

Passion and Knowledge

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Nothing that can be called thinking is formalized or formalizable; nor can it be likened to a mechanical process (Church's hypothesis). Rather, thinking sets into motion human imagination and passion.

Having already written extensively on the imagination,¹ I will limit myself here to outlining its basic structure. At the two opposite poles of knowledge, as well as in its center, lies the creative power of the human being, that is, radical imagination. It is thanks to the imagination that the world is presented in this form and not in some other: it is imagination that creates axioms, postulates, and the fundamental patterns that subtend the structures of knowledge; finally, it is imagination that both furnishes the hypothetical models and idea-images of knowledge, and makes possible their potential development and/or insight into them. This imagination, however, both in itself and in its essential operations – which include its social forms, experienced on this level as the creation of an anonymous collective force – is neither formalized nor formalizable. Obviously, the imagination contains – just as does everything else that exists – a totalizing, identity-bearing dimension (which for brevity's sake we have elsewhere called *ensidique*)²; but this dimension of the imagination is not the essential one, neither in its operations nor its results, no more than the arithmetic relations between tones are the essential element of a Bach fugue.

Why can't a computer replace a human mind? Because it lacks imagination and therefore can neither violate nor resubmit to the rules that cause it to function (unless this has been specially programmed into it as a rule in itself); and, because a computer is without passion, it is incapable of impulsive decisions. Unlike a living human being, it is incapable of replacing one object of study with another one – ignored till now – merely because of an infatuation with the new idea. And neither of these deficiencies can be remedied by the programming of aleatory functions.

1. The Paradoxical Relationship Between Passion and Knowledge

At first glance it may seem absurd to try to unite passion and knowledge, since the terms seem to be mutually exclusive. Most semi-educated citizens, supported, it should be noted, by the opinion of the majority of philosophers, would probably affirm that this relationship can only be a negative one. Passion, (like imagination, "the madman of the house"), they would argue, can only disturb or corrupt the real work of knowledge, which demands detachment and cool-headedness from the thinker. Of course, one can easily contradict this line of reasoning with the obvious fact that all great works of knowledge have been motivated by a single-minded passion and tyrannical absorption in a single object – from Archimedes, whose death was a result of his unwillingness (in the face of enemy attack) to leave behind the latest experiment on which he was working, to the feverish mathematical writings of Evariste Galois, hastily penned on the night preceding his fatal duel. Perhaps our hypothetical interlocutor would answer back that he did not have in mind the passion to know itself, whose object is truth or knowledge, but rather extrinsic, impure passions; passions like envy, hatred or resentment, the love of money, of power or glory, and also, and perhaps especially, the egoism of the researcher puffed up with "his" ideas and "his" results.

With the case of Hegel in mind, we could answer that cunning reason – in this case as in others – is prepared, when necessary, to put the most ignoble passions in its service. Has not rivalry among masters and among schools – rivalries often based on the most mixed motives: see the cases of Newton and Leibniz, Kronecker and Cantor – been a driving force in the progress of knowledge? In our times especially, who would dare assert that the passion for power, of fame at any cost, or of money itself, is not a powerful stimulus to scientific research? Does not the veritable fever for advancement and rank that plagues contemporary life prove it?

To reach our object we can and must bore into a deeper stratum, and to do so we must give a more rigorous definition of the word passion. Along with Piera Aulagnier,³ we affirm that passion is present when an object of pleasure is transformed into a necessary object; in other words, when the object can no longer be done without, when the subject can no longer conceive of its life without possessing the object, without pursuing it, being absorbed in it. In a certain sense, passion occurs when the subject is completely identified

with the object of its passion, perceived now as a life-and-death stake. Can such a relationship exist in the field of knowledge? Surely it can. It is not only experience that proves it; there are certain, so to speak, *a priori* considerations that constrain us to concede that there can be *no* non-routine object of knowledge without the kind of passion we have just described; no knowledge without the total dedication of the subject to the object. But what exactly is this object in the case of knowledge?

Knowledge begins with questioning: that is, with “what is . . .” or “why is . . .”, and so forth; but this questioning does not become knowledge, even in the case of philosophy, unless it leads to some kind of result. This is a point that must be emphasized in an age (ours) that speaks only of questions, of indeterminacy, of deconstruction and the weakness of thought.

What then is at stake in the passion for knowledge?

