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*Individual, Society, Rationality, History**

Cornelius Castoriadis

As an old admirer of Max Weber,¹ I want to take the opportunity here to reexamine a series of questions which, as far as I am concerned, have been settled for a long time but which the “spirit of the times” has raised again in a fashion I find to be regressive, and whose decisive elucidation a critical confrontation with Weber, it seems to me, would allow.²

THE QUESTION OF INDIVIDUALISM

We all know that Max Weber taught what he called an individualist method. The ultimate goal of sociological and historical inquiry—for Weber, and rightly so, there is at bottom no distinction between these two objects of inquiry—would be to refer all phenomena investigated back to the effects of the acts and behaviour (*Verhalten*) of “one, few or many” determinate—that is to say, separate and definite—individuals. As he himself says in *Economy and Society* (p. 15, section no. 9), it is only in this way that “something more” becomes accessible, something “never attained in the natural sciences”: “the understanding of the behavior of the singular individuals that participate in these social structures”. This is certainly a very important point: all physical processes are describable, and they are often explainable, that is to say, they lead us back to “laws” which govern them. But they are not understandable, and in truth there is nothing there to be understood. On the other hand, various instances of human behaviour are—at least partially, at least virtually—understandable. Squabbles between children, a fit of jealousy, most often these sorts of behaviour can be understood as such and as they unfold, even in extraordinary and improbable ways (whereas it would be, strictly speaking, impossible to provide an “explanation” in the sense of the exact sciences). This task of the understanding is conditioned by the possibility that we can have what Weber calls *sympathisches Nacherleben*, a sympathetic (or empathic) reliving or recapturing of the behaviours and motivations of another.³ But this

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“empathic reliving” is not, as we shall see, the basic characteristic of “understanding”.

What Max Weber calls the individualist method seems to be opposed to a substantialist or ontological individualism. The sociology Weber wants to promote proceeds by constructing (or restituting) a subjectively understandable *meaning* of the behaviour (*Verhalten*) of single (*einzelnen*, “one or more”; *E&S* 13, no. 9) individuals. It accedes to this meaning all the better, or rather it can attain it, to the extent that this meaning is “rational”. This attainment of meaning is accomplished via the construction of ideal types (of individuals, or of instances of behaviour). I will return to these as well as to the enormous question of whether “the *signification* of social phenomena is *constructed* by the social scientist starting from a particular standpoint” (PhR, 51) and of whether no presuppositions are made during this construction relative to its object.

Fully anticipating the possible perversions of this view, Weber characterized in advance as a “monstrous misunderstanding” (*ungeheuer Missverständnis*) the attempt to draw from this “individualist method” an “individualist system of values” in any sense as well as every attempt to draw from “the unavoidable tendency of sociological *concepts* to assume a rationalist character” any conclusions concerning the “*pre-dominance* of rational motives” in human action or even a “positive *valuation* of rationalism” (*E&S* 18, no. 9; emphasis added; cf. also *E&S* 6–7, no. 3). Those who are familiar with his violent and obsessively repeated criticisms of Rudolph Stammler can easily imagine the harsh sarcasm he would have heaped upon the “individualism” and “rationalism” found in the social sciences today—not to speak of the pseudopolitical conclusions that have been drawn therefrom, using arguments that resemble nothing so much as the syllogism that “unicorns exist, therefore the universe is made of quince preserves”. Upon such arguments Friedrich von Hayek has made his reputation.

From this perspective, what can be said of “social collectivities” or “social formations”? Weber’s expressions are, in these cases, so categorical that it can immediately be seen that if the individualist method does not involve taking an “evaluative”, and still less a political position, it is nevertheless tantamount to an ontological decision concerning the Being of the social-historical: “For the interpretive understanding of behavior ... these social collectivities must be treated as solely (*lediglich*) the

resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of *individual* persons since, for us, these alone can be treated as comprehensible agents of meaning-oriented action” (or “bearers of meaningful behavior”: *sinnhaft orientiertem Handeln*; *E&S* 13, no. 9).

This powerfully-worded statement is accompanied by three remarks concerning the relation between “the subjective interpretation of action” and “these collective concepts”:

- (a) It is often necessary to use expressions such as “State”, “family”, etc.—but one must avoid confusing them with the corresponding juridical concepts by imputing to them a “collective personality”.
- (b) The process of understanding must take into account that these “collective formations” are also “*representations* in the minds of real men”, and that they thus can “have a powerful, often a decisive (dominant, *beherrschende*) causal influence on the course of action of real individuals”. But clearly, in this context such “representations” can be thought of only as the *result* of the action of other “real individuals”.
- (c) There is an “organic” school of sociology that tries to explain social behaviour on the basis of “functional” considerations, the “parts” accomplishing the functions necessary for the existence of the “whole”. These kinds of considerations may have value, says Weber, as a “practical illustration”, for they may establish a “provisional orientation” for one’s investigations (but beware of the risk of “reifying concepts”!) or they can be heuristically useful (allowing one, for example, to detect the most important actions within a given context). But all this is just a prelude to the work of sociology proper, which alone accomplishes the true task: the understanding of the behaviour of individual participants (*E&S* 13–14, no. 9; cf. also the remarks on Othmar Spann’s “universalistic method” or “holism”, *ibid.*, 17–18).

These remarks clearly have no import on the level of basic principles. Weber’s individualist method does not prevent him from ultimately deciding the ontological question in the most categorical of terms: “The real empirical sociological investigation begins with the questions: What motives *have determined* and *do determine* the singular (*einzelnen*) members and participants in this ‘collectivity’ to behave

in such a way that this community came into being (was formed, created: *entstand*) in the first place and that it *continues to exist*?" (*E&S* 18, no. 9; emphases added).

Only individual acts, therefore, would be "understandable" or "interpretable". But in what does this comprehensibility of theirs consist? Weber's "initial" formulations are broad and exhibit his prudence in this matter: "The basis for certainty in understanding can be either rational . . . or it can consist of an emotionally or artistically appreciative empathic reliving (*empfindend Nacherleben*)"; at the same time, he speaks of how difficult it is for us to understand "many ultimate 'ends' or 'values' toward which experience shows that human action may be oriented" if, when we "relive them in the empathic imagination" (*empfindende Phantasie*), they depart too radically "from our own ultimate values" (*E&S* 5, no. 3). He thus seems to maintain a balance between the two opposing poles, and their difference arises only from the relative difficulties involved in understanding each one. Let us note in passing, however, the underlying imprecision of this opposition: we understand more easily an action oriented toward ends or values which are near to our own and/or which unfold according to a rationality of means relating to ends; we have more trouble understanding, and sometimes we do not understand at all, actions which occur in conformity with ends that are not our own and/or whose application appreciably departs from the rationality of means relating to ends. (In line with what is becoming more and more the current usage, I will call the later "instrumental rationality". Weber's term, *Zweckrationalität*, which in this one case is rather unfortunate, really means *Mittelrationalität*, rationality of means used, which obviously can be adjudged only in relation to an end that an actor has set forth and intended, whereas the literal translations, "end-related rationality" or "rationality according to ends" create an intolerable ambiguity.)

But in reality, if one attentively rereads the section of *Economy and Society* entitled "Methodological Foundations" while keeping this problematic in mind, there is little possible doubt about the double movement being made there. On the one hand, the "understanding" is reduced more and more to the understanding of instrumentally-rational action. On this point, let me quote at length from this section, for the passage (*E&S* 18–19, no. 10; emphases added) sheds light on almost all aspects of the entire matter at hand:

These laws /which interpretive sociology tries to establish/ are both comprehensible and univocal to the highest degree insofar as at the foundation of the typically observed course of action lies pure instrumentally-rational motivations, ... and insofar as the relations of means and end are, according to the rules laid down by experience, also univocal ... In such cases one may assert that *insofar as* the action was rigorously rational in an instrumental way, it *would have had to* (*müsste*, in the sense of necessity and not obligation) occur *in this way and no other* ...

