de Sales again, because this great psychologist proves himself to be a certain guide in this interior labyrinth.

The first objective to obtain is to remain firm and unshakable in all circumstances. One, however, does not attain it instantly, through

²⁸ Saint Francis de Sales, *Treatise*, p. 352.

²⁹ Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 267.

a heroic or courageous act. As Mauss saw clearly, one never acquires such a virtue except on the condition of submitting oneself (or being submitted!) to a long and progressive education. For does not education, any education, first of all and fundamentally consist in opposing our tendencies, our penchants, and our spontaneous or 'natural' reactions? Spiritual exercises, like traditional wisdoms, distrust everything instinctively, for they see in them nothing but menaces that can trouble the consciousness, and break interior equilibrium, if it exists.

Considering them retrospectively, it is impossible to not recognize that these 'techniques' and disciplines—which are not as rudimentary as one might think—contain some of the arms that every culture develops in order to help individuals to carry the weight of nature and condition. The cultivation of patience and the development of endurance, and the bearing of evils without complaining³⁰ are some of the means recommended for this end. Patience still designated endurance in this period (*tua patientia famis*, Cicero) along with forbearance, that is, 'the virtue that allows one to endure evils with moderation and without murmuring' (Littré)—and not simply the ability to wait for the underground without becoming irritated. The acquisition of these qualities implicates individuals' interior forces and integrity, allowing them to preserve their calm and self-mastery in all circumstances.

The practice of humility, obedience, kindness, chastity, and poverty,³¹ despite their distinctively more marked Christian and moral colouring, are teachings that go in this same direction, because these abilities first of all witness to the individual's capacity to master an exuberant and impulsive 'I'. Every inflation of the ego, every excessive complicity in regards to one's own moods, and, obviously, any incapacity to overcome sensual impulses are considered as obstacles on the path to this self-mastery, which appeared in this period as the most undebatable sign of a true interior liberty. Liberty corresponded, quite precisely, to this capacity. One could consider oneself free if, and only if, one was capable of mastering the most incorrigible of one's ingrained penchants—in other words, if one was free of them. The establishment of a definitively Christian personality occurred, we would say today, by the voluntary remodelling of one's body and psyche in order to eliminate the rougher elements of the senses and the sensitive appetite.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 121, 123, and 125.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 128, 142, 151–4, etc.

The profound tendencies of character, temperament, and personality are even harder to combat and dominate. Not only do they elicit many passional eruptions (pride, jealousy, ambition, fear, or hate), but they discolour all of life:³²

There are sour and bitter hearts that, following their nature, make everything they receive also sour and bitter, and convert, as the prophet says [Amos 5: 7], judgement into absinthe, never judging their neighbour except in all rigour and harshness.... Some judge with temerity, not by bitterness, but by pride, since they think that in the measure that they suppress others' honour, they raise their own up.... Some do not have this obvious pride, but only a certain small pleasure in considering others' evil, in order to savour and to more sweetly savour the contrary good, which they think they have.... Others judge by passion, and always think good of what they like and evil of what they hate, except in a surprising yet real case, where the excess of love causes them to judge what they love poorly. This is a monstrous effect that also comes from the impure, imperfect, troubled, and sick love that is jealousy.³³

To defeat this evil, the remedy proposed by Saint Francis de Sales ('drink the most you can of the sacred wine of charity') will undoubtedly seem too weak. But it is also based in an assiduous practice, a constant will, and a 'work' that does not neglect any of our affections: 'If your affections are sweet, your judgement will be sweet, if they are charitable, your judgement will be likewise.'³⁴ The treatment is global so to speak; thus, before judging the efficacy of this seemingly insufficient remedy, one must recall that it is inserted in a general system that fights on all fronts and levels of the personality.

³² Sadness (see Sirach 30: 21–5), which 'takes all sweetness from the soul, and makes it almost paralysed and powerless in all of its faculties,' and worry, 'the greatest evil of the soul' (Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, pp. 269 and 272), must also be combated, because they weaken the soul, i.e. the nucleus of the personality, in a general manner. The panoply of remedies that Saint Francis de Sales proposed (pp. 272–4) skilfully mixed voluntarism in all domains, both the fervent activities turned towards the exterior and the soothing word (for the latter point, see also Fénelon, *Œuvres spirituelles* [Paris: Aubier, 1954], p. 224). When they do not use antidepressants and tranquilizers, do modern therapies have much better to offer?

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 204–5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

Discipline of the Spirit

If the turns and contours of the heart are disconcerting, those of the spirit are no less impenetrable and enigmatic, and challenge the possibility of a trustworthy and serious introspection:

Certainly, if our spirits wished to return on themselves by reflections and folding in on their actions, they would enter into labyrinths where they would undoubtedly become lost, and it would be unbearable to think what our thoughts are, to consider our considerations, to view all our spiritual views, to discern what we discern, or to remember what we remember—these would be entanglements that one could not undo.³⁵

Before the inextricable maze of his or her mental life, the spiritual person's choice will consist, not in attempting to untangle it (an unending task), but to cut the circuits that connect it to the exterior world. In order to stop the agitation of the spirit and the dizzying proliferation of its rhizomes, one proceeds to complete isolation. In order to 'cool' the heart of this interior reactor, there is no other solution than to stop feeding it. This is why the final stage of Christian spiritual experience can be found in an exercise, meditation, which, when properly carried out, leads to perfect recollection, that is, contemplation. Behind these terms, whose Christian sense is well established, there is in fact a type of experience whose principle is known elsewhere—in Stoicism³⁶ as well as in Buddhism³⁷ or yoga³⁸—that consists in favouring the folding of the soul, detached from the senses, in upon itself. For the literal sense of this image (the folding of the soul), it must be understood that, by appropriate concentration exercises, the spirit progressively calms down, no longer troubled by any care that could grab it and

³⁵ Saint Francis de Sales, *Treatise*, p. 352. 'But, if you seek your support in the immutable and ever-living truth, you will not be at all weighed down by sadness when a friend leaves you or dies', Thomas à Kempis (*The Imitation of Christ*, III, 42) declares.

³⁶ Seneca, *On the Tranquillity of the Soul*, XIV, 2: 'In the end, the soul, detaching itself from all external things, must fold in on itself, have confidence in itself, enjoy itself, admire itself, distance itself as much as possible from what is foreign to it, and focus on itself; it must not feel material problems, and even interpret adversity in a favourable way'.

³⁷ *The Dhammapada*, § 362: 'He who controls his hand, he who controls his feet, he who controls his speech, he who is well controlled, he who delights inwardly, who is collected, who is solitary and content, him they call Bhikshu [beggar-monk].' See also Silburn, *Le Bouddhisme*, pp. 52–66 and Bareau, *Les Religions de l'Inde*, pp. 54–6.

³⁸ This is the *pratyāhāra*, or retraction of the senses (*Yoga-sūtras* II, 54), that precedes concentration (*dhāraṇā*) properly speaking.

hold it outside of itself: ...*prayer is called meditation until it has produced the honey of devotion; after that, it changes into contemplation.*³⁹ This is a contemplation in which the same author distinguishes two types of recollection, based on whether it depends on the person alone, or it is willed by God.

According to spiritual authors, 'however odd thought might become',⁴⁰ however prompt our imagination is to go astray, and thus however versatile our consciousness is, one must manage to calm and pacify the spirit—through the use of one's own faculties. One cannot stop it (from thinking, imagining, conceiving...) like one immobilizes the body. A simple decision is insufficient. Confronted with the spirit's inopportune activity, simple will alone is powerless. The spirit itself must then reach this result, knowing that the effort of an intellectual or mental nature is based in the results that are acquired by all the exercises (renunciations, resolutions, bodily disciplines, etc.) that precede it. The attempt to master the spirit achieves a process that began with the elementary techniques of the body.

In the general domain of prayer, especially mental prayer, that is, of an activity that permits a person to concentrate the attention on a familiar word, meditation makes 'thought sharp and reflected'.⁴¹ It is a mastication or rumination⁴² that can support itself on the imagination and understanding, both being carefully watched.⁴³ The goal is always to enclose the spirit 'in the enclosure of the subject that you want to meditate'.⁴⁴

³⁹ Saint Francis de Sales, *Treatise*, p. 363. See the *Dictionnaire de la vie spirituelle*, pp. 177–87, s.v. 'contemplation'.

⁴⁰ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way*, ch. 27. See Silburn, *Le Bouddhisme*, p. 40: 'O monks, what is called consciousness, thought, or spirit appears and disappears day and night in perpetual change' (from the *Samyutta Nikāya* II, p. 95).

⁴¹ Hugh of Saint Victor, quoted by Ch.-A. Bernard, art. 'Méditation', *Dictionnaire de la vie spirituelle*, p. 673.

⁴² Ibid., quoting P. Philippe, 'L'Oraison dans l'histoire', *Cahiers de la vie spirituelle* (Paris, 1947), p. 10. See also Saint Francis de Sales, *Treatise*, p. 377.

⁴³ Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, pp. 72–4.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 74. See Fénelon, *Œuvres spirituelles*, p. 190: 'This meditation must even become more and more profound and intimate every day. I say *profound* because, when we humbly meditate on these truths, we dig in deeper and deeper to discover new treasures there. I add *intimate* because, like we dig deeper and deeper to enter into these truths, these truths dig deeper and deeper to enter into the substance of our soul.'

Since one cannot interrupt the spirit's agitation,⁴⁵ which never stops to pirouette, moving from one object to another, one 'fixes' one's attention on a verbal support, biblical text, or prayer. This technique, which associates the concentration of thought⁴⁶ and the attentive repetition of a known word with the assimilation and digestion of its content, impedes the development of all other intellectual activity. The spirit, which is subjected to this exclusive tension and orientation, isolates itself from the external world, and pulls into itself. Perfectly and completely present to itself, the consciousness, which is purified and unified, tastes, it is said, an incomparable fullness within this almost total dispossession.

It is then, having silenced the spirit, that the phase of recollection that achieves this steep itinerary towards beatitude is found. Saint Teresa offers a precise description of it:

It is called recollection because the soul collects together all the faculties and enters within itself with its God.... Although they [souls] have not sailed completely away from land, they do what they can to free themselves from it, in the time at their disposal, by recollecting their senses to themselves.... It withdraws the senses from these external things, and sees them in such a way that, without its understanding how, its eyes closed to not see them, so that sight further awakens to the things of the soul.... For it is the Lord's will that, in return for the time they have spent, the soul and the will should merit to have such a power over the senses that, by only making a sign that it wants to recollect, the senses obey and are recollected to it.⁴⁷

In this profound and silent recollection, the soul, whose faculties other than the 'fine point of the will' are asleep, (finally!) tastes peace.⁴⁸ The saint attributes this happiness, quieting, and perfect calm to the fact that the soul would be 'recollected in its God',⁴⁹ while it is, more mundanely, a state known to all wisdoms that results from the almost complete interruption of all cognitive and mental activities. The mythological plot construction only imperfectly hides the fact that this is the result of a process that is desired and methodologically constructed.

⁴⁵ This is reminiscent of the *cittavṛtti* [*nīrodha*] of yoga described earlier.

⁴⁶ See Max Weber, *Sociologie des religions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 199.

⁴⁷ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way*, ch. 28. See also Saint Francis de Sales, *Treatise*, p. 382.

⁴⁸ Saint Francis de Sales, *Treatise*, pp. 384, 387, and 389.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

It allows us to witness a triumph of an emaciated and quieted 'I' that is freed of all possible sources of perturbation and worry. Ascesis, dispossession, and discipline have paradoxically reinforced the structure of the 'I'. This interior fullness and quiet have an express condition of the complete folding of the individual in on him- or herself, into this undefeatable fortress that is built through renunciations and submission to severe regimens.⁵⁰

This vast group of techniques and exercises has a high degree of coherence, because it covers the whole of a human personality, from banal sensation to the fine point of its soul, and because it has one goal, 'the peace of the soul', that is, the cessation of all the (affective, intellectual, emotional, etc.) forces that can trouble and shake it. Under 'religious' guise, its vocation is thus essentially practical, one could almost say that it is therapeutic.⁵¹ Further, the efficacy of meditation and that of recollection depend on the level of concentration and vigilance that one attains, and not on the 'support' that they focus on. This is why yoga judiciously recommended the individual to choose some sort of object or geometric figure.

⁵⁰ Having been led and having reached this high ground of the spiritual life, let us not forget, let us never forget at least this sarcastic warning of Lucian, *Hermotimus, or The Sects*, 76–7, that must have seemed indecent, if not sacrilege, at the end of this dialogue:

– call him a Philosopher...have you ever met one...such as...to be...happy?
 – No, I have never met such a man.

⁵¹ This aspect is absent from certain materialistic theories of the soul, or rather it is only found in the form of a highly aristocratic intellectual lucidity: 'But now let go of all these goods, which are no longer of your age, and without regret, let us go, it is most necessary to give them up', Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, III, 961–2; 'Whoever thinks in this way will be wise, just, at peace with his lot, and therefore happy', Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *L'Homme machine* (Paris: Vigdor, 1998), p. 190. This perhaps explains the lack of an audience. People seek rules of life and formulas of wisdom that can help them, rather than purely speculative theories. Does not Lucretius commit the sin of optimism when he writes: 'It is thus that everyone seeks to flee himself; but, as it were, he is usually utterly incapable, and one unpleasantly adheres to it, and hates it for this, because, sick, one does not grasp the cause of one's evil. If it were seen clearly, one would leave everything, and primarily study to know the nature of things' (ibid., III, 1068–72)? How many individuals find a definitive consolation and remedy for their evils in the study of 'the nature of things' alone? The efficacy of the techniques of wisdom and spiritual techniques is instead found in the fact of offering numerous, detailed sentences that regard, on a daily basis, every aspect of individuals and their existence. As we have noted, if they have sinned, it will have been through excessive pessimism.

The practical vocation of these techniques is sufficient to explain their indifference to everything miraculous or supernatural. They are inspired by an unflinchingly lucid observation, even if it means darkening human nature a little more, something that does not require much. Their application and exercise concern the individual in this world, just as they both are. They never attempt to add the slightest embellishment to them. This practical orientation also permits the individual to understand that moral subtleties are secondary in their eyes. The unsolvable questions of causation⁵² preoccupy them less than the determined search for an efficacious posture. At any rate, they are strictly individualist. Practised far from the world, they only concern the interior, solitary person. One must constantly seek silence,⁵³ solitude, and even 'mental solitude'⁵⁴ along with extreme vigilance in observation. On this point, as with others, they are intransigent and voluntaristic. In their implacable conception of humanity, no clause is included to attenuate the consequences of its choices. One recognizes humans' great will, while their responsibility is, however, total.

We should say here again that it would be vain to judge these exercises from our modern individualistic perspective alone, which is more inclined to consume or enjoy than to renounce. We would find nothing there but matter permitting one to condemn or mock an ideal of life founded on a radical rupture with the world. What we must attempt to appreciate is situated elsewhere. This is in the finality of the consistent choices (even if they seem austere, and even inhuman today) made by Christian culture in order to create the type of people who are capable of overcoming the dangers that arise from their fragile and unstable nature. Since the key issue of Christian spiritual tradition is situated in humanity's interior life, one must admit that the pertinence of its teachings must be evaluated in light of its efficacy, that is, in light of the benefits that is provided for many centuries. How else can one explain its success and longevity? If the Church's heavy hand cannot justify everything, neither can it explain everything. We should note in regard to this that the authors that we have cited up to this point, who are nonetheless quite orthodox, do not give the Church and its rites more than a highly secondary role. For each of them, the

⁵² See Jean Delumeau, *L'Aveu et le pardon: Les difficultés de la confession XIII^e-XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1990).

⁵³ *L'Âme religieuse*, pp. 69-71.

⁵⁴ Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 84.

essential part, and they are perfectly aware of it, unfolds in the individual's heart, because it is by the total conversion of the first that the second will become Christian.

Accomplished without excesses, that is, keeping within the correct balance proper to the spirit of ancestral wisdoms, the advantages and benefits that these disciplines offer are inestimable. One usually cites interior strength and liberty; self-mastery⁵⁵ and knowledge; interior lucidity, serenity, and peace;⁵⁶ and, obviously, the inestimable capacity to bear 'the weight of this corruptible life'.⁵⁷ In brief: this is an 'I' that is, if not unshakable, at least as solid as our condition that is so quick to vacillate can let us hope for. However, the preservation of such an equilibrium by keeping oneself a good distance from all excess is a dangerous exercise. This Stoic⁵⁸ preoccupation for the happy medium is a permanent challenge, because it is situated on a very fine ridge line. Far from being a fixed point that one could dock to once and for all, remaining there implies never-ending re-evaluation, that is, permanent attention and vigilance. On this narrow path, on this razor's edge, one must recognize that Christianity often stumbled. The inevitably precarious equilibrium, which fears nothing more than dogmatism and excess, was constantly menaced and corrupted by choices that radicalized certain orientations present in Christian mythology. By exacerbating certain tendencies (towards suffering and self-disdain) to the point of making them exclusive and hegemonic, they led to a morbid imbalance in many faithful, which obscured the horizon of Christian wisdom.

⁵⁵ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way*, ch. 29.

⁵⁶ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, II, 1–3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 51.

⁵⁸ Seneca, *On the Tranquillity of the Soul*, IX. To which one can add this counsel of common sense offered by Fénelon, *Œuvres spirituelles*, p. 218: 'The rule for finding this happy medium depends on the internal and external state of each person, and one cannot give a general rule for what depends on the circumstances in which each person in particular finds himself.'

CHAPTER NINE

SUFFERING AND CULPABILITY

One cannot deny that Christianity's synthesis, which mixes ancestral recipes or techniques to its own conceptions of the human condition, took, all too often, a particular, morbid orientation that caused it to turn its back on the measured teaching of the wisdoms.

These radical choices were placed under the sign of suffering, inexorable culpability, and self-mortification taken to the point of abjection. It is because these three tendencies (suffering, culpability, mortification) were celebrated and exacerbated to the extreme that one can correctly speak of excess. At this point, the Buddhist idea of a 'middle path' that is equally far from abandonment to sensuality and ascetic mortification has become inconceivable.

It is certain that no civilization has ever attempted to apply such a macabre educational program with so much care and stubbornness—one that would destroy all sources of serene joy and well-being in humanity. Nor have there ever been such categorical sentences condemning life or the simple fact of existing. While the techniques of the body and traditional recipes of wisdom sought, certainly by steep paths, to lighten the burden of existence, Christian spirituality and mysticism, leaving this liberating path, instead burdened it a bit more by leaving the human heart and personality to the oppressive anxiety of culpability and the bitterness of self-disdain.

In view of clarity, we have only examined the exercises and techniques that post-medieval Christian spirituality maintained and organized to elaborate an ideal model of spiritual existence. This deliberate choice, which focused on the description of its techniques, has led us to leave the examination of the tormented and morbid spirit that Christianity has often associated with them, to the point of disfigurement, until now. This spirit condemns all lightness, banishes all pleasure, and will go so far as to prohibit laughter. It only scrutinizes the heart to find mud there, and only looks at people to ask them to belittle themselves. It knows no remedies other than suffering, and pronounces no judgments other than condemnation.

