

On the Utopian/Dystopian Equivalence Between Functions and Experience

In his notebooks on psychology Paul Valéry called for a thought experiment:

Imagine a person whose entire experience were changed into functions. He would be the scientific being par excellence. Would he not be troubled by these innumerable functions? A person who would not forget the cards already played and would deduce the opponent's play.

Intellect is simply the activity which substitutes for this infinity, the use and organization of a limited number of functions. Or rather which transforms experiences into functions. (Psych. 111-112)

The scenario laid out in the passage and its provocation depends on the assumption of a disparity between the undenumerable multiplicity that composes experience, and the intrinsic finitude of the functions that can be carried out by human psychophysiology. This way the commutability introduced between experience and function works first to position the innumerable diverse and incorrigibly relational experiences as potentially permanