

# On Being Downstream

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*Thinking in history* requires some reflection<sup>1</sup> – perhaps not primarily on the concept of history, but rather on the notion of *thinking in* history. Once we get a grasp of what this “thinking in” could mean, other things will, I hope, follow. Hence, as a way of introducing my thoughts on this topic, I would like to reflect upon the meaning of a metaphor I stumbled upon in one of the texts of the French/Greek philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis.<sup>2</sup> The metaphor to which I refer is “being downstream” (*être en aval*), qua description of our historical and social situation.

There are, of course, several different senses in which *being downstream* can be understood in connection with history and time. Most evidently, perhaps, the notion of *downstream* evokes a river that flows *from* a perhaps unknown source or origin towards its goal (the sea) – in this respect, the metaphor tends to guide our thinking about history, about our being in time and in history, towards a conception where time flows, irrevocably, independently, not heeding our human needs and preoccupations, following a pre-established direction, where we, as it were, are more or less reluctantly washed away with the flow. Ever since Heraclitus<sup>3</sup> this image has been an integral part of Western thinking, ceaselessly subjected to different interpretations, but none the

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<sup>1</sup> I have previously written two texts in Swedish on this subject: “Den ohörda tanken, den slumpartade formuleringen och den nytänkta idén – skäl att bry sig om filosofins historia” [The Unheard Thought, the Random Formulation and the Newly Thought Idea – Reasons to Care about the History of Philosophy], in Mats Rosengren and Ola Sigurdson (eds.), *Penelopes väv* [The Cloth of Penelope], (Glänta production: Göteborg, 2003); and “Skapelse ur intet” [Creation out of Nothing] in *Res Publica*, no. 58, 2003. The present essay restates, reformulates and develops themes from both of these texts.

<sup>2</sup> “The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy” in *The Castoriadis Reader*, editing and translation David Ames Curtis, (Blackwell: Oxford, 1997), p. 270.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Fragm. no. 12, 49a, and 91.

less always implying that change, time and therefore history has a direction whether we like it or not. We may succeed in building some barriers and, for a time, be able to divert the current from its main course, but in the end the flow of time will carry us all away towards whatever end or *telos* it itself is approaching.

Moreover, the image *being downstream* in history or time evokes a difference in level: What has happened before is upstream; what is to come, what will come to pass, is even further downstream. And we are all familiar with how differences in elevation tend to transform themselves into differences in value: the metaphor might seem to imply that everything was better before the present, and will be worse in the future – the water used to be clearer and fresher; after us, it will be even more polluted. In this sense the notion of being downstream is a nostalgic one – expressing a longing for times past and shores long passed, and urging us to look for the faraway source or origin whence it all sprang forth.

But the value-transformation may work in the opposite direction as well. The trickle, coming from a small source lost in the high, barren wastelands of unfriendly mountains, gains strength, flows more easily, grows mighty and strong as it reaches the valleys and becomes a majestic river in the flatlands, where it unhesitatingly chooses the easiest course towards its goal – the sea, farther away still. If you interpret the metaphor in this way, what is better, richer and more desirable for us human beings will constantly be found downstream, and the final goal, the sea, even if forever unattainable, will represent an ultimate value, that which gives meaning and purpose to time, history, and to us all.

The three interpretations mentioned this far all convey what I would like to call a heteronomous notion of history and time – that is, a notion of history as something given and immutable, its laws and properties given once and for all by nature, God, or whatever. Of course, this notion does not utterly exclude human influence on the events of history, which would be absurd. To a large extent however, it presents history as pre-determined by laws and conditions beyond human reach, laws and conditions that we have to accept and subordinate ourselves to.