The sense of measure and the goal to attain in this world that was so essential to the practical wisdoms was perverted by Christianity. The highly subtle sense of measure appeared to us, it is true, to be difficult to discover and conserve. To reach it, one needs to be very solidly clear sighted and intuitive. Further, the spiritual techniques and exercises, since they deal only with the most unstable and vulnerable elements of human personality (sensuality, affectivity, imagination, memory, etc.), must be dosed and applied with much care and dexterity. It is easy to provoke unbalances. Every 'virtue', when practised without moderation, can engender a greater evil than that it aims to combat. How can one define, for example, the 'proper measure' in matters of sexuality in such a way that it does not lead to frustrations and obsessions that risk, in the end, disorganizing the individual more than the most unbridled passion would? Where, in this case, are situated, not only this proper measure, but the solutions that would permit one to preserve it through the unforeseen events of existence? These difficult and subtle questions have been objects of debate for millennia. All the solutions have been examined and practised without any one of them finally imposing itself. In front of an alternative as simple as enjoyment without restraint or renunciation to all pleasure, individuals still do not know in an incontestable manner today what they must do, so that they usually follow conventional morals (which is thus more perspicacious than one usually thinks of it) which tries to avoid these two pitfalls by allowing them to enjoy a moderate pleasure that endangers neither their personal equilibrium nor the cohesion of the group.

The originality of the wisdoms seems to be to have rejected both radical asceticism and this conventional arrangement that is adopted by most. This original path, however, other than that it is not set out anywhere and thus each one must discover it, requires moral and intellectual capacities, and strength of character and will that are far above common abilities. Fairly paradoxically, this median path that, for the distracted observer, seems to come from a prudent compromise without vision, instead introduces the most admirable heroism into the heart of *mediocritas*.

These subtle choices of wisdoms hardly captured the attention of high Christian spirituality. Its reutilization of classical recipes, from the renunciation of temporal goods to the exercise of solitary meditation, occurred in a highly particular context that has almost nothing to do

with the reflected and serene spirit that animated them. One could say it did quite the contrary, because it transposed them into an oppressive world that is dominated by the exaltation of interior suffering and darkest culpability.

If we cannot present the entire history of this profound neurosis here, one can at least note that this morbid delectation completely impregnated Christian spirituality.

We find the devaluation of life in this world at its beginning:

Arrange and order everything to suit your will and judgement, and still you will find that you must suffer something, whether you want to or not; and thus you will always find the cross.

Either you will experience bodily pain or you will undergo tribulation of spirit in your soul...

You cannot escape, you cannot be relieved by any remedy or comfort, but must bear with it as long as God wills...

The cross, therefore, is always ready; it awaits you everywhere. No matter where you may go, you cannot escape it, for wherever you go you take yourself with you and shall always find yourself.¹

Instead of instructing individuals so that they can find the capacities in themselves to confront and endure this painful existence, spiritual Christianity will, through a spectacular reversal while magnifying the passion of Christ, value the request for, acceptance of, and consummation of this suffering. On this point, the witnesses are as elevated as they are unanimous:

Now your work bears fruit, your tears are acceptable, your sighs are heard, your suffering satisfies God, and purifies your soul...

The more flesh is afflicted and broken, the more the spirit is internally strengthened by grace...

Nothing is more acceptable to God, nothing more helpful for you on this earth, than to suffer willingly for Christ.²

...see how well [his Father] accomplished in Him by giving Him labours, and pains, and injuries, and persecutions; and finally, until his life ended with death on a cross...

...struggle to pass through whatever his Majesty wills...³

¹ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, II, 12.

² Ibid., I, 24 and II, 12.

³ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way*, ch. 32.

...to ask for pain, tears and torment with Christ in torment.⁴

...giving itself to suffer for Christ and to annihilate itself in everything.⁵

My God! If You do not judge me worthy of martyrdom by blood, grant me that of love.⁶

The morbid attraction to suffering, the wounds, and stigmata of the crucified Christ reaches such a level that it leads to rejection of every form of joy and any occasion of smiling. Laughter becomes obscene:

Sorrow is source of much good, which one promptly loses by dissolute behaviour.

It is a wonder that any man who considers and meditates on his exiled state and the many dangers to his soul, can ever be perfectly happy in this life.⁷

Avoid thoughts on things of pleasure or joy, such as the glorious resurrection of Christ. Because whatever consideration of joy and gladness hinders feeling pain and grief for my sins, which are to be sought out, and instead recalling death and judgement...

Absolutely do not laugh nor say anything that provokes laughter...

...avoiding joyful thoughts, although good and holy, like those on the resurrection of Christ and glory, but rather to draw myself to grief and to pain and anguish, bringing to mind frequently his passion, labours, fatigues and pains, which He endured from the moment when He was born up to his leaving this life...⁸

...to choose for Christ everything that is most disagreeable, either from the part of God, or the part of the world; and this is true love of God.⁹

The expected corollary to such a rejection of life and its consolations can be found in the mortification (*mortis facere!*) of the flesh, self-abjection, and the annihilation of one's own personal humanity:

⁴ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, wk. 1, ex. 1, prel. 1. See Fénelon, *Œuvres spirituelles*, p. 225: 'A weakened and humiliated soul, who has no more resources in herself, who fears, who is troubled, who is sad unto death...is far more purified, more free of herself, more annihilated and dead to all her own desires, that these strong souls who enjoy the fruits of their virtues in peace.'

⁵ Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent*, bk. 2, ch. 6.

⁶ *L'Âme religieuse*, p. 285.

⁷ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, I, 21. On the contrary, for Seneca, *On the Constancy of the Wise Man*, I, 9 (excerpts) the wise person has 'an elevated and happy character' and is 'full of continuous joy' that one could certainly compare to the enigmatic smile of the Buddha.

⁸ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, wk. 1, ad. 6; wk. 1, ad. 8; wk. 3, day 2, n. 3.

⁹ Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent*, bk. 2, ch. 6.

...mortified and empty of that pleasure to the senses, as if they are in obscurity...

Always tend—not to the easiest, but to the most difficult...do not go seeking the best of temporal things, but the worst, and desire to enter, for Christ, into all nudity, and want, and poverty in regard to everything in the world.¹⁰

Thus everything is in the cross, and everything depends upon your dying on it. There is no other way to life and to true interior peace than the way of the holy cross and of daily mortification.¹¹

Why would we hesitate to mortify the interior, since in it all the rest is much more meritorious and perfect, and afterwards we accomplish them with more gentleness and calm?...

It is clear that if one is a true religious or a true man of prayer, and hopes to enjoy the gifts of God, one should not turn one's shoulders to the desire to die for Him and to pass through martyrdom.¹²

One only lives for God through a continual death to self.¹³

This 'continual death to self' implicates a substitution for a vigilant ethics of 'self care' by an almost sickly ethos of self-disdain. Well beyond modesty and healthy humility, this ethos nourishes a true aversion to all individual preoccupations:

I am your poorest servant, a vile worm, much more poor and contemptible than I know or dare to say....

Be zealous against yourself! Allow no pride to dwell in you, but prove yourself so humble and lowly that all may walk over you and trample upon you as dust in the streets.¹⁴

Finally, I will examine all my corruption—the depravity of the soul, and the ugliness of the body—and I consider myself to be like an ulcer or an abscess, from which so much ichorous of sins and discharge of vices have flowed out.¹⁵

However, I now say that one must not only love the evil [that befalls one], which is accomplished by the virtue of patience; but one must also cherish abjection, which is accomplished by the virtue of humility.¹⁶

The first [practice] is to work for one's own disdain, and to desire that everyone has it (and this is against the concupiscence of the flesh).

¹⁰ Ibid., bk. 1, ch. 13.

¹¹ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, II, 12.

¹² Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way*, ch. 12.

¹³ *L'Âme religieuse*, p. 275.

¹⁴ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, III, 3 and III, 13.

¹⁵ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, wk. 1, ex. 2, pt. 3.

¹⁶ Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 134. For the virtue of patience, see note 30 p. 158 above and the corresponding paragraph.

The second is to speak of oneself with disdain, and to desire that others do it (and this is against the concupiscence of the eyes).

The third is to think lowly and in disdain of oneself, and to desire that everyone does it (against oneself as well, and this is against the pride of life).¹⁷

For all those who are 'tepid' and might try to cut corners in the application of this program of annihilation, Saint John of the Cross specifies:

for [some people] still go to feed and clothe their nature with spiritual consolations and sentiments, instead of stripping and denying it in this and that for God. They think that it is enough to deny it in what is of the world, without annihilating and purifying it of spiritual property....

This chalice is to die to one's nature, stripping and annihilating it, so that it can walk on this narrow path in everything that can pertain to it according to sensation, as we have said, and according to the soul, as we will now say, which is in its thought, in its pleasure, and in its sentiments....

[This path that leads to God consists in one indispensable thing,] which is to know how to truly renounce both externally and internally, giving oneself to suffer for Christ, and to annihilate oneself in everything.¹⁸

Likewise, the nocturnal dark and cold of a culpability¹⁹ that is all the more ensnaring because, having accompanied the process of internalization examined above, it has slipped into the deepest folds of each consciousness. It seems to be encrusted in the most intimate fibres of being. It is an infinite and inexpugnable culpability of the anxious creature that reproaches itself, and to whom existence itself is reproached. It is an unfathomable and incurable culpability, because God penetrates and sees to the depths of the soul! It devours the conscience and leaves it only a tenuous possibility of expiation, on the condition of enduring new, unending sufferings:

finally, coming back to myself, bowed down in heart and spirit before the throne of divine justice, I recognize, admit, and confess that I am truly touched and convicted of the crime of having aggrieved the divine majesty, and culpable for the death and passion of Jesus Christ, because of the sins that I have committed, for which He dies and suffered the

¹⁷ Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent*, bk. 1, ch. 13. See also bk. 3, ch. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, bk. 2, ch. 6.

¹⁹ For this, read Fewzner's indispensable work, *L'Homme coupable*.

torments of the cross, so that I am consequently worthy to be forever lost and damned.²⁰

Likewise, in the second exercise, considering how much I have sinned, I will imagine myself bound in chains, standing before the supreme Judge, as is the custom, for one who has committed murder, shackled in chains, to be led to the tribunal.²¹

...yes, it is you, it is you who, by your sins, by your infidelities, have reduced Jesus Christ, your heavenly Spouse, to this deplorable state: It is your sins that caused his torments, that spilled his blood, that attached Him to the Cross, that led Him to death.

And even if you have not caused his great sufferings and death by grave sins, are not venial sins and deliberated faults a large enough source of pain for you, who have increased his sufferings, re-opened his wounds, and added to the bitterness of his chalice? This is what you have done, and what you have to reproach yourself, and to deplore in the bitterness of your heart—if your heart is capable of sentiments.²²

The love that unites the believer to the divinity would seem to be able to offer a friendly refuge in this tormented and desperate landscape. But He, who is exclusive,²³ total, jealous,²⁴ and intolerant, is clothed in no less sombre and disturbing colours:

[Christ responds to the believer who asks Him what he should renounce:] Every day and at every hour, in the smallest things as in the greatest. I exclude nothing. In all things I wish you to be stripped of self. Otherwise, how can you be mine or I yours, unless you are free of your own will both internally and externally?²⁵

And how could a love remain hidden that is so strong, that is so just, that is always growing, that sees nothing to stop loving, that is founded on such a foundation as that of being paid by another love, that cannot be doubted because it is shown so openly, with such great sufferings, and labours, and shedding of blood, to the loss of one's life, so that we would have no doubt as to this love?²⁶

²⁰ Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 57.

²¹ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, wk. 1, ad. 2.

²² *L'Âme religieuse*, p. 103. For scrupulous souls, who are haunted by this sentiment of infinite culpability, confession opens even darker abysses.

²³ 'Watch yourself in everything you do and say. Direct your every intention toward pleasing Me alone, and desire nothing outside of Me' (Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, III, 25 [clearly, Christ is speaking]).

²⁴ 'If a spouse is so jealous that he does not want his bride to interact with anyone, it is a beautiful thing' (Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way*, ch. 22).

²⁵ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, III, 37.

²⁶ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way*, ch. 40.

And thus it happened that the soul is inflamed with yearnings of the love of God, without knowing from where they come nor on what they are founded. And it was that, just as faith enrooted and established itself further in the soul through that emptiness and darkness and stripping of all things that is spiritual poverty (so that we can all call it the same thing), likewise, joined to it, the charity of God enroots and establishes itself further in the soul.²⁷

The reader will certainly have noted a curious contradiction. Since antiquity, love was considered among the great passions that can trouble the soul, obscure the judgement, and disorganize the personality. It is, however, celebrated in the most exalted manner in these texts, on the condition that it regards the divinity, and the divinity alone. Is this exclusive attachment sufficient to purify and spiritualize it, that is, to remove every noxious psychological aspect from it? Does not such a complete and unmeasured love have the usual characteristics of morbid passion? Does it not condemn the one who feels it to the troubles and disorders that accompany the human loves that it fundamentally resembles, as Saint Francis de Sales witnesses to?²⁸

We can go further. While the recipes of the wisdoms sought to deliver individuals from their passions, to fortify their body and spirit, and to strengthen their defensive capacities, Christian spirituality broke their worldly ties only to better re-introduce numerous passions into their souls (exalted love for the divinity, self-disdain, shame, irremediable culpability, sentiment of abjection, etc.). How could they not permanently trouble the conscience and heart of those who feel them? How could they not constantly give rise to disorders and disorientations? How, for example, could the sentiment of culpability that is violently felt and lived as an inexpiable sin, not provoke obsessive conduct and melancholic deliriums?²⁹ How many consciences came out of this trial

²⁷ Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent*, bk. 2, ch. 24.

²⁸ Saint Francis de Sales, *Treatise*, p. 412: 'Yes, I know well, Theotimus, that Plato spoke thus of the abject, vile, and sickly love of the worldly. However, *these properties are still found in the heavenly and divine love*'. See also Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way*, ch. 26: 'be sure to have an image or portrait of our Lord that is to your taste—not to keep it to one's breast and never admire it, but to speak often to Him, and He will give you what to say to Him'.

²⁹ See Fewzner, *L'Homme coupable*, pp. 72–3. The fundamental commerce of modern psychologists is still essentially the attempt to eliminate this sentiment of culpability, which seems to have survived the slow agony of Christian culture, from their patients. For this, one can also read Nietzsche's anathemas in *The Antichrist*, Fr. tr. Éric Blondel (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1996), especially § 51.

broken and weakened? Instead of helping people to free themselves of all forms of passion and attachment, Christian spirituality appears only to condemn some to exalt others.

Should one say that Christianity betrayed or twisted the spirit and lesson of human wisdoms? In these terms, the question certainly appears far too abrupt. Further, it insinuates that Christianity was animated by some sort of deliberate or Machiavellian will. Should one then say that it distanced itself from them? It is undeniable that it subordinated the practice of spiritual exercises to what was until that point an unheard of maceration and suffering, and that it encumbered human consciousness with the oppressive weight of an infinite culpability.

Raised to the level of an incomparable and insurmountable ideal, the passion of Christ could not but lead to an exacerbation of morbid tendencies that haunt humanity's imaginations or phantasms. The ideal of ancient wisdoms was always founded on the choice of a balanced *regimen*,³⁰ since it regarded the serenity and tranquillity of the soul, and was thus situated from one end to the other in this world. Conceived by and for the human person, they had never, until this point, sought any other paths than those that could lighten his or her burden.

³⁰ The etymology, however, refers to the Latin *regere*: to govern, to guide, to direct. It regards establishing and following a rigorous rule of life to which one submits oneself. For this, one can read Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. II, *L'Usage des plaisirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p. 143: 'In brief, the practice of the regimen as the art of living is something far different than a group of precautions designed to avoid sicknesses or to manage to heal them. It is an entire way of constituting oneself as subject that has the proper, necessary, and sufficient care of his body. This is a care that traverses daily life; that makes major or normal activities of life into events regarding both health and morals; that defines a circumstantial strategy between the body and the elements that surround it; and that aims to arm the individual himself with a rational conduct.'

PART THREE

THE WISDOMS OF CULTURES

Our beliefs and desires, as our sentiment of self, could well be nothing but irreducible and necessary illusions so that our spirit, populated by an infinite number of disorganized agents, can find calm and consistency. (Alain Blanchet, *Le Principe d'influence*, p. 56)

The illusion of a unified, homogeneous, and consistent 'I' is not without social foundations. One could even say that the celebration of the unity of self is a permanent activity of our societies. (Bernard Lahire, *Le Travail sociologique de Pierre Bourdieu*, p. 142)

Of yourself you always tend to nothing. You fall quickly, are quickly overcome, quickly troubled, and quickly discouraged. (*The Imitation of Christ*, III, 4, 3)

A man is not a supporter of the law because he talks much; even if a man has learnt little, but sees the law bodily, he is a supporter of the law, a man who never neglects the law. (*The Dhammapada*, § 259)

CHAPTER TEN

WISDOMS AND HUMAN SCIENCES

The analyses and demonstrations that occupied the first two parts of this work first of all led us to rehabilitate the idea of wisdom; to resituate some isolated but tenacious hypotheses about substantial lability or even futility of the human person (from the distant epoch of Buddha up to Lévi-Strauss, passing by Hume, Janet, Proust, and de Martino) in the perspective opened up by this idea, to redefine the completely decisive role of cultural creations in the constitution of every human subject,¹ and to finally underscore some deep affinities between Christian and pagan wisdoms. We must now summarize the major themes one by one, and present their principal theoretical results, because they open up a considerable controversy whose arguments we will examine and confront in the next two chapters.

HUMAN FRAGILITY

Of the great trials that confronted humanity, the most difficult did not only come, as is often thought and said, from the so-called wild. Animal ferocity, storm waves, epidemics, or famines have obviously caused numerous sufferings and dramas. They continue today, like wars and genocides, their work of destruction and death. But these were not the only tragedies that humanity had to confront. It is within themselves that individuals encountered the most constant dangers. Stupor, dread, 'invasive emotionality', fear, confusion, the undefeatable

¹ One can immediately see how this conception, which privileges the 'psychic' individual over the 'biological' individual, is distinguished from the materialist and strictly functionalist interpretations proposed by Bronislaw Malinowski, *Une théorie scientifique de la culture* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), and summarized on pp. 106–7, or by Walter Burkert, *Homo necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983). It is quite difficult, if not impossible, to justify or derive the most complex cultural creations, which are often the most contrary to 'natural' laws at the same time (severe discipline, renunciation, maceration, solitary meditation), while taking one's initial paradigm from the biological postulate of 'basic needs'.

sensation of weakness or extreme solitude, physical exhaustion, moral distress, and interior break up are no less menacing dangers, because they are capable of breaking the fragile unity of the human person at any moment. Every self-consciousness is permanently, throughout the entirety of its brief existence, confronted with the activity of its own internal dynamics and the presence of its effective perennality. As soon as the first relaxes, the inexorable deterioration of the personal entity follows. Without the felt certitude of the second, the unbearable sentiment of one's own disappearance arises. This consciousness, however, finds itself precipitated into a turbulent flow of a life where many aspects are perils that can cause it to stumble or disappear. Paradoxically, the moment that it best or most penetratingly perceives itself often coincides with the moment when its constitutive fragility imposes itself on it with the clearest evidence. There, it feels itself, by itself, and in itself, as something that is infinitely vulnerable. This evidence is as blinding and immediately felt as that of suffering that roughly grips the body. This first, foundational, experience precedes any discursive or ritual actualization that is designed to attenuate its impact. In it, individuals, each person, discovers themselves while discerning at once their own incertitude and their own incompleteness.