The examples cited (arithmetical calculation, insertion of such and such a proposition in such and such a place in a proof, rational decision of a person acting according to the determinate interests involved in undertaking an action corresponding to the results s/he would expect) are clear-cut. On the other hand, Weber amasses a series of examples of behaviour which are not instrumentally rational: *all* traditional activity, many aspects of charismatic actions (*ESS* 17, no. 9)—and of course, reactions—then (*ESS* 21–22, no. 11) the quasi-totality of “real action” which “goes on in the great majority of cases in a state of apathetic (vague, numb: *dumpf*) semi-consciousness or unconsciousness of the ‘meaning one intends’”. “In most cases the individual’s action is governed by impulse or habit ... Really effective meaningful behaviour (*sinnhaftes Handeln*), where the meaning is fully conscious and explicit /whether it be ‘rational or irrational’/ is a marginal case”. Whence the conclusion, already formulated: “All these facts do not discharge interpretive sociology from the obligation, in full awareness of the narrow limits to which it is confined, to accomplish what it alone *can* do” (*ESS* 17, no. 9; emphases added).

So that no one hastens to object that within traditional, habitual, semi-conscious or unconscious behaviour can be found a sort of “rationality”, let us note that there are two unsatisfactory options: either we know nothing about it or, in order to establish its existence, we would have to have recourse to ideas of “objective rationality” which Weber had dismissed in advance—and rightly so, given the horizon of his philosophical views—for, as Weber says, “we shall speak of ‘action’ insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective *meaning* to his behavior”. Such meaning “may refer first to the actual or effective (*tatsächlich*) existing meaning in the given concrete case of a particular actor, or to

the average or approximate meaning attributable to a given plurality of actors; or second, to the meaning subjectively *intended* by the actor or actors *thought of* as types within a conceptually constructed *pure type*" (*E&S* 4, no. 1; emphases added). And in any case, a mystery would remain: Why and how do the great majority of individuals in the great majority of their acts act simply because they have become habituated to act in that way, what does it signify in relation to the *very being* of human individuals, and what can we say of the *instauration* (each time pristine) of these "habits" or of "tradition"? What can we say, too, of the prospects and chances for interpretive sociology if the latter, when faced with 95 per cent of human history, must confine itself to saying: that is not understandable, but it is traditional?

We will have to criticize the philosophical foundations of Weber's position. But before doing that, we must understand the logic (and, arising from its foundations, the necessity) of his attitude.

Sociology must understand, and not (or not simply) explain. (I will return below to the mistaken idea that one can *separate absolutely* these two moments.) What can one understand? Meaning. And, according to Weber, there is no meaning except "in", "through" and "for" actual individuals (even if as simply for the social scientist who "constructs" this meaning)—in any case, it is an *intended* meaning (*gemeinter*; the German word strongly suggests the "subjective" side, and it is quite close to the Greek *doxazō*). But what sociology is to understand is not simply an "isolated" meaning, supposing that such a thing could exist. It has to understand the concatenation of people's acts—the socially oriented behaviour of individuals—and not "explain" them, as physics does, by mere acknowledgment of incomprehensible irregularities. And as far as possible, sociology has to understand these concatenations as *necessary*. It is thus, and thus alone, according to Weber, that it can be a science. Its task (*E&S* 12, no. 7; emphases added) is to furnish "a *correct causal interpretation*," and this requires that "the process which is claimed to be typical must appear adequately grasped on the level of meaning and at the same time that its interpretation must to some degree be shown to be causally adequate". For Weber, causality is essential. Now, what must really be called, in the last analysis, Weber's rationalistic (methodological, but also ontological) individualism depends entirely upon this connection between causality (necessity) and understanding, which is inevitably represented (we shall soon see why) by rational intelligibility. Indeed, in opposition to the "stupid regulari-

rationally connected concatenation of acts is bound to appear to us as both intelligible and necessary—intelligible in each of its moments and in their connection, and likewise necessary. (To Weber's chosen examples, cited above, one can add that of the general who, under given circumstances and with given means at his disposal, would have made those decisions that were instrumentally rational in view of the end he had set for himself; here we would be able to "*explain* in causal terms" the distance, the margin of deviation of his actual acts, by the intervention of "misinformation, strategical errors, logical fallacies, personal temperament or considerations outside the realm of strategy"; *E&S* 21, no. 11.)

Now, causality signifies neither "irreversibility" nor any kind of temporal ordering and still less, quite clearly, a mere, empirically established, regular succession from one phenomenon to another. Causality signifies the regularity of a succession whose *necessity is expressed by a universal law*. In the case of the physical sciences, the universality of the law, *formaliter spectata*, is a prerequisite for scientific thought and, *materialiter spectata*, it is represented by the, in principle indefinite, reproducibility of the particular succession under investigation. (I am leaving aside here such distinctions as experimentation, observation, indirect inference, and so on, which are of only secondary importance in relation to my theme.) But in the case of social-historical phenomena (I repeat that for Weber there is in this regard, and rightly so, no essential distinction between society and history) both reproducibility and even non-trivial repetition properly speaking are beyond our grasp, for a thousand reasons that have been stated many times and which still would be enlarged upon. Now, it is precisely this absence of reproducibility which, from his causalist perspective, gives substance to Weber's remarks on "rationality" and intelligibility. The intrinsic intelligibility of a concatenation of motivations and acts is precisely what effectively substitutes for the kind of reproducibility found in the experimental sciences (as it increases, moreover, our "understanding"). Experimental reproducibility is replaced, in effect, by a *statement of potentially indefinite reproducibility* of the sort: "Every other rational individual in X's place would have decided, when faced with the same circumstances, to employ the same means, Y". Or, if you prefer: *qua* rational individuals, we are all substitutable for one another and each of us "would have to reproduce" the same sorts of behaviour when confronted with the same conditions. (Let us note that under these conditions the

very singularity of historical events is dissolved, except in the form of a numerical singularity, or of irrational deviation: “What would you have done under these conditions?” “Exactly what he did”. “And why didn’t you do it?” “I drank too much champagne”.)

If such potential reproducibility, itself issuing from considerations of “rationality”, is, however, lacking, what Weber calls the *Fehlen an Sinnadäquanz*—a lack or shortage of adequation of meaning—comes into play, thus reducing the observed regularity to an “incomprehensible” or “statistical” regularity (*E&S* 12, no. 7)—that is to say, it makes us retreat to the side of the observational physical sciences. And this is true even for “psychic elements”: “the more precisely they are formulated from the point of view of natural science, the less does one understand them. This is never the road to interpretation in terms of an intended *meaning*” (*E&S* 13, no. 9; emphasis added). Certainly, as Weber adds, incomprehensible processes and regularities are not for all that any less “valuable”; but for sociology their role is the same as that of all factual situations established by other scientific disciplines (from physics to physiology). They belong to the conditions, obstacles, requirements, incitements and so on that the non-social world presents to people in their capacity as social actors.

Is there not then beneath all of this any philosophy (other than a “theory of knowledge of the social sciences”)? Oh, indeed there is! It is not even worthwhile entering into discussion over the untenable idea of the existence of some “method” (or “theory of knowledge”) that would involve *no* ontology. Without the two interconnected assertions—viz. that *there is* something comprehensible in society and history and that what is understandable *is* (*par excellence*, if one wants to insist on the point) the “rational” dimension of *individual* action—Weber’s method would no longer possess an object of investigation (and one would no longer understand why he has chosen to apply this method to society and history rather than to the expansion of galaxies). There is no point in adding such phrases as “we do as if . . .” (why not use this same “as if” in molecular biology?) or “we are speaking of the parts covered by our method without making any judgements about the totality” (therefore *there very well are* parts which your method takes in, and this fact cannot depend upon your method *alone* since the other parts resist its application). The origin of the idea that the comprehensible is the product of individual action can be traced back to Vico and his celebrated statement, *verum et factum convertuntur*—truth and (human)

deeds/facts are interchangeable, or, more freely but still faithfully: only that which we have done is intelligible and everything that we have done is intelligible—and upstream from Vico, all the way back to Hobbes. Of course, the origin of this idea is to be found in theological philosophy: when, in the *Timaeus*, Plato wants to “explain” the world, he makes its constitution *understandable* “as much as possible” by putting himself in the place, so to speak, of a “rational” demiurge (indeed, one placed at the summit of “rationality”: a mathematician and geometer) who works on the basis of a model that is itself “rational”. (If the world is not completely “rational”, it is that Plato, who in spite of everything remains Greek, has contrived for his demiurge to work upon matter that is itself irrational and independent. This option is not open for the Christian theology of an omnipotent God.) Clearly, the same scheme predominates in German idealism (the intelligible is correlative to the action of a subject—finite in Kant, infinite according to Hegel). In all events, Weber’s Kantian and neo-Kantian roots are well known and quite evident, especially in this regard.