The interpretation I favor is quite different, much less intuitive and not evocative of a river at all, or even streaming water. For me, the notion of being downstream, is consonant with being thrown into water that is already there – in puddles, canals, small lakes and swamps. In

this marshland the water flows to and fro, currents are created, grow in strength, diverge, concord, diminish and disappear. Canals go dry, others overflow, puddles stagnate and evaporate, others are re-connected to the bigger lakes and so on. No direction is inscribed in this interpretation, no from where to there. In these marshes of history every position we may take or find ourselves in is always already downstream – in the sense that there is always water there before us, filled with toxic or nourishing particles and debris, the remains of earlier happenings in the marshes. Nor is there a difference in value implied by this interpretation – the different parts of our marshland are just different, *other* in relation to each other, more or less suitable for different purposes, nothing more.

The purpose of this metaphorical exercise is, of course, to try to say something comprehensible about the way in which we affect ourselves and are affected by history while creating philosophy as well as other things. It should already be quite clear that I reject the notion of History, and even of Time, as something with its own unalterable properties, affecting us human beings in predetermined and unavoidable ways.

But I am not rejecting the notion of change. And I am not implying that change could, as it were, go both ways: what is changed is changed into something other, and even if it were changed “back again” it would not – in the strict sense that I am concerned with here – be the same again. At the very best it would be “an other same” – that is something that for some purpose or other can *serve* as the same thing as that which was there before.

But does not this imply that I accept a general direction after all? Well, yes – a direction in change: that which has changed cannot return to exactly what it was. For us human beings, *aging* is an example of change that we cannot hinder nor reverse, try as we might. And aging may of course be seen as giving our individual existences a direction – from the cradle to the grave, so to speak. But our way of experiencing, or living, aging is by no means an unavoidable fact, identical for all members of the human race, then, now and forever. Nor is it a fact of nature, in a traditional objective, ontological sense – but it is of course an unavoidable aspect in *our* human lives, as we know and experience them. But to promote even the most evident and tangible of human experiences to an ontological condition strikes me as an unacceptable anthropomorphism. Such a “promotion” would, as it were, “cover

over” our very same human activity, i.e., the transformation of a specific experience to an objective condition for all human life, by instituting this condition as a natural one beyond our reach. So, while I, along with everybody else, obviously have to deal with aging as an irreversible process of change in my own life, and in the world we live in, I do not accept an overall ontological direction governing all changes.

But there is interaction, of course – one change affects, and is affected by, what surrounds it, and may cause other changes. There are large areas, or *magmas* to use one of Cornelius Castoriadis’s central notions, within *our human world* in which changes are predictable, even foreseeable – according to scientific laws for instance – and where consequences can be calculated and evaluated. No human life as we know it would be possible if this was not the case.

Not all domains or *magmas* in our world are subject to such predictability, though, nor are the relations between the domains one of simple, or even complex, causation. In the fabric of our world there are thresholds, interruptions, gaps as well as series, chains and connections. And this means that, if we are to try to understand our world and our being in the world, we must abandon several myths about ourselves and our world:

First of all we have to reject the notion of universal causality, for example the myth of the river of Being flowing from its source (“the Big Bang,” for instance) towards its ever faraway goal. Then, and in accordance with this, we must reject the idea that Being is One – that everything that *is*, is a variation of one and the same basic Being. And we must abandon the notion of Being as being universally rational – the idea that our human rationality is capable, in principle, of unveiling all the enigmas of Being and eventually to create a Theory-of-Everything. Finally, we must accept that we are capable of *creating* our world, indeed, that we already are creating our world – in an ontological as well as in an epistemological sense. Indeed, to my mind neither history, nor time, nor our world is something that we endure. On the contrary, they are our proper creations.