In the various psychic states that result from this, 'everything occurs as if a fragile, disarmed, labile presence did not resist the shock that such a violent emotional content produced, that it did not have enough energy to maintain itself before it, by recovering, designing, and mastering it within a network of defined relationships'. For de Martino, from whom these lines are borrowed,² the 'drama of presence', that is, the uncertain presence of individuals to themselves in a world that is about to submerge or crush them, is characterized by the subjects' incapacity, both to master the dread or stupor that have literally 'gripped' them, and to think of a counteraction that permits them to evacuate or metabolize this destructive excess of energy without too much damage. Naming an evil, evaluating its noxiousness, resituating it in a mythical scenario, exorcizing it through magic or rites, and ritually mimicking its destruction are some of the panoply of means that people have come up with in order to free themselves of them. This drama would reveal, always according to de Martino, the most characteristic trait of the structure of the primitive personality. Unconfident,

² De Martino, *Le Monde magique*, p. 93.

unstable, porous, and permeable, it would suffer of a sort of constitutive weakness, deficiency, or asthenia. On this particular point, de Martino will correct himself, and later admit that this existential situation is not exclusively found in archaic worlds, and that it is still valid for the modern individual, and that it even belongs, we would willingly add, to the nature of humanity itself. This is witnessed to in their way by all of the methods of wisdom, which, always and everywhere, were conceived only to help individuals to confront this catastrophic interior failure. A reading of contemporary magazines that specialize in the search for interior well-being or personal development would not fail us either. Far from primitive worlds and their fragile equilibrium, that is, at the heart of the contemporary West, of a dominating and self-confident civilization, who would say, who would dare claim that individuals henceforth enjoy an unchangeable capacity to overcome their interior failures? Further, if modern medicine and pharmacology managed to cure all illnesses other than one, death, is it not probable that the quantity of anxiety in the world would not diminish one iota, because it would concentrate entirely on this final malediction?³

THE SUBJECT OF THE HUMAN SCIENCES

Such considerations, like those that previously guided us in the interpretation of trials of initiation, Christian techniques of the body and soul, archaic regimens of life, and ancient Western and Oriental wisdoms, have a characteristic that, although it does not appear to at first, distinguishes them from those one usually finds in the academic disciplines which, from history, to anthropology, and sociology, have nonetheless placed humanity at the centre of investigations. In reality, this last expression should be corrected, because it is less individuals themselves, reduced to their own constitution, to their mortal condition, to their fragile individuality, to the trying face to face they have with themselves, that is most often retained by these sciences than the vast (ideological, political, social, cultural...) superstructures in which they anonymously act as interchangeable elements of a more or less vast group (the middle class, the workers, the French, the Christians,

³ According to the strong expression of Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Mort et pouvoir* (Paris: Payot, 1978), p. 56: 'All civilizations exist to fight against the corrupting power of death.'

the immigrants, etc.). The 'drama of presence' is thus removed from reflection, and replaced by interrogations on the functioning of these superstructures that have their own history and their own organization, which are most often indifferent to the dramas that unfold in individuals. This indifference is only equalled by that which these same sciences have shown for the wisdoms until now. In their eyes, when the wisdoms are not ignored, they only represent the final avatar of anachronistic and naive behaviours that would only interest a handful of innocuous and marginal people. Their 'practical' vocation, and the fact that they address each person in particular, have not done them any less of a disservice. It is also significant that the word 'wisdom(s)' only appears today in the titles of anthological works that aim at a credulous group of readers.

The important consequences that flow from this paradoxical attitude (why do the sciences of humanity turn so far away from the human person, as he or she is, in the flesh? And if they were disinterested in human wisdoms?) must now be evaluated in more detail.

Schools of thought as different and opposed as the positivism of the end of the nineteenth century, Marxism, Durkheimian sociology, structuralism, phenomenology, quantitative history, and the cognitive sciences tacitly made a pact whose terms admitted that the living individual, reduced to his or her individual condition, is a negligible parameter in the establishment of equations that should allow the extraction of general laws or intangible essences. In this regard, modern science prolongs and continues, most often unknown to itself and according to its own proper codes, a prejudice that European idealistic tradition has not stopped defending since Plato. The intelligible, and especially its highest expressions, cannot be found alongside the unstable and fragile characteristics of humanity, particularly when they include with them the most mundane and intimate aspects of an individual's personal existence.

Outside of some recent and timid exceptions, which are rather oriented towards a 'psychological sociology'⁴ that tries to rehabilitate the various dimensions of private or domestic life, the specialists of the human sciences almost always act as if human condition and nature

⁴ See Bernard Lahire, ed., *Le Travail sociologique de Pierre Bourdieu: Dettes et critiques* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), pp. 5–20 and 23–57.

are not a vital problem for people themselves, nor even important facts to retain while studying them. For that, they erase all these traits, have them disappear from the scenery, in the same way that hearses have disappeared from the roads of our cities to the point that a child today would believe that death itself has left the world. Upon reading certain contemporary works, one could wind up forgetting that humans are above all vulnerable, mortal creatures whose existence is punctuated by painful trials and countless worries—something that the ancient wisdoms instead placed at the centre of their anthropology and *Weltanschauung*. Once humans are separated from this heavy weight, from the sharp awareness that they have that each day that passes adds to their own finiteness, it is then easy to insert preoccupations that will, depending on the case, seem superficial or secondary, as long as they remain detached from this backdrop within a sort of existential weightlessness. The least polemical consequence of this state of affairs is predictable. The human that the human sciences study, beyond being chopped up and dismembered by them to the point that it is impossible to reconstitute a complete image of him or her,⁵ usually no longer has more than an imperfect resemblance with the real human that each person is aware of being. It is a strange divorce that separates the human person of the street from the sciences that nonetheless are tasked with learning what he or she is.

It is also revealing that this human, who is stripped of his or her carnal and existential depth, is the one whom literature, popular media, and cinema never stop focusing on.⁶ With the help of means that one might consider to be summary, stereotypical, and approximative, they nonetheless often teach us more about the human person (his or her

⁵ The 'progress' of the human sciences today is correlated with a fragmentation and dissipation of the human fact and reality. This demonstrates, although by the absurd, that the 'whole' person is not their, unlike the wisdoms', primary concern. Nobody today would dare to undertake or would be able to conclude a synthesis of the disparate results of these sciences. The individual, endowed with the entirety of his or her constitutive dimensions, has become for them today an unthinkable, and perhaps even inconceivable, 'object'. Contemporary psychology is itself divided between so many methods and approaches that it is no longer at all capable of proposing a unified vision of its subject matter; see M. Parot and M. Richelle, *Introduction à la psychologie: Histoire et méthodes*, 3rd ed. (Paris: PUF, 1996), pp. 375–6 and 388; P.-Y. Brandt, 'Quand la religion se mire dans la lorgnette du psychologue', in P. Gisel and Jean-Marc Tétaz, eds., *Théories de la religion* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2002), p. 283.

⁶ See note 1 p. 20.

anxieties, passions, and dramas) than these so-called sciences do. Will not the image of contemporary humanity that the popular songs written in the twentieth century will leave in the memory of future generations be in many ways more faithful than that sketched by the works of many renowned theoreticians? This is a surprising paradox, that becomes even more so once one imagines that, in few centuries, perhaps only these erudite witnesses will still exist!

Who would deny on the other hand that Maupassant, Flaubert, and Proust have spoken better of the interior person, and even, at the summit of irony, of the individual's 'social life'⁷ than generations of sociologists and psychologists after them have? It is thus not surprising that a large number of people still turns to these arts close to life (cinema, literature, biographical accounts,⁸ journalism, song) to find possible echoes (from the most trivial to the most romanticized) of their own preoccupations. Far from despising them and following the prejudice of the School, we should perhaps listen to them and study them attentively. We would find the indispensable 'human' complement to every study of human beings. The reading of various facts in the daily newspaper is as healthy an exercise as an indispensable one.

The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu offers an excellent opportunity⁹ to precisely measure the extent of the divergences brought about by the integration or non-integration of the fundamental dimensions of the human condition in a reflection that is situated in the context of the human sciences. The following text, chosen because it treats 'the domain of lifestyles' illustrates fairly well how one manages to skirt 'the', that is, 'our' problems of life':¹⁰

The relation that is in fact established between the pertinent conditions of economic and social conditions (the volume and structure of capital, understood synchronically and diachronically) and the distinctive traits associated with the corresponding position in the domain of lifestyles,

⁷ In their case, one should attribute the full existential signification to this term.

⁸ This fairly well embodies the individual micro-history, instead of any 'meta' concept—that is not so much abstract as foreign to the human condition.

⁹ It would have been just as instructive to choose this example from among other specialities (historians, anthropologists, psychologists) of the human sciences. Bourdieu's work is perhaps one of the most exemplary, in that his hyperdeterminism and his pan-sociologism completely subordinate individuals to their activities and to the logic of social positions alone, which is itself founded on the possession of various forms of capital that enter into the definition of these positions!

¹⁰ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, VI, 52 (see note 6 p. 10).

only becomes an intelligible relation through the construction of a habitus as a generating formula that allows one to explain at once classable practices and products and judgements, which are also classed, and constitute a system of distinctive signs from these practices and works. To speak of the aristocratic asceticism of professors or the pretension of the bourgeoisie is not to only describe these groups by some of their properties, even if they are the most important ones, it is an attempt to name the generative principle of all their properties and all their judgements on their properties and on those of others. This necessity is incorporated and converted into a generating disposition of reasonable practices and perceptions that can give meaning to practices that are engendered in this manner—the habitus, insofar as a general and transposable disposition, has a systematic and universal application that extends beyond the limits of what was directly acquired, of the inherent necessity of conditions of learning. It is what makes the group of practices of an agent (or the group of agents that are the product of similar conditions) at once systematic, insofar as they are the product of the application of identical (or mutually convertible) schemata, and systematically distinct from the practices that are constitutive of another lifestyle.

From the fact that different conditions of existence produce different habitus, or systems of generating schemata that can be applied, by simple transfer, to the most varied domains of practice, the practices that generate the different habitus are systematic configurations of properties that express the differences that are objectively inscribed in the conditions of existence in the form of systems of differential separations that, when perceived by agents endowed with the schemata of perception and appreciation necessary to locate them, interpret them, and evaluate their pertinent traits, act as lifestyles.¹¹

Summarized in a few words, these large and heavy lines mean roughly that the objective differences (fortune, rank, power, influence, relations, etc.), tied to the possession of different forms of capital and integrated as a type of habitus,¹² define stereotyped lifestyles which in turn offer, beyond dispositions that generate practices, schemata of perception and appreciation of these same differences. Although the word may seem odd in this context, this manner of seeing things is in fact quite metaphysical. It defines a mechanism of social production and reproduction that is perfectly homogeneous (every significant human fact comes exclusively from the social realm as it was defined

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979), p. 190.

¹² See Philippe Corcuff, 'Le Collectif au défi du singulier: En partant de l'habitus', in Lahire, *Le Travail sociologique de Pierre Bourdieu*, pp. 95–120.

a priori in the beginning), circular (the presuppositions only produce events that lead back to their own foundations!), and exclusive (closed on itself, it does not recognize the existence of any other significant reality or realization). It thus circumscribes the problem of 'lifestyles' in a very tight manner, placing it in a world where the transformation of differences generated by unequal distribution of various forms of capital into objective and systematic differences tasked with justifying these differences is the only thing that matters. Thus the schematic opposition of 'rich vs. poor' can be declined into numerous subsequent oppositions that are globally homologous, like 'distinguished vs. vulgar', 'powerful vs. subjected', 'elegant vs. rustic', 'cultivated vs. crude', 'superior vs. inferior', 'elevated vs. low', etc., to which various symbolic styles are associated (clothing, pastimes, taste, etc.). Each of them justifies the existence of the first, and thus favours its perpetuity, and the continual movement of reproduction that animates it.

In this perspective, whose founding principle is to be found in Marx, the question of 'lifestyles' is sequestered by a point of view that, as in Godelier,¹³ appears subordinated to maintaining both the tangible and symbolic differences that exist between the members of social classes that are strictly differentiated and hierarchized. The social world only exists in order to perpetuate the distinctive traits that are tasked with founding its inequalities, following a movement, let us repeat, that is perfectly circular and closed. However, to affirm that the human world, in what is most human in it, coincides exclusively and entirely with the social world defined in this manner is the same as saying that there are no other vital questions besides those the corresponding sociology raises and attempts to resolve. To this individual, who is the possessor of this 'socially constructed identity'¹⁴—itself fixed within its own *habitus*—Bourdieu attributes a unity and permanence that are not fundamentally different than those classical philosophy gave to its celebrated 'subject'. Everything that comes from the 'drama of presence' seems to not concern the subject, much less affect him or her.

Even if one admitted the existence of these distinctions and their functions as Bourdieu describes them, one would nonetheless have the right to ask whether they alone summarize the major traits of the

¹³ See note 7 p. 98.

¹⁴ Corcuff, 'Le collectif', p. 109.

human condition. In their way, the great 'literary sociologists' (Saint Simon, Balzac, Flaubert, Proust, but also Simenon) were already more equitable, and thus more convincing, in that they recognized other motivators of human actions, and had these various aspects 'play', so to speak, with each other. The characters of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* are not only more complete or dense than the skimpy one-dimensional subjects of Bourdieusian sociology, they are more lively because of this, that is, closer to what each person is aware of being. From what can one draw the judgement by which readers are not required to 'recognize' themselves in a treatise of sociology—when a novel, a literary construction, a work of fiction, offers them this possibility?

In any case, should one not correlate a certain form of consciousness and interiority to every 'lifestyle', inasmuch as it defines a coherent and codified manner of *being* whose traits are all carefully coordinated? Do not those who adopt it give it a type of value and eminent function rather spontaneously, which are themselves founded on the fact that these different forms of life are hypostasized and often perceived as ontological domains? Is not every person persuaded that his or her way of life, *insofar as he or she fully adheres to it, and he or she has accepted and internalized it*, is more authentic, more real, more human than those of others, which are considered superficial or fake? On this explicit condition, what is true for the Catholic priest or the militant communist is also true for the Indian peasant or the Chinese worker. This is sufficient to convince them of the value of their being. None of them dreams of changing their lives, because this strange promotion would constrain them to abandon 'their' world, which they obscurely sense to be indispensable. The fact that the dominated classes do not value their own 'lifestyle' any less than the dominant classes, and the latter have often developed 'lifestyles' that are as austere as they are constraining¹⁵ further unambiguously indicates that the questions regarding this transcend the logic of social positions alone, and should be at the heart of every anthropological reflection, insofar as it accepts to engage itself on this path. Likewise, does not the order that is

¹⁵ The recurring theme of renunciation of the world was almost always defended by the men and women from privileged, even aristocratic, classes. Why would they abandon the numerous privileges and pleasures that allowed them to enjoy their situation? What strange social logic would be able to justify this surprising paradox?

created and conserved by these 'lifestyles' change the 'social world' into a world endowed with symbolic significations that transfigure its material existence, by raising it to the level of the real world,¹⁶ that is, one that is not contingent and relative?

In this regard, Mauss, speaking of *habitus*,¹⁷ and above all Max Weber¹⁸ in his analyses of the Protestant ethos, saw something that leads us in this direction, beyond the topoi set up by Marxist-inspired sociologies. It is because the elaboration of Protestant ethics favoured the emergence of a new lifestyle that is Puritan and ascetic that it is possible to associate it with the appearance of a specific human type. The existence of this type, characterized by a certain 'global *habitus*', in turn favoured the creation of a certain type of mental interiority. This essential point, which above all should not be considered as a distant or accidental consequence, does not pass unnoticed by Weber's perspicacious eyes:

The equally vigilant self-control of the Puritan was directed towards something positive—a defined and designated behaviour that came from somewhere within him. It was the systematic mastering of one's own inner nature, which was regarded as corrupted by sin. The consistent Pietist established an inventory of sin in the manner of book-keeping....¹⁹

This is similar to how it did not escape Saint Augustine that Christianity, and Christian faith in particular, opened new areas for introspection, interior areas that this same Christianity would attempt to map and evangelize.

What the Puritan Protestant aimed at by this 'self control' and 'systematic mastery of his own interior nature' appeared to be situated on another level than that of Bourdieu's concept of 'distinction'. Despite the austere context (if it is not because of this context), one must agree that this 'ethics of interiority' must have offered those who adopted it what Weber rightly calls substantial and indisputable 'psychological

¹⁶ What is the complex sense with odd metaphysical resonances for the word 'world' in the expression: 'He (or she) is not of our world'? On another level, one can note that the fact of seeing a world come together that is no longer, can never again, be 'theirs' probably helps people to bear old age and death less poorly. 'We will no longer be here to see it', according to the popular saying.

¹⁷ Mauss, 'Les techniques du corps', pp. 367–8.

¹⁸ *Sociologie des religions*, analytical index, s.v. '*habitus*' and '*style de vie*'.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, s.v. 'Whimster', p. 49.

benefits'.²⁰ One can neither neglect these, nor subordinate them to the simple logic of social status: one can easily imagine more pleasant, and above all more spectacular, means to distinguish oneself from the popular classes. In the period that modern individualism started to affirm itself, itself bringing new interrogations and preoccupations, one would have expected all the more precious and indispensable advantages from the difficult efforts that this way of life required.

What we are attempting to present, without going further along Weber's path, is that the 'Puritan' capitalist that he describes to us from the interior is far more than a simple social or professional type, but is more properly what this term usually describes. Weber's analyses are ordered towards the type of consciousness and interior life that is capable of forging a certain 'lifestyle,' that is itself necessarily situated at the centre of a *cosmographic formation*,²¹ of an original but highly consistent vision of the world and human destiny. The emphasis on the description of its constraining rules of life, its public conduct, its code of moral values, its educational principles, its sense of honour, its alimentary and sexual regimen, its spiritual exercises, its convictions and beliefs, etc.—in brief, its 'ethics of interiority'—leads us to a level that we are now familiar with, because it reminds us of the recipes and techniques perfected by the ancient wisdoms.²²

The austere regimen of Puritan life described by Weber clearly corresponds to a level of preoccupations that Bourdieu's work ignores. Such attention to the observation of interior 'movements,' the permanent vigilance that this supposes, and the type of meticulously regulated life that comes from them seem odd in the type of sociological explanations proposed by Bourdieu. What good is this refined introspection, this luxury of details and subtleties, these trying efforts, these disciplined requirements, or these renunciations of pleasures if the final goal is nothing but the singularization of one social habitus among others? Would not any other means that is more efficacious and brutal, or, if one prefers, less painful and weighty, be better? Further, if these new dispositions and capacities could favour 'the development of a "lifestyle" appropriate for the burgeoning capitalism of the modern era',²³ they were neither the exclusive cause nor the principle one, as

²⁰ *Sociologie des religions*, p. 142.

²¹ See note 12 p. 26 and the corresponding paragraph.

²² Thus outside of the Stoic renewal of the classical period; see note 64 p. 142.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

Weber unceasingly reminded us, in contrast to all those that wanted to make him endorse a rustic and mechanical causality. Instead, the presence of these requiring ethics that engaged the entire life of those who submitted to them, manifests, beyond the obvious sociological causes (social status, relationships of domination and prestige, group identity, and homogeneity), and more fundamental than them, that other causes intervene that either orient the means that they use to other ends, or add others to them. Conformed to the Proustian principle of 'multiple ends', the rigorous ethics of the Puritan entrepreneur could at once²⁴ inspire an original lifestyle, considered superior to other social categories by its followers, and favour the development of a new kind of economic rationality, while forming and reinforcing the interior personality of the entrepreneur in question.

THE SPECIFICITY OF CULTURAL CREATIONS

The subtle example of sociology that allows us to meditate Weber's work meets up with a distinction that has served as a counterpoint throughout this work, and that Le Breton still draws attention to in order to show that, in our period, the two social and cultural domains no longer develop with the same rhythm. Social changes are far more rapid than cultural transformations.²⁵

Another consideration is more important here for the moment, regarding less their different evolutions than their mutual relationships. Although collective, like every human creation, the world that comes from and is formed by culture surpasses social organization *stricto sensu*, simply because it comes from other problems and it responds to a larger number of, often vital, questions. These are, in particular, those posed to individuals by their daily life, their destiny, their own nature, their always too short existence, and by their uncertain condition in a overly brutal world. These are questions that 'restricted' sociologists deliberately ignore, something that does not stop them from claiming to speak (in the name) of humanity, as if they could grasp its entirety or what is essential to it.²⁶ Adversity, death, the meaning of

²⁴ *Sociologie des religions*, pp. 148 and 155.

