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# The Emergence of the Unconscious in Western Thought (1)

## Summary:

*Following his phenomenological thinking, the author shows how Freudian theory of the unconscious is actually the point of arrival of a long process of European thinking that began with “Cartesian doubt” and with Descartes’ idea that one’s sense of the “I” is the only certainty. This process, which combines reflections on the subject and a philosophy of life, basically continues in Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and in phenomenology. Starting from an analysis of Freud’s Project for a Scientific Psychology-to be considered a theory of subjectivity-the Author examines the role Freud gave to life drives: the foundations of the subject lie not in representations but in affects. He also underlines the “Schopenhauerian” limits of Freudian theory: Freud appears to have put too much emphasis on psychic representations instead of putting it on affect as the ultimate truth of the subject. The Author then concludes by examining the common ground between Freud and Marx, insofar as both insist on individuality and on the subjectivity of human life.*

Sergio Benvenuto: *Prof. Henry, you have written a book, The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis(2), which is in fact a book about the emergence of the unconscious in Western thought.*

Michel Henry: The idea of the emergence of the unconscious in the West had its origins in my phenomenological work, since phenomenology does not reflect on different phenomena but on what makes each one of them a phenomenon; that is on phenomenality, on that which at a certain moment in classical philosophy became called “consciousness”. Now this is a fundamental problem because, whether one thinks of it explicitly or one lets it intervene without paying attention to it, it is phenomenality that acts as a support for phenomena and ensures that something shows itself to us in such a way that we can talk about it. In relation to the unconscious, phenomenality is a paradoxical theme or affirmation. In fact if one takes as a criterion the classical definition of phenomenality in terms of consciousness, this definition seems to purely and simply deny this phenomenality, this appearing, without which there is nothing: there is, for us, no experience. And so what is left? What can we talk about if nothing remains, if is no giving left? For phenomenologists, who think that every philosophical discourse should be based on some piece of giving, the very affirmation of an unconscious leads to a sort of *aporia*. What does it mean to speak, to think, if nothing reveals itself? That is why I wanted to clarify the paradox of the unconscious starting from the phenomenological presuppositions of my philosophical thought.

Benvenuto: *You start your analysis from the cogito of Descartes, which you consider as a source of this thought of the unconscious.*

Henry: The Cartesian *cogito* seems far removed in relation to psychoanalysis and 20th century thought. But it is a source that cannot be hidden, for reason that not only the unconscious of psychoanalysis, but every

form of thought in the 20th century has questioned the *cogito* of Descartes. And with this calling into question of the *cogito*, phenomenality was called into question. In this way one wanted to say not that phenomenality does not exist-because that would be impossible-but that it is an appearance, that it is deceptive. That is why, instead of considering it as a sound and safe basis for our thought and for our intellectual practice, it is necessary to cast doubt on phenomenality. It was the famous “age of suspicion”, as Ricoeur expressed it: that is, the contestation of a moment in which, on the contrary, philosophy would have liked to be grounded on an indubitable phenomenality, because fundamentally the *cogito* is this: it is the affirmation of a phenomenality, of an absolutely incontestable appearance, upon which one can rely. This appearance is not just any sort of appearance, but is an appearing to myself and above all my own appearing to myself. “I think” means: I appear to myself and this appearing to myself is absolutely indisputable. On this certainty rests all the knowledge that I can acquire about myself and the world. According to Descartes, in as much as I have a certain knowledge of myself and all the instruments of knowledge, everything that I know benefits from this invincible certainty that I carry within me. As a consequence, if the thought of the 20th century, all taken and considered together, calls in question the *cogito* of Descartes, it calls in question that which was considered by classical modern philosophy, but not by contemporary philosophy, as a certain foundation. Thus everything is called in question: it is the age of suspicion.