## Creation

To elucidate this, I fear, far too condensed introduction, I will need to address the question of creation more directly – and to this end I will

make use of Cornelius Castoriadis. His position in this matter is radical:

[T]here is creation in being, or, more precisely, being is creation, *vis formandi*: not creation of “matter-energy” but creation of forms. There are always necessary but not sufficient conditions for this creation. Creation, as far as form – *eidos* – is concerned, is *ex nihilo*, but it is not *in nihilo*, nor *cum nihilo*. What is the point in adopting a term with such a loaded history? On the one hand, to end the subterfuges and the sophistries concerning the question of the new: either there is creation, or the history of being (and consequently of humanity too) is an interminable repetition (or an eternal return).<sup>4</sup>

One reason for taking Castoriadis’s position on the question of creation seriously is that this “question of the new” is in fact inevitable, in science as in everyday life. The last fifty years of research in epistemology, political and social theory, as well as within the human sciences in general – with its emphasis upon the social construction of facts, the production (as opposed to *gathering* or *collecting*) of knowledge, and the intrinsic and unavoidable relations between knowledge, power and our all too human desire for truth – would seem more or less nonsensical unless some kind of genuinely human capacity of creation of new “things” is presupposed. And this should come as no surprise, since we do create new things all the time – from making bread to composing music, from building houses to making friends. Creation is an everyday affair, part and parcel of our human lives.

But human creation is infinitely more complex than these ordinary activities may lead us to believe. The examples just mentioned all stress or assume acts of creation as things done intentionally, by an individual intending to create a more or less definite something, whereas the most important (and perhaps most insidious) forms of human creation are not attributable or reducible to individual, conscious intentions – at least not in general or in simple or obvious ways.

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<sup>4</sup> “[I]l y a création dans l’être, ou, plus exactement, que l’être est création, *vis formandi*: non pas création de ‘matière-énergie,’ mais création de formes. De cette création il y a chaque fois des conditions nécessaires mais non suffisantes. La création quant à la forme, à l’*eidos*, est *ex nihilo*, mais elle n’est pas *in nihilo*, ni *cum nihilo*. Pourquoi adopter ce terme à histoire chargée? D’une part, pour en finir avec les subterfuges et les sophismes concernant la question du nouveau: ou bien il y a création, ou bien l’histoire de l’être (donc aussi de l’humanité) est interminable répétition (ou éternel retour),” in “Complexité, magmas et histoire” in *Fait et à faire – les carrefours du labyrinthe V* (Seuil, Paris, 1997), p. 212. The translation is my own.

Colors, to take one of Castoriadis's favorite (and problematic) examples, do not exist in nature, they are human creations. It would hardly make sense to ask for the intentions lurking behind the creation of orange, or to try to find out the intended meaning of the visual spectrum. Castoriadis writes:

To the question "Why do certain classes of living beings grasp certain electromagnetic waves *as* colors and *as these* colors?" there is no answer, [...]. This faculty of making be, of bringing out of itself modes of being, determinations and laws [...] is what I call radical creation.<sup>5</sup>

It seems to me that we have good reasons to follow in Castoriadis's wake and accept that we humans are – always in specific and changing ways, but not always, or rather quite seldom, consciously – creating our own facts, our own truths, our own possibilities. In a profoundly cosmogonic and ontological way we do create our world in doing politics, science, peace and war. And this is why we so badly need to address the problems of creation, not only in relation to literature, poetry or art, but in the very core of the scientific endeavor as well as in our historical existence. We must at least try to answer the following questions: How does this human creation come about? What can it achieve? Are there limits to our ability to create, and if so, what are they? In short – how are we to understand this creation in which we are all engaged?

## Out of nothing?

Let me turn more directly to Castoriadis's radical and problematic notion of creation. In another one of his many formulations concerning *creatio ex nihilo*, in *Fait et à faire*, he writes:

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<sup>5</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, "Done and to be done" in *The Castoriadis Reader*, ed. and transl. David Ames Curtis (Blackwell: Oxford, 1997), p. 404. This theme is also developed in "Anthropologie, philosophie, politique" in *La Monté de l'Insignifiance – les carrefours de labyrinthe* IV, p. 110 and onwards, where Castoriadis states that "L'imagination commence avec la sensibilité; elle est manifeste dans les données les plus élémentaires de la sensibilité. [...] L'imagination incorporée dans notre sensibilité a fait être cette forme d'être [les couleurs] qui n'existe pas dans la nature (dans la nature il n'y a pas de couleurs, il n'y a que des radiations), le rouge, le bleu, la couleur en général, que nous "percevons" – terme abusif certes – et que d'autres animaux, parce que leur imagination sensorielle est autre, 'perçoivent' autrement." (p. 111)