²⁵ Le Breton, *Anthropologie du corps*, pp. 14–15.

²⁶ An expanded definition of the universe that integrates all the elements of the cultural domain, while conserving their specificity, is obviously conceivable, but this

life, the fragility of the 'I', the enigma of descendancy, incurable pain, evils of misfortune, catastrophes with irreversible consequences, and so many other things that are just as objective raise critical questions that cultures were unsatisfied to respond to with myths or hardy speculations. They also sought to form and educate individuals to permit them to confront the corresponding trials. They undoubtedly found, and continue to manifest at each occasion, their most certain vocation therein.

Cultural creations, from the common education of composure to the most elevated spiritual exercises, obviously respond to other necessities and finalities than those required by the unequal division of wealth. These, including the trials of initiation that are dear to Mauss, the ascetics of yoga, Stoic or Puritan ethos, Christian spirituality, and Buddhist wisdom, were not born only from the worry of the dominant class of their epoch to protect their birthrights. No sociological hypothesis has ever managed to justify their genesis or existence, as if these creations largely escape the only type of determinism that this type of explanation can think of. An identical conclusion is necessary when one considers literary fictions, mythical and artistic creations, symbolic networks, bold philosophical speculations, the recipes of wisdom, and the countless forms of ritualization. Should not their importance in the life of the individual, their universality, and their obstinacy of continual reforming impel us to grant them a central place in the development of any anthropological research occupied with expressing humanity as faithfully as possible? For a number of sociologists, anthropologists, and historians, the cultural paradigm, however, tends to translate or sublimate only those traits that come from organization in hierarchized or antagonistic classes. This fairly frustrated sociology throws cultural creations on the *habitus* insofar as it 'apprehends the differences of condition, which it grasps in the form of differences between classed and classing practices... according to principles of differentiation that, being themselves the product of these differences, are objectively granted to them, and thus tend to be perceived as natural'.²⁷ In doing this, it forgets that some of these

would require the sociologies that are oriented almost exclusively by the study of differences, gaps, and hierarchies to renounce the metaphysical principle that guides them, i.e. that everything eminently human is necessarily subject to this social logic alone! Nothing permits us to think that such a revolution is near.

²⁷ Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, p. 192.

creations (rules of life or lifestyles, ethics, religious 'beliefs', techniques of the body or soul, spiritual exercises, educational principles, psychomental principles, etc.) do something else that is infinitely more invaluable, and responds to the questions people ask regarding their own social condition compared to those of their peers. In brief, they go beyond the question of the literal sense that one should attribute to the distinctions that follow from them.

THE WISDOM OF CULTURES

If cultural creations have finalities other than the simple preservation of social inequalities, this is true in particular because most of them actively participate in the constitution of individual consciousnesses, that is, in the construction of personalities that are capable of confronting the world and life. These personalities, that individuals would like to recognize as only a flattering reflection of their innate talents and original abilities, owe much, if not their essential aspects, to the rigorous 'moral'²⁸ education that they have received: the clear awareness of self, composure before danger, courage before fear or misfortune, resistance to suffering, mastery of sensibilities and emotions, moral rectitude, loyalty, strength of character, honesty, the sense of honour or that of responsibility, deep-seated virtues,²⁹ etc., are as many architectonic traits that define (that is, 'organize') our interior personal 'character' and ethos, and which, because of this, are the result of a slow process of incorporation and internalization whose initial elements are found in the cultures that conceived of and actualized them.

Each of them also authors its instructions from these relevant elements, which are grouped in anthologies known from the oldest antiquity (Egyptian, Akkadian, etc.), that is, from the earliest origins of writing. They likewise conceive their heroic figures and idealized images (the Roman citizen, the Christian knight, the Confucian wise man, the Calvinist Puritan, the militant communist, the Cornelian hero,

²⁸ Although still too imprecise, this adjective is nonetheless used to show that one should certainly not confuse this type of integral and highly coercive education with simple scholastic education! See Malinowski, *Une théorie scientifique*, pp. 109–111.

²⁹ '*Virtutes continentiae, gravitatis, justitiae*', Cicero said in his *Pro L. Murena* 23. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 153–5, for the role of generosity in the Cartesian ethics of honour.

the revolutionary officer, the Franciscan sister,³⁰ or even Indiana Jones and Michel Vaillant...) that they propose as a model (for example, in novels and myths) and which, through the methods of education they have defined, they attempt to 'embody'.³¹ In order for this Promethean task, this great discipline, this long 'moral' education of humanity to succeed, each culture has always been required to constitute itself as a 'world'. This is a necessary condition. Although this proposition risks being surprising on first sight, since it seems so far from its objective, this is undoubtedly the best definition that one can give it. As an original and perfected creation, every culture is by and for itself the best, if not the only, possible world. In this sense, every culture culminates in the establishment of an original *cosmographic formation* that has a strict organization.³² It is only by the existence of the latter that, for example, the idea of limit takes form and is extended: within is what is conformed, licit, permitted, recommended, and 'normal'; beyond is what is not. This idea is indispensable, even essential to every organized life, whether it is collective or interior. Through it, the rule and the norm become vital creations, and at the same time lose their contingent or arbitrary aspects. The rule, 'conformed to' and 'inserted into' a certain conception of the world, is not only precious for the group, because the dispositions that respect for it implies enter (should enter!), through education, into the formation and reinforcement of every interior life. Once again, the mastery of affections (mood, sensibility, emotions) appears to be one of the principal goals.

Through this large 'cosmographic' detour, every culture offers every individual whom it 'forms' and educates an arsenal of efficacious means to protect him- or herself while conserving the culture as

³⁰ One should note that all of them are characterized by a sharp awareness of their state and of its value. This awareness can only be a determining element of their robust personality.

³¹ This expression should be taken literally here, because this body also becomes Catholic, Buddhist, or Stoic.

³² It is the presence of this superior end that is alone able to give meaning and coherence to the famous, but parataxic, definition of culture proposed by E. B. Tylor around 1871 ('that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, *art*, morals, *law*, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society') in *Primitive Culture* (London: Murray, 1920 [1871]), p. 1.

For the moment, we will leave aside the difficult question on the connections between neighbouring or shared 'worlds'. It nevertheless seems undebatable that the observable rules of subsumption permit numerous 'enclosures', thus allowing, e.g. the insertion of any restricted or local universe into a larger cosmic vision.

well. In a highly schematic manner, one can distinguish three levels that follow each other and fit together, while recognizing that each of them presupposes the existence of the other two. Like a fractal, level 1, although more inclusive and impersonal, should be able to adjust to every element of the most intimate level, 3, which concerns the individual's interior formation.

First of all, thanks to the inevitable and indispensable cosmographic discourses that every culture formulates, the world that we live in is endowed with an origin, a history, a topography, laws, archetypes, models, principles, etc. In doing this, they express humanity's place, even though it is uncomfortable and undesirable. Misfortune, suffering, and death themselves are in fact explained therein. Every existence, even the most mundane or burdened, becomes capable of recognizing and stating its place in the universe. This is an inestimable cognitive benefit, because the most unbearable aspects of our reality will thus be described and elucidated. By intertwining the threads of one's own biography to the narration of biblical history (Genesis, Incarnation, Last Judgement) Christians, for example, are capable of inserting and weaving their own existence into it.

On a more 'familiar' level, 'coordinated' with the last, all the objective references (name, affiliation, status, functions, powers, consecrated gestures, rituals, regular activities and occupations, relations,³³ obligations, customs, habits³⁴...) are added, which, while defining a certain 'form of life' (Wittgenstein), permanently reaffirm our identity, continually remind us of our position and situation, and allow us to always be recognizable, as long as we do not leave our 'world'. The complex group of elements that are intertwined, interwoven, and interlaced with each other (which allows them to acquire a resistant texture) where personal history, cultural and intellectual aspects, and collective and social references mix together, guarantees each person's *ipseity*—the fact that each of us is a self-aware reality. Contrary to what we may be tempted to think, this result is not self-fulfilling. It presupposes the permanent collaboration of all the elements that compose our daily existence. Only a 'world' that has been developed for this purpose is capable of attaining it.

³³ In the sense understood by Norbert Elias, *La Société des individus* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), pp. 59–65 in particular.

³⁴ On the 'intelligible and familiar character of daily events', see Le Breton's correct remarks, *Anthropologie du corps*, pp. 94–5.

To finish, we find the mammoth synthesis of 'internalizable' elements ('moral' formation, common norms,³⁵ values, beliefs, attitudes, self-maintenance, corporeal and mental *hexis*, lifestyle, rules of conduct, ideals³⁶...) that enter and are interlaced through the education of daily life in the organization of every efficacious and well-constructed ethos. These elements are clearly conformed to the principles and lessons that inspire the global discourses of level 1. Likewise, when fittingly assimilated, they extend and reinforce the self-awareness whose identity was confirmed by the preceding stage. Thus, the devout person understood by Saint Francis de Sales ideally possesses a 'Christian' self-awareness and morals, an identity that is largely formed by the 'Christian' society that surrounds him or her, and a 'Christian' ideal and style of life—that is, a 'Christian' ethos that pushes him or her to act and behave 'Christianly' in a world conceived according to the conceptions of 'Christian' cosmology. This general system, which is saturated by homologies and cultural connections that tie the interior microcosm to the divine macrocosm, fairly well exemplifies what we mean by 'world' or *cosmographic formation*. It is in the union of such worlds that individuals live or attempt to live. Often, to blame only the constraints that arise from it, we wind up no longer recognizing the inestimable benefits that we receive from this. The same remark applies to the principles of education. It would be unjust to only retain their coercive aspects in order to condemn them. They are indispensable, as are all of those that characterize a 'lifestyle' dedicated to the discipline of the unstable and ingrained elements that make up mental life. The great, infinitely subtle art of the pedagogue, like that of the wise person, consists in finding the correct measure or the happy medium between excessive severity and lack of rigour.

This subtle alchemy forms a group that represents the best part of individuals themselves. Their 'I' does not pre-exist this original synthesis; perhaps it does not even have *in nucleo* the specialized mental or psychic dispositions that would develop to reach this result and it

³⁵ They also dispense from the fastidious and even exhausting intellectual labour that would consist in (re)thinking every new experienced or expected situation. In this sense, they suppress countless interrogations, aporias, dilemmas, and unsolvable perplexities.

³⁶ Every individual who is excluded or rejected from the 'world' made of the interlacing of these elements finds that his or her own personality deteriorates rapidly. This world is not a framework or environment in which pre-existing individual entities that are constituted elsewhere evolve.

alone. For this result owes much more to the tremendous and impressive work of education that permitted the 'T's formation, to the exclusion of all other possibilities. Every culture is first of all concerned by its own educational principles, and cannot survive without their help. On this point, one can rightly think that there is a precious opportunity in the malleable, unformed material that is offered to culture, which takes hold to model it. We are not born endowed with a particular predisposition (for asceticism, composure, courage, or the sense of honour). The evidence shows that the respective education models and develops it in us. Once we have acquired it, it is clearly impossible for us to turn back to find this original plasticity in ourselves. At any rate, if there were any dispositions, they would only exist in the state of unformed sketches or very general capacities—and not as precisely defined characteristics.

Additionally, this process of education and formation does not only develop in time, but in our very lives, so to speak. Thanks to this dynamism, the process transforms our unpredictable and contingent paths into a reassuring organization.³⁷ The last remark should not be taken as a trivial observation. The synthesis that results from it is neither mechanical nor easy to attain. It is not a simple mechanical process, because it develops from malleable and fragile psychic elements that are themselves exposed to numerous dangers throughout the course of an existence. It is not easy to attain either, because it supposes an uninterrupted series of lucid and voluntary efforts designed to permanently integrate and adjust the countless elements, 'the things that life is made of', that unexpectedly arise.

To recognize oneself in everything that one accomplishes, that one sees, or that one feels, to have an unmovable bearing in face of adversity, to act with constancy and composure, or to accept misfortune without reacting and death without trembling are capacities that presuppose, beyond much tenacity and some success, a maturely reflected and mastered way of life. Quite often, refusal, discouragement, various forms of addiction, even suicide, as well as the anaesthetizing abandon to perfect conformity are the resigned and disappointing responses to these various challenges. We should not forget, to be complete, that

³⁷ We should not forget that, through the reasonable use of the significant capacities of the *textual function*, (see note 13 p. 27 and the corresponding paragraph), each of us also has the possibility of gathering the scattered and successive elements of our existence in order to retrospectively compose our own history.

cultures are, as every human creation, incomplete and imperfect organisms that are permanently menaced by human violence and passions. The effort to rehabilitate them by justly attributing to them everything they create and continue to accomplish should not blind us or lead us into a naive idealism. The principles that they defend are also relative, because they only have meaning and flourish in the world that they found! All of them have aspects that, when considered from the parapet of another world, will seem absurd, excessive, or unjust.

It remains that the harmonious modelling of individuals' bodies, their spirits, their sensibilities, their affections, their corporeal *hexis*, their imaginations, their beliefs, their desires, etc., in order to make a Buddhist monk, a Hindu Brahman,³⁸ a Jansenist, a liberal Lutheran, a solid communist militant, a virtuous citizen, or a Stoic wise man, nonetheless represents a prodigious transformation that one must attribute to the corresponding culture. Could one imagine greater or higher anthropological ambitions? To achieve this, there are initially disparate elements (norms, rules, lifestyles, ideals, alimentary and sexual regimens, value systems, etc.) that cultures must assemble and harmonize into a whole that is fairly consistent, and will serve as armour for a human personality, which will then be capable of confronting the trials of life and mastering the 'movements' that our own tradition attributes to the triad of soul, body, and spirit (*anima, corpus, spiritus*).³⁹

³⁸ This theme has been treated in our *Anthropologie poétique*, pp. 109–18, where the impressive cosmological work accomplished by the Brahmanic corpus was accentuated. The Sanskrit treatises titled *Dharmaśāstra* also describe, with an unheard of richness of detail and meticulousness, the countless obligations to which the Brahmins are submitted. No occasion or situation is neglected, as if these treatises feared more than anything to leave a 'void'. But are not our own existences just as perfectly occupied and filled up? One can refer in this regard to the amusing but poignant remark of Jean Pouillon, *Le Cru et le su* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), pp. 80–1, about the 'tremendous burden of custom' (A. M. Hocart) that weighs on the shoulders of Western individuals.

³⁹ See Jean-Claude Schmitt, 'Le corps en chrétienté', in Godelier and Panoff, *La Production du corps*, p. 342. Among these causes of troubles, desire invariably holds to primary place. Undoubtedly, in envisaging individuals and the essential characteristics of their nature, this is what would come out of all the texts that we could examine—just as popular, Buddhist, Stoic, and Christian wisdoms are unanimous on this point. It is a tumultuous, insatiable force, they untiringly repeat. Desire feeds the passions, leads the spirit astray, elicits faults, obsessions, fantasies, setbacks, and bitterness. As soon as it arises, it swells, becomes blown up, and recognizes nothing in the world other than its own (and provisory) coveted object. As soon as it has attained it, grasped it, and tasted it; fullness and boredom arise, waiting for another to come and seduce it. All the wisdoms have seen the surest obstacle to interior serenity and

The rigorous methods and principles of education (of the will, composure, courage...) that cultures have developed first of all demonstrate that they became aware quite early on of this unstable and vulnerable nature in humanity. They then prove that these same cultures demonstrated wisdom, a profound and indispensable wisdom, by seeking practical means that would allow a person to remain upright in the heart of this tumultuous flood. One cannot be blamed if one theorizes that it is from this that they began to exist.

This attitude, we have said, is inspired from the lucid observation that leaves no place for dreams and illusions. They untiringly repeat that life is difficult, that misfortune 'follows our steps'. The human body is menaced by thousands of pains and old age, where death runs in and lies in wait. Waiting for this, incertitude often oppresses us and leads us astray. Have not the dramas and misfortunes that risk striking us already returned? No refuge will ever offer us a sure and indestructible shelter. To these exterior perils, one can add all those that our feeble constitutions cause to arise in us (passions, folly, asthenia, immoderation, anxieties...). Cultures drew their principal teachings from this implacable observation. We still witness today to these principles of wisdom that are inscribed in our education in its irreplaceable and admirable popular sayings⁴⁰ such as 'hold yourself upright', 'don't listen to yourself', 'don't complain to yourself', 'patiently endure your evils', 'content yourself with what you have', 'take on yourself', 'live with simplicity', etc. Like their prestigious precursors, they are based on a heroic understanding of endurance and courage, even if it is also possible to hear the poignant side of fatalism and resignation ('Why bother!' 'That's life!' 'You can't be and have been!' 'To each day its evil!' 'Everything ends!' 'One can't do anything!' 'Too bad!' 'It's my time!').

harmony in it. Uncaring before the ravages it can provoke, its bulimia endlessly menaces the equilibrium that the individual never attains for more than a short moment of rest. Before its excesses, the will and lucid judgement usually only raise up pitiful resistance. And yet desire is only one of the many sources of trouble and instability that menace humanity!

⁴⁰ See Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d'être soi*, pp. 143–4 and their distant biblical precedents, Proverbs and the Book of Wisdom.

SPIRITUAL TECHNIQUES AND EXERCISES

On the basis of this implacable observation and the no less lucid conception of human fragility, the wisdoms of the virtuosos, as one could be tempted to call them in honour of Weber (doctors of the human condition such as Buddha was, and as numerous savage physicians, 'sorcerers' and 'magicians', ancient philosophers—Pythagoreans, Epicureans, Stoics—, spiritual directors of the classical era, etc. undoubtedly were), were constructed. Like the simple popular wisdoms that were just mentioned, their conceptions of the individual and of human existence only cultivate a highly measured optimism. In their eyes, humanity remains trapped in a difficult, painful situation that risks deterioration or exacerbation at any moment. They would further add that the brevity of human life makes happiness and its search unsatisfying. Like their most ordinary cadets, the great wisdoms placed their primary accentuation on education, that is, on the transformation of the personality, and particularly on the growth of its physical resistance and its moral strength. In brief, they developed its capacities of endurance. In order to reach this, they mobilized all the resources of the will and the good that is called 'strength' of character.

The divergences follow later, from the moment that the techniques established by the virtuosos became more systematic, more specialized, and more in depth—engaging one's entire life. The Buddhist monk, the Stoic wise man, and the Salesian religious aim to subordinate all the aspects of their existence to this ideal of wisdom.

CHRISTIAN WISDOM AND PAGAN WISDOMS

Compared to the teachings that one finds with these virtuosos, those Christian spirituality of the classical era retained and developed seem to be inspired from the same principles and wind up with the same techniques. Here and there one finds, as we saw, comparable stages within a program of life that is just as global and rigorous, which can be schematically presented as:

- Categorical resolutions that mark the rupture with previous life and entry into a new existence.
- Renunciation to pleasures, well-being, egotistical cares, distractions of worldly life, and the choice of a frugal one.

- In all circumstances, a decisive preference is granted to retreat and silence, while worldly life always appears as a source of temptation and corruption.
- Daily exercises designed to affirm the personality and to allow it to acquire a mastery of itself that is as perfect as possible. For this, in a somewhat abridged form, one can distinguish:
 - Discipline of the body and senses, principally designed to ‘quell the flesh’, which no school doubts is at the origin of most of our troubles. Desire, passions, and imaginations are the most frequent and best known manifestations.
 - Discipline of heart and character. Through the practice of a perfect vigilance and will, this is called to make the personality firm and unshakable.
 - Discipline of the spirit, through tested mental techniques (concentration, meditation, consideration, and contemplation), aims to calm the self and bring it tranquillity and quiet. Indirectly, this interior (mental and affective) homoeostasis strengthens lucidity and favours the indispensable equilibrium of vision.