And so the *cogito* of Descartes is called in question, which acted as the foundation not only of our thought, but of the truth of all our experience. And so one has to ask oneself why this truth is called in question by all of modern thought, and one has to ask oneself first of all if one has understood what Descartes meant by affirming the *cogito*. This was one of the themes of my reflection, to which I have dedicated three chapters of *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*. There has been a very serious misunderstanding of the *cogito* of Descartes: it was believed that the *cogito* meant “I think”-and in fact this is the meaning of the Latin word-in the sense “I represent [something] to myself”, and in the sense that “I have some evidence” and [in the first place] I have the evidence of my existence. Now evidence is something that one sees and it is something that one sees in such a way that one cannot doubt it. Thus the sensible experience seems indubitable for common sense. I can see very well that I am here in a room, that I am talking to you, that near me there is a lamp, etc. And there is further evidence, rational evidence. I see that in a circle the radii are all equal. I see that  $2+3=5$  and I also see that, if I think then I am, because if I didn't exist I could not think. That is what the *cogito* is for the readers of Descartes and for modern thought.

Unfortunately, with his *cogito* Descartes says exactly the opposite. Descartes says: I doubt everything I see. I doubt not only everything I see with my physical eyes, with my senses-and the doubt regarding the judgement of the senses had been known ever since antiquity-but I doubt also the rational truths. It is here that Descartes says: “Let us suppose the existence of a god who is a malignant spirit who wanted to deceive me when I believe that  $2+3=5$ ; well then I would be deceived; I would be wrong and my thought, my intelligible seeing would not be worth anything”.

At this point Descartes re-formulates the *cogito* in a strange way, to which sufficient attention has not been paid. Let's see how. In the very moment when any seeing is cast in doubt, Descartes must find the indestructible foundation he is looking for. This foundation appears in *The Passions of the Soul*, article 24, in which Descartes makes the hypothesis of the dream and says: when I see or imagine one or another thing in a dream it is all false. Now the dream has an important role in psychoanalysis. The dream is a sort of hallucination. I see myself running on the pavement after a train which is leaving, but in reality there is neither a pavement nor the train. At this point Descartes says: “I doubt everything I see”. And so what remains? And immediately afterwards there is a fantastic phrase, which invalidates all the criticisms that modern thought has launched. Descartes says: if in a dream I feel sadness or any other passion, anguish for example, even though it is a dream, that passion exists. It exists in as much as I feel it. If I feel fear, in the moment in which nothing is left in the world because I have doubted everything, everything about which one can doubt, here is something that I cannot doubt: the fact that every sentiment-if I limit myself not to what I relate about it, but to that which I feel-is indubitable. Here we find the genuine *cogito* of Descartes: the “I think” is an “I feel”. Sensation testifies to itself in such an incontestable way that if I feel pain I can find myself all the explanations in this world, but for all the period that the pain lasts I will continue to suffer. Nobody can deceive me about this, pain does not lie. This kind of revelation has remained hidden.

*And so when Le Senne proposed his “I suffer, therefore I am,” he was not really so far from Descartes. However Freud in The Interpretation of Dreams says the same thing: that the sentiment in a dream is never interpretable; the latent and the manifest coincide. The images in the dream can be interpreted: that which is seen, but not the feeling-which is always authentic. If in a dream a beautiful scene provokes anguish in me instead, the scene should be interpreted in such a way as to make my anguish comprehensible.*

This is a thesis which I sustain in *The genealogy of Psychoanalysis*. The problems raised by Descartes, which have not really been understood, open the modern age, as much as they are valid, just as much as they are false. What does Descartes doubt? He doubts representation, which is that which one sees. And that which we see is always that which is put before us, that which is in front of us, such that we can see it, thanks to its distance, both with the eyes of the body and with the eyes of the spirit, with the intellect; as when we see that the radii of a circle are all equal, which is a rational truth. Here we are dealing with representation. Western thought believed only in representation, while Descartes was basically the first to call representation in question. This means that the Heideggerian interpretation of Descartes is completely false: “I think” actually means everything except “I represent to myself”. And from the moment in which Descartes casts doubt on representation, then phenomenality, falsely identified with representation, becomes the unconscious.