It is clear that social-historical creation (as in any other domain, for that matter), if it is unmotivated – *ex nihilo* – always takes place under constraints (it does not occur *in nihilo*, nor *cum nihilo*). Creation does not signify, not in the social-historical domain, nor anywhere else, that anything can happen anywhere, at any time and in any way.<sup>6</sup>

Castoriadis's focus is thus unmotivated creation – that is, the “capacity to make emerge (*faire émerger*) that which is not given, nor derivable, via combinations or in any other way, from what is given.”<sup>7</sup> Castoriadis returns to this point throughout his work, incessantly insisting on the crucial difference between *causing* and *conditioning*. But how are we to understand this cleavage within the domain of human creation? How is the necessity of such a distinction founded by Castoriadis?

It seems to me that the main reason for Castoriadis to insist on creation as conditioned and not as caused is that the alternative is fundamentally absurd. If we do not reckon with our ability to create *ex nihilo* (in the sense that Castoriadis gives to this notion) we would have to admit all kinds of oddities. We would, for example, have to accept that everything that now *is*, from hairdryers and hot-dogs to symphonies and quantum-physics, is out of necessity; and therefore, in a sense, it has been there (where?) ever since the Big Bang (or what ever *arche* you choose). Or, if it is not already there, at least that “everything” is fully explainable in casual terms – a position that Castoriadis calls “the myth of being as determined.” This critique is obviously formulated from within our human situation, following a rationale that one may call immanent (be this term not excessively burdened with metaphysical signification). It may be summarized as follows: Since the notion of universal causality and “the total rationality of what there is” seems to be at odds with the way the world actually presents itself to us, and with the way *we* are in this world, we have to assign to causality and rationality their proper place and range – that is to the strata in the

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<sup>6</sup> “Il est clair que la création social-historique (comme du reste n’importe quel autre domaine), si elle est immotivée – *ex nihilo* – a toujours lieu sous contraintes (elle ne se fait ni *in nihilo*, ni *cum nihilo*). Ni dans le domaine social-historique, ni nulle part ailleurs, la création ne signifie pas que n’importe quoi peut arriver n’importe où, n’importe quand et n’importe comment.” *Fait et à faire – les carrefours du labyrinthe*, (Seuil:Paris, 1997), p. 20. The translation is my own.

<sup>7</sup> “Création: la capacité de faire émerger ce qui n’est pas donné, ni dérivable, combinatoirement ou autrement, à partir du donné.” “Anthropologie, philosophie, politique” in *La Montée de l’Insignifiance – les carrefours de labyrinthe IV*, p. 110. The translation is my own.

magmas that actually, inevitably and necessarily are “ruled” by the ensidic logic – no world is even thinkable without an ensidic dimension.

“Ensidic thinking” or “ensidic logic” is Castoriadis’s shorthand expression for the kind of thinking and logic that he calls “ensembliste-identitaire” – that is, thinking based on the idea that all aspects of being are specific differentiations of a determined original element, an element that therefore should be considered to constitute the unity, identity, or essence of these aspects of being. The ensidic logic rejects the possibility of human creation and, thus, posits the origin of the laws of our world (natural laws as well as social ones) outside of *our* world and society. In this respect the ensidic thinking is heteronomous and tends to “cover over” the fact that man and society inevitably are autonomous – that is that they posit their own laws. Needless to say, Castoriadis claims that ensidic thinking has been dominating Western thought ever since philosophy was created.