The spiritual exercises and the ‘techniques of the soul’ that are proposed by the great mystics and spiritual directors resemble those encountered in the ancient Western and Oriental wisdoms in too many points to not tempt one to recognize a common inspiration and an identical finality in them. In this, Christian wisdom, pagan wisdoms, and Buddhist wisdom—as examples—are comparable. They all place humanity’s unstable and vulnerable nature at the centre of their preoccupations and programs.

The presence of these traits that are common to pagan wisdoms and Christian spirituality should not be surprising. The latter clearly rediscovered (or borrowed) the recipes and techniques that had been part of the treasure that humanity had patiently accumulated throughout its history for a long time. The nature of the human condition had undoubtedly hardly changed during the last few millennia. Is it not predictable that those who sought means to bring relief to it discovered everywhere roughly the same principles and techniques?

The differences should be no more surprising. Certain traits that are proper to the ideology that Christianity developed (the value of suffering and mortification, affirmation of humanity’s unlimited culpability, the importance of salvation and eternal life, the annihilation of the

individual before the omnipotent divinity) in the end could not but deviate from the teachings of traditional wisdoms.

This is why we have treated Christian spirituality here while placing the finalities usually tied to its mythology (redemption, immortality of the soul, union with God, etc.) in the background, to retain only the 'techniques' that it employed, which have meaning mainly when one considers their efficacy in and for this world. The word 'techniques' was chosen to show that what is important regards the work individuals can attempt on themselves, and particularly on the tumult of their interior life. One finds that the works of spirituality, spiritual direction, and, to a lesser degree, the great mystical texts,⁴¹ can *also* be read as guides that aim to orient believers in the knowledge and mastery of their interior life. These guides, which transmit the teaching of the Church, obviously subordinated the exercises that they prescribed to the obtaining of salvation in the hereafter. In doing this, however, they offered an original solution to the problem here below that was presented in depth in the first part of this work. It undoubtedly is even *the* solution that was patiently elaborated by Christian culture, when confronted, as all of those like it, with the individual's challenge raised by the existence of this unstable and fragile interior life within him- or herself. This is why one can unsurprisingly find a group of prescriptions in these texts that most often, in their principles and fundamental objectives, have almost no specifically Christian characteristics. Most of them can be situated within the triad of: toughen the body, discipline the spirit, and 'fortify the heart' (Saint Francis de Sales). Having said this, as soon as they were reflected on and reworked within the context of Christian theology and anthropology, these prescriptions undoubtedly acquired further particularities whose specific influence cannot always be easily evaluated: In what is the chastity demanded of the Salesian believer (to what point is it? In what sense is it? At what level is it?) comparable to that advocated by Stoic philosophers? Above all, in what does it fundamentally distinguish itself in terms

⁴¹ Their ultimate finality, the union of the soul with God, is situated beyond the usual objectives of wisdoms (ataraxy and self-control) in the sense that it aims for divestment that leads to a total self-effacement. On this point, the mystical path is close to that one finds in the final stages of yoga. On the other hand, their preparatory exercises, their prolegomena (renunciation, isolation, meditation, and concentration) are inspired from the same principles as the wisdoms.

of its psychological effects? While presenting them, one must always remember this enigmatic part they contain, because it comes from a series of specific interior experiences that undoubtedly had countless fine and subtle aspects.

Despite this last difficulty (which mainly interests the comparatist who seeks difficult questions), the properly Christian mythological clothing that covers these spiritual techniques cannot stop them from revealing that their primary vocation is on the human side. The art of living that they defined remains subordinated to the search of an ever more refined consciousness of what it is itself, of what it feels, and of what it should do. It allows individuals who adopt it or are inspired by it to acquire a better state, or at least to hope that they will do so.

The expression of 'art of living' will make some readers laugh, as this art seems so austere and daunting in our eyes. The use of this expression does not mean that it is an exclusive means, nor that it would be pertinent or possible today to recommend it to our contemporaries, although it will be interesting to compare this 'art' to contemporary remedies (psychotherapies, use of the pharmacopeia of psychotropics).⁴² More modestly, we should consider this art of living as a courageous and even heroic attempt to resolve the inevitable problem that every culture must confront. In this light it merits, if not our deference, at least that we should study it with the highest attention. For this, one should use an original approach and method for it and those like it that can be summarized in the expression: 'explanation through wisdom'. Before examining it and manifesting its principal characteristics, let us recall the reasons that would once again⁴³ make any 'explanation by religion' unsuited and unsatisfying.

⁴² This is what we will do in the conclusion, titled 'The Forgetting of Wisdom'.

⁴³ For what follows, one can find important complimentary developments in our *The Western Construction of Religion*.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

METAPHYSICS AND RELIGIONS

It is hardly necessary to specify that the texts (the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine, *The Imitation of Christ*, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola...) that we cited in the second part of this work and from which we borrowed numerous quotes are, from our perspective, that is, from the perspective of everyone raised in a country with Christian culture, 'religious' texts. They even belong to the prestigious category that includes the masterpieces of Western mysticism and spirituality. For this reason they are considerably respected, something that means that they are undoubtedly not read and meditated upon as much as they merit.

It is precisely to the attribution of this conventional and so familiar epithet that we would like to return, because, according to us, not only does it not explain much, but it contributes to confine reflection to a perspective whose terms do not have any true meaning outside of the history of Western culture.

As any assertion that ultimately reposes on a tautology (every phenomenon or object that a 'religious' approach considers 'religious' is 'religious!'), that is, that characterizes a thing by what should be first defined, this one fundamentally plays on our most ingrained prejudices: each person believes to know, at least intuitively, what a 'religious' reality is, because, for us, the religion *par excellence*, Christianity, is at once something familiar and the central framework of our own culture, the one that intellectually formed us. Thus one rarely seeks to precisely specify what this adjective ultimately designates, whether this attribution is universally pertinent, or if another generic term would have a more precise or larger explanatory value here or there.

Confronted with the particular case before us, that of so-called 'religious' texts, we easily abandon ourselves to the common or most widely shared belief: because everyone says it, and we find the best educated among this 'everyone', we spontaneously consider that this epithet is true. Intellectually speaking, it is quite difficult to transform this fundamental proximity, which is constitutive of ourselves, in order to consider the objects it regards from another point of view.

These familiar objects ('religious' texts) are not at all strange in our eyes, although this immediately strikes us when we look at objects that come from elsewhere. 'Religious texts' (it matters little whether we are atheists¹ or believers) are a familiar curio for us that *naturally* has its place on the shelves of our 'world'. If, for example, a Chinese person said to us (in his or her language that we would have learned for the occasion): 'It would be better if these texts that you call "religious" were included in the genre of books of magic, imaginary speculations, or metaphysical novels', we would undoubtedly conclude that this Chinese person is an ignorant and insolent person.

Outside of its role of conventional label, what does the use of the adjective 'religious' teach us of a text, of its history, of its semiotic and linguistic structure, of its outstanding value, of the nature of its knowledge, of its possible functions, or of its uses? Nothing or little, because the attribution of this epithet is a definition and even a transfiguration here. It raises the cultural object (a text) to transform it into a 'religious' object, which takes it from the ordinary realm of trivial objects that science can study without any particular precautions, that is, without epistemological gloves or forceps.

If the adjective 'religious' can at least allow us to class a certain number of familiar objects or facts within a conventional group, but is nonetheless incapable, by itself, of enlightening us on the nature of their constitutive elements, their laws of composition, or to explicate their precise functions, this is because it does not entail any particular analytical or critical program. When science solemnly declares that this or that fact or object is 'religious', while implicitly borrowing its notions from the Christian conception of 'religious', it does not avoid the tautology mentioned above at all either. This is another way of reminding people that the term 'religion' and the idea that corresponds to it are a creation within the Christian 'religion', and not the result of comparative anthropological research. This creation preceded the birth of the human sciences by numerous centuries. Therefore, where Christian culture and, with it, *doxa* say: 'This text is a religious text', the historian and ethnologist must respond that 'religious' is an indigenous term that designates, within the culture in question, what it considers as 'religious' in conformity with its dogmas, that is, at

¹ 'Western' atheisms deny the existence of god(s), and not that of humanity's religious aspirations!

the end of a perfectly circular and closed autofoundation. This term then has a full designatory value only there, in this precise context. Outside this case, it has a weak heuristic value, not to speak of the numerous misunderstandings that it elicits or perpetuates. It does not, for example, introduce any distance—critical or otherwise—between the object it designates and what it means itself. On the contrary, it crushes this distance in order, it seems, to suspend any care for investigation. To affirm that a text or event is ‘religious’ is to propose a pseudo-description, which undoubtedly calms our aversion or anxiety before any human fact that would be unthinkable, because different or monstrous (this is how we understand cannibalism when we attribute the term ‘religious’ to it, for example, in a sacrifice, while it appears bestial and inhumane anywhere else), but that tells us *nothing other or more precisely* than what Christian tradition understands by this term. By taking it up in turn, science forbids itself to think more or better than what Christian theology and common sense, influenced by it, have been able to say before it. At the most, it has been able to attribute trivial causes or functions to religion (for example, sociological or psychological ones); something which, paradoxically, contributed to providing it with a further precautionary aspect: if what is ‘religious’ depends on immanent causes, as Marxist and Freudian thought affirm, it means that it exists at least in this way. If it exists for this reason, nothing stops us from thinking that it also exists in a superior form that eludes these reductionist explanations. Thus, materialist and atheist explanations, which are involved in their antireligious polemics, often provide a great thurifying service to the existence of an atemporal *homo religiosus*.

To attempt to understand this paradox (how did an indigenous cultural notion manage to acquire the status of an anthropological object, and, in the wake of the modern history of religions, a universal descriptive, if not explanatory, value?), one must repeat that the notion of ‘religion’ is an original creation of Christianity. There is nowhere, in any civilization, a corresponding or even similar concept. Neither the Chinese, nor the oldest Indo-Europeans,² nor even the Greeks had, in their language, a synonymous or even periphrastic term to designate the same level of phenomena (when the word ‘religion’ appears in a

² See Émile Benveniste, *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, (Paris: Minuit, 1969), vol. II, pp. 265–6.

translation of the New Testament, it should not fool us, because it is only the abusive translation of two Greek terms that mean 'piety' and 'cult' respectively). If the notion or idea did not exist in these 'pagan' cultures, it is because the thing probably did not in fact exist: how could a domain of human activity that is *separate* and *distinct* from others according to the requirements that are continually reaffirmed by the Christian conception, escape the attention of its contemporaries to the point of remaining unperceived? On the contrary, if the 'religious', instead of representing a distinct domain, was omnipresent and diffuse, according to what criterion or criteria is it still specifically 'religious'? Will one say, would someone still dare to say today, that the 'religious' is only fully itself in the case of Christianity? That everywhere else it is only sketched out or corrupted? On the level of similar ideas, one can note that the existence of a common 'religious' substrate to paganism and early Christianity, did not strike the vigilant witnesses who were contemporary to this important event.

This highly specialized sense given by Christians of the Latin language to the word *religio*³ could have remained a lexical singularity as one finds in every civilization—a cultural *hapax* (like *dharma* in Sanskrit or *tao* in Chinese) that the erudite and philologists would have enjoyed dissecting. It, however, had an incomparable destiny with almost no equivalents in all of human history. This is first of all because it accompanied Christianity's exceptional rise and spread, which for many centuries, was expressed in Latin. Its fortune followed that of Christianity, which was considerable, and could even be identified to it. It is then because the almost complete evangelization of Europe in the first millennium and the later evangelization of the newly discovered worlds were contemporary with military and economic conquests by those who professed the same faith. Christian religion finally became, beginning in the sixteenth century, the privilege of the most entrepreneurial and conquering nations. At the dawn of the twentieth century, dominating most of the world, they could imagine that they would succeed in imposing their faith and laws everywhere. Finally, because this faith considered itself to be the only true one,⁴

³ Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, X, 1, still reproaches the 'civic' meaning of this word, because it meant, in the mouth of the cultivated Romans of his time, something like piety or filial respect.

⁴ 'No religion other than ours ever taught that man is born in sin, no philosophical sect ever said it—thus none of them ever spoke the truth. No sect or religion has

it could only propagate this universal, *catholic* vocation that began in the Letter to the Romans ('[to preach]...the obedience of faith among *all* the nations') by being dogmatic and intolerant.

One of the most interesting consequences, from our perspective, of this long history and tendentious movement can be found in the fact that this idea of 'religion', after having a central role in Christian anthropology and theology, unanimously finds a central place in scientific anthropology, that is, in the general conception of humanity that the European sciences began to formulate in the second half of the nineteenth century (Müller, Morgan, Tylor, Lang, Durkheim, etc.), that is, in the period when the intellectual, military, and economic hegemony of the West appeared to be unrivalled. One of the key concepts of Christian culture became one of the key concepts of the newly formed sciences. Its secularization, or its transfer from theology to science, did not question its pretensions of occupying a fully central position in all anthropological discourse. For science, as for theology, humanity was 'religious', no matter what judgement one made elsewhere on the signification of the corresponding facts.

With completely good intentions, Durkheim could write in 1912, with either ingenuity or presumption:

If we have taken [archaic religion] as the object of our research, it is because it appeared more fitting than any other to help understand man's religious nature, i.e., to reveal an essential and permanent aspect of humanity to us.⁵

Despite Durkheim's confident tone, the incapacity of modern thinkers to agree on a heuristic definition of the word 'religious', on the specific form (structure, system, aggregate, assembly...) that 'a' religion must take to merit this name, on the signification of meaning of its exterior limits, on the ultimate nature of religious facts, on an enumeration of their proper character or, even more generally, on the identification

always been on the earth other than the Christian religion' (Pascal, *Pensées* [Paris: Cerf, 1982], 806). Claiming to represent the only authentic or true 'religion', Christianity could not, and undoubtedly never will be able to understand that its conception of 'religion' is not universally and eternally valid.

⁵ Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, 7th ed. (Paris: PUF, 1985), p. 2. In what way could the expressions of 'man's religious nature' and 'essential and permanent aspect of humanity' have annoyed (and could still annoy today) the most intransigent theologians? See notes 9 p. 211 and 11 p. 215.

of the necessary ingredients⁶ that should be at the base of all the phenomena that these same thinkers nonetheless call 'religious' is an obvious fact today.⁷

One thus rarely takes into account the hypothesis by which the 'religious' would only be an epithet that designates phenomena without any radical originality⁸ or that there could be different forms of the 'religious' that are profoundly different from each other, and that would not include any atemporal essence of 'religion'. This polymorphism is incompatible with a tenacious and unconscious prejudice that tacitly admits that humanity can only have, *in nucleo*, one determining religious function (or aspiration). We observe here what is undoubtedly one of the most curious epistemological inheritances from theological monotheism in the functioning of modern science. We can offer two very simple examples to support this remark. There were various forms of cult in Rome (imperial, civic, private) and different practices that by themselves should merit that one question the idea of a unique and homogeneous 'religious' aspect. Further, always in Rome, where were the limits between 'religion', 'magic', and 'astrology'? On what epistemological principles and what universal principles would one base oneself to delineate these limits? The rather banal case of Rome is, however, only one of the numerous individual examples one could cite to show how we place highly disparate facts under the labels of

⁶ And what would be their ultimate nature: substantial, material, structural, semiotic, or functional element(s)? Would a strictly structural conception of religion, like, e.g. the Lévi-Straussian conception of myth, be easy to receive? What would it mean on the ontological level for theologians and metaphysicians? Further, one could agree (something highly improbable) on the nature of this or these ultimate element(s), without solving the problem of the localization of the (biological, psychological, sociological, supernatural...) realization where the initial departure took place (or that produced it).

⁷ Is not the embarrassment of contemporary theologians before this recognized contradiction (there are numerous occurrences in the personal contributions of Pierre Gisel and Jean-Marc Tétaz in Gisel and Tétaz, eds., *Théories de la religion*) revealing in itself? We should add that the attempt to justify the anthropological pertinence of the concept of religion on the basis of citations from philosophical works that are themselves influenced by Christian theology and the controversies it has elicited (Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel, Schelling, etc.), appears to be a project destined to failure in our eyes, because it is incapable of transcending its/our own indigenous prejudices.

⁸ 'To me as well undoubtedly, the domain of religious life appears to be a prodigious reservoir of representations that objective research is far from having exhausted. These are however representations like any others, and the spirit in which I approach the study of religious facts supposes that I refuse them any type of specificity' (Lévi-Strauss, *L'Homme nu*, p. 571).

'religion' and 'religious', facts that are difficult to correlate to identical cultural aspirations, configurations, and functions.

Can one (another hypothesis of the school that aims to prove the limited autonomy of scientific reflection in regard to Christian tradition) imagine a definition and/or explanations of religion that would be valid for all the cultural formations that we conventionally call 'religions' other than Christianity? Or can one imagine this definition or these explanations while *a priori* abstracting from the Christian example, that is, at the price of a completely remarkable intellectual effort? Or again, can one imagine that they would lead to the conclusion that the most pure or most authentic forms of the 'religious' are in fact found far from the West, that is, in certain forms of syncretism where the so-called magical-religious facts are inextricably intermixed (always from our European perspective)? These last three suggestions are not designed to be provocative, because, beyond their paradoxical formulation, they raise one of the most embarrassing questions posed to specialists of the human sciences: how should they orient themselves in order to conceive of universals that are not simply lightly retouched copies of our indigenous categories, and thus of our indigenous *a prioribus*?

Nonetheless, unlike Lévi-Strauss, many refuse to draw all the expected conclusions from this observation, and continue, unperturbed, to use the terms 'religion' and 'religious' as if they in fact designate a distinct order of homogeneous human facts which, due to this, even if indirectly and implicitly, reveals one of humanity's inalienable dimensions. In doing this, however, they once again blindly follow the dogmas of Christian anthropology that recognizes the human person as a fundamentally, that is, 'naturally', religious creature.⁹ There is also

⁹ 'For there was always a natural manifestation of the one almighty God among all right-thinking men; and most of them, who had not quite divested themselves of shame with respect to the truth, apprehended the eternal beneficence in divine providence.... Man is far from lacking of a divine idea—man who, it is written in Genesis, partook of inspiration, being endowed with a purer essence than other living beings. Thus the Pythagoreans say that mind comes to man by divine providence, as Plato and Aristotle state; but we assert that the Holy Spirit inspires him who has believed. The Platonists hold that mind is an effluence of divine dispensation in the soul, and they place the soul in the body' (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, V, 13, 87, 2–88.3). This text should be compared to this passage of Kant: 'It [polytheism] doubtless arose because human beings could not comprehend the apparent conflict of purposes in the world, the mixture of good and evil; so they assumed several beings as the cause of this conflict and assigned to each a special department. Nevertheless, in addition to these

a current of thought within the contemporary history of religions, the phenomenological one, that a priori admits that religious phenomena have a 'specific essence' (Wach), which is an affirmation that takes up one of the central dogmas of Christian revelation in a philosophical and abstract form! One can imagine what success the theses of a contemporary astrophysicist that were inspired from the principles of medieval astrology would have.

There are at least three reasons that allow us to explain this situation that is as curious as it is paradoxical.