In the article “The unconscious” of 1914, and in other texts of the period, Freud can introduce the concept of the unconscious, precisely because representation disappears. One of his most relevant arguments is the memory. I believe that if one looks at the world of representation, with its structure, one sees clearly that in the world of representation, before my gaze, there is only room for one thing [at a time]. Thus the clearing [*clairière*] in which I can see limits my horizons, such that the thing I see rapidly leaves this zone of light, to relinquish its place to another-and so then I see this other object. But there is a price to pay. In the world of representation, when I see a thing I do not see all the others which are then called unconscious representations. At this point, initially Freud demonstrates the unconscious by saying: there are some representations I think about, but from the moment that I cease to think about them they leave the circle of light of representation, which identifies them with the conscious mind: they become unconscious representations, or memories, and they go to fill that container, that is my unconscious. Thus is born the unsustainable aporetic concept of an unconscious representation, that is of something that is there in front of me, that I see and I do not see: it is the case of all the representations that I see only for an instant and that in the next instant disappear. This is the first period of psychoanalysis: the moment in which the unconscious affirms itself as regards the representation.

Representation as a finished mode of appearing gives origin to the idea that true reality is unconscious. But what is the true reality? It is important to precisely recognize that it is a reality of a different kind from that of representation, which can be found in the depths of myself and that Freud will call “unconscious”. It is invisible, but not in the sense of something that is temporarily visible before passing into an equally temporary invisibility, in a field of unconscious representations, from which it can return to the condition of visibility, as when I perform a reminiscence or an analysis which permits me to rediscover repressed memories. Thus we find ourselves in a world which is that of the passage from the represented to the non-represented, in such a way that the non-represented can always return into the represented. And this is the world of representation; it is the world as such. But our reality is of a different kind. It is a very particular reality, which subsists in a condition of invisibility-Freud would speak of the unconscious-which does not have the power of passing into the visible, and which does not even have the power of disappearing, in the sense of an invisible void, of a represented thing which has always been there within me, invisible. And so is it necessary to call it “unconscious” or give it another name instead?

Its true name is life. It is life, if life is what I feel, just as Descartes felt it in his dream, and as Freud also found it at the bottom of the unconscious. It is life as it is lived, but invisible, something that I feel without it ever being able to appear before my eyes. All my experiences are of this kind. I feel anguish, but I don't see it. Perhaps it is destined to modify my vision, and in fact it certainly will do: it will completely modify the world of representation-it is one of the great themes of Freud, but it had already been a theme of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. But anguish in itself is of another nature, it is not in the nature of representation, and it is however me myself: it is my life.

*And so we should return to the emergence in Western thought of this essential theme of life and the world-of-life. We should go back to what was behind Freud-to Kant and Schopenhauer-to see how this growing centrality of the theme of life and thus of sensation develops in the thought of the twentieth century.*

Your question is essential, because this theme has a history. The unconscious did not suddenly break upon the scene in the moment when the *cogito* was not understood. It is a historical fact that, at the moment of its formulation, the great Cartesians did not understand the *cogito*: neither Malebranche, nor Leibniz nor Spinoza understood the *cogito*. Precisely because it was very difficult for them to understand it, they believed that the *cogito* was evidence and was thus a representation. And again Heidegger criticizes this way of understanding it, when he says: " *I think means I represent to myself*", "I present myself to myself", "I present myself in front of myself", exactly as I represent the things of the world. Here there is a massive contradiction.

Also Schopenhauer thinks along the same lines as Kant. Kant created, with Transcendental Aesthetics, a theory of representation-of the world as representation. The forms of intuition are in fact forms of representation: the space in which things are arranged in front of me, as in this room, and the time in which things are arranged in my spirit, one after the other. And then the categories of the intellect allow me to link up everything which is arranged in front of me by means of syntheses that are of the nature of thought. Forms of the intuition and concepts of the intellect together constitute the universe of representation. Schopenhauer, who is fuelled with Kantism, has an overwhelming intuition: *the world is representation, but there is something else*. What else is there? There is within me the desire to live, which is totally different from a representation: it is a sort of force that passes through me, against which I can do nothing and which is reality. The reality, for example, of the sexual impulse, which leads me towards its own objects? The reality of desire. The reality in addition which dwells within sentiments to the degree in which they all have a dynamic value: for example love, which leads me towards its object, or hatred, which makes me feel repugnance. This is our reality.