As soon as we have rid ourselves of these imperious and heteronomistic notions of causality and rationality, we realize that if there is (to be) any world at all, it has to be created in some way. And since the options of God or of evolution both seem to presuppose the very notions of universal causality and/or saturating rationality that we are trying to avoid, and since the world undeniably is there, we are left only with ourselves and our autonomous ability to create our own world. Hence, in order to understand ourselves and our world, we have to presuppose that we are endowed with a *radical imagination* that makes it possible for us *to create out of nothing* – that is to create new forms in and for our world. (This is of course a *very* rough sketch of what I take to be the main arguments supporting Castoriadis’s notion of radical imagination and creation.)

But this unmotivated creation, this *creatio ex nihilo*, is, as Castoriadis says in the piece I just quoted, not to be thought of as a random upsurge of hitherto unknown forms, thoughts or things. It is a conditioned creation, a creation that “always takes place under constraints.” And these constraints are of many various and immersed kinds: social, historical, conceptual, corporal, biological, psychical, and so on. The task of describing exactly the ways in which they limit and constrain, and the way they support and condition our radical imagination is immense, and I will not even try to approach this question here.



Let me instead follow another route: If we are able to create out of nothing, if we all have it “in us” to be the origin of our world, then we urgently need to rework our conception of origin. The Italian philosopher Fabio Ciaramelli suggests, in his detailed analyses of Castoriadis’s notion of creation, that we should conceptualize the activity of radical imagination – that is *creatio ex nihilo* – as a “temporalization of the originary.”<sup>8</sup>

To say that the originary is temporalized is, at least in my interpretation, to say that the originary is not *an* origin, but an ever present originating. Not a thing, a point, an *arche* but an activity or rather a movement, a change. This way of conceiving the origin is by no means only a creation of Castoriadis’s. For example, Jacques Derrida has, in several of his early works, conceptualized this ever present movement as *différance*, and he has to my mind convincingly shown both that the classical conception of origin (*arche*) is and has always been faulty, as well as how the logic guiding the “metaphysical cover up” of this fact works.<sup>9</sup> This change or *différance* – itself unexplainable, yes even unthinkable, as long as we remain only within the framework of ensidic thinking – is, as it were, what makes originating possible. Another way to phrase this would be to say that what presents itself to us as an origin (that is, origin in the classical, heteronomous sense) must, to be able to thus present itself, always already partake in the movement of originating. But exactly what does this movement do (if one will permit me this somewhat intentionalistic language)? It engenders *meaning for* beings, it presents a world to one or several beings, a world that has some sense *for* them. Being in general is chaos, Castoriadis claims, it is the complete absence of meaning and sense, of form, and is therefore not liveable for any creature. “Creation emerges,” Ciaramelli explains, “in order to cover over the Chaos that nevertheless manifests itself in and through such an emergence.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus we are entitled to draw the following conclusion. Since there is a world (the world we all are living in) that presents itself to us,

<sup>8</sup> Fabio Ciaramelli, “The Self-Presupposition of the Origin: Hommage to Cornelius Castoriadis,” in *Thesis Eleven*, number 49, May 1997, p. 46

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida has, in his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Social Sciences,” shown that to rework the concept of “structure” and “centered structure” is also to rework the concept of origin and of all the concepts that are “in system” with it. I have tried to state some of the consequence of such a reworking in my *Doxologi- en essä om kunskap*, Rhetor, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Ciaramelli, op. cit., p. 48

through always already present social-imaginary significations,<sup>11</sup> as a diversity of meaning (a stone has meaning for us, as well as a word or a cosmogonic theory etc.), there must be an originating movement that “makes sense” for us, that institutes the social-imaginary significations that we live through and by. Furthermore, this must mean that whatever the world is, it is at least organizable in a way that is in some minimal sense meaningful to us. This creation of a world endowed with meaning is what Ciaramelli calls (if I have understood him correctly) “immanent creation.”<sup>12</sup>