The initial answer to this question is obvious: truth. It is not necessary here to enter into a philosophical discussion of the question of “what is truth?” in order to affirm, as a starting point, that truth is related to the *results* of knowing. But here is where the paradoxes begin to reappear. The passion for truth cannot be separated from the passion for results in which this truth is embodied or in which it seems to be embodied for the researcher, the scientist or the thinker. However, this state of affairs can, and often does, lead the thinker to a fixation with these (his or her) results; indeed, the process of identification with results can reach the point at which the identity, and even the being, of the researcher seem to be called into question when (his or her) results are called into question. This narcissism of the subject necessarily spreads outward, absorbing – and this occurs not only in the field of knowledge – the products of the subject’s knowledge; henceforth these objects are endowed with a categorical and indubitable character.

This investment by the subject, however, which transforms the truth into a possessed object, often turns into – especially, but not exclusively, in philosophy – an obsession with system-building. Yet this attachment is in fundamental contradiction with the initial motive and engine of the search for truth. Indeed, systems can only inhibit questioning; they prevent the free analysis of results and make almost impossible the questioning of the postulates that make the results possible. We have here one of the root causes of the spread of dogmatism and fanaticism in the various fields of knowledge.

Is there a way out of this dilemma? Or are we doomed either to:

— an obsession with results, without which truth remains a phantom (or, at best, a kind of Kantian regulatory concept, with the antinomies that result from it), and thereby run the risk of becoming fixated on these results;

— or else an obsession with the search for truth itself, thus in the final analysis giving ourselves over to questioning without limitations; here, however, we run the risk of forgetting that this infinite questioning will leave us as if suspended in mid-air because we lack any fixed markers.

The answer to this question is multipartite. On the philosophical level, we need to embrace a new idea of truth based on an open relationship between questioning and its results. This truth must be conceived of as a kind of *sui generis* movement alternating between periods of process and stasis, between digging (*creusement*) and confrontation (the idea of “correspondence”). On the psychoanalytic level, it calls for an historically novel and individual concept of this relation; a concept of the self as the source of creativity and of the activity of thought in itself as such.⁴ But under what conditions can knowledge be conceived as a process and activity, and not simply as a result? And to what extent can we conceive of ourselves as both originator and agent in this process?

2. Philosophical Aspects

“If you were say to me, ‘Socrates, we shall let you go this time, but upon one condition, that you abandon this kind of inquiry and cease henceforth to philosophize . . . ,’ I would have say to you . . . ‘I shall never cease to philosophize . . . the unexamined life is not worth living’ (*o de anexetastos bios ou biôtos*).”⁵ Although various motives and factors lead to the death of Socrates, surely the most important is that examination and questioning have become an object of passion for him: without the ability to engage in these activities, life is no longer worth living for him. It is especially noteworthy, in this regard, that Socrates does not speak of truth; indeed, he always proclaimed, even if ironically, that the only thing he knew for sure was that he knew nothing. He speaks of *exetasis*, inquiry, examination. The two strands of knowledge we have identified above are clearly distinguishable here: that is, passion, the object of which is worth life itself; and the nature of the object, conceived not simply as a possession but as an occasion for quest and inquest, an examining activity.

In *Phaedrus*, and especially in *The Symposium* (the words themselves are those of Diotima), Plato makes amorous passion, or Eros, the foundation not only of knowledge but of all that makes life worth living. Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics* with this famous line: "All men by nature desire to know." This idea contrasts sharply with the spirit of modern philosophy: if we exclude Spinoza and his concept of knowledge of the third kind, that is, true intuition, which is *amor Dei intellectualis*, or the intellectual love of substance (and to this we must add the caveat that the term *intellectualis* significantly weakens the term *amor*), then we can assert that from Descartes to Husserl and Heidegger (including here the entire Anglo-Saxon tradition) knowledge is treated as strictly an affair of the intellect. We shall use the example of Immanuel Kant to make our point here.

As is known, Kant divides the question of "the interests of the human being" into three parts: what I can know, what I should do, and what I may hope for. The vast treatment that the first category receives is a result of its being conceived as an inquiry into what Kant calls the transcendental conditions of knowledge, or in other words: how are *a priori* synthetic judgments (i.e., necessary and nontautological in nature) possible? The result of this inquiry, for the purposes of our discussion, is the construction of a transcendental ego (the recipient of sure knowledge), in which "imagination" has a clearly defined – and subordinate – role; this subordination consists in the production of eternally immutable forms given once and for all. At the same time, the transcendental ego – this is another necessary result of the way it is constructed – is totally disembodied, not only somatically but psychically. It is a mental machine – today we might call it a computer. Moreover, there are two computers here instead of one, and there is no communication between them. In effect, Kant establishes an unbridgable gap between the transcendental and psychological subjects. The former is supposed (indeed, is postulated) to function solely on the basis of *a priori* judgments; the judgments of the latter, subject to the laws of empirical psychology, are therefore not motivated but determined (as understood by the natural sciences) by psychological causes. In spite of some of Kant's attempts to get around the problem (for example, the introduction of the concept of the schemata of categories, defined as a "force hidden in the depths of the human soul"), it cannot even be said that this soul is itself described as split in two; rather it is more accurately described as something that stands on