Here the destiny of western thought before Freud is being played out. Schopenhauer affirms that there is something totally different from representation, from the world, and that this something is within me. But since he continues to identify phenomenality, appearance, with representation, he is forced to say that this force in me is blind, it is unconscious and anonymous. Not by chance does Freud speak of Schopenhauer as a great thinker. He says: that which Schopenhauer called "the will to live", I call "impulse". We are dealing with a reality which from this moment-they are texts of 1818-is understood as man's deep reality; while everything else, the world of representation, is an unreal, phantasmagoric world, basically analogous to that of the dream. And this is the reason why Schopenhauer so easily accepts the thought of India, because the world is the veil of Maya, it is appearance, illusion. Thus on one side there is the world of representation, which is the world of unreality: that which I see which continually deceives me and deludes me; and on the other side there is a reality which passes through me without my feeling it.

If we had the time to enter into the details, we would see some contradictions in the texts of Schopenhauer. He said first of all that the will is felt by itself and that the will is the same thing as the body-but here the subjective body is intended; the body as I live it and that is unrepresentable. And on the other side there is representation, the only center of light. At this point the equation of the modern world is already proposed: either the light of representation, of thought of the world, or the unconscious. Schopenhauer therefore affirms the reality of the unconscious in a contradictory form. At first he attaches meaning to the evidence of the will to live in me, saying that basically the will to live, Will-which here is nothing to do with the intellectual will of classical thought-is something like a way of appearing. There is an extraordinary phrase of his which seems to me to be a timeless truth: our body appears to itself in two ways. On one side it appears to itself as an object in the world of representation-and in effect I see my body, my hand, I can touch them. But on the other side it appears to myself without being seen, from within, in the desires, the sentiments, in suffering, anguish in the will to live.

*Can one say that representation, according to Schopenhauer-and according to those of us who read him-is the subject as studied by science, the subject as studied by scientific psychology, or that which calls itself such?*

One can say so. And in fact in the further evolution of Schopenhauer's thought there is a moment in which he says so. But the important thing for the formation of modern thought is this extraordinary chiasmus: on one side the unreal which is the light and the visible, and on the other side the real which is immersed in the unconscious. This great chiasmus is taken up by Nietzsche, who should be seen as an intermediate reference point, between Schopenhauer and Freud, although Freud is much closer to Schopenhauer than to Nietzsche. So in Nietzsche there is an effort, which we see as pathetic and movingly passionate, to save *life*. To simplify things a little, Nietzsche basically accepts the thesis of Schopenhauer regarding representation. There is a world of representation, which in his mythological universe he adopts, is the figure of Apollo. Apollo is the realm of visible forms, the realm of beauty, and he is also the realm of everything that is revealed before us and that can have a cheering or placating function. Placating because there is another realm, that of the will, which for Nietzsche becomes the will to power. But one should note that Nietzsche more often defines this other realm in terms of pathos: it is the realm of Dionysus, and Dionysus is essentially our life seen as suffering...

*And enjoyment too!*

... but which is at the same time enjoyment. And here we encounter one of the greatest intuitions of Nietzsche. You are right to underline it: it is the ambivalence of the sentiments in our own depths, an ambivalence that can be understood. In *The Essence of the Manifestation* I have tried to propose an explanation which is able to make this ambivalence fully intelligible. Nietzsche is content, one might say, with giving some particularly pertinent historical examples: cruelty, for example. What is cruelty? It is the pleasure of inflicting suffering. Nietzsche insists on showing how, as much in primitive Greece as in the Middle Ages, there were ceremonies whose purpose was to offer the pleasure that the suffering of others gives us. In the Middle Ages public executions were great festive events. People went there not only to see someone being hanged, but also to see him tortured. The masses went to see spectacles that for us in the modern world, sensitive to pity, would be intolerable. Now for Nietzsche the strength and the greatness of man consist in the fact that in him can be found the pleasure of suffering. And so, in Nietzsche the connection between suffering and pleasure is extraordinarily interiorized, which prefigures Freudian themes. Not only can I obtain an extraordinary pleasure from the suffering of others, but I can also in a certain sense be the sculptor of myself and, to make myself suffer, cut and engrave my own flesh. From this derive the great phenomena of the bad conscience, of self-disgust, in which I am pleased with myself despite everything, because they contain their own joy. But in conclusion the problem that Nietzsche did not deal with and which it is not necessary to tackle here and now, is that of the internal comprehension of suffering and joy. Why does this connection exist originally within life? This is one of the great problems that we have inherited from the moment in which Schopenhauer formulated the antinomy between unreal representation and this dark world which is ours.