To air out the discussion a bit and to expose more clearly the stakes involved, let us take our distance in the most brutal terms possible. Without prejudicing the moment of partial truth it contains, Vico’s statement as well as the whole constellation of ideas denoted by it is false. We would not live in the world we live in, but in another, if everything we did was intelligible and if what we did was alone intelligible to us (— as individuals or as a collection of individuals designatable by name). It hardly is worth recalling that not all of what we do or of what others do or have done is intelligible (or, oftentimes, even understandable, however broadly we expand the meaning of this term). And many things—the most decisive—are intelligible to us without us having done them or without us being able to “redo” them, to reproduce them. I have not made up the idea of a norm or law (in the effective, sociological sense, not in the “transcendental” one); I might invent a particular law but not the *idea* of a social law (the idea of institution). In vain will it be said that concretely designatable persons have taught me language; to teach me language, they already had to have possessed it. Will one go so far as to maintain that “rational individuals”, driven by their “interests” or their “ideas”, have *consciously* made up language (language in general, or some particular language)? (“Will one go even further and maintain that it is only to the extent that language has been done *consciously* that it is intelligible?”) Let us stop laughing, and sim-

ply ask: *Without language*, is a “rational” and “conscious” individual conceivable as an effective individual (and even as a “transcendental subject”)?

We know how Dilthey, starting from a perspective of “individualistic” (and, at the beginning, “psychological”) understanding and borrowing from Hegel while rejecting Hegelian metaphysics, was led to take into account the manifestations of what he calls, following Hegel but with a meaning much larger than what is found in the latter’s philosophy, the “objective spirit” (which practically overlaps completely with what I call the institution): language, custom, forms of life, family, society, State, law, etc. Though as early as 1883 he had characterized the individual as an abstraction, one may also rightly note the persistence in Dilthey of the principle of *verum factum*: “The field /of the sciences of the mind/ is identical to that of the understanding and consequently the object of understanding is the objectivization of life. Thus the field of the sciences of the mind is determined by the objectivization of life in the outer world. *The mind can understand only what it has created*” (from Dilthey’s *Der Aufbau der Geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* in *Gesammelte Schriften* /1915/, vol. 7; emphasis added; cited by PhR, 86). Dilthey’s philosophical position here is clearly confused. *Something* is objectivized which is not Hegelian Reason or the World Spirit; it is called, incidentally, “life” or “mind”—and that in which it objectivizes “itself” is *de jure* understandable to us (across differences in times and places). Also, the conditions for this understanding remain obscure: it could be said that we participate in this “life” and in this “mind”—but is that a sufficient condition, especially once it is no longer a matter of understanding “rational” activities alone but also the totality of human experience and above all its “objectivized” forms?

This was not a problem for Max Weber—since, as we have seen, collective entities “appear anew as simple givens which the understanding must seek to reduce to the activity of individuals” (PhR, 121). But at what cost! One must endorse an ontology (that of critical philosophy) which affirms: *If there is meaning*, it is because *there is* a subject (an ego) that posits it (intends it, constitutes it, constructs it, etc.). And *if there is* a subject, it is because it *is* either the source and unique origin of meaning or meaning’s necessary correlate. That this subject is named, in philosophy, “ego” or “consciousness” in general and, in sociology, the “individual” undoubtedly creates serious questions (notably the problem of how to pass from the transcendental subject of

critical philosophy to the individual effectively acting in society, who, according to the principles of Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy, can only be the “psychological”, “empirical”, “phenomenal” subject), but it basically changes nothing. In both cases, the postulates and intentions of thought are clearly *egological*. Whatever one then does, there is one thing one cannot avoid doing: viz. presenting the social-historical as the “product” of the cooperation (or of the conflict) between “individuals” (or claiming, in an attenuation of this individualist methodology, that we can think about it only to the extent that it is individual).

What are these “individuals”? Two paths open up, and both lead to untenable conclusions:

- (a) Either it will be said that the essential aspect of individual behaviour is “rational” (or progress toward “rationality”)—and if I can understand the individual, it is because I participate in the same “rationality”. We immediately proceed, full steam ahead, toward a (Hegelian) absolute idealism as concerns history, even if this is labelled “reconstruction of historical materialism”, as it is in Habermas. That one might happen, within this “rationality”, to distinguish between a “logic of interests” and a “logic of ideas” (or “representations”) changes nothing: it is still a matter of logic; and if there be conflict, it would be a conflict between two logics. Everything that does not come under this heading, everything that cannot be rationally reconstructed in a philosophy seminar—not much, really, just the totality of human history—is scoria, a gap to be filled in progressively, a learning stage, a passing failure in the “problem solving” exercises assigned to humanity (by whom and for what purpose?) or—why not?—“primitive nonsense”, as old Engels said.
- (b) Or, following Terence (*humani nihil alienum puto*) and the great classical philosophers, I take the “individual” in its fullness, with its capacity for “rationality” but also with its passions, affects, desires, etc. I then find myself faced with a “human nature” that is more or less determined but assuredly identical across space and time—and whose latest avatar is a pseudopschoanalytical marionette which, it must be said, Freud himself had a substantial hand in fabricating. Even supposing that, following the path that leads from *The Republic*, *The Leviathan*, *Totem and Taboo*, etc.,

I might be able to understand why and, above all, how this being could produce a society, I remain with the following enigma: why and how has it produced so many different societies, and why has it produced a history (and indeed many of them)?

Two things fill me with an ever-renewed sense of wonderment: the starry sky above me and the ineradicable hold these schemata have on my contemporary fellow authors. Learning, we are told once again today, is the basic motor of human history. Considering the ease with which people “forget” psychoanalysis, ethnology, prehistory, history—or, more concretely, two world wars, gas chambers, the Gulag, Pol Pot, Khomeini, and so on and so forth—we must concede that learning is not a motive force, not even a secondary one, for contemporary reflection in this domain.

THE SOCIAL-HISTORICAL AND THE PSYCHICAL

We do not “understand” all individual acts of behaviour, not even our own—far from it—and we can understand “objects” that are irreducible to individual acts of behaviour when they belong to the field of the social-historical. The social-historical world is the world of meaning—of significations—and of the *effective* or *actual /effectif/* meaning. This world cannot be thought of as a mere “intended ideality”, it must be borne by *instituted forms*, and it penetrates into the very depths of the human psychism, decisively fashioning it in almost all of its discernible */repérables/ manifestations*. “Effective meaning” does not necessarily mean (and, moreover: *never* exhaustively means) meaning for an individual. The dividing line between “nature” as the object of the “experimental” sciences and the social-historical does not have to do with the existence or non-existence of individual behaviour. Whether it is a matter of acts of individuals, collective phenomena, artifacts or institutions, I am always dealing with something that is constituted as such by the *immanent actuality of a meaning*—or of a *signification*—and this is sufficient for me to place the object within a horizon of social-historical apprehension. That there may be limit-cases (Is this pebble “natural”, or has it been worked upon?) does not weaken our assertion any more than does the fact that we might have trouble deciding whether someone is trembling with rage or shaking because s/he is suffering from a neurological condition. The understanding is our mode of access to this world—and it does not necessarily, nor by its essence, require recourse

to the individual. If, in reading the *Parmenides* or the *Lex duodecim tabularum*, I understand these writings, it is not because I am sympathetically reliving someone's behaviour. Faced with a social-historical phenomenon I have the (in the immense majority of cases, enigmatic) possibility of "sympathetically reliving" or "reconstituting" a meaning for an individual; but I am *always* gripped by the presence, the "incarnation" of meaning. That I might try to make understandable as well the "intentions" of an author, the possible "reactions" of his/her potential readership, changes nothing. The social/historical object is co-constituted by the activities of individuals, which incarnate or concretely realize the society in which they live. And in extreme cases I can take account of these activities only "nominally". A dead language studied as a no longer evolving corpus, Roman law as a system, these are *institutions* that are accessible as such; they do not refer back to individual actors except "at the margin" or in a wholly abstract manner. And, far from considering language as the "product" of cooperation between individual thoughts, it is language that tells me, first of all, what was thinkable for individuals and how it was so.