the side of pure fact (subject to questioning *quid facti*), gazing hopelessly at the other side of the abyss on which the transcendental essence and the idea shine in the glory of pure morality (alone capable of answering the question *quid juris*). At best, this gap is conceived as a split between a transcendental consciousness (or practical reason), the basis of which is a totally inaccessible "ought to be" (in which case we are trapped in a relativist empiricism) or the true reality of "we humans," *wir Menschen* (in which case we find ourselves living completely outside of nature), and the empirical psyche, which even when it speaks the truth (or does good) can say (or do) none of this good except for bad reasons (i.e., empirical or impure). In the field of knowledge, in any case, this empirical soul can be nothing but a source of disturbances and errors; for example, when "the empirical imagination," or worse still, the passions, interfere (although it must be asked how this interference occurs) with the functioning of the transcendental consciousness.

Cutting short a long discussion, we must limit ourselves here to several assertions that the preceding description can, I trust, make at least plausible.

What we are concerned with here is the real knowledge of real people, that is, neither knowledge of a phantom transcendental world nor of an inaccessible ideality. It is only a seeming paradox that an exclusive preoccupation with the latter can lead only to skepticism and solipsism.

These real subjects are always socio-historical subjects. Their social and historical dimensions are neither superfluous, accidental, nor an obstacle to anything; rather, they are positive and essential conditions for the possibility of knowledge. This is a direct result of the fact that thought cannot exist without a language for it and that the existence of this language is socio-historical.

These real subjects are also subjects in the broadest sense of the word; that is, they are not merely products of socio-historical conditions but subjects for themselves and, more particularly, for human psychic activity.

Let us now take a step backward. In order for any kind of being to exist for itself and be capable of undertaking any activity (this holds for a bacterium as well as a human being), what real elements – not merely theoretically necessary conditions – are required?

The real existence of a being for itself requires that it:

— create its own world; place itself in this world and engage in at least a minimum of interaction with the substrata of this world;

remain obedient to the laws dictated to it by the constitution of this world;

— pursue certain objects and flee others (failing which, it will cease to exist); and

— positively or negatively evaluate the objects and results of its activities.

Let us now try to translate these requirements into the language of the human psyche: the psyche itself must create an image of the world and of its place in this world; it must desire some things and despise others; it must experience pleasure from the objects it desires and experience revulsion from the objects it despises.

However, socialization is also a necessary condition for the existence of the psyche. This means that, in large measure, the world supplies the psyche with its image of the world and of itself, with the objects that the psyche endows with meaning, as well as with the psyche's criteria of valuation and its sources of pleasure and revulsion.

It is passionately that the individual psyche – which finds itself immersed in a social collective – invests these images, objects, and criteria; and without this investment neither one nor the other could exist.

The preceding reflections are neither empirical nor transcendental. They belong to the ontology of human being, both individual and collective, and of its relationship to the world that it creates and the being that it creates by making itself being. This being and this relationship exist only socio-historically, and thus this is the central dimension for all these questions. We shall now briefly take up one of its aspects.

3. Faith, Knowledge, Truth

The passionate endowment of the image of the self and of the world, which we have spoken of, is not yet, in itself, an act of knowing. Rather, this act belongs to the domain of faith. Faith is found everywhere where there is human being, either individual or collective. Life would be impossible without a pragmatic faith in the being and regular course of things. Doubtlessly we share this belief with all other living beings – even if we are the only ones who hold this belief explicitly and consciously. But in the case of human beings this belief goes well beyond that of a simple perception of the things of this world and of their relations. Rather, this belief is

above all characterized by a general faith in the system of signs that holds together the totality of the world, society, and the life and death of its individuals. It is the subjective counterpart of the imaginary institutions of society. Its contents (or objects) are, almost without exception, of a social nature and origin; among individuals they differ only marginally and accidentally, that is, to the extent that these contents depend on individual experience and idiosyncrasies. This is why they are virtually unquestioned, almost always and everywhere. A single, material fact can be called into question; the imaginary significations of an entire society cannot be. The institutions of society have in all cases been founded and sanctioned by religion, in the broad sense of the term;⁶ and no believer can call into question the dogmas of his or her religion. Even those societies that have been to some extent freed from the grasp of religion – as are certain contemporary societies – there exist innumerable ideas that a normal citizen would never for a minute call into question. This citizen is a believer – without even necessarily knowing that he *believes* (he believes that he *knows*).