*In what sense do you mean it when you say that Nietzsche saved life?*

The great merit of Nietzsche was that of having given back to life its phenomenological dimension. Because basically the affirmation that life is unconscious has no meaning. Living is above all having the sensation of oneself [*s'éprouver*], feeling oneself. This is true even for the most simple modality of life. If one considers an impression of pleasure, what meaning could a pleasure have that one does not feel? The armchair, which does not have the sensation of itself [*ne s'éprouve*], does not feel either pleasure or pain, even if we give it an axe-blow. That is why pushing the affirmation that life is unconscious to its limit is nonsensical. Therefore the merit of Nietzsche is immense, in as much as he did not give a phenomenological definition of life in terms of representation-that is of the putting things at a distance thanks to which the *gaze of observation* becomes possible-but rather he gave a definition of phenomenality in terms of *feeling*, of pathos. A figure such as that of Dionysus, who suffers and enjoys at the same time, is essentially that of a living being, because pleasure and pain are in my opinion the primary modalities of life. Life is above all pleasure or pain, it is need, but need is painful; it exists only on the affective level. If need were not felt, it would not be anything.

Thus there is in Nietzsche a deep desire to make of life something splendid, and to understand that this

splendor comes from the fact that it is a revelation; in fact a self-revelation, because every affect reveals itself alone, it feels itself. We have a proof of this phenomenological character of life, utterly opposed to the abandonment to the unconscious, the dark, and anonymity, such as we find in Schopenhauer and partially also in Freud. The proof of this value of revelation of life is that Nietzsche made of life the source of values. While in Schopenhauer it was a source of absurdity, and while in Freud it will often be a source of deliriums, madness, phantasms of every kind, in Nietzsche life is the *initial principle* of values. Life creates values: for Nietzsche there are not values in nature, in objects, but it is life which gives them a value, and so life is the initial principle of evaluations. That is why the fundamental question that one should ask is: why does that initial principle of evaluation, which is life, have a value itself? Why does life have a value and why in the end does life have a value for Nietzsche? Because he is happy to be alive, because having the sensation of oneself [*s'éprouver soi-même*], which is special to living beings and which will be taken away from us when we die, is an extraordinary thing.

In Nietzsche life is analyzed through a certain number of figures. One of the principal figures through which Nietzsche analyses life, are the nobles. Nietzsche has the nobles say: "we nobles, the good the happy..." That which justifies life is thus happiness. That is why we have to defend it against all the processes which attack it, the most terrible of which, according to Nietzsche, is the process by which life turns against itself. This is one of the most inspired discoveries of Nietzsche: having recognized in human experience the processes of self-destruction. And in the moment in which he discerns these processes of self-destruction, among which suicide is only an external figure, Nietzsche draws back in horror saying: what a strange beast is man, who destroys himself! Now these processes of self-destruction are in the service of bad conscience, feelings of guilt, all that which generates disgust towards ourselves, tiredness and malaise. For Nietzsche an illness of life exists, but the most terrible thing is that this illness of life is also the conscience of suffering, only it is no longer a suffering which leads towards life, but a will towards self-destruction. Thus in Nietzsche suffering has a double role: the movement towards life to put oneself to the test [*s'éprouver soi-même*], and meanwhile the terrible process of self-destruction begins, which we have before our eyes also in the modern world.