In opposition to a substantialist or ontological individualism, a methodological individualism would be an approach that refuses (as Weber does explicitly) to ask questions of the kind: "Is it the individual or society that comes 'first'?" "Is it society that produces individuals or individuals that produce society?" while asserting that we are not obliged to answer such "ontological" questions, the only thing that we might (come to) understand being the behaviour of the (actual or ideal-typical) individual—this behaviour itself being all the more comprehensible when it is "rational" (or at least "instrumentally rational"). But what is the actual /*effectif*/ individual—and what is *effective* rationality?

The individual is not, to begin with and in the main, anything other than society. The individual/society opposition, when its terms are taken rigorously, is a total fallacy. The opposition, the irreducible and unbreakable polarity, is that between *psyche* and society. Now, the *psyche* is *not* the individual; the *psyche* *becomes* individual solely to the extent that it undergoes a process of socialization (without which, moreover, neither it nor the body it animates would be able to survive an instant). We need not pretend we do not know when we do. Surely, Heraclitus has not been "surpassed": as he says, we will not reach the limits of the *psyche*, even after having traversed its entire path (or all its

paths). But we know that human beings are born with a given biological constitution (which is extremely complex, rigid in certain respects and endowed with an incredible plasticity in others) and that its make-up includes a psyche so long as it is functioning. Though we are far from knowing everything about the latter, we nevertheless know quite a lot. The more we explore it, the more we discover that it is essentially alogical, that in this regard the terms “ambivalent” and “contradictory” give us an idea of its mode of being only to an immensely slight degree. But we also know when exploring the psyche that we encounter on all its strata the effects of a process of socialization that it undergoes as soon as it comes into the world—and this is so not only because the patient of psychoanalysis must put his dreams into words or because the psychoanalyst must think on the basis of certain categories.

This process itself is certainly a social activity. And as such, it is always necessarily mediated by identifiable individuals, the mother for example—but it is *not only* them. Not only are these individuals always already themselves socialized, but what they “transmit” goes far beyond them: let us say, roughly speaking and so as to point out merely one feature, that they provide the means and the modes of access to virtually the whole of the social world as it is instituted in each instance, this whole being a totality which they in no way need to possess in actuality /*effectivement*/ (and which, moreover, they *could not* in fact “possess” in actuality). And there are not only individuals: language *as such* is an “instrument” of socialization (though it certainly is not only that!) whose effects go immeasurably beyond everything the mother who teaches it to her child could “intend”. And as Plato already knew, children (and youths and adults) are socialized by the very walls of their city well beyond any explicit “intention” of those who constructed them.

I will not repeat here what I have set forth at length elsewhere upon many occasions (*Institution*, Ch. 6; *Subject*, *passim*). I will simply summarize my views by saying that the socialization of individuals—itsself a socially instituted process, and in each case a different one—opens up these individuals, giving them access to a *world* of social imaginary significations whose instauration as well as incredible *coherence* (the differentiated and articulated homology of its parts as well as their synergy) goes unimaginably beyond everything that “one or many individuals” could ever produce (*MRT*, pp. 135–156). These significations owe their actual (social-historical) existence to the fact that they are *instituted*. They are not reducible to the transubstantiation of psychical drives: sublimation

is the psychical side of the process whose social side is the fabrication of the individual. And they are obviously not reducible to "rationality", whatever breadth one grants to the meaning of this term. To state that they are is to oblige oneself to produce, here and now, a "rational dialectic" of history and even of histories in the plural; one would have to explain, for instance, in what way and how during the 14th and 15th centuries, the civilizations of the Aztecs, Incas, Chinese, Japanese, Mongols, Hindus, Persians, Arabs, Byzantines and West-Europeans, *plus everything* that could be enumerated from other cultures on the African, Australian, Asian, and American continents, represent simply different "figures of rationality" and, above all, how a "synthesis" of them could be made—here's the state of the World Spirit in 1453, for example, and here's why, in and through this diversity on the phenomenal level, the underlying unity of Reason, whether human or not, manifests itself—or, lacking this, here's how these civilizations could be *ordered* rationally (for, a Reason that could not, even "dialectically", give order to and establish a hierarchy for its manifestations should be put out to pasture). The thick-headedness displayed in the various versions of contemporary rationalism when confronted with these questions—which questions themselves could be multiplied indefinitely and which are as basic as they are incapable of being circumvented—clearly shows that it represents much less a stage in the history of thought than a regression of an *ideological* nature (the motivations behind this ideology cannot detain us here). The philosophy of history does not begin with a reading of Kant but with a study of human sacrifices among the Aztecs, the massive conversions of Christian peoples to Islam in half of the Eastern Empire, or Nazism and Stalinism, to take a few examples.

On the other hand, if we grant the existence of a level of Being unknown to inherited ontology, which is the social-historical *qua* anonymous collective, and its mode of being *qua* radical imaginary in its capacity as *instituting* and *creative of significations*, we will be able to keep in mind the weighty evidences social-historical phenomena themselves present to us—viz. the irreducibility of the institution and of social significations to "individual activity"; society's coherence, beyond the functional level, in matters relating to *meaning*; the mutual irreducibility of different social-historical formations and of all of them to some sort of "progress of Reason". The existence of this level is shocking only because people do not wish to depart from settled habits of thought; in itself, there is nothing more (or less) astonishing about it than that

other level of being whose existence everyone stupidly accepts, if I dare say so, because they believe they have always seen it : viz. life itself. The existence of the social-historical is revealed (and even “proven”) by its irreducible effects; if we do not grant its existence then we must, in no uncertain terms, make of language, and of languages in the plural (and this is only *one* example), a biological phenomenon (as Habermas practically does). These same effects reveal its creative character: where else does one see a *form of Being* like the institution? It is a creation that manifests itself, *inter alia*, by the enormous diversity of social forms as well as in their historical succession. And this creation is *ex nihilo*: when humanity creates the institution and signification, it does not “combine” some “elements” that it would have found scattered about before it. It creates the *form* institution, and in and through this form it creates *itself* as *humanity* (which is something other than an assembly of bipeds). “Creation *ex nihilo*”, “creation of form” does not mean “creation *cum nihilo*”, that is to say, without “means”, unconditionally, on a *tabula rasa*. Apart from one (or perhaps several) point(s) of origin which is (are) inaccessible and unfathomable and which itself (themselves) *lean(s)* on properties of the first natural stratum, of the human being as biological being, *and* of the psyche, all historical creation takes place upon, in, and through the already instituted (not to mention whatever surrounding “concrete” conditions there may be). This conditions it and limits it—but does not *determine* it; and quite clearly, still less does it do so in a “rational” manner since in major instances what occurs is a passage from one magma of social imaginary significations to another (*Institution*, Ch. 7; *Domaines*, 385–418). Thus it is a mere rhetorical objection to state that if there is creation in history then Homer could have been located somewhere between Shakespeare and Goethe. None of these “phenomena” (authors) can be detached from its own social-historical world—and it just so happens that, in *this* case, these worlds succeed one another by “being conscious”, more or less, of those that preceded them in *this* segment of human history. The existence of conditions during a succession of such phases does not suffice to make such a succession “rationally causal”. My reading of Hegel enters into the conditions for my thinking at this moment; if, against all odds, I succeeded in thinking something *new*, Hegel will not have been the “cause” of such an occurrence. The world built upon the ruins of the Roman Empire from the 5th century onwards is inconceivable without Greece, Rome, the New Testament, and the Germanic