There is no possible way for us to “go beyond” this immanent creation, since this creation is the very creation of our world. The world is given to us – we may be bats or human beings – as being already there, something that we cannot doubt or question (in the sense that we cannot seriously, in practice, doubt our need for food or water if we want to continue on existing.) And it is given to us *the way* it is given to us because we are *what* we are.<sup>13</sup>

This notion of immanent creation should not be understood as implying that there is a non-immanent creation as well. Ciaramelli writes, in somewhat Heideggerian language, that:

...this does not signify that behind the ontic origin, which each time is determinate, there exists a stratum of being – an ontological dimension – that one should attempt to discover or unveil or recollect: in that case one would once again, despite everything, be thinking the origin as a determinate *event* – that is as the upsurge of a *tode ti* – and one would overlook the originary qua *self-advent*.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, if there are Gods, theories or even a universe at all it is because they have been created by us human beings through the unfolding of this immanent originating movement – the “figure and its horizon created together,” as Ciaramelli puts it.<sup>15</sup> And these figures have, to the extent that they are already present in our human world, been instituted

<sup>11</sup> Why not just talk about “social significations” *tout court*? In “Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary” Castoriadis explains: “I talk about imagination because of the two connotations of the word: the connection with images in the most general sense, that is, *forms* (*Bilder*-, *Einbildung* etc.); and the connection with the idea of invention or, better and properly speaking, with *creation*.” *The Castoriadis Reader*, ed. and transl. David Ames Curtis (Blackwell: Oxford, 1997), p. 321.

<sup>12</sup> Ciaramelli, op.cit., p. 49

<sup>13</sup> I touched upon this idea of Castoriadis’s above – see footnote 4.

<sup>14</sup> Ciaramelli, op.cit., p. 47

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 48

as social-imaginary significations and incorporated in the magmas of the society in which we happen to find ourselves. And we ourselves are, as Castoriadis once said, but walking fragments of the institution of our society:

History is creation: the creation of total forms of human life. Social-historical forms are not “determined” by natural or historical “laws.” Society is self-creation. “That which” creates society and history is the instituting society, as opposed to the instituted society. The instituting society is the social imaginary in the radical sense. The self-institution of society is the creation of a human world: of “things,” “reality,” language, norms, values, ways of life and death, objects for which we live and objects for which we die – and of course first and foremost, the creation of the human individual in which the institution of society is massively embedded.<sup>16</sup>

We may now return to our initial metaphor – *on being downstream* – with a perhaps more developed idea of how the waterlands in which we find ourselves affect us, and of what they contain. The marshes in which we wander are *magmas* of social-imaginary significations instituted by those who were here before us and transmitted, upheld, transformed and communicated through different kinds of institutions: language, of course, and habits, ways of being in the world, practices – but also and more concretely political systems, schools, laws, trade-agreements, etc. These social-imaginary significations are the forms in and through which we live, they present a world to us.

## What about philosophy?

But how, if at all, does this conception of society and history *as creation* affect how we do philosophy today? Is there anything specific about this creative approach to questions related to history and thinking that has not already been developed within, say, the hermeneutical tradition and contemporary constructivist epistemology?

I think there is indeed something yet to be developed here, even if the affinities with both hermeneutics and constructivist epistemologies are many and undeniable. In the beginning of this text I briefly men-

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<sup>16</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis; “The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy” in *The Castoriadis Reader*, ed. and transl. David Ames Curtis (Blackwell Publisher: Oxford Malden, 1997), p. 269.