Knowledge, in the strict sense that concerns us here, begins with a process of examination and inquiry that calls into question the beliefs of the group, thereby creating a breach in the metaphysical system that the collective has created. This breach, however, is necessarily conceived within the existing system of faith: as Bohr and Heisenberg have emphasized, the strange results produced by the theories of general relativity and quantum mechanics assume the existence of – and can in fact only be confirmed in – the world of general experience. But these theories question our faith in our general experience and, as a general rule, subvert the established meanings of its signs and the credibility of the data received by the senses.

In the reality of history, of course, this distinction is not always quite so clear-cut, and intermediate zones between the two poles exist. To take one of the more productive examples of this phenomenon: the three monotheistic religions have allowed the contents of their respective faiths to be made the object of critical inquiry (usually this investigation concerns the “true meaning” of one their sacred texts); these inquiries have long fed scholarly debates (and been a cause of a considerable number of massacres). However, this examination has necessarily been limited, in the mathematical sense of the word: this examination must always remain within the limits defined by a postulate whose ultimate truth – because revealed – cannot be critically scrutinized.⁷

Like knowledge, belief is the creation of beings for themselves – the creation of living beings, psyches, societies. But this belief is created within a bounded intellectual space: for belief, it is enough that it permit the being-for-itself in question to exist in the world, to live within the boundaries created by the belief. Consequently, this belief must satisfactorily be able to account, in one way or another, for the existence of the world as understood by simple beings in their totality and by the instrumental side of human life. But this constraint ceases to obtain when we take up the really important side of the question of human beliefs – that is, the imaginary component of human beliefs, the part that has to do with significations. For this investigation, the only essential constraint is the one imposed by the boundary of meaning itself, that is, the “ability” to respond to any question that may arise in the society in question.

It is this boundary that is transgressed by examination and the process of knowledge, a process which itself is subject to a different constraint: this is the *logon didonai*, which must take up and account for all that occurs, and reject anything that can not stand up to questioning. This necessity can be fulfilled by satisfying two requirements: internal coherence and taking up what really exists in the world. These two requirements in themselves immediately prompt other questions. If only for this reason, the process of questioning is virtually never-ending.

We will now turn to the questions of how the subject endows these activities with meaning and what implications this meaning has for the psyche.

4. Psychoanalytic Aspects

The analysis of these particular activities – believing, thinking, knowing – ought to play a central role in psychoanalytic theory since, after all, these activities are the presuppositions for the very existence of psychoanalysis. Yet, such an analysis was barely broached by Freud, and his successors have left the question in more or less the same undeveloped state.⁸

In an early treatment of this problem (*Trois Essais sur la théorie de la sexualité*),⁹ Freud invokes the concept of a knowledge drive – *Wissenstrieb* – whose status, it must however be said, is at the very least somewhat strange. Following what he had written earlier (*Trieb und Tribschicksäle*, 1915), Freud says that a drive is on “the border between the psychic and somatic dimensions”: it necessarily has a

“somatic source” that is “delegated” to the psyche by means of an idea or representation (*Vorstellungs-repräsentanz des Triebes*). However, it is difficult to see what “the somatic source” of the “knowledge drive” could be. It should be kept in mind that in 1907 Freud had not yet developed his full theory of drives and was using this concept (both in the *Trois Essais* and *Les Théories sexuelles infantiles*) in connection with an investigation into the sexual curiosity of infants. This pedigree, although certainly endowing the “drive” with psychoanalytic respectability, fails to help us bridge the enormous gap between infantile sexual curiosity and the existence of religions, cosmological theories, and theorems concerning primary numbers. Why don’t cows have religions – or indeed why don’t sexed animals in general produce infantile sexual theories and even seem to be lacking in any curiosity in this regard? Instead, they engage directly in sexual activity. The answer to this question would surely be – or at least it should be – that the sexual functions of animals are purely “instinctual,” that is to say, the paths and aims of their sexual activity are predetermined, functional, and unchanging, while human sexuality is not the result of an “instinct” but precisely of a “drive.”

What do we find in the literature about this difference which, after all, from the Freudian point of view, should require a strict differentiation between animality and humanness? Neither in the essay of 1915 nor in those that follow is this question taken up directly. One finds instead that Freud alternates between outlining various answers to the question and avoiding the question altogether. At one end of the spectrum is the “biological” thesis, which, if taken to its logical conclusion, would obliterate the difference between animals and humans. Freud himself of course does go this far, but one can justifiably wonder what motivates him to extend his idea of the struggle between Eros and Thanatos to include the entire living kingdom; indeed, he asserts that the death drive can be found among the most elementary organisms.¹⁰ At the other end of the spectrum is his oft-repeated assertion that there is at least one essential quality of human psychic phenomena of which we have no real knowledge: the phenomenon of consciousness. At times, however, Freud’s reference to “our God Logos” (in *L’Avenir d’une illusion* [*The Future of an Illusion*]) leads one to believe that he is presupposing rationality to be an irreducibly human quality. However, it is clear that rationality does not necessarily imply consciousness (any predatory animal acts rationally), nor consciousness rationality (as