barbarians. This in no way signifies that it springs from an “addition”, “combination” or “synthesis” of elements from these four sources (and others one could think of). It is a creation of new social-historical forms (which are, moreover, radically other in the Eastern Empire and in the Western barbarian kingdoms); they confer an essentially new meaning upon the very elements which pre-existed them, and which they “utilize” (*Domaines*, 231-333). To speak of a “synthesis” in such instances is pure mental laziness and a dreary repetition of old clichés; they blind one, for example, to the fact that the “utilization” of Greek philosophy by Christian theology would have been impossible without a huge distortion of this philosophy (whose effects, moreover, are still making themselves felt) or that the institutionalization (and already the spread) of Christianity has required the abandonment of essential elements of the New-Testament faith, such as its acosmic outlook and the purported imminence of Parousia (the Second Coming). Far from being able to “explain” or “understand” the Byzantine world on the basis of these elements, I must, quite to the contrary, understand the Byzantine world as a form for itself and a new magma of instituted significations in order to “explain” and “understand” what its pre-existing elements have become through the new meaning they have acquired. In the actual practice of such an investigation, there is certainly always a give-and-take between the two approaches, but this in no way alters the main point on the level of principle. (For a sketch of the problems involved in, and the means available to the understanding, see “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy”, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* (New School for Social Research), 9, 2 (Fall 1983), pp. 81-93; forthcoming in my *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (Oxford University Press)).

Of this, at least, Weber was thoroughly convinced *as well*—even if his terminology differs from ours. The true referent for the “incomparability” or “incommensurability” of “values” and ultimate “ends” of “people’s social acts” and for the “war of the gods” is the otherness or *alterity* of different social-historical worlds and of the imaginary significations that animate these worlds. They express his acute perception of the problem created by the irreducible multiplicity of the forms through which the social-historical deploys itself as well as his profound awareness of the impossibility of giving these forms, when considered in themselves, any hierarchical ordering. But this allows an ineradicable antinomy to remain in his thought. As clear as is his refusal to consider modern “rationality” and “rationalization” as *de jure* “superior”

to other forms of social existence—and I will add, for my own part, that from *other* points of view, notably philosophical and political, this refusal is highly criticizable and ultimately unacceptable—his “violent rejection /*refus*/ of historical irrationalism” (PhR) *obliges him*, due to the irreducibility of “ultimate values” (i.e. of other imaginary significations), to set up a rationalist individualism (which, we have seen, cannot simply be “methodological” in character) and to establish instrumental rationality as the horizon of intelligibility for the social-historical. We should now be capable of seeing how the two terms of the antinomy feed upon each other: the more people’s acts are motivated “in the last analysis” by adherence to mutually irreducible “ultimate values” (and, of course, to “Reason”), the more “scientific” analysis has to fall back on instrumental rationality as the only solid field of investigation; and the more “rationality” is postulated as the ultimate horizon of the understanding, the more the “ultimate values” of different cultures become *de facto* inaccessible and the understanding of the social-historical world finds itself reduced to the reconstitution of a few fragments, or instrumentally-rational dimensions, of human action.

But what is this “instrumental rationality” itself? The “instrumental rationality” of human individuals is, each time, socially instituted and imposed. (That this imposition encounters in the psyche what, through a difficult and painful process, makes it possible, is another question; cf. *Subject*.) It is, for example, impossible without language. Now, every language conveys the totality of the social world to which it belongs. There are, of course, some “elements” of this rationality which, in the abstract, are transhistorical: $2 + 2 = 4$ is undoubtedly valid in every society. These are the elements which belong at the intersection (the common part) of the ensidic (the ensemblistic-identitary) understanding which every society must, at minimum, institute and which also correspond, sufficiently as to need /as Aristotle would say/, to the ensidic component of the first natural stratum upon which every society lives (*Institution*, Ch. 5). *However*, these elements are *always* co-determined to a great extent by the magma of social imaginary significations in which they are immersed, and which each time they instrument. Without such instrumentation, these significations could not even be *voiced*. But without these significations, the “rational” (ensidic) elements would have *no meaning*. A book in mathematics written entirely in formalized terms and containing *no* explanation of its symbols, its axioms and its rules of deduction, is totally incomprehensible. Thus, if one cannot

avoid taking these transhistorical elements into consideration (a condition which does not take us very far, however), it is impossible to have a *correct* access to these same elements as they are actually given in a certain society unless one first has viewed the imaginary institution of this society. I must know something of the Christian religion to avoid seeing in the statement "1 = 3", as propounded by a believer in or a theologian of the Holy Trinity, a pure and simple instance of absurdity. It is therefore impossible for me, in trying to carry out the Weberian "methodological" program, to consider individual behaviour as composed of a central "rational" (ensidic) component that is supposed (be it /only/ "methodologically") *everywhere and always the same* and of *individual* deviations from this "rationality". The understanding is instituted social-historically, and it is immersed in the overall imaginary institution of society. To speak in crude but clear terms: what is different in another society and another epoch is its very "rationality", for it is "caught" each time in another imaginary world. This does not mean that it is inaccessible to us; but this access must pass by way of an attempt (certainly always problematical; but how could it be otherwise?) to reconstitute the imaginary significations of the society in question.

In the second place—and this is another aspect of the same thing—the difference, the alterity, the deviation through which the object of social-historical inquiry is presented—and which constituted the principal difficulty for this inquiry—is of an entirely other order than the deviation of an instrumentally-rational form of behaviour from the actual behaviour observed. Marc Antony gave up the battle of Actium when he saw Cleopatra's vessel depart—though, "rationally speaking", he still had a chance of winning; this interference of passion in the application of instrumental rationality offers us no great enigma to resolve. What really astonishes us, and what constitutes the difficulty involved in the attainment of social-historical knowledge, is the enormous and massive alterity separating the representations, affects, motivations and intentions of the subjects of another society from our own. How can we begin to understand the behaviour of Arab warriors during Islam's great period of expansion, Christian soldiers during the Crusades, participants in the religious wars that tore apart Europe from 1530 until the Treaty of Westphalia, if the only instrument we have at our disposal is the ridiculous comparison between the instrumentally-rational component involved in each of these cases and that which deviates from this component? I will have understood nothing if I have not tried to pen-

strate an entirely other *world* of significations, motivations and affects; these certainly contain an ensidic component of *legein* and *teukhein*, but they are irreducible to it. And nearer to us, or rather closer to home: What good would it do me if I tried to understand the behaviour of Hitler, the SS and members of the Nazi party or Stalin and members of Stalinist parties as instances of instrumentally-rational behaviour which, on certain precise points, have deviated from this rationality (the two parts of this statement being, moreover, quite true)? What would I have understood then of totalitarianism? And how can one avoid seeing that in this case the very implementation of such a demented “instrumental rationality”, sometimes applied down to its tiniest details, has been dependent to a massive degree upon the imaginary of totalitarianism as well as decisively codetermined by it? Once again, one cannot avoid thinking that the return in force of such a “rationalist” individualism, and even of a certain rationalism, is actually motivated today as well by the desire to put an end (in words and philosophically) to the horrors of the 20th century, even while these horrors continue to happen and diversify before our very eyes.