tioned three myths or ideas about ourselves and our world that we have to abandon if we accept that history and society is auto-creation – the three ideas were, as you will recall, *the notion of universal causality; the idea that everything that is is a variation of one and the same basic Being* and *the notion of Being as universally rational*. Once we abandon these notions we find ourselves in a *consciously* autonomous position – that is in a position where it is clear to us human beings that we institute our own laws, be they natural, social, or historical. But our instituting creativity is, as we have seen, not totally free or random: it is a conditioned activity, inevitably taking place within the constraints of a specific social-historical situation, within the specific social-imaginary significations that constitute the situation. So I am not implying (nor is Castoriadis, for that matter) that our ability to create could be an argument in favor of crude historical revisionism – the atom-bomb was dropped over Hiroshima, and the Holocaust really took place, there is no doubt in my mind about that. But these facts only exist as social-imaginary significations within the dominant *doxa* of most of our scientific and political communities – nowhere else. And these communities, as well as their *doxai*, are ever-changing, but not according to a pre-established order or necessity – which makes it all the more important to reflect upon the ways in which historical change is *created* (not *takes place*) and the ways in which facts, fictions and truths are *instituted* (not *found, given* or *unveiled*). And this is a political as well as a scientific task.

In philosophy, where the affinities with the hermeneutical tradition become clear and obvious, this task would amount to, among other things, a need to be aware of the social-imaginary significations that condition our thought (i.e. to do history of philosophy as well as critical conceptual and ideological analysis); how they have been understood in the past; how they can be interpreted in the present; how they were created and how they have been transmitted and upheld; what possibilities they offer us today, and what they deny us. The philosopher has to deal with the significations that are always already there – and they may take form in concrete instituted and institutionalized social demands, like the practical constraints of his or her discipline – but is at the same time not constrained by a notion of pre-established tradition, following its own rationale from ancient Greece and onwards. And this will, I hope, affect at least *the way* philosophy is done and thought. Let me, to end this somewhat erratic discourse, give you

an example – and it is, as you may guess, not chosen at random – as a way of *showing* rather than stating what I mean:

In a recent text Jesper Svenbro, philologist and poet working at the Centre Louis Gernet in Paris, the perceptual theory of Empedocles is discussed. By way of introducing his topic, Svenbro makes use of Wittgenstein's familiar discussion of the duck-rabbit to bring out the peculiarities of the Greek expression *bleponta ou blepein*, "to see without seeing." An illiterate person who looks at a row of letters is in this situation. He sees only one aspect of the scribbles – the letters (the *grammata*) – but he does not see what they mean (he cannot see them as *stoikheia*, as a meaningful sequence of letters): He sees without seeing. Put with other, more Wittgensteinian phrasing: He is blind to one of the aspects of what he actually sees. Svenbro then proceeds to a discussion of the *Optics* of Euclid, and shows that for the ancient Greeks, the gaze was thought of as a "visual ray" (*rayon visuel*) going *from the eye to the object* seen. After these preliminaries, Svenbro is prepared to attack his principal subject: The perceptual theory of Empedocles. His point of departure is fragment 84 (in the Diels-Kranz edition) where the human eye is compared to a lantern, prepared by a man who is venturing out into a stormy night, and therefore needs to shelter the light inside the lantern from the violent winds. In the analogy the pupil is like the light inside the lantern, projecting its fire through the vitreous body (the transparent shelters in the "windows" of the lantern) out into the world.

Svenbro then confronts Jean Bollack's interpretation/translation of the fragment. Bollack says that Empedocles' only concern is with the anatomy of the human eye – not with the gaze. For Bollack, the pupil is like the lantern taken as a whole, and therefore the analogical counterpart to the vitreous body of the eye will have to be the stormy night. Interpreted in this way, the fire of the eye – that is "the gaze" – never leaves the eye, but stops, as it were, at its "threshold." One reason for Bollack's interpretation seems to be that he wants to save Empedocles from stating something foolish. And he is not the first one to forward such an interpretation. Aristotle had pointed out that the perceptual theory of Empedocles does not seem to be consistent: "Sometimes he says that we see in the way described by the analogy, sometimes that we see due to the emanations from the things seen."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *De sensu*, 438a.

But Svenbro does not accept Bollack's way of trying to help Empedocles save face – instead, he shows that Bollack's interpretation is faulty, and that one has to accept that Empedocles actually states that there is fire, or rather the light of fire, emanating from the eye. And – to explain how Bollack could be so mistaken – he evokes Gérard Simon who claims that the epistemic break between ancient and modern optics is so complete that ancient optics, and the knowing it represents, has become all but “unthinkable” for us moderns.