*What do you think about the celebrated Deleuzian interpretation of Nietzsche's thought-in Nietzsche et la philosophie-in terms of conflict between active and reactive forces ?*

I do not agree with this interpretation, that Deleuze gave as a solution to a Nietzschean problem which we have still not alluded to: that of the strong and the weak. For Nietzsche in the strong-since life is the will to power, and this is his difference from Schopenhauer-there is no lack, but rather a sort of super-abundance, which takes enjoyment from itself, a form of happiness. Thus one must think that the strong are happy precisely because they have the feeling of fullness which is life. And so why do the weak exist? At this point the interpretation of Deleuze intervenes, because for him there are quantitatively different forces; and when a stronger force meets a weaker force, the weaker force becomes reactive towards the stronger force, and so resentment is born together with all the various reactive processes. It is a celebrated interpretation, because Deleuze's book had a very favorable reception in Paris when it came out, but which I do not agree with, because it does not really explain the weakness of the weak, because there are some beings in whom the force is supposed to be present in a lesser quantity than that which is present in the strong. Well, in Nietzsche the force, in the very fact that it is such, is never marked by weakness. Then in Nietzsche there is another extraordinary analysis of weakness: that of the ascetic priest. In fact it is true that there are for Nietzsche both the strong and the weak, and one can consider this as a given fact, a mysterious one moreover; but since there are two forces also in Deleuze's discourse, weakness cannot derive from anything other than a decision of life, of the vital force, to turn against itself. And why should life turn against itself? Because it suffers. And thus weakness get itself into strength, in the moment in which strength, instead of accepting suffering, turns itself against it with a suicidal attitude so as to destroy itself. At this point weakness is created: this is not a primary datum, but a metaphysical attitude, which derives from the fact that life turns against itself. Thus in the ascetic priest we find this extraordinary fact: the ascetic puts himself at the head of the flock of the weak, because what is most extraordinary in the weak is that they continue, despite everything, to fight. One of the most abyssal affirmations of Nietzsche is that at the bottom of

weakness there is a strength, infinite in itself. Thus the weak enter into conflict with the strong with this infinite force, of which the ascetic priest is the depository. For this reason they have to invent various strategies: they have to lead the strong to believe that what they do is evil, that strength is bad and that the weakness of the weak, of the sick, is good and that they should be cured. This is the inversion of values which the weak operate, but once they have effected it, that which permits them to defeat the strong is the fact that the strength which remains deep within them is in some way stronger than in the strong, because it is menaced. At this point the deepest instincts of life act in such a way that in reality the weak get the upper hand over the strong. This is one of the paradoxes of Nietzsche. One should be able to enter deeper into this extraordinary description.

*And so Freud arrives. Does Freud also want, like Nietzsche, to save life?*

Freud's attitude is equally ambiguous. But a precise reply to his question can only be found if one consults the famous *Project for a scientific psychology* of 1895. It is an extremely interesting project, because in it Freud proposes a scientific explanation of psychic activity, which in reality is a description of the neuronal system. In this sense it is truly modern, and can be connected with certain modern trends in neurosciences. Here Freud says that the neuronal system is divided in two: Psy system and a Phi system. What characterizes the neurons is that they are of two types. One type experiences external stimuli which determines a series of behavior patterns intended to favor flight from external danger-because one can flee from it one can escape from its action, and there are many ways of doing so. But the real danger for Freud, as for Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, is interior. Unfortunately there are other neurons whose characteristic is self-excitement, in the sense that they undergo an excitement which is no longer exogenous, but endogenous. And this interior excitement is terrible-there is nothing to be done. And this determines entropy for Freud. For him there is an excitement of the neuronal system which itself tends only to liquidate excitements. Since excitement is troublesome the neuronal system tends towards a quantity of energy  $Q = 0$ , that is towards a state of inertia or of death. As a consequence the whole theory of psychic activity built on the neuronal model is centered on the flight from excitement, because, according to Freud, excitement produces a suffering in the neuronal system, and thus in the psychic activity, "the malaise of need" as Schopenhauer would have called it, the malaise of desire; the libido, which gradually becomes unbearable as the quantity of excitement increases. What should be done then? Liquidate excitement, and in order to do this it is necessary to try to bring the neuronal system-and thus the psychic system which is its reflection-towards the state  $Q = 0$ . Basically it is necessary to liquidate the excitement which provokes malaise in us-this is Schopenhauer again-and to liquidate the malaise it is necessary to suppress the excitement. But basically to not feel malaise it is necessary to be an armchair or pair of shoes-it is a system of death. That is why I believe that in the end the apparition of the death impulse in meta-psychology is not a chance event, and it is exactly this aspect of Freud's thought that I do not accept. Confronted with this Freud, I have the same reaction-if you will allow the comparison-of Nietzsche confronted with Schopenhauer. I believe that life is good and therefore that it is not a case of liquidating our affections. The opposite is the case, as it was for Kandinsky: that of making life become more intense, such that it ever increasingly has the sensation of itself [*s'éprouve elle-même*]. I believe that all great works of art have the effect not of permitting life to liquidate its libido, but on the contrary of increasing by degrees its happiness and joy, which tend towards a sort of absolute beatitude.