The situation is reversed, but the question is rendered no more solvable, in the opposite case: alterity tends toward a minimum—and ideally toward zero—when the object of investigation is the researcher’s own society. In this case, the risk is that the researcher will consider the “rationality” of his/her society (and his/her very own rationality) as going without saying, as unquestionable, and that, for this very reason, s/he will fail to recognize that the imaginary that lies at the basis of his/her society and founds it in its singularity. Need we recall to what extent this risk has trapped some of the greatest thinkers—from Hegel and Marx to Freud and Max Weber himself, not to mention those among our contemporaries who are legion? It is in this way that the Prussian monarchy, capitalist technique and the capitalist organization of production, the patriarchal family and the modern bureaucracy have, each in their turn, appeared as the incarnations of an unquestionable (“instrumental” or substantive) rationality.

IDEAL TYPES

As conceived by Weber, the intended purpose of the (“scientific”) construction of ideal types is to establish “typical” concatenations of individual motivations and acts (which ought, in the “perfect” case, to be

both “adequate as to meaning” and “causally adequate”) and thereby also to establish ideal types of *individuals*, at least with regard to an aspect of their activity (“king”, “official”, “entrepreneur”, “magician”, to take examples Weber cites in *E&S* 18, no. 9). Now, one of the paradoxes of his work is that several of the ideal types he has constructed (or elucidated)—and among these, some of the most important are terms which were formerly imprecise or vague and to which he has given a much more rigorous content—do not refer to individual behaviour or to individuals but to great collective artifacts; that is to say, they refer in fact to institutions and types of institutions: the city, the market, varieties of authority, bureaucracy, the patrimonial or legal State, etc. Of course, what Weber was seeking to do was to see to what extent in each case a specific instance of a class of phenomena, taken as belonging to the same term, approaches or diverges from its ideal type (cf. what he says about “the market”, *E&S* 82–85), which is not of interest to us here, and on the other hand, to reduce these artifacts each time, ideally, to “individual behaviours”—an objective which is in truth rarely, not to say never, attained, given that it is intrinsically unattainable. To reduce, for example, the “market” to the maximizing behaviour of “rational individuals” is both to make individuals of that type fall down into place from the sky and to neglect the social-historical conditions by which the “market” as institution has been genuinely *imposed* upon people (Polanyi has already said a good deal of what there is to say about this). What is constructed in each case is the ideal type of an *institution* which certainly has to accommodate “individuals”—no institution can survive if it does not—but which concerns another level of being than “purely individual” existence and which, much more important, is the general and specific *presupposition* for our being able to speak about the “rational behaviour” of individuals. It is because *there is, already there*, a bureaucratic universe that my behaviour *qua* bureaucrat would or would not be “rational”; even in modern bureaucracy, to be a bureaucrat with instrumentally-rational behaviour signifies behaving according to “rational” (and just as often, “absurd”) rules instaurated by the bureaucracy in general and by the particular bureaucratic corps to which I belong.

But there is much more. The social-historical world is a world of effective and immanent meaning. And it is a world that has not waited around for the theoretician in order to come into existence as a world of *meaning*, nor in order to be, to a fantastic degree, *coherent*, for without

coherence it would not exist. (“Coherent” means neither “systematic” nor “transparent”.) This sets requirements on the construction of ideal types; to an extent, these requirements were tacitly admitted by Weber; to another extent, he ignored them.

Ideal types have a *referent* which is the effective social meaning of the “phenomena” (behaviours) observed. That this actual meaning is never “given immediately”, that there is always necessarily an (in principle interminable) circulation back and forth between the theoretical construct and its confrontation with the (significant) “facts” changes nothing on the level of principle. Contrary to what Popper believes, one can say idiotic things about ancient Greece (I am not speaking here in terms of geography or demography) or about any other society—and one can show, with the aid, for example, of an ancient Greek text, that they are indeed idiotic. There are an infinity of absurd “interpretations” and few *prima facie* plausible ones relating to the historical “material” at hand. The validity of an ideal type can only be judged by its capacity to “make sense /sens/” of the historical phenomena, which are already *in themselves and for themselves* bearers of meaning /sens/.

Now, such meaning is never “isolated”. It always participates in the overall institution of society as institution of imaginary significations, and it is of a piece /*solidaire*/ with it. This is also why—and independently of all “empirical” and “vulgar” refutations—I cannot insert the ideal type “shaman”, for example, in a capitalist society or the ideal type “financial speculator” among the Arunta. *It just won't stick*. More generally speaking, the ideal types that I construct for a given society under study have to be *coherent, complementary*, and (ideally) *complete or exhaustive*. If I construct an ideal type of “Roman patrician”, for example, it must be able to *hold together* with the ideal type Roman plebian”, the two with that of “Roman slave”, Roman “*pater familias*” and “*mater familias*”, etc.; but none of these ideal types can be constructed without reference to Roman law, Roman religion, the Roman army, the possibilities of the Latin language, etc. It is not that, *at the end* of this work, I will have reconstructed Roman society in its entirety; rather, it is that I cannot undertake *the first step* in this task unless I have this society *as such* in view. “Social facts” and “individual behaviours” are *effectively* possible (as “facts” *and* as meaning) only because there is, each time, a society which “functions”, as is said in English, “as a going concern”. (This has nothing to do with any sort of “functionalism”: I simply mean that society exists, that it reproduces

itself, changes, etc.). It is not because the ideal types constructed in order to grasp a given society have been constructed with an eye toward its coherence that they “produce” a coherent society—it is because society *is* coherent (even during civil war and in concentration camps) that the theoretician can try to construct ideal types which hold together somehow or other. I do not “freely” construct the Athenians’ relation to their *polis*; it is because this relation has actually /effectivement/ existed, in its historical singularity, in its coherence, and in its relative permanence, that I have before me the *polis* and the Athenian as objects of knowledge. As a coherent totality, society exists first of all in and for itself; it is not a “regulative Idea”. “Total understanding” of it is, of course, an inaccessible ideal—but that is something else entirely.

RATIONALITY AND POLITICS

In order to appreciate the *constraint* that Weber’s idea of “rationalization” as a *historically active factor* (and therefore one which is *immanent* to history and not “constructed” by the theoretician in order to better understand it) imposes, we should have discussed in precise detail Weber’s immense work on the question of religion (the three volumes of the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* as well as Chapter 5) of *Economy and Society*, 399–634, in particular the paragraph on “theodicy”, *ibid.*, 518–526). It is impossible to do so here: given the intrinsic importance of the subject and its revival in contemporary discourse, I hope to be able to return to this topic very shortly. Nevertheless, in the meantime I want to note that I consider completely false Weber’s idea, which has been revived and expanded by Habermas, that “all religions have to resolve the problem of theodicy” and that there is an “*internal logic of religious representations*” which drive them toward a *movement* of “rationalization”, whatever qualifications one will add to fix up this thesis.

I will conclude with a few remarks concerning Weber’s political views and their relation to his philosophy and social theory, especially with regard to what must be called Weber’s “decisionism” in matters political, or the idea of a “politics of the will” (PhR, 183).

Ultimately, Weber’s “decisionism” boils down to saying that just as in the social-historical world the ultimate “values” orienting human activity are mutually irreducible and incommensurable, so the action of the politician (and of each of us, inasmuch as we are political subjects)

rests on ultimate values which no amount of “rational” argumentation can impose upon those who do not share these same values. Let us note, first of all, that if Weber did not free himself, as we have seen, from Kantian rationalism in the domain of knowledge, he breaks with it in the domain of action; second, that this position (the “politics of the will”) is in reality hardly weakened at all by Weber’s marked preference for an “ethics of responsibility” (which takes the results of action into account) as against an “ethics of conviction” (which enjoins one to act according to certain principles or “for the greatness of the cause”, whatever the real consequences of one’s actions might be). The distinction is itself untenable, if not on the (descriptive) sociological plane, then in any case on the logical and normative, the only one of interest to us here. All “responsibility” is responsibility with regard to certain *ends*. If my “ethic of responsibility” prevents me from undertaking some political action—because, for example, it might entail the sacrifice of human lives—it is quite obviously because I posit human life as the supreme value, or at least superior to all others, this being a “conviction”. And if I want to promote the “greatness of a cause” by any means possible, come what may, I greatly run the risk of destroying this cause. (One can think in terms of an absolute “ethic of conviction” without contradicting oneself only if this ethic is oriented in a completely acosmic fashion.) Third, quite obviously the choice to take on “responsibility” itself follows from a “conviction”. Finally, as Philippe Raynaud notes, “the ethic of responsibility itself presupposes the limits of its own validity *and can thus grant the irreducibility of conviction*” (PhR, 184; emphasis added).