In the period from when they merited the name, that is, for roughly a century and a half, the human sciences have never seriously considered sacrificing the claim to universality of a term that, because it was tied to the rise of Christianity since antiquity, should not, however, have appeared to them as anything but a singular historical creation, and not as a fundamental anthropological fact. In fact, if they have not done so, it is because Western culture as a whole is largely constituted around the Christian cultural realm, and these human sciences come, for a thousand reasons and in a thousand ways, from this culture. They belong to this same 'world'. In this case, it was almost inevitable, ethnocentrically inevitable, that European scholars defined humanity from the central aspects of their own cultural tradition, of which they were also the best educated and most fervent propagandists.¹⁰ They thus thought about the exotic or distant worlds that they encountered by using the categories that they already employed in their own world.

lower gods every heathen people has the thought of a special original source out of which they flowed. But they made this supreme principle in and for itself so blessed that it has nothing to do with the world. Examples of this are the Tibetans and other existing heathen peoples of inner Asia. And in fact they follow the course of human reason, which needs a thoroughgoing unity in its representation and cannot stop until it has reached the One which is higher than everything. Polytheism as such, not combined with a supreme original source, would be in conflict with common human understanding; for a common sense teaches monotheism by taking as its supreme principle a being which is all in all. Thus one should not think that the doctrine of one God needs to be built on a very advanced degree of human insight; rather it is a need of the most common reason. Hence the insight was universal even in the beginning. But because human beings subsequently perceived many kinds of destructive forces in the world, they did not believe that these forces along with the agreement and harmony in nature could be derived from God, so they assumed various lower gods to which they ascribed these particular effects' (*Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, in Allen W. Wood [ed.], *Religion and Rational Theology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], p. 380).

¹⁰ Developments corresponding to this thesis can be found in our *The Western Construction of Religion*, pp. 147–86.

'Religion' and 'religious' had the same evidence, in their eyes, as has every cultural category that has served as a pillar for a *cosmographic formation* that one has made one's own, and in which one lives. The explanations of the 'religious' that these scholars conceived were likewise often those that Western tradition had thought of to explain myths or cults for quite some time. In a very schematic manner, one can distinguish the 'political' explanations (Critias, Machiavelli, Marx), the 'psychological' explanations like those of Lucretius, and the 'metaphysical' explanations based on humanity's supposed 'religious' nature (Schleiermacher, Otto, van der Leeuw, Eliade). Thus, only the 'sociological' explanations (Durkheim, Mauss, Weber) are certainly original.

These schools of thought were all the more swift to adopt this concept of 'religion' that Christianity recognizes in humanity, as we have just recalled, as a sort of innate 'religious' disposition that it claims is universally valid. In this sense, it offered them an easy 'ready-made' solution, because it a priori disqualified a large number of embarrassing questions, which have in fact remained without response.

The second reason, although trivial, is no less decisive. If one recognized the imprecision or inadequacy of the word 'religion', one would not immediately see what other term to use to replace it. Since we have not sought for it, we do not have an obvious solution to substitute. Further, the lexical nomenclature and paradigms of the principal European languages, having been constituted during the period when Christian law dominated unchallenged, reflect its prejudices and mental categories. Thus contemporary English and French have only very meagre vocabularies, with the words *religion*, *magic*, *superstition*, and *sorcery* to describe (Chinese, Aztec, Pygmy, Paleo-Siberian, pre-historical, Bororo...) cultural realities that are light years from the mental universe of Bossuet or Saint Francis de Sales. These words and the oppositions that they insinuate are, however, only truly pertinent within Christian civilization. It is for the use of that world, and that world alone, that they were created. Everywhere else, they are simply unfitting, imprecise, erroneous, and/or anachronistic. This is certainly true for the principal semantic areas that are associated with these terms.

However, and this will be our third point, in these disastrous epistemological circumstances, the word 'religion' paradoxically winds up representing a sort of advantage—that of gathering numerous heterogeneous facts, but that one thinks to have the right to stick under the

same label, under the same designation. Despite this approximative and sloppy character, this final point is undoubtedly important. If it is true that nobody has yet been able to define this (mental, ontological, structural, or functional) 'nucleus' that is common to all the heterogeneous facts that are, something better lacking, called 'religious', it has always seemed obvious that they must have some necessary and obscure affinities, even though it was not yet possible to agree on their number and nature. This can be considered a supplementary proof of a well-known fact. We are more susceptible to the persuasive force of an ingrained cultural prejudice than to that of an empirical truth that is disappointing because it contradicts the affirmation of the prior. This notion thus acquired an anthropological and scientific status that is completely fictitious, since it is the result of the promotion of one of our indigenous concepts to the dignity of a universal category. This is a result that would never have occurred if the word 'religion' had belonged to the language of a colonized culture, for example, African or Oceanic: how could a central concept for the definition of humanity be borrowed from a 'savage race', as was said without the least scruple in the nineteenth century? Thanks to this epistemological promotion, European science from Christian culture gave itself the exclusive privilege of thinking of humanity, the human phenomenon, in light of *its* own conception and *its* values alone. From this, humanity became 'religious', and it was studied from this perspective. One studied the 'religions' of prehistory, of Egypt, of China, or of primitive civilizations, without anyone ever agreeing on an analytical definition that could explain what is fundamentally common to them, or that allowed one to understand the easily observable differences. One recovered from this false step in a more or less explicit manner by opposing 'religion' to 'religions', calling the latter primitive (animism, fetishism), archaic (idolatry), ancient (polytheism), traditional, or savage. A large number of current reflections on 'religions' are still tacitly nourished by this evolutionism and these summary distinctions.

To declare or lazily admit that texts are 'religious' would only allow them to be studied from the criteria that the 'religion' par excellence, Christianity, considers as validly 'religious' criteria. Two simple examples can help us to understand the strange paradoxes this truism quickly leads to.

Christianity excludes magic, which it contributed to discredit, from the religious realm proper. Magic, however, is not only excluded from

the immutable religious block¹¹ by the history of religions, but, we underscore, this is due to the same principles and by giving it the same disreputable definition. With the notable exception of de Martino, the unfavourable judgement of modern science in regard to magic repeats that formulated by theologians from before Saint Augustine's period.¹² Modern science has borrowed from Christian theology one of its prejudices and, above all, with it, the same designation, the same division of knowledge, and the same system of values! One is tempted to ask: why has nobody attempted to rethink this enormous group of 'magical-religious' facts with original and new epistemological foundations? This would have permitted the human sciences to analyse from specific criteria and concepts that no longer owed anything to Christian tradition. The (disappointing!) response that imposes itself was already evoked above: in the process that allowed the history of religions to constitute and impose itself as an academic discipline, various ways of thinking, classifying, and arguing were borrowed from the scholarly culture of the period, and among these were numerous elements

¹¹ 'The Hebrews on their part from ancient times and, so to say, from the very first origin of man, having found the true and religious philosophy, have carefully preserved this undefiled to succeeding generations, son having received and guarded a treasure of true doctrines from father, so that no one dared to take away from or add to what had been once for all determined. So neither did Moses the all-wise, who has been shown by our earlier discourse to have been older than all the Greeks, but last in time of all the ancient Hebrews, ever think of disturbing and changing any of the doctrines held by his forefathers concerning dogmatic theology, except to found a certain conduct of life towards each other for the people in his care, and a code of laws for a kind of moderate republic. Nor have the prophets after him, who flourished for countless periods of years, ever ventured to utter a word of discord against each other, or against the opinions held by Moses and the elders who were loved by God. Nor even has our Christian School, which derives its origin from them, and by a divinely inspired power has filled all Greece and Barbarian lands alike, introduced anything at variance with the earlier doctrines—Perhaps one should rather say that not only in the doctrines of theology, but also in the mode of life, Christianity prescribes the same course as the godly Hebrews before Moses. Our doctrines then described in this way, and testified to by all authors, first middle and last, with one mind and one voice, confirm with unanimous vote the certainty of what is both the true religion and philosophy, and are filling the whole world, and grow afresh and flourish every day, as if they had but just established their first prime. And neither legal ordinances, nor hostile plots, nor the often sharpened weapons of enemies have exhibited a power superior to the excellence of the reasons that we followed' (Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Evangelical Preparation*, XIV, 3, 1–5).

¹² See notes 24 p. 47 and 33 p. 50. This does not stop the Church from celebrating rites that can but with difficulty be called 'religious', i.e. in the sense that she herself understands the term, as they so admirably illustrate 'magical' formulas and mechanisms (exorcisms, miraculous healings, incantations, transubstantiation, etc.).

that came from Christian intellectual tradition. Further, for numerous scholars of the second half of the nineteenth century (1860–1914), everything occurred as if the evolution of humanity had to fatalistically lead to the appearance of the monotheistic religion of which we, Europeans, had the most perfect and accomplished expression. Linear teleology, summary evolutionism (so conformed to the spirit of this Spencerian century), unshakable sentiment of absolute superiority, and arrogant narcissism came together to give Western people the most reassuring version of their own destiny and human history that could be imagined. Their pretensions to dominate the world had nothing to modify. These prejudices have endured until now with enough force that the cultural *a prioribus* on which the history of religions is founded have not been questioned.

Inversely, Christianity considers the presence of divinities, or better, of a unique God, as the decisive criterion that allows one to recognize the presence of a ‘religious’ conception. Proper theology would thus have required the exclusion of Buddhism or Taoism from the manuals of the history of religions, given their indifference in regard to gods. For this, however, one would have to admit that humanity is not fundamentally ‘religious’ by nature, and that ‘religion’ is not an intrinsic element of our canonical definition, because entire continents are without it. This lucid attitude would have contradicted another dogma of Christian heritage: the universality of ‘religious’ attitudes and belief in God (or a transcendent principle), itself based in the idea of an original revelation. It would have been scandalous to insinuate that brilliant civilizations and vast territories could have lived without any religious preoccupation. How could one admit that a civilization could be built without knowing the principles that seem the most indispensable to the very idea of humanity? ‘Wisdoms’ and *cosmographic formations*, that would otherwise have never been integrated under this unexpected patronage, were thus changed into ‘religions’.

Let us imagine, in order to measure the scandalous nature of this annexation and disfigurement, the reaction of the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith if a Yakonan or Nahuatl professor demonstrated that the exorcisms and rites of spell removal practised by the Catholic Church have numerous affinities with important ceremonies celebrated since the end of prehistory within the oldest shamanistic cultures! Further, if, encouraged by his discovery, he deduced from his scholarly demonstration that there is a *homo shamanicus* who has flourished for many millennia, and who

characterizes our humanity to the highest degree. Irritated by this precedent, a Bengal professor, from an ancient family of orthodox Brahmans, would perhaps not hesitate to affirm that it is the *homo dharmicus* (from *dharma*, the impersonal and objective social-cosmic order) that should claim this honour, the *homo dharmicus* whose most perfect and pure expressions are preserved by modern Hinduism. Do not laugh at all, because this is what the West has done and continues to do with its *homo religiosus* without shame.

Another embarrassing fact can be added to all these difficulties that make the use of the words 'religious' and 'religion' so delicate. For historical and institutional reasons that nobody really dares to question or even to examine, the study of the great 'religious' texts of the West (the Bible, patristic and theological texts, mystical works, and spirituality) has remained a domain reserved to churchmen and scholars who have complicit relationships with Christian tradition, or have a high degree of respect and devotion intermixed with their work.¹³ The style of these authors excludes any form of scepticism as well as any distancing that would strip these texts of their claim to transmitting truths of a transcendent nature. Their study, instead of attempting to 'remove the charm', instead tends to sustain it. It uses the same terms, the same metaphors, the same emphasis, even to the point of the same lyricism, and winds up creating a similar climate (or at least one that is perceived as such) to what reigns in these texts: it belongs to the same world, and is inspired from the same presuppositions. It is further probable that this specular 'effect', each reflecting in the other, contributes to the suppression of any serious possibility of exiting this hermeneutic circle from the work being studied and its commentary. These authors carry the respect of the clauses of the reading pact defined by the works they study so far and so scrupulously that they wind up giving the impression that no other perspective would be acceptable or even possible. Their analyses, however subtle they may be, obviously cannot transgress these invisible limits that they also contribute to making even more insurmountable, by finding further foundations or justifications.

¹³ If one asked an astrologer to define astrology, the response would never manage to offer other ideas than those inherent to astrology itself. Whatever the erudition and apparent originality of said astrologer, this definition would be fatally 'glued' to its object. It would at best offer an elegant paraphrase.

The autonomy of the 'religious' that is demanded by all those who attempt to reserve it the status of an unconditional reality is the result of a process that is largely rhetorical. It essentially consists in speaking only with the help of notions or concepts taken from works that speak the same language. Beyond a certain quantitative and qualitative level, the lexis, the countless quotations, the borrowing of one genre from another, the topics, the major arguments, the dominant themes, and the recognized paradigms wind up forming a closed network. This refined idiolect is capable of justifying every element of the reality that falls into its net. This vast linguistic domain, this verbal world never stops proliferating and feeding its own dynamism. If one can attribute a certain autonomy to it, it is only this one, of a discursive nature, that is, the one that every ambitious cosmography manages to acquire in time by elaborating its own universe within itself from discourses that are unendingly paraphrasable by one another.

Every 'explanation by religion' takes a large detour, a sort of loop, but winds up eventually returning to its starting point, which is constituted by the group of notions that one finds written a priori in the Western, that is, Christian, definition of 'religion'. In particular, it is incapable of adding anything at all that would contradict the principles at the foundation of this last item. In brief, every 'explanation by religion' will at best find only 'religious' reasons, and, for this reason, will open itself to as many aporias when it exits the world that conceived it.

We can now better perceive the type of inconveniences tied to the unthinking use of the word 'religion', and in particular the alternative that it places us in front of: either one places oneself comfortably in the wake of tradition and decrees that these texts that are called 'religious' are in fact 'religious', in which case one condemns oneself to inserting any analytical or interpretive process within a perspective that is largely preconstructed by the very thing one is attempting to explain; or one refuses this easy path, but one immediately perceives the profound upheavals this substitution will imply on the theoretical and methodological levels. The change that must occur is considerable, because it consists in transforming 'an object of culture into a cultural object', according to the radical principle proposed by Wiktor Stoczkowski,¹⁴ that is, to make an 'instrument of knowledge' an 'object

¹⁴ Wiktor Stoczkowski, 'Rires d'ethnologues', *L'Homme*, 160 (2001), pp. 91–114, especially pp. 110–14.

of knowledge'. Said in yet another way, it is to renounce recognizing powerful analytical tools in the terms 'religion' or 'religious' in order to transform them into objects of study.

A Christian text that is approached from a 'religious' perspective can only propose 'religious' explanations that always extend according to a plan that transcends the human order. In order to suppress this privilege of scientific extraterritoriality that 'religious' facts enjoy *de facto* when they are considered from the place that engendered the notion of 'religion', it is thus indispensable to break the fallacious charm that the tautology just recalled radiates. The study of wisdoms sketched out here is one of the means, because, by manifesting their profound singularity, it has shown that they had an original anthropological dimension as well as their own functional autonomy. In other words, they do not come *a priori* from any instinct or any claimed religious disposition to which they would only add the secularized and prosaic version. Whatever of the senses one chooses to give to the words 'religion' and 'religious' from all of those that exist, they will never manage to explain and justify the specific process of wisdoms. An 'explanation by wisdom' thus appears to be not only conceivable, but also eminently desirable.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ANTHROPOLOGY AND WISDOMS

In order for the singular employed in expression such as ‘the anthropological foundations of wisdom’ or ‘the explanation by wisdom’ to be validated and accepted, one must first recognize the fundamental common traits that ‘the’ wisdoms have. Then, based on them, one must attempt to develop the general philosophy, which is so well named in this case.

This task will be facilitated by the already mentioned fact that they make up fairly consistent groups that are subordinated to their exclusive vocation, which can be summarized as: the delivery of humanity from fear and anxiety, and from desire and passions, by favouring, through ad hoc disciplines and exercises, the development of a more stable interior ‘I’ and a more peaceful consciousness, which will also help individuals confront the difficult trials of this life (sicknesses, misfortune, solitude, suffering, death).

Whatever its imperfections may be, this first definition has the merit of immediately specifying, without the least reserve or ambiguity, that the individual, and the individual alone, is their only preoccupation. For it is of humanity, and of humanity alone, that they speak, and only to humanity that they are addressed. It is not, however, to any person, and certainly not to those who have satisfied themselves with a certain Western philosophy quicker to construct the artifices of verbal universes than to roll up its sleeves and deal with the human condition. The person to whom they offer so much advice is, prosaically, the one whom each of us is aware of being: imperfect, vulnerable, and mortal. They never deviate from this unique preoccupation. It is thus quite rare that their sentences, even if pronounced twenty centuries ago at the other end of the world, no longer resonate with us. For they only evoke things that are *lived*, that is, so obvious and familiar that anyone can immediately recognize them and make them his or her own: the inconsolable brevity of existence, implacable old age, the bitterness of life, ‘the sadness of death’,¹ the vanity of riches and worldly honours,

¹ See Étiemble et al., *Philosophes taoïstes: Lao-Tseu, Tchouang-tseu, Lie-Tseu* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1980), p. 374.

physical suffering, stubborn misfortune, moral distress, and the pain of separation are neither incomprehensible nor untranslatable themes. On the contrary! Beyond (or rather beneath) the cultural diversity, do not these themes touch the universal human condition in the sense that every person, one day or another, will cross them in his or her life? Is not the narration of the four encounters of the naive young prince who would become the Buddha (an old man, a gravely ill man, and a cadaver on a funeral pyre—these three narrations preceding that of the ascetic) immediately understandable? These are not, however, simply banal trivialities or common loci, because they concern the human person to the highest degree, and are like our pulsating flesh. Nor are they traits that are unworthy of a thought that merits this prestigious name.² One can note with some relief that the wisdoms, which are always consistent, have never stopped considering the human condition precisely in order to allow individuals to endure it.

This 'humanistic' vocation of the wisdoms, that people could only discover through the experience of their own humanity, is necessarily joined with another trait. If we were not afraid of anachronism, we would add that they always address each one in particular, even if a person belongs to a defined school or community. Nonetheless, it is not this individual, insofar as one would discover an incomparable personality whose originality one would seek to enjoy, who matters in their eyes. More precisely, it is those individuals, but insofar as they feel in themselves and by themselves all of the painful afflictions that distress them. The wisdoms know where suffering hides, that it is lived in an interior way, and that it is not shared. In other words, it is the individual, and the individual alone, who should be strengthened in order to endure trial. They are thus completely consistent by making resolution, strength of character, and the use of the will their first and undoubtedly principal allies. On their level, a collective action or

² That all of modern philosophy has not, e.g. consecrated even one book to the debilitating effects of old age and the wait for death does not at all mean that old age and death are any less central human problems today, but rather that said philosophy never seems as gossipy as when it allows itself to neglect prosaic reality and to disguise itself as a Germanic metaphysician. See, as both an example and a curiosity, this pearl, whose understanding appears to be reserved to a tiny group of the initiated: 'And since one intends to dismiss all ontic understanding from phenomenality, should not one return to being as the ultimate limit of all phenomenal gift?' Dominique Janicaud, *Le Tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (Combas: L'Éclat, 1991), p. 58. Other readers will perplexedly ask: What is he speaking about? How are we implicated by such a phrase? Don't we have more urgent or vital problems to deal with?

remedy would have little sense or efficacy. Since the source of evil, that is, humanity's fundamental vulnerability, is found in the individual's self, each one in particular must learn to protect him- or herself. The wise person's solitude is an unavoidable fatality that is comparable on numerous points to that of mystics who engage themselves on the path of complete dispossession.

This aspect, which appears to be inspired by a type of robust common sense, is the first that arises when one considers what must be called their realism and pragmatism. Nothing is more foreign to the spirit of the wisdoms than the wonderful (miracles!), the supernatural, or magical incantations. They are right away situated in this world, and never move away from it. This is why the wisdoms that we can roughly call 'indifferent to the gods', 'atheist', or 'agnostic' (Buddhism, Epicureanism, Taoism) are not only conceivable, but also make perfect sense.