*One could however object that this liquidation of the libido corresponds for Freud to its satisfaction; it corresponds to an enjoyment. For Freud the fact of liquidating the libido is pleasurable.*

You are right. There are two moments in Freud's reply, since he himself gave a reply to his own question. There is the moment in which enjoyment is the attenuation of excitement, and thus it does not suppress it-Freud says that it is impossible to suppress it. Enjoyment makes it return to a stationary state, according to the principle of constancy, not that of death, and as a consequence it has to satisfy, as far as possible, the impulses and needs. At this point a sort of equilibrium is found, preferable to desire. This is a first reply. Then there is another very different one, which intervenes at the end, upon which especially Paul Ricoeur reflected in his fine book on Freud: Eros suddenly arrives. In this world in which the death impulse reigns, in which its dominion expands, suddenly Eros arrives-we know neither where from nor why-to re-activate life

and to re-animate the scene. Eros is love in all the meanings of the word, who gives back to life that character of activity which, despite everything, is inherent within it. Here Freud is correct without any doubt; but it is also true, as Ricoeur noted, that here there is an error or fault [*faillie*] in the Freudian discourse, in that the principle of Eros falls in a certain sense from heaven.

*Nevertheless, in your opinion, does Freud truly constitute an overcoming or superseding of the classical philosophy of representation, or is he rather a compromise between the rediscovery of life as a positive fact and the classical vision? Perhaps Freud is halfway between classicism and dionysism?*

I believe that Freud is very close to Schopenhauer. In him there is the decisive affirmation, which I fully agree with, that the basis of our being is not of the order of representation, that representation is a non-reality, and that our reality is to be found in the depths of the unconscious. But at the bottom of the unconscious there are two things in conflict. On one side there is the affect, which Freud said-in a marginal note which to me seems magnificent-is never unconscious, in the sense that the affect feels itself [*s'éprouve*]. But on the other hand there is in Freud a theory of the unconscious which remains on the side of representation. Since basically, in the texts of 1912 and 1914, it is through unconscious representation that the unconscious regains its right of citizenship. While as regards deeper reality, there is also in Freud a contradiction: on one side there is an unconscious that, at its limit, is absolute; and on the other there is an affect that is for him, as it is for me, the basis of life. In the last formulation of analytic therapy, a story of affects is in question. In this context Freud had some intuitions of admirable profundity, for example in his theory of anguish. He puts anguish on the same plane as all affects. Every affect, before becoming realized, in the moment in which it still has not found its fulfillment, when it is in some way abandoned to the simple weight it exercises on itself, turns into anguish. And the anguish is not overcome until love finds a new incarnation. Here Freud, in relation to classical philosophy, has explored an essential dominion.

*Philosophically speaking, what is in your opinion the essential difference between Freud's anguish and that of Heidegger?*

The anguish of Freud seems to me much closer to reality. It is much closer to the anguish of Kierkegaard than to that of Heidegger-or, if you prefer, I feel much closer to the Kierkegaardian description of anguish than to that of Heidegger, because for Heidegger anguish puts us into the presence of the world, while for Freud, as for Kierkegaard, anguish arises from the relation of self [*du soi*] with itself. More precisely, it arises from pure suffering, in which life gives itself up to itself and in which the suffering of malaise gives itself to itself. The weight of need, when it becomes intolerable, leads to the arising of anguish. Thus in Freud anguish is born from the relationship of the ego with itself. In some phrases Freud says it explicitly: the ego cannot bear itself-while in Heidegger anguish puts me in relationship with the world. But I do not believe that this relationship with the world truly provokes anguish in people, such that this phrase of Heidegger – “anguish puts me in front of the void”-is taken up by Kierkegaard, in whom it however has a completely different sense. I said “the void”, because Heidegger, like Hegel, identifies the world with the void. The world is this horizon of visibility in which there is still nothing and in which things reveal themselves. And so here there is a complete shifting away from the anguish of life, which is that of Kierkegaard and of Freud, towards an anguish of the world, which to me seems less pertinent.