even the most superficial observation of human behavior, individual or collective, shows). At most, Freud's concept of the foundation myth, as developed in *Totem and Taboo*, can account for the origin of a specific "religious" faith; it cannot account for consciousness or conscience, for explicit rationality or the activity of knowing. It is of little help to add that we cannot justify identifying the activity of knowing with another "instinct," that of self-preservation. This too is found universally among living beings, and even if we couple it with the assertion of a genetically superior "rationality" among humans, this concept can at best lead only to a quantitative increase of a purely functional and instrumental knowledge, subordinated to the satisfactions of eternally identical "needs."

It is essential for us to investigate this question further, precisely within the parameters established by Freud. Why should we find in human infants – why, in effect and in fact, *do we find* – a form of sexual curiosity that is lacking in other mammals? And why does this curiosity lead to the bizarre twists of the theories that attempt to account for infantile sexuality? It would be laughable to insist that the cause is the "secret" of human parental sexual activities; with the possible (and far from certain) exception of certain Victorian nurseries of the urban upper-middle classes, infants in human societies have traditionally been permitted to observe animal sexual activities. Thus the emergence of "sexual curiosity" can only be attributed to some other factor, which we now propose to examine. And it is Freud himself who, if involuntarily, can supply us with the framework within which to carry out our investigation.

It was mentioned above that Freud never directly takes up the question of what distinguishes animality from humanness, and this is true. However, if his 1915 text on "drives and destinies" is properly understood (which has not been the case until now), we can see, in outline, the basis for an answer. Drives, the source of which are somatic – but which, in order to be understood by the psyche, must speak its language – cause the psyche to produce an image or representation that can be used as a delegate or ambassador (*Vorstellungs-repräsentanz des Triebes*). Before this moment, there is no difference between the human and animal psyche. The difference arises now, when we state – which Freud never does, although it must be recalled that this is not the subject of the essay in question – that in the animal this image is constant while in the human being it is variable. Without fear of error we can affirm that, for each animal species, the "representative" representation is fixed, determi-

nate, canonical. Sexual excitement is in each case provoked by the same stimulating images, and the performance of the sex act is, in essence, standardized. (The same obtains in regard to nutritional needs, etc.) If there are exceptions, these are truly exceptions or aberrations. In the human being, however, the exception is, so to speak, the rule. This means, in psychoanalytic terms, that for the human being there is no canonic expression of a drive that holds for the entire species; indeed, the same representation does not even hold for the same individual in different circumstances or at different moments.

If we ask "Why is there this difference?" the answer is not difficult to furnish: the representative function – an essential component of imagination – always furnishes animals with the same products, while it furnishes the human being with liberated, open-ended, or, if you will, disturbed, products. Generally speaking, living beings possess a functional imagination whose products are fixed: the human imagination is by nature nonfunctional and its products indeterminate. In the human being this is joined with another essential trait: the pleasure of representation tends to surpass organ pleasure (a reverie can be as pleasurable, and even more so, than an act of coitus). This fact, in turn, is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the emergence of another process that is unique to humans (and of which Freud acknowledged both the importance and obscurity): sublimation. Indeed, for humans there is one source of pleasure (a source that can tyrannize over biological needs and even threaten simple survival) whose objects and activities do not simply produce any organ pleasure (and cannot produce it), but whose creation and valorization are strictly social – so much so that the essential dimensions of these objects cease to be perceptible.¹¹

This analysis can and should be supplemented on the basis of another element identified by Freud (as early as his *Trois Essais*): this is the desire to gain "control" of reality (including control over the subject's own body). What is the status and origin of this desire for control? And what is its relation to sexual curiosity? To answer these questions, we must leave Freud behind (but not, we hope, betray him). The desire for control is a product and transposition into "reality" of a primary omnipotent narcissism, that is, of the omnipotence of the monadic subject¹² (which Freud, under the term "the magical omnipotence of thought," correctly located in the unconscious of all humans, both children and adults). But this omnipotence, it should be pointed out, is originally – and remains

so in the unconscious – an omnipotence in relation to representations or images (for the psyche, representation is the genus, “reality” the type). This omnipotence, which serves the pleasure principle, is itself the glue that guarantees meaning. For the rudimentary psyche, a “meaningful” representation is a source of pleasurable representation – and a representation that causes displeasure is “nonmeaningful” (like cacophony). Here thus is the matrix of sense: everything holds together, everything should hold together, and that which holds together is sought, positively valued, a source of pleasure. Organ pleasure itself is the holding together of the object that is a source of satisfaction, with the erogenous zone as its site. Coitus is copulation, that is, reunification of what has been separated (see the statements of Aristophanes in *The Symposium*).