One discovers at the same time, thanks to them, that individuals did not wait for the time of rationality or of the modern State to look at their own state without complacency. In contrast to an idea that is often received and repeated without reflection, one must affirm that the 'disillusionment of the world' (Weber's *Entzauberung der Welt*)³ did not begin yesterday, nor the day before. Its history is as old as that of humanity. Nothing permits us to see a recent catastrophe in it that would have brutally arisen to break who knows what captivating charms radiated by the so-called primitive or savage⁴ religions. Humans were always and everywhere undoubtedly far more lucid and far more perspicacious than some modern theories⁵ would lead one to believe. These theories lose themselves in fiction by transforming the premodern person into a sort of mystic or visionary living in a paradisiacal world, in a true *golden age* that magic enveloped or that the widespread presence of gods and the *Sacred* illuminated. This

³ See Weber, *Sociologie des religions*, s.v. 'désenchantement'.

⁴ See Marcel Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde: Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. xi.

⁵ Weber, Heidegger, Gauchet, etc. Eliade remains the best known popularizer of these theses. He states, in his *Le Sacré et le profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 142: 'For him [the man of ancient societies], life as a whole can be sanctified.... It is founded to think that, in a far distant past, all of man's physiological organs and experiences, all of his gestures, had a religious signification.' A little earlier, p. 82, he spoke of 'the fresh, pure, and "vigorous" world, as it came from the Creator's hands'. It is also fairly significant for our thesis that Eliade reproaches the Buddha for his 'anti-metaphysics', and for having had, like Marx, the ambition of wanting 'to change the human condition', *Fragments d'un journal I, 1945-1969* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 444.

courageous and enduring person, our distant ancestor, certainly did not wait for Freud to rediscover the *principle of reality*. Numerous quite ancient (Chinese,⁶ Greek,⁷ Latin,⁸ Indian,⁹ Egyptian and Middle Eastern,¹⁰ Hebrew¹¹...) texts were always unanimous on this point.¹² Although they were undoubtedly composed by clerics, that is, by people in a privileged situation, they already described the difficult human condition without the least illusion—or they insinuated it in a fully explicit manner. Their sentences and proverbs witness to this, and they, from wherever they come, still remain intelligible to us. How could peasant peoples, confronted with the rigours of life during millennia (droughts, painful labour, epidemics, injustices, death) not recognize their difficult condition and not fairly accurately measure its implacable harshness? At any rate, one cannot both observe that people invented means to combat misfortune everywhere and insinu-

⁶ See note 1 p. 221.

⁷ 'For before this the tribes of men lived on earth free and safe from sufferings and hard labour and painful sicknesses which bring the Fates upon men. But the woman [Pandora] took the great lid off the jar with her hands, and scattered all of them, and her scheming caused sorrow and mourning for men. Only Hope remained there in an unbreakable prison under the rim of the great jar, and did not fly out at the door; for the lid of the jar stopped her, by the will of Aegis-holding Zeus who gathers the clouds. But the rest, countless plagues, wander amongst men; for earth is full of evils, and the sea is full. Of themselves diseases come upon men continually by day and by night, bringing mischief to mortals silently; for wise Zeus took speech away from them. So is there no way to escape the will of Zeus' (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 90–105).

⁸ 'But in life there is fear for the outstanding evils one has done, and expiation for outstanding crimes: prison, a horrible fall from a rock, lashes, torturers, shackles, pitch, the blade, and torches; which, even if they are lacking, the mind that is aware of having done them fears, and brings sharp pain and the burning of the whip on itself, meanwhile it does not know when the end of these evils might be, or what his punishments' end will finally be, and likewise fearing that these might become more oppressive in death. Thus, in the end, the life of the foolish becomes Acherusia [or "the underworld"]' (Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, III, 1014–1023). See also the quotations that correspond to notes 26, 28, 29, and 30 pp. 107–108.

⁹ See note 16 p. 104. Like Hesiod, Hindu texts describe the fourth *yuga*, our current cosmic age, in the darkest terms.

¹⁰ See H. Brunner, *Altägyptische Weisheit: Lehren für das Leben* (Zurich/Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1988), and G. Minois, *Histoire du mal de vivre* (Paris: Martinière, 2003), pp. 9–11.

¹¹ Genesis 46: 9; Job 14: 1–2, Psalms 39: 5–7 and 90: 9–10; Qoheleth 2: 23; Wisdom 2: 1–5; and Sirach 40: 1–2: 'Much labour was created for every man, and a heavy yoke is upon the sons of Adam, from the day they come forth from their mother's womb until the day they return to the mother of all. Their reflections and fear of heart, their anxious thought is on the day of death.'

¹² Other examples can be found in the American Indian myths analysed by Lévi-Strauss in the four volumes of his *Mythologiques*.

ate that they were not clearly aware of it and of its damages. Does not sickness precede diagnosis, as diagnosis precedes the search for a remedy?

Humanity has thus remained the only preoccupation of the wisdoms, but, let us repeat it, individuals as they are, that is, they who are unembellished by an illusion or false complacency. The universe of wisdoms is never enchanting nor utopian. In this regard, they are distinguished from all the attitudes, whether they are called 'religious' or 'magical', that have preferred to substitute persevering effort and the uncompromising exercise of the will with an anthology of supernatural recipes and hopes. These attitudes are usually no less lucid than the initial diagnosis of the wisdoms. They simply proceed in another way, in the sense that, from this observation, they conclude that inescapable misfortune can be transfigured, overcome, or quashed. Perhaps we observe here the contours of two major positions that individuals have conceived to deliver themselves from the evils that hinder them.

The first path, that of wisdoms, affirms that humanity is certainly condemned to endure an unenviable, often painful position here below, so it teaches individuals the practical means that will help them to endure it. On the contrary, the second path claims that there are supernatural possibilities to modify the normally inexorable course of events.

The first strips the world of all prodigies, of every supernatural element, while the second instead transforms it by intermixing a group of expressive signs, supernatural objects, and invisible agents. One could say that the first's austerity is Cistercian, while the other contents itself with the baroque excesses of a vivid imagination.

According to the wisdoms, which are founded on lucidity and effort, individuals can only be comforted by themselves, and on the express condition of adopting an austere, requiring way of life that leads them to turn away from a life whose many seductions sooner or later wind up making them the captive and victim of their own inclinations. This path counsels them to renounce their desires and illusions in order to allow them to instead acquire a calm and more robust 'I'.¹³

¹³ A 'psychological' result that the teaching of ancient Buddhism, which nevertheless denied the existence of a permanent personal substrate (*ātman*), would have attained!

Facing this characteristic and perfectly defined attitude, the other position has such a diversity of expression that it is more difficult to specify a satisfying order or criteria. It nonetheless seems possible to say that it fills the universe with agents that are as efficacious as they are invisible (spirits, genies, 'living forces',¹⁴ *mana*, demons, divinities, saints, thrones, seraphim, angels, powers, ancestors, fluids, astral influences, etc.) whose existence and activity are known through expressive signs (*hiero-* or *theophanies*, symbolic connections, miracles, prophecies, dreams, etc.) or supernatural objects (talismans, relics, amulets, phylacteries, etc.). The individual invariably expects that they and their powers, on the condition that one manipulates or enters into contact with them according to precise rules, will free him or her from current misfortune or from definitive annihilation, which are themselves symbolized by other hostile or evil 'forces' (demons, devils, evil spirits, vampires, fate, etc.). For these worlds that are filled with supernatural interventions are only rarely marvellous or enchanting places. Shamanistic or 'animistic' universes, like that of Thomas à Kempis, are terrifying worlds, hardly made to reassure a person on first glance. At least they offer the individual's desire (to ward off evil or acquire some benefit: fortune, power, healing, happiness, peace, eternal life), on the imperious condition of using the proper means (rituals, prayers, beliefs, exorcisms, spells, incantations...), the possibility of being fulfilled. Each of these means often requires other severe conditions: initiation, fasting and chastity, purifying ablutions, interior purity, payment of a 'retribution', scrupulous conformity to rules, acts of faith, abandonment or submission, moral integrity, etc. This 'supernatural' path is no less aware than the previous of the rules of exchange and the price of effort. Further, they both agree in affirming that humanity does not live in an enchanting and paradisiacal world, where happiness could be plucked like a flower: effort, sacrifice, renunciation, and perseverance are always required of us.

This path, which is opposed to that of the wisdoms, could only be called 'religious' by a linguistic abuse (or convenience).¹⁵ It includes too great a diversity of objects and procedures for this epithet to be fitting. What would it gain, since we have just demonstrated that 'the explanation by religion' does not say anything more than what our

¹⁴ Mauss, 'Théorie générale de la magie', 113.

¹⁵ See notes 6–8 p. 210 and the corresponding paragraphs.

own cultural tradition *a priori* includes under this term? On the other hand, it appears that all the facts that are conventionally grouped under the labels of 'magic' or 'religion' are opposed as a group to wisdoms far more than they are opposed to each other. On this point,¹⁶ as on so many others, anthropological reflection is free, and should thus not feel indebted to any indigenous distinction, whose principle is Christian. In this case, we can add that the true dividing line perhaps passes between the two terms of the following alternatives:

Deliver individuals from the fear of death, or convince them that they are immortal?

Help them to see things as they are, that is, to recognize 'what can be born, and what cannot' (Lucretius), or persuade them that an invisible world surrounds them?

Turn their regard towards themselves, or encourage them to orient it over the horizon?

Teach them to count on their strengths alone, or lead them to think that a shrewd positioning of objects, symbols, or signs will increase their power over things or events?

Teach them to endure misfortune, or claim that they can, on certain conditions, turn away its deadly blows?

Help them to endure their condition, or lead them on in the illusion that it is only transitory?

Each individual¹⁷ and each culture is confronted with these alternatives, and his or her choices define the individual's interior profile, his or her personality.

¹⁶ See notes 24 p. 47, 34 p. 50 and 12 p. 215.

¹⁷ Individuals' attentive observation nonetheless shows that the majority of them usually prefer to compose, and tried to obtain—either simultaneously or successively—the most easily accessible advantages of the two paths, while remaining open to the pleasures of this world. Reasonably wise, they frequently had recourse to the invisible realities they had imagined, while trying to enjoy the pleasures of this life as well. In their own way, they cultivated the art of eclecticism rather than that of the happy medium, which they warped in the process. Only a few rare and great virtuosos (wise men and women, mystics, or libertines) engaged themselves in an exclusive path. This is why all wisdoms are capable of being contaminated some day by supernatural beliefs or 'powers', as it is true that it is difficult for individuals to resist the temptation to invoke them. Is not the unstoppable need to escape an intolerable suffering capable of transforming the most resolved atheist into one who wears amulets? This prosaic (craftsman-like?, opportunist?) character of humanity might seem impure or indecent to some. However, with a little more reflection, in the name of which strange dogma should they be judged or condemned? Does not our condition provide us with some

The constant and exclusive vocation of the wisdoms is confirmed by the arsenal of means, exercises, and techniques that they have developed. We have located a number of them (frugality, chastity, moral rectitude, bodily techniques, mental disciplines of concentration, meditation, and contemplation) and noted that they extended and developed the teaching at the heart of the systems that all cultures have dedicated for the education of their members in a systematic fashion. In all cases, the objective is to manage to make personalities more stable, more solid, and more self-mastered—personalities that would otherwise only ask to disunite, to melt—given how overly painful are the trials they are sometimes confronted with daily.

On a similar note, one can see that the wisdoms are never gnostic. This is because, on one hand, the idea of a sudden and definitive saving knowledge is contrary to both their lucidity and their ethics of effort and perseverance, and on the other hand, because their scope is limited to this world. Their domain is that of what is visible, of daily existence—in brief, of lived experience. Their variegated and subtle knowledge is limited to humanity, and even, one could be tempted to add, to individuals living in this world. Beyond this there extends, according to them, the domain of gratuitous speculations and superfluous preoccupations¹⁸ that risk turning people away from themselves and misleading them. A fortiori, hermeneutic controversies, heretical

attenuating circumstances? Who is responsible with awarding a person the diploma of orthodoxy anyway? And which orthodoxy is that?

This last remark will not please specialists either, because it contradicts the tendencies of the human and social sciences that hypostasize their object(s) by transforming individuals or groups into incarnations of ideal, and thus pure, models. It is not even worth discussing whether the use of ideal models provides an easy intermediary for reflection and analysis, but this epistemological detour does not imply that reality should be beautified in the process. A model would be no less ideal if it had some contradictions, weaknesses, or obscure areas that are regularly present in reality. 'Ideal' refers to the heuristic or schematic function of the model, and not to its literal content. Nothing (i.e. no epistemological criterion) forbids delineating the portrait of the 'ideal model' of the alcoholic worker, of the local gangster, or of the paedophile priest. Further, it is not uncommon that programs of truth that a healthy rational conception would lead us to judge to be contradictory or exclusive nonetheless co-exist quite explicitly in the mind of one individual. Their difficult condition has made individuals eclectic or ingenious—and sometimes quite prudent. As a great ethnologist (Malinowski) has noted, the members of societies that best express an unbeatable confidence in the powers of supernatural forces do not whatsoever stop cultivating the earth in a highly pragmatic fashion. They would never think of satisfying themselves with incantations or charms.

¹⁸ See note 12 p. 74 and the corresponding quotation. See also Seneca, *Letter 71 to Lucilius*.

behaviours, and dogmatic affirmations are in principle foreign to them.

Whether in regard to popular wisdoms or the systematic creations of virtuosos, but obviously with an emphasis on those of the latter, we noted that they are inspired from a fundamental principle, that of the happy medium.¹⁹ Their principles and techniques, which might sometimes seem too mundane, should not consternate us, since it is a highly refined art that requires a high vigilance and much skill.²⁰ How should one define the rule? How should one obey the norm? What does it say? Where does excess begin? Is it the same for everyone? Will what is true today still be true tomorrow? Is what is fitting for one also fitting for another? On this moving terrain, paradoxes flourish, and, with them, the need to adopt a flexible and mobile attitude appears quickly. The wise person should be agile, perspicacious, and dexterous. And he or she must above all remain this way. All educators and pedagogues know, or learn quickly at their own expense, that this art of the happy medium does not concern them less than others.

What we have proposed to call 'explanation by wisdom' thus does not lead to the aporias or unsolvable dead ends in which 'the explanation by religion' previously mentioned is bogged down. In order to understand why, a very simple reason imposes itself: the wisdoms (which subordinate all metaphysical speculation to the search of efficacy in this world, avoid dogmatism, are primarily worried about relief, are close to individuals, and are attentive to their existential situation) have the same constitutive principles and traits almost everywhere. This is how the archaic medical techniques operated on another level, which is perhaps not as distant as one would think. Under these conditions, do not the wisdoms offer one of the best observatories to understand how

¹⁹ See notes 34 p. 108 and 58 p. 16.

²⁰ See François Jullien, *Un sage est sans idée* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), pp. 31–9 and this example taken from p. 31: 'virtue will be the "equal" understood as the happy medium between excess and lack (thus, the mid-path between fear and temerity is "courage", and between prodigality and parsimony, it is "liberality", etc.). The quest for this refined art of the happy medium sometimes favoured speculative tendencies that in turn opened onto savoury enigmas or paradoxes before flourishing in the form of a scepticism that condemned itself to silence'. The invention of paradoxes and aporias allows, particularly in the Buddhist context, one to 'play' with the conventions that underpin reality and make humanity captive. Overly attached to dogmas, and that of creation in particular, as well as to the orthodoxy of its 'word', Christian tradition has not valued these intellectual games and this art of evasion at all.

people have applied themselves to resolve the crucial and vital problem posed to them by their own nature and their difficult condition? Could one think of anthropological questions that are more essential than these two tightly linked themes? Therefore, instead of beginning from 'religions' and their metaphysical presuppositions to attempt to better understand humanity, would it not be more prudent to consider all the techniques and disciplines that we have elaborated in 'our' wisdoms to make ourselves less vulnerable? The study of these wisdoms should teach us much about humanity's basic nature, while displacing reflection to a path that is not obstructed by vain theological quarrels.

One would hope that, in this spirit, the 'human' sciences, like the archaic wisdoms, would resolutely turn towards individuals to observe them 'as they are', straightforwardly and without embellishment. One would hope that they would finally consider the effects that our own nature and our difficult condition have had on our cultural creation and our existential choices. In what way would it be scandalous or unacceptable if they did so?

CONCLUSION

What is wonderful is that, to reassure men, it suffices to deny the evidence. (Robert Bresson)

The words of truth seem paradoxical. (Lao-tzu)

All the beings of this world always seek happiness, but they always find misfortune; their thought focuses on the ātman, but there is no ātman. Beings always fear misfortune, but they are always unhappy: They are like the blind man who, while seeking the right path, wanders off and falls into the ditch. After these reflections, the Buddha 'laughed wholeheartedly'. (from the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* attributed to Nāgārjuna)

Then a worry, that until then had been held down in our chest under other evils, awakens and begins to raise its head... (Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, V, 1207–8)

THE FORGETTING OF WISDOM

If the wisdoms, whether popular or erudite, rustic or buttressed by ambitious philosophical systems, have been primarily preoccupied with offering a practical and efficacious response to the problems that the existence of our fragile 'I' and our difficult conditions have continually posed to us, it is impossible that their pursuit (or that of their benefits) is no longer pertinent. The solutions, methods, and means proposed today to attain the same ends are nonetheless distinct from those that they promoted. By comparing the principles and techniques of the ancient wisdoms to the remedies proposed by our (post)modernism, it will be possible, more than once, to manifest some of the pathetic contradictions that traverse the latter.

It appears that the evils that contemporary humanity attempts to combat are no less numerous or difficult than those that our ancestors were confronted with. As with them, these evils threaten the personal interior dynamism¹ that culminates in consciousness.

Among the causes of trouble or exhaustion, the following are frequently cited today: excessive fatigue, stress, depression ('sickness of the century'), feeling 'down', anxieties, overly violent emotions, emotional or behavioural troubles,² phobias, traumata, all kinds of dependencies and addictions, etc. Curiously, our period, which, on one hand has an arrogant disdain for whoever is not inspired from its model of civilization, on the other hand presents itself as that of 'malaise'!³ The

¹ See notes 15–22 p. 46 and the corresponding paragraph.

² It seems that at least eight are found in the contemporary child (autism, hyperactivity, obsessive-compulsive disorders, mood swings, anxiety, anorexia, bulimia, and schizophrenia). According to Inserm's study, summarized in *Le Monde*, 7 February 2003, these problems affect 12 per cent of children and adolescents. Among the important factors, the authors of this study cite, beyond 'genetic susceptibility', the parent's mental fragility (alcoholism, drug addiction, depression) and family conflicts.

³ As Ehrenberg quite rightly said in *L'Individu incertain* (Paris: Hachette, 1995), pp. 13–30, this ambivalence culminates at the heart of the mechanisms that engender the distribution of prestige in our modern societies. The obligation to accumulate the greatest number possible of external signs of accomplishment (wealth, health, youth, success, etc.) in a world wide open to all forms of rivalry and competition, and thus 'to assume the responsibility of being oneself alone' (p. 14), plunges the individual into a headlong race.

current overconsumption of drugs, stimulants, tranquilizers, neuroleptics, and soporifics witnesses to this in its way.