The irreducibility of conviction to anything else is another way of saying that nothing allows one to provide a “foundation” for ultimate choices and to escape the “combat of the gods”. Nothing can save us from our *ultimate responsibility*: to choose and to will in view of the consequences. Not even Reason, that latest historical figure of a Grace that would shower upon those who entreat her with sufficient ardour.

There are two ways to attempt to go beyond—or, I would rather say, avoid—this situation, and both appear to me untenable.

Raymond Aron thought he could “escape from the circle in which he /Weber/ enclosed himself” by invoking “universal rationality” as exemplified by “scientific truth”. But “scientific truth” (and even the fact that “it addresses itself to all men”) is a value and criterion only for those who have *already accepted* the value of “universal rationality”

and who (this additional condition is absolutely essential) have passed from the latter to a practical and political/ethical universality. The first condition makes this statement into a tautology, the second reveals the fallacy that lies within. I see no incompatibility between the acceptance of “ $2 \times 2 = 4$ ” (Aron’s example) or quantum theory, and a call to kill the infidels, to convert them by force, or to exterminate the Jews. Quite the contrary, the *compatibility* of these two classes of assertions is the massive fact of human history. And it is particularly striking to witness the fact that it is smack in the 20th century— the century that, more than any other, has monstrously demonstrated, and continues to demonstrate, that it is possible to dissociate the techno-scientifically “rational” from the politically reasonable—and *after* the experience of Stalinism and Nazism, that people have begun again to whistle in the dark the tune of universal rationality as a way of building up their courage.

We must again, we must always make distinctions. An ensidic “rationality” exists, it is universal up to a certain point, and it can take us very far (up to the point of manufacturing H-bombs). It was there before Greco-Western science and philosophy, it does not commit anybody to anything, and it could continue, for an indefinite period of time, upon an inertial course even if philosophy and science in the strong sense were to suffer a temporary or definitive eclipse. And Khomeini can, without any contradiction, consider Western science null and void—since all truth is in the Book—and buy from Satan such effective products as Stinger missiles so as to put them in the service of the One True God. And even if this were a contradiction it would change nothing. Contradicting oneself never prevented anyone from existing. But scientific *truth*—which is of the same nature as philosophical *truth*: namely, it perpetually puts to the test the closure in which thought is every time caught—contains the possibility of a *historically effective* universality only by effecting a *rupture* with the world of traditional or authoritarian instituted representations. (It is actual historical universality with which we are concerned when we confront the political question, not “transcendental universality”). Now, to “give oneself” this rupture as something already effectuated—which is what Aron does when he speaks of a “community of minds across boundaries and centuries”—is to assume that the problem is already resolved. In this effective sense, scientific or philosophical universality presupposes subjects who have *actually* put into question their belonging to some

particular social-historical world. In a sense, it is, even, just that. It is therefore tied to the exigency of a universal ethics and politics only *at its root*: both of them express and try to realize the project of autonomy. This project therefore has to be posited *before* one can draw out any argument whatsoever in favour of scientific universality—and the latter will be valid only for those whom this project is valid. *Downstream* from this project, everything becomes effectively an object of reasonable debate from which gains can be expected in all domains. But these gains, this debate, this project itself, what value have they then for a genius like Pascal, who renounces, so to speak, the invention of infinitesimal calculus because everything that *distracts* the soul from its relation to God is pure diversion or *distraktion*? (“Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things; But one thing is needful”, *Luke* 10, 41–42.) And upon what basis other than personal faith (“conviction”!) or a parochial cosmo-historical prejudice will one judge Pascal’s and Kierkegaard’s God worthy of respect while saying that of Khomeini is not?

Certainly, the term (or idea) of “authenticity” is not useful for this debate, and the idea that an “autonomous” individual is one that, in its actions, “obeys values” is untenable. In what way is a religious fanatic who drives an explosives-filled truck against an embassy’s gates “inauthentic”, and how could it be said that s/he does not obey “values”? Either “values” are arbitrary and mutually equivalent or else not all values are the same, and to say this already means that one has already accepted the reasonable discussability of values as one’s supreme value and criterion. It is impossible to circumvent the necessity of affirming the project of autonomy as the primary position, one which can be elucidated but which cannot “be founded”, since the very intention of founding it presupposes it.

I cannot take up here again the discussion of the idea of autonomy (cf. *MRT*, 101–114; *Domaines*, 241–260; “The Greek *Polis*”, op. cit.; “The Nature and Value of Equality”, trans. David Ames Curtis, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 11, 4 (Fall 1986), pp. 373–390 /errata in 12, 4, p. 388; forthcoming in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*;/ and *Subject*). But we must reiterate that the question will remain intractable so long as autonomy is understood in the Kantian sense, viz. as a fictively autarchic subject’s conformity to a “Law of Reason”, in complete misrecognition of the social-historical conditions for, and the social-historical dimension of, the project of autonomy.

Let us now take up the normative standpoint (the political/ethical one, the two being at bottom indissociable). There is a goal which a few of us have set for ourselves: the autonomy of human beings, which is inconceivable except as the autonomy of *society* as well as the autonomy of *individuals*—the two being inseparably linked, and this link being in fact an analytic judgment (a tautology) when we understand what the individual is. We set autonomy in this sense as the goal for each among us, both with respect to each one of us and with respect to all the others (without the autonomy of others there is no collective autonomy—and outside such a collectivity I cannot be *effectively* autonomous). Since 1964 (*MRT*, 71–79) I have called the activity that aims at autonomy *praxis*: this activity aims at others as (potentially) autonomous subjects and tries to contribute to their efforts to attain full autonomy. (The term “*praxis*” therefore has here only a homonymic relation to the meaning Aristotle assigns to it.) This activity may take on an intersubjective form the precise sense of unfolding in a concrete relation to determinate beings *intended as such*. Its most obvious cases are then pedagogy (also and especially “informal” pedagogy, which occurs everywhere and always) and psychoanalysis. But it also has to, under penalty of lapsing into total incoherence, take a form that goes far beyond all “intersubjectivity”: *politics / la politique/*, namely, the activity that aims at the transformation of society’s institutions in order to make them conform to the norm of the autonomy of the collectivity (that is to say, in such a way as to permit the *explicit*, reflective and deliberate self-institution and self-governance of this collectivity).

It is by starting with this position that we can understand why, contrary to what some may think, Habermas’s efforts to found a theory of action on the ideas of “communicative action”, “interpretive understanding” and “ideal speech situations” do not really go beyond “the mere critique of Max Weber’s subjective convictions” and cannot “culminate in a fruitful attempt to redefine the tasks of social theory” (contrary to PhR, 190). There certainly is a “communicative” dimension (more simply put: there is communication) almost everywhere in social action (just as there is, everywhere, “instrumental i.e. ensidic activity”, a *legein* and a *teukhein*). Communication, however, is hardly ever an “end in itself”, and it is totally inadequate as a way of bringing out criteria for action.

Let us consider the simplest cases, those apparently most favourable to Habermas’s thesis. Both in pedagogy and in psychoanalysis, “com-

municative action” and “interpretive understanding” are certainly important *moments* of these activities. But in no way do they define either their *meaning* or their *end*. The *end* of psychoanalysis is not “interpretive understanding” between the analyst and the patient (which in no way is intended *as such*, and which is highly asymmetrical, as also is the case in pedagogy)—but rather a contribution to the patient’s access to *his/her own* autonomy (his/her capacity to challenge him/herself and lucidly to transform him/herself).