In another regard, the purpose of the infant’s sexual curiosity is to answer the question “Where do children come from?” which is an abstract and generalized form of the question “Where do I come from?” This question can only have meaning in the context of a general inquiry into origins – which itself is an aspect and stage of the inquiry into *meaning* (an aspect and stage of the inquiry into the causes and conditions of meaning). The psyche demands meaning more than it demands milk or sleep; it demands this holding together, *for itself*, of that which presents itself *to* the psyche without apparent order or relation. The question of origin is the question of order and of meaning in its temporal (“historical”) dimension. This inquiry into origins punctures the plenitude of the present; it therefore presupposes the creation of an authentic temporal horizon (a work of the subject’s radical imagination): a rear horizon of birth and beginnings, and a forward horizon, ahead, of projects but also of death. Clearly, this temporalization can only be carried out simultaneously with a corresponding socialization of the psyche, which allows and forces the psyche to acknowledge a world ever more differentiated. However, this aspect of the question does not concern us here.

The tendency of the infant to satisfy its sexual curiosity by resorting to a sexual theory (necessarily infantile) is an attempt to assert the controlling power of thought over origins; in other words, the psyche attempts to define the meaning of its own history. Subsequently this inquiry takes the form of questioning about the origin of everything, to which the socially legitimated concepts offered by theology and cosmology will always have an answer. In other words: sexual curiosity tends toward a certain desire for control,

and therefore control as such always has sexual connotations. (As can be seen in *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud was fascinated by the creation of mechanisms that sublimate and link this curiosity with instrumental control; however, we are in no position to explore this interesting question here.)

Whether we are speaking of its relationship to sexual curiosity, control, or the sources of pleasure, the rupture with animality is caused by the emergence of the individual psyche's radical imagination and the resultant emergent imaginary social locus in its role as source of institutions (that is, source of those objects and activities that feed sublimation). This emergence destroys the "instinctual" basis that regulates animal behavior; it adds the pleasure of representation to organ pleasure, and causes a demand for meaning and signification that it then satisfies by the creation, on the collective level, of imaginary social significations that can explain anything that can arise in the relevant society. These significations, borne by socially legitimated objects, are desexualized and essentially imperceptible; their meaning is sustained by individual subjects under pain of death or accusations of madness. It is this process of investment and sustenance – as well as the results of this process – that should be called sublimation.¹³

Sublimation, however, is the condition of knowledge, not knowledge itself. This is because in almost all societies, the objects of knowledge are unquestioned *beliefs* – for instance, that the world rests on the back of a giant turtle, or else God created the world in six days and then rested, etc. – that assure the *saturation* of the demand for meaning. This is achieved by a faith's ability to answer, in a way that the society finds adequate, anything that can be the object of a question. It also serves as a *boundary* to examination by establishing an ultimate and catholic source of all signification. To explain the origin of knowledge, we must therefore go farther.

5. Knowledge and the Passion for Truth

Let us be so bold as to contradict Aristotle. The psyche, just like society, desires; and what both of them need is not knowledge but belief.

Clearly the psyche is born with the need for meaning, or rather it is born in what for the psyche *is* meaning and will remain the model of meaning for the rest of its life: the psychological monad's enclosed self and the plenitude that encompasses it. This plenitude

and closure, however, are doomed to be ruptured under the combined pressure of corporeal need and the presence of the other human being on whom the satisfaction of this need depends. The nonsatisfaction of this need is experienced – and can only be experienced – as a form of meaninglessness (“the end of the state of psychic tranquillity,” Freud calls it); and therefore the person who is able to satisfy this need is immediately transformed into the Master of meaning – the Mother, or her surrogate.

In its initial guise, questioning is a stage in the struggle of the psyche to escape both from the nonmeaningful and from the anguish that results from this lack of meaning. (At this stage of the psyche’s development, whatever lacks meaning can be experienced only as a threat to the very existence of the self.) In response to this anguish the psyche embarks on a quest for control, and this control is understood as control of meaning (in the beginning it is viewed as total control, i.e., an “hallucinated” or “ecstatic” control).

The generation of meaning is a result of the psyche’s ability to link together all possible “elemental” shreds of meaning that might arise. It is also tied to the pleasure that results from the more or less successful restoration of the integrity of the psychic flux: a reestablished coalescence of representation, desire, and affect. This is the meaning of meaning seen from the psychoanalytical point of view, and it is not difficult to see its relationship to the meaning of meaning as conceived by philosophy (the *eudimonia* of the theoretical life).