While these troubles largely seem to follow states of weakness, asthenia, or exhaustion, which themselves have a variegated aetiology (individualism, solitude, competitiveness, nervous fatigue, worries, tensions, etc.), most of the means developed to overcome them were constituted in the wake of Freudian thought. This theory of human psyche and its disorders is based on the idea of an interior conflict⁴ that the word alone would be able to untie—although after the fact. This is a word that many today seem ready to give almost magical powers, as if it was enough to just talk.... If, like every confession, admission, or confidence, the analytical cure manages to attenuate some of these conflicts by reducing the ‘sentiment of culpability’⁵ the patient feels, it is obviously not suited to strengthen someone terrorized by the prospect of war, laid low by cancer, worn out by sorrows, gripped by the fear that comes from seeing massacres, broken by the trials of life, ruined by torture, or faltering before death! On this point, the ancient wisdoms appear to have demonstrated a greater lucidity by *preparing* the individual to affront the perils of existence in conditions that are not as bad. Far from all pan-sexuality, but instead with a high degree of relevance and practical sense, they coolly observed humanity’s fragile nature and our difficult position in this world. Like with the trials of initiation, their techniques appear to be pragmatic solutions that are methodologically tested and aim to strengthen the individual’s capacities of resistance and endurance.

Whatever this profound difference means, the range of methods that are proposed today appears so vast and diverse that one is tempted to recognize the most certain symptoms of our contemporaries’ profound disorientation and febrility, who are ready to throw themselves at any promise of improved well-being. It is also undebatable that the

⁴ See note 14 p. 46. Further, ‘with a general look over the evolution of representations that Freud gave to conflict, it is striking on one hand that he always tries to bring it to an irreducible dualism that can only be founded, in the end, on an almost mythical opposition between two great contrary forces; and on the other hand, that one of the axes of the conflict is always that of sexuality, even though the other refers to various realities (the “I”, “the impulses of the ‘I’”, “the impulses of death”)’ (Laplanche and Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, pp. 92–3).

⁵ Which only really has meaning, i.e. felt and lived meaning, for ‘Christian’ consciousnesses. The ‘sentiment of culpability’, like the sentiment of shame or that of honour under other skies, is a specific cultural element. Thus it does not have intangible universal properties.

use of the term 'psychotherapy', which is most commonly used in this context, reminds us without the least doubt that suffering manifests itself in the *psukhē*.⁶ This clouded psyche has come today to designate this central but obscure zone, human personality, that indiscriminately manifests the entirety of troubles that can affect it to the point of its deterioration.⁷

It is precisely this unlimited domain of human suffering that contemporary psychotherapies long for. Surprising and unexpected heirs of yesterday's wisdoms, they do not look down on adopting an air that is sometimes scientific and sometimes mysterious, attiring themselves in strange words for the most part. Simple relaxation becomes 'tantric', 'dynamical', or 'holistic'. As for useless astrology, it is today called 'energizing', 'humanist', or 'psychological'. Along with these, countless methods and schools flourish, whose very listing makes one dizzy,⁸ along with a highly precise idea of the vitality of credulousness in so-called developed societies.

Let us remain far back from the abyss, and instead examine the type of benefits that these therapies, their methods, and the beliefs or illusions on which they rest may promise. In this way, the contrast between them and the teachings of past wisdoms will appear on its own.

In terms of objectives, these contemporary therapies manifest a good and even solid optimism, which is completely conformed with that of a period which, whatever one may say, does not like cool lucidity at all, particularly when it does not endow human existence with any embellishments. They unanimously promise self-discovery,

⁶ On the Greek prehistory of this term, see the classic study of Richard B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁷ It is noteworthy that their study is not at the heart of university teaching of psychology, which appears to have 'exploded' with numerous objects of study and protocols (see note 5 p. 185). In brief, humanity's 'sufferings' are not its primary interest, particularly when they would presuppose that one had first interrogated the profound nature of the principles that contribute to founding the unity of our being and personality.

⁸ Music therapy, transactional analysis, neurolinguistic programming, sophrology, gestalt, metascript, bio-dance, dance therapy, psychological projection, reiki, graphology, Ericksonian hypnosis, the Hoffman process, sleep-relaxation, bio-energy, behavioural therapy, emotional grammar, sleep therapy, lying, primal therapy, rebirth therapy, holotropic breathwork, (ortho-)physiotherapy, bio-system therapy, art therapy, shamanism, numerology, sexology, coaching, and enneagrams, without forgetting the various forms of analytical psychotherapy, etc.

valorization, and esteem. As if this was not enough, they add serenity, the sense of well-being, interior harmony, and personal development and fulfilment to their benefits. We can definitely sense their (and certainly their 'salesmen's')⁹ temptation to reconcile their propositions with the aspiration to individual happiness that remains so lively among our contemporaries. Do not disappoint or discourage them by an overly austere discourse like that of Marcus Aurelius when he counselled, 'where things seem most reliable', 'strip them down, clearly see their meanness, and take away all the external details by which they are exalted'.¹⁰ Modern therapy, on the contrary, presents itself as the *sine qua non* condition for happiness, as a sort of indispensable propaedeutic for the hedonistic re-appropriation of existence. There where the wisdoms recommended the mastery of our impulses and coveting through renunciation and frugality, it defends, for example, the idea that the satisfaction of desires contributes to personal well-being.

It is clear that, by maintaining the possibility of happiness in this world, modern therapies do not only go further than what the ancient wisdoms proposed. It would be more precise to say that they turn their back on them. The ancient wisdoms, as the reader will remember, were instead unanimous in the affirmation that happiness is chimerical, and is surely ephemeral. At the most, individuals can hope to attain a certain provisory interior peace. For this they must still distance themselves from the world and renounce their vanities (riches, honour, glory, pleasure, power, etc.) which, in their eyes, are as many sources of passions and illusions, that is, of sufferings. These, however, chain individuals to this world in some way, since, for our desires, 'living on does not provide any satisfaction'.¹¹

In order to understand this profound divergence, one must turn to the implicit characteristics of these therapeutic methods that summarize their spirit. The contrast with the teachings of traditional wisdoms will appear every time.

⁹ Is it necessary to recall that all of these 'therapies' are commercial? They are even the basis for a flourishing industry (sessions, residencies, courses). Since suffering and disorientation are consubstantial to the human condition, some might add that this industry has inexhaustible possibilities.

¹⁰ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, VI, 13 (excerpts).

¹¹ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, III, 1081.

They resolutely base themselves on the idea that happiness, well-being, or personal development are within easy reach of any individual, and their practical instructions reflect this fundamental optimism—even in the details of their programs. The formations they propose are open to everyone, without any preliminary examination. Desire and good will (which should absolutely not be confused with the will according to Descartes or Saint Francis de Sales)¹² seem, in all softness, to suffice—as if one sought above all to not rush or scare anyone. Nothing resembles or even halfway evokes the courageous resolutions, obstinate perseverance, and the type of heroism required by their predecessors. The instructions they proliferate also seem to be easily accessible. They require neither difficult effort nor sacrifice. Their position is so contrary, so perfectly contrary to those promoted by the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola or the instructions of the Buddha on the eightfold path in their times, that comparison today will always be humorous. The word ‘renunciation’ also seems to have disappeared from their preferred vocabulary. Would it be discouraging? Demobilizing? It is true that it would be difficult to ‘sell’ a method that recommended complete detachment from and renunciation¹³ of worldly goods. Their teachings, which are easily accessible, do

¹² See note 10 p. 151.

¹³ Pascal Bruckner, *L'Euphorie perpétuelle* (Paris: Grasset, 2000), p. 263, has humorously and poignantly noted another contemporary paradox, while evoking the grotesque destiny of Western Buddhism:

With the exception of a small number of learned scholars, it is not Buddhism that triumphs in the West, but a religion decorated with exoticism. It is not even a spirituality, but a therapy, a shield against stress that offers a universal entry credo that is acceptable to most people. How could a doctrine of renunciation seduce a society that is structured around the mundane? By renouncing renunciation, by offering it in a *light* form for our delicate stomachs and our exalted egos. One can then dip into it like into a box of chocolates, taking the best and leaving the others. The important part is that the wrapping stays Tibetan, Zen, or Tantric.

There is perhaps something else at play in this infatuation for the Orient: The invention of an unheard of syncretism, the magical reconciliation of contraries, of serenity and anxiety, of attachment and indifference, of personal development and the illusion of self through the means of a minimum of belief. What is the Neo-Buddhism? The spiritual complement of a spiritless globalization, the religion of the end of religions? Perhaps. Something will come forth from this crazy embrace of East and West, a contemporary of the era of easy doctrines, that will not be like anything yet known—certainly not like authentic Buddhism, which is still too rigid, too disciplined, and which will be disfigured and stepped upon, a victim of its own success. An enormous paradox will arise—the eternal form of newness in History.

not multiply any less quickly. Conferences, discovery sessions (of two days or a week), and even complete formation seem to be calibrated to fill the spaces of free time that others devote to their own recreation. Here again, they are far from the severe and universal regimens recommended by their requiring predecessors so that individuals could conform their entire existence to them on a daily basis. They are no less distant from the requiring ethics (frugality, chastity, intellectual rectitude, irreproachable morality, honesty, examination of conscience, etc.) that all the wisdoms inserted into their prolegomena.

Clearly, the majority of the exercises that these therapies prescribe (relaxation, confident dialogue, yoga,¹⁴ dance, vegetarianism, massage, writing) and in which attention to the body often has an important role, all have a relaxing and reassuring aspect. They are not at all inspired by Saint Francis de Sales' 'faithfully, courageously, constantly'.¹⁵ One no longer seeks to 'checkmate the flesh', but to caress it; no longer to contain the deviations of the imagination, but to allow them to express themselves; no longer to master the desires and passions, but to liberate them of all sense of culpability; no longer to defend the virtues of renunciation, but those of fulfilment. We can already note that this last notion accepts, as self-evident, that individuals, despite everything that they ignore, everything they hate, everything they desire, everything that unendingly agitates and troubles them, and despite their fundamentally unstable nature, are nonetheless predisposed to follow a personal evolution that can lead them to a sort of happy fullness. 'Despite sickness, old age, and death?' one might be tempted to ask with a dose of scepticism. There is another paradox to note. These techniques that, unlike their predecessors, do not recommend either retreat or silent solitude, seem to maintain that peace and serenity are accessible to any and all, even if they continue to live and distract themselves in the world.

The eclecticism manifested by the various modern therapies is only comparable to that which appears to seduce and please their audience.

Making yoga, dedicated to the annihilation of the 'I', a form of relaxation that contributes to personal well-being and development should not be considered an any smaller of an exploit. In both cases, the obstacle is the same: the impossibility or extreme difficulty for Westerners to free themselves from an 'I' that they usually expect to transform into a receptacle of pleasures rather than an impassable fortress.

¹⁴ See the previous note.

¹⁵ Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction*, p. 303.

All the combinations, even to the point of the most unrealistic syncretisms (astrology, sexology, tarot, Zen, numerology, etc.) are possible. They are so possible that one can even ask, with some perplexity, what strange conceptual stew assures the ties between all of these elements. One can ask, for example, always with some perplexity, what does a world governed by the interlaced laws of astrology, sophrology, Ericksonian hypnosis, Zen Buddhism, and Freudian psychoanalysis resemble? One is however required to admit that such worlds exist, and that people live in them!

On the other hand, in this soothing context, the definitively negative aspects of existence (the certainty of death, the oppressions of agony, incurable diseases, insurmountable trials, traumata with irreversible consequences) are not freely mentioned, as if one feared that their very evocation might darken the atmosphere of fun and well-being that these therapies attempt to create. They spend no time at all on the pessimistic diagnosis that most wisdoms made of human existence, such as Seneca's famous 'You were born to die.' This voluntary indifference places them in a paradoxical situation, because how can one claim, in the same movement, to lighten humanity's suffering without evoking all of them, and seeking out their ultimate causes?

In order to understand how such a contradiction can not appear for what it is, one must remember the beliefs and illusions that a large part of our contemporaries share. These therapies perhaps definitively represent nothing but one of the possible expressions next to those that one finds in the paradisiacal fictions that contemporary hedonism peddles. These beliefs and illusions also feed a large part of popular contemporary mythology. We find its favourite themes in them.

If a requiring ethics, an intensive use of the will, divestment or frugality, silence and solitude, intellectual rectitude, courage, frequent examinations of conscience, and difficult and tiring exercises are not usually required by these therapies, one should certainly not be surprised, because these themes have for quite some time not been part of the current principles of education. On the other hand, in a completely symmetrical manner, these contemporary therapies privilege everything that is 'soft', 'light', easy, and quick. Would not the demand of long and difficult effort or sacrifice appear as a marketing error? Sensitive to the themes in fashion, they always evoke, as good gourmands, 'personal' self-fulfilment, desires, and well-being. Never, in all the history of humanity, have human sensuality and narcissism

been indulged and caressed to this point. Nothing is too beautiful for them, nothing is too expensive. Veritable odes to happiness, their promotional arguments tacitly recognize that this is a right, thus forgetting that whatever comes from an incredible effort, which itself merits to be called 'personal', cannot be considered a right. Careful to not let down the expectations of their contemporaries, they also tacitly suppose that individual liberty is at the service of our aspirations to well-being, while, in the eyes of the wisdoms, we must first of all free ourselves from our own tendencies and weaknesses.

This contrasting comparison inevitably leads to a last question that cannot be avoided: are these modern techniques, which are so radically contrary to the teachings of the wisdoms and their austere commitments, at least efficacious? The wisdoms, one will have noted many times, judged that human nature is fragile, that humanity has numerous weaknesses, and that the human condition is difficult. They also considered that the serenity they could bring individuals is always proportional to the effort that they have made beforehand. These different aspects proved to be indissociable, and traced the contours of a lucid and pragmatic anthropology. On each of these critical points, contemporary therapies have adopted diametrically opposed positions, which are characterized by euphemism and ease. Once one neglects the most difficult aspects of the human condition, one adopts an optimistic conception of individual life and personality, one perpetuates the reassuring myth of happiness in people's minds, and one avoids proposing an overly severe method, one undoubtedly keeps oneself from obtaining any significant results. What harm is there, one might ask, in enjoying a small spoonful of honey from time to time? One must simply be aware that it does not cure any profound and enduring evil. While harmless, it is also inefficacious.

The comparison of the great wisdoms with these contemporary therapies has been informative. It has allowed us to better understand one of the 'mythologies' of our age. But it also and above all allows us to better evaluate, in conclusion, the considerable influence that these wisdoms have had in the history of the human race.

Because of both their original ethos and their efficacious techniques, the wisdoms are one of humanity's greatest conquests, perhaps the most important one. They have undoubtedly been the great educators of the human race. Thanks to them, but always in various degrees, individuals have learned to have a more clear-sighted perspective on

themselves and their condition. Some have drawn the strength and courage from them to endure this condition, that is so often difficult and painful. At the same time, by teaching individuals the means of fortifying themselves, they convinced them that their fundamental fragility should not be considered to be an ineluctable fatality. They taught individuals to view extreme danger with composure, and death calmly. It is hard to envisage what this progress implies in terms of effort, will, lucidity, and self-knowledge.

Considered to be austere and rigid, they instead cultivated the infinitely refined art of measure and the happy medium. Frequently accused of being sad or even sinister,¹⁶ the wisdoms have mainly suffered from remaining in the shadow of 'religions' and their study. The latter have retained the attention, all the attention, of the human sciences. The modern theories of the 'religious', from Schleiermacher to Bourdieu, from Marx to Eliade, have attracted the greatest minds and contributed to the rejection of the wisdoms to the fringes of historical and anthropological studies, to the point that they wound up becoming insignificant and unrecognizable. On the contrary, heirs of twenty-five centuries of metaphysical controversies, considered prestigious by most clerics and intellectuals, these theories of the 'religious' have always instigated and monopolized debates. Thus, often without being questioned, they have affirmed with aplomb that they unveiled the ultimate and most essential truths. While the wisdoms, like Lucretius, affirmed that, of all illusions, the one that affirms a providential world or nature with humanity at the centre is undoubtedly the most misleading:

To say however that it is for men that [god] desired to prepare the world and its marvels, and that consequently his admirable work merits all our praise, that one must believe it is eternal and destined to immortality, that this building was constructed by the ancient wisdom of god for the human race and is founded on eternity, that it is sacrilege to shake its foundations by any attack, to speak ill of it, and to wish to turn it upside down—all of these propositions, and whatever else one can imagine of this sort, Memmius, are rubbish. What benefit could beings that enjoy

¹⁶ Christian spirituality has, as noted in the chapter titled *Suffering and Culpability*, a serious responsibility here. It was it that deviated the teaching of the wisdoms by trapping them under the weight of sin and the macabre model of crucifixion. Likewise, one should absolutely avoid a Christian reading of Stoicism by retrospectively introducing the deleterious effects of culpability into it; see Seneca, *The Constancy of the Wise Man*, I, 9, and note 7 p. 170.

an eternal beatitude hope for from our recognition, so that they might undertake anything at all for us?

As for so-called magical or religious beliefs, however subtle and refined they may be, it seems that their ultimate principle resides in the incapacity of people to accept 'things the way they are',¹⁷ that is, paraphrasing the Buddha, 'composite', 'painful', and 'ephemeral'. Individuals often prefer, instead of this appeasing but so heroic vision, the conviction that things also obey other powers, that are greater and more efficacious than the sickly ones that animate their ordinary gestures:

wherever their miseries have led them to it, they [humans] sacrifice to the dead, they immolate black sheep, they present offerings to the divinities of the dead; and the very acuity of their evils does nothing but further agitate their spirits to turn towards religion.¹⁸

It is true that, by refusing the help of anything marvellous, transcendent, or supernatural, the wisdoms resolutely placed themselves outside these providential speculations and their cortège of magical practices. Nonetheless, far from being grateful to them, 'we' (since it is certainly a collective prejudice) have often preferred to recognize this as a weakness or a lacuna, while it was instead the most obvious result of a concerted intellectual effort. The refusal of beliefs and superstitions that distance a person from him- or herself is not the sign of a fundamental incapacity, but the fruit of a veritable intellectual ascesis, as Lucretius had already noted:

Piety is not to always be seen in a veil and turned towards a rock, and to go to all the altars; nor is it to bend to the ground in prostration, or to hold one's hands open before divine sanctuaries; nor is it to cover the altars with animal blood, or to constantly add vow upon vow—it is *instead to be able to view everything with a calm spirit*.¹⁹

¹⁷ See note 45 p. 114.

¹⁸ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, V, 156–67 and III, 50–4. Here, as in the following quotation, the words 'religion' and 'piety' designate the excessive, i.e. sick, fears, terrors, and scruples engendered by the 'fear of the gods'. On this point, see Georges Dumézil, *La Religion romaine archaïque*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Payot, 1974), p. 608. Lucretius affirms quite clearly, against the contemporary partisans of 'disenchantment' from the world (see notes 3–4 p. 223), that a 'religious' world, governed by the gods, is a terrifying and anxiety-ridden world. His proposal, the wisdom taught by Epicurus, seeks to free humanity from both from the 'fear of death' and the 'fear of the gods'.

¹⁹ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, V, 1196–203. Italics mine. See also I, 62–72: 'While in the eyes of all, humanity led a life on earth seriously oppressed by religion, which imposed its horrible face over mortals from the heavenly regions where its head

'Wisdoms' and 'religions' (or 'superstitions' or 'magic', as one wishes) are completely opposed, like the recollected silence of the first ones is opposed to the chattering of the second ones. One must therefore conserve this clear distinction where so many others would rather maintain an unacceptable confusion. The wise person is not the descendent of any *homo religiosus*, who is obsessed by the hereafter, immersed in a stream of the sacred, and fascinated by the gods. In order to allow him- or herself to confront the ravages of death and the terrors of this life, the admirable wise individual simply taught humanity the formidable honour of acquiescing. But it is perhaps in this acquiescence that one finds the highest imaginable witness of humanity.

was raised, a mortal, a Greek [Epicurus], was the first to raise his eyes and the first to oppose them. Neither the reputation of god, nor lightning, nor the threatening sounds of heaven held him in, but they instead more sharply irritated the virtue of his soul, so that he desired to break down the closed entry gates of nature. Thus the lively vigour of his soul prevailed.'

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