And again, these are (the most important) instances of “intersubjective” action. Now, activities that aim at autonomy have to (under penalty of succumbing to an annihilating incoherence) take on a *social*—that is to say, a *political*—form. And here we must dispel a radical misunderstanding and expose an ideologically-based terminology that has reigned in philosophy at least since Husserl. The philosophers do not know (or rather, what is worse, do not *want* to know) what *the social /le social/* is. The term “intersubjective” systematically serves to evacuate the genuine (theoretical as well as practical) question of society and to mask their inability to think it. The term “intersubjectivity” expresses their continued enslavement to a metaphysics of the “substantive individual” (of the “subject”) and the desperate attempt (already found in Husserl) to escape from the solipsistic cage to which egological philosophy leads—an attempt which, moreover, fails, the “other” always remaining in this perspective an incomprehensible prodigy.

But the social is something entirely other than “many, many, many” “subjects”—and something completely else than “many, many, many” “intersubjectivities”. It is only in and through the social that a “subject” and an “intersubjectivity” may become possible (even “transcendentally”!). The social is the always already instituted anonymous collective in and through which “subjects” can appear, it goes indefinitely beyond them (they are always replaceable and being replaced), and it contains in itself a creative potential that is irreducible to “cooperation” among subjects or to the effects of “intersubjectivity”.

It is the *institution* of this social /sphere/ /le social/ that is the aim of politics, which therefore has nothing to do with “intersubjectivity” or even with “interpretive understanding”. Politics intends the institution as such, or the grand options affecting society as a whole. It “addresses itself” to the anonymous collective, both present and to come. Certainly, it always acts through a determinate public, but it does not *aim*

for interpretive understanding between the political actor and this public; rather, it aims at the fate of the collectivity for a period of time that is, in principle, indeterminate. The fact that the orator has to express him/herself in a comprehensible way, or even that we want, and consider of capital importance, that the decision result from the most reasonable discussion possible, is not even worth mentioning here. The intended end, and the actual result, are something else entirely, these being the adoption of a new law, or engagement in some important common endeavour. In important cases, all these decisions *modify* not only the individuals presently involved but also those to come. All this goes far beyond “communicative action” and “interpretive understanding”. These latter are, so to speak, only the atmosphere indispensable to *political* life and creativity—and their very existence depends upon instituting acts. The *end* or *goal* of these acts goes far beyond the establishment of an ideal communication situation, which is only part of that end, and really just a mere *means*.

Now, if one adopts not a *normative* standpoint (we want autonomy, what it presupposes and what it entails) but rather a descriptive-analytic one concerning society and history in their actuality—as is, in reality, the case with Habermas—Habermas’s attempt to elicit from the *very fact* that “communicative action” occurs everywhere and always some sort of *exigency* can be seen only as an enormous logical blunder. As “reproducing product” of society, “interpretive understanding” is everywhere: among 5th century BC Athenians, New Yorkers and French people today, the Communards of 1871—as well as among the oligarchic Spartans, the Waffen-SS or Khomeini’s pajdarans. What distinguishes for us the second group from the first does not relate in any way to some kind of deficiency in the capacity for intersubjective communication (which is, perhaps, at a maximum within a homogeneous group of fanatics of any sort) but to the fact that such communication is *always already structured* exhaustively by the given institution of society in such a way that it is *effectively impossible*, from the social-historical point of view, for the participants to put into question this institution (which they are doomed to reproduce indefinitely) and, *by this very fact*, to open themselves to the reason of others. It is the institution as it is given each time that always assures communication and traces the limits of the humanity with which one can, in principle, “communicate”. It is therefore this *institution* as such that has to be aimed at if the field of such communication is to be enlarged. And if we will to enlarge it,

it is not because we will communication for itself, rather we will it in order that all humanity be put in a position where it would be able to work in common toward the creation of institutions that will advance its freedom of thought and creative making/doing (*faire*).

Habermas's attempt "rationally" to educe, once again, right from fact—the idea of a "good" society from the *reality* of the conditions of social life—appears to me just as untenable as the other attempts of the same kind that have been made in the past, and which he repeats. It leads him, in a totally characteristic way, to seek a mythical *biological* foundation for the questions of social theory and political action. The following passage, one among many others, bears witness to this: "The utopian perspective of reconciliation and liberty is ingrained in the conditions for the communicative sociation of individuals; it is built into the linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species" (*Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* I, pp. 532–533 / *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, Beacon Press, 1984), p. 398/). Since when has biology (the "linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species") ever "built into" it a "utopian perspective"? Why would such a "mechanism" not be compatible with the preservation of closed societies—which it has, on the contrary, safeguarded almost everywhere, almost always, throughout history? And why would freedom be "utopian"? Freedom is neither a "utopia" nor a fatality. It is a social-historical project without whose already occurring, yet still partial, realization neither would Habermas be in a position to write what he writes nor would I too object to it. (Here, as in all contemporary parlance, "Utopia" clearly is a replacement for the Kantian "regulative Idea"; it removes the disagreeable "idealist" connotations as it confers upon it, now that Marxism has gone bankrupt, an agreeable "pre-Marxist revolutionary" scent.) To found the project of freedom philosophically in reason is already a bad usage of reason, for the very decision to philosophize is but a manifestation of freedom; to philosophize is to try to be free in the domain of thought. To want to "found" it on "the linguistic conditions for the reproduction of the species" is to revert to a biological positivism that leads to an incoherent paradox: it makes of freedom both a fatality inscribed in our genes and a "utopia".

From the moment we have left the closure of the sacred institution, from the time when the Greeks posed the questions: "What ought we think?" "What ought we do?" in a world they had built in such a way that the gods had nothing to say about these questions, there is no

longer any possible evasion of responsibility, choice and decision. We have decided that we want to be free—and this decision *is already* the first realization of this freedom.

Tinos, August 1987—Paris, January 1988

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NOTES

*Originally published as “Individu, société, rationalité, histoire,” in *Esprit*, February 1988, pp. 89–113. Translation by David Ames Curtis. For reasons of space and interest to English-speaking readers, several references to Philippe Reynaud and his *Max Weber et les dilemmes de la raison moderne* (Paris: PUF, 1987)—hereafter PhR—which occasioned this essay, have been eliminated. The present article is to appear in my forthcoming volume of essays, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (Oxford University Press).

1. My first published writings in Greece (1944), which Ypsilon has just republished in Athens (1988), included among other things a translation with extensive commentary of Weber’s “Methodological Foundations” from *Economy and Society* and an “Introduction to Theory in the Social Sciences”, the composition of which was heavily influenced by Weber.
2. I will cite Philippe Raynaud’s book by the abbreviation PhR; *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (eds) (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978) will be indicated by *E&S* followed by a page number, and by a section number in those cases where the “Methodological Foundations” section is cited. /Translator’s note: I have in many instances altered this translation of Weber’s posthumous work in order to make the English conform more closely to Castoriadis’s original French translation from the German./ As I have treated this question at length elsewhere, the reader may, if interested, consult my 1964–65 essay, “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory”, which now appears as the first part of my 1975 book, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, Mass., MIT and Oxford, Polity, 1987), and is cited here as MRT; the second half of *The Imaginary Institution ...*, cited here as *Institution*; also, *Domaines de l’homme* (Paris, Seuil, 1986), cited here as *Domaines*; and finally my 1986 essay, “The State of the Subject Today”, trans. David Ames Curtis, *Thesis Eleven* 24 (1989), cited here as *Subject*. All italicized words and passages are in the original, unless stated to the contrary.

3. Let us note in passing that not so long ago this possibility of a sympathetic or empathic reliving of experience provoked bursts of laughter from progressive Parisian psychoanalysts. Quite clearly, without this possibility social life itself would quite simply be impossible.



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