This quest and questioning are usually predetermined by the imaginary social significations that human beings absorb and internalize during the strenuous process we call socialization. Moreover, these significations themselves are almost always conveyed within strictly defined *boundaries*, since the elimination of certain questions is the first and best means to ensure the perpetuation of the validity of these signs. It may be objected that “reality” itself can call these significations into question – but “reality,” for each society, can only be described within the network of institutionally legitimated meanings that the network itself defines. Only the purely “instrumental” meanings, or rather, only the instrumental dimension of certain meanings, can sometimes be short-circuited and thus called into question by “reality.”

It is the institutionally legitimated “theory” of society, that is, its established beliefs, that is passionately defended by this structure. The mode of adherence in this case is precisely that of *belief*, and the

affective modality of this belief is *passion*, which is almost always expressed as fanaticism. This passion is carried to its maximum intensity because the socialized individual must identify himself, under penalty of both his own nonmeaning and that of all that surrounds him, with the organization of his society and the meanings that this organization embodies. If either is denied, physical suicide is often the result; short of that, psychic suicide almost always occurs. The reverse side of this passion, of this unlimited love for one's self and one's loved ones, is hatred for all that denies the legitimacy of these objects, that is to say hatred for the institutions and meanings of "others" and for the individuals that embody this otherness.

Such has been, and in principle still is, the human condition almost everywhere and at all times. But we would not even be able to conceive of *knowledge* in this way – that is, in opposition to belief – if not for the fact that the above-described condition had not on several occasions been disrupted. This has indeed been the case on at least two occasions, in ancient Greece and in Western Europe; as a consequence, the results of this rupture have become potentially accessible to any individual or human collective.

We cannot know "why" this rupture occurred, and in truth the question has no meaning; the rupture itself was a new creation. We are unable to characterize its content with more precision. Since such a rupture – or creation – is the consequence of a process of questioning that no longer accepts the limitations imposed on it by socially legitimated authorities, it is both a creation of philosophy – that is to say, an open-ended and free critical inquiry into all the certainties of the group, even the certainties of its group of wisemen – and a political creation in its establishment of a democratic politics – that is to say, an equally open-ended process of inquiry into the real institutions of society and of the unresolvable question of justice. Perhaps, above all, it is the process of cross-fertilization of these two activities.¹⁴

Limiting ourselves to the realm of thought narrowly defined, we must say that the object of knowledge's passion is the quest for knowledge itself, as the term *philosophia* so eloquently expresses it; that is, not a wisdom that is eternally certain and firm but rather the love or Eros of wisdom.

This activity is tri-partite in nature.

Clearly, the process of knowledge presupposes two conditions that are related to being itself. Yet, strangely, only one of them has

traditionally been brought into the foreground of philosophy. For there to be knowledge, there must be something knowable, since it is obvious that no subject whatsoever can have knowledge of a totally chaotic world. But it is *also* necessary that this world be neither “transparent” nor exhaustively knowable. Although the simple existence of beings for themselves creates a certain stability and order on at least one level of being (that is, its first and natural level, the one with which all living creatures must deal), the *history* of knowledge has other, profound ontological implications. In effect, the history of knowing proves that the nature of being is such that neither an initial examination nor the initial efforts of knowing exhaust being. Pursuing this question further, we can affirm that these thoughts are only thinkable after being itself has been fragmented and stratified by thought.¹⁵

The socio-historical condition of an individual or society has a bearing on the emergence of open societies, that is, on those societies in which the institutions and established codes of meaning can be called into question and in which the very process of knowing is positively vested and valued. Given that the real existence of society fundamentally depends on the individuals who bear and, so to speak, incorporate its meanings, it necessarily flows from this that the emergence of such societies both causes and presupposes the formation of individuals capable of encouraging and deepening the process of investigation.

Finally, as we have argued, if it is not knowledge or know-how but belief that the psyche desires most of all, then it becomes of paramount importance to answer the following questions: what psychic conditions are necessary for the emergence of the possibility of knowledge? What are the supports, and what are the vested objects, in the field of knowledge, that can have meaning from a strictly psychological point of view?

Strangely, the psychic dimension can in this context be expressed only in the form of a narcissistic passion that presupposes a transubstantiation of the image of the self. Here the self is no longer conceived as possessor of the truth, but as the capacity and source of a constantly renewed act of creation. Or, what amounts to the same thing: the vesting process is centered on the act of thinking itself, apart from any particular result, although conceived as capable of producing true results. And this idea is linked with a different concept of truth, both as a philosophical idea and as an object of passion: the true is no longer an object to be possessed (“a result,” as

Hegel himself called it) nor Heidegger's passive spectacle that sees being as an endless alternation of veiling and unveiling. The true becomes creation, always open-ended and always capable of reexamining itself; it is the various forms and contents of thought that seek out what is. The true is no longer the vesting with sense of an "image," nor even of "an image of the self" in the usual meaning of the word; it is the vesting of an "object/nonobject," which is equivalent to the activity and source of the true. The commitment to this idea of truth is the passion for knowledge, or thought as Eros.