Svenbro himself is not entirely convinced by Simon's arguments. In a somewhat surprising move he refers to Oliver Sacks and his book *Awakenings* from 1982. Sacks describes the case of a patient which seems to suggest that perception is of an almost *teleological*, pre-modern if you like, nature: He writes about a female patient – Hester – suffering from “kinematic vision” (i.e. that her visual perception is cut up as if in different frames):

Thus, on one occasion, when Hester was being visited by her brother, she happened to be having kinematic vision at about three or four frames a second, i.e. a rate so slow that there was a clearly perceptible difference between each frame. While watching her brother lighting his pipe, she was greatly startled by witnessing the following sequence: first, the striking of a match; second, her brother's hand holding the lighted match, having “jumped” a few inches from the matchbox; third, the match flaring up in the bowl of the pipe; and fourth, fifth, sixth, etc., the “intermediate” stages by which her brother's hand, holding the match, jerkily approached the pipe to be lit. Thus — incredibly — Hester saw the pipe actually being lit several frames too soon; she saw “the future,” so to speak, somewhat before she was *due* to see it... If we accept Hester's word in the matter (and if we do not listen to our patients we will never learn anything), we are compelled to make a novel hypothesis (or several such) about the perception of time and the nature of “moments.”<sup>18</sup>

Svenbro comments: “Could it perhaps be the case that visual perception is inseparable from thought? In any case, the quote relates a state of affairs that is quite uncomfortable for ‘us moderns,’ a state of affairs that reasonably should undermine the assurance with which ‘we’ imagine the visual perception.”

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<sup>18</sup> Oliver Sacks, *Awakenings*, 1982, p. 102-103, the quote and the reference are taken from Svenbro's text.

Svenbro then returns to Empedocles and fragment 84. He acknowledges that even though the gap between ancient and modern experiences of perception is not as evident or clear as Simon claims, the modern conception of light nevertheless has no counterpart in the ancient world. The ancient concept of light seems to be an “undifferentiated” one, where one and the same term can be used to designate either physical light (the light of the sun) or psychical light (the light of understanding). If this is the case, then we do not have to accept that there is an inconsistency in Empedocles’ theory of perception: Seeing works in fact both ways – physical light emanates from the objects we see, and the light of understanding emanates from our eyes. And then, perhaps, Aristotle’s remark concerning Empedocles – “One moment he says: we see like this; the next: we see like that” – should not be understood as pointing out an inconsistency but rather as a statement about his theory – “He says: one moment we see like this, the next like that,” i.e. that Empedocles conceives of perception as a double movement, one active, the other passive. An idea that seems to be consonant with fragment 88 in Diels-Kranz

... from both there was one vision.

Svenbro’s way of arguing is entirely consonant with the position that I am sketching in this paper:<sup>19</sup> With care, historic and linguistic knowledge and meticulous attention to details he sets different (social-imaginary) significations in motion; in addressing his problem he makes use of what he finds useful, like the famous *bricoleur*, without being constrained by heteronomistic notions of how one is to treat a philosophical problem – and in the process he manages to make a case for a critical attitude towards our own cherished beliefs. He invites us to enrich our understanding, not only of Empedocles’ theory, but of our contemporary concept of perception as well, by pointing to aspects of which many of us were unaware – as if we were in the position of a person who cannot see the duck in the duck-rabbit, but who can be taught to do so. Finally, he does not say but he demonstrates that philosophy is and has always been a creative discipline.

I have chosen to conclude my text with this example, since it shows, I hope, what it could mean to think in the marshes of history, where no

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<sup>19</sup> But I do not, of course, claim that Svenbro does actually agree with me on this. But he has agreed to figure as an example in my text, for which I am very grateful.

directions are prescribed, surprising connections are allowed, and may produce new and other forms of thinking – yet unseen.