*But one could object that also for Freud anguish is relation with an object. Especially when he speaks of phobic anguish: there is a phobic object, an external object is a source of anguish.*

Yes, but in Freud anguish, in order to become relieved, *searches* for an object. The phobic object, which has nothing to do with the real situation, is simply a way to project outside oneself the unbearable weight of anguish. Thus the phobic object is a sort of deceit into which anguish leads itself in order to flee from itself. But it is not the phobic object which allows anguish to free itself from itself. Only an authentic transformation of the affect on the same level as the affect allows anguish to become free from itself. It is a self-transformation of life which can unblock the situation-for example being able to love again, without deceitful projections. In these projections consists the illness. This illness that tries to flee anguish in the



world of representation is curious, and it shuts itself off in a street with no exit and will remain closed in there until it finds the true way which Freud indicates in treatment: the *abreaction* of the affective traumatic event. It is necessary to start again from this traumatic event in order to find the solution in the context of life and reality, accepting the plane of reality, rediscovering on the plane of reality a reason to live, that is an actualization of our affective power.

*A less philosophical question now: Does your sympathy for the thought of Freud extend also to the modern practice of psychoanalysis? Would you advise a close friend who had some problems to go to an analyst?*

Psychoanalytical practice has gone down two paths. It has gone down a first path which was the same path of Western philosophy, the way of the Greeks: the way of knowledge, of the awakening of awareness. It was believed that the subject, by becoming aware of the traumatic event, would have been able to liberate himself from it. And during the work of analysis it was realized that becoming aware of the traumatic event, which was often in fact only made up and imaginary, sometimes invented by the analyst or by the person analyzed, did not lead to anything. As a consequence the work of analysis has in reality completely changed its nature, as has been pointed out by Michael Dvorák in his remarkable works on Freud. It is precisely in analytical treatment, on the plane of the affect and thus of the reality of life, through a modification of the affect and not by working on representation, that the treatment can advance rather than becoming blocked. This is my way of understanding psychoanalysis.

*You have worked for a long time also on Marx. Can you tell us something about the affinities and difference between Marx and Freud?*

The same contradictions are expressed regarding Marx as those for Freud. Marx has been assigned to the “age of suspicion”, as Ricoeur said. Like Freud, Marx is a thinker who leads us to treat our discourses as suspect. The solution, for Marx as for Freud, is to be found on the plane of reality. For ten years I did nothing other than read Marx. And instead what I found remarkable in Marx, and what I discovered by chance, is that at the root of reality he places a subjective body. He says it not only in his youthful writings, but also in his last manuscripts, which are admirable, and which went to make up Book III of *Das Kapital*. For Marx all explanations start from work; which is a mode of corporeal activity—here we re-encounter Schopenhauer. But this work is understood as subjective and not unconscious work; because after all if above all the work of the 19th century—physically very hard—was painful, then it was not unconscious. Computers and machines do not work. One can make them “work” as much as one wants, but in another sense.

Human work is subjective, individual, living. It is subjective in as much as it is suffered, but it can also be joyful. Human work is individual—while an anonymous force is not individual. And to say that human work is living means that it has the sensation of itself [*s'éprouve*]. If I had here the late manuscripts of Marx I could show you that every time he defines man he always speaks of “subjective force of living work”. And when this theme comes up in the manuscripts, Marx always writes it in italics. In order to construct the economy, it has been necessary to quantify—an impossible thing—and to qualify—an equally impossible thing—this subjective and living work. It is impossible, because one cannot quantify and qualify an existence, a suffering, love—unless we are dealing with prostitution, and perhaps not even in this case. And so human reality is basically always the same, even though we study it in such different fields as psycho-pathology and economic life.

*Translated from the French by Tristram Bruce*

## **Notes:**

- (1) Conversation held in Paris, January 30, 2001, at Michel Henry's apartment.
- (2) Transl. by Douglas Brick (Palo Alto: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998).