Translated from the French by Thomas Epstein

Notes

1. See "La découverte de l'imagination" (1978), in *Domaines de l'homme — Les Carrefours du labyrinthe II*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1985, pp. 327–63; or, more recently, "Logique, imagination, réflexion" (1989), in *L'Inconscient et la Science*, R. Drey (ed.), Paris, Dunod, 1991.

2. On this term, see, for example "La logique des magmas et la question de l'autonomie," in *Domaines de l'homme, op. cit.*, pp. 385–418.

3. Piera Aulagnier, *Les Destins du plaisir*, Paris, P.U.F., 1979, pp. 14 and 163.

4. On this subject, see my article "Épilègomènes à une théorie de l'âme que l'on a pu présenter comme science" (1968), in *Les Carrefours du labyrinthe*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1978, pp. 61–63.

5. Plato, *The Apology*, 29 c–d, 38a. Twice in the course of *The Apology*, Socrates envisions a situation in which he is offered acquittal (or exile) on the condition that he cease his philosophical activity; in both cases he refuses.

6. See my article "Institution de la société et religion" (1982), in *Domaines de l'homme, op. cit.*, pp. 364–84.

7. Thus Augustine (*Confessions*, XII, XVI) agrees to enter into discussion with all those who oppose his ideas and yet refuses to enter into discussion with anyone who rejects the authority of Holy Writ.

8. Although a detailed review of the secondary psychoanalytic literature on this question is beyond the purview of this article, it can be generally stated that this literature has produced very little in the way of new ideas. The works of Piera Aulagnier, however, constitute an exception to this rule. In this regard, see (along with the book referred to in note 3) *La Violence de l'interprétation*, Paris, P.U.F., 1975, and *Un interprète en quête de sens*, Paris, Ramsay, 1986.

9. *Gesammelte Werke*, V, pp. 95–97; *Standard Edition*, VII, pp. 194–97. In fact, as is known (cf. the *Editor's Note*, p. 126, S.E. VII), the section on the theory of infantile sexuality in the *Trois Essais* was added to the edition of 1915. However, this addition adds little to the basic argument of the essay, since what is added is a simple rehash of the text of 1907, *Über infantile Sexualtheorien* (G.W. VII, pp. 171–88, S.E. IX, pp. 207–26), along with the addition of the idea and term *Wissstrieb*, which he says "can neither be counted among the elementary drives nor be reduced exclusively to an

aspect of sexuality" but rather "corresponds, on the one hand, to a sublimated form of control and, on the other, works with [by using] the energy [libidinal] of the pleasure of seeing" [or the desire to see, *Schaulust*]; see *G.W.*, p. 95. The question of Freud's conception of the drive that determines the quest for knowledge and desire for inquiry, of its exact nature and specific objects (sometimes associated with the question "Where do babies come from?" sometimes with, "What is the difference between the sexes?"), and of the development of these notions in the history of thought, is worthy of a detailed investigation, although it is outside of the scope of the present article.

10. See, for example, *G.W.*, XIII, p. 269 (*Das Ich und das Es*); XIV, p. 478 (*Unbehagen in der Kultur*); XVI, p. 22 (*Warum Krieg*) and p. 88 (*Endliche und unendliche Analyse*).

11. In this regard, see my book *L'Institution imaginaire de la société*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1975, chapter VI, in particular pp. 420–31; "L'état du sujet aujourd'hui," in *Le monde morcelé*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1990, pp. 189–226; and "Logique, imagination, réflexion," referred to *supra*, note 1.

12. See my *L'Institution imaginaire, op. cit.*, chapter VI, p. 371–420.

13. See the texts cited in note 11. The term sublimation is used for the first time by Freud in his "Trois Essais."

14. The singularity of Western civilization is probably a result of this unique cross-fertilization of theoretical research and political activity (institution building) narrowly defined. This is distinct from both the more or less a-cosmic or, at the very least, apolitical philosophies of Asia, and from the "democratic" but "closed" institutions of certain archaic societies.

15. See my texts, "Portée ontologique de l'histoire de la science," in *Domaines de l'homme, op. cit.*, pp. 419–55, and "Temps and création," in *Le Monde morcelé, op. cit.*, pp. 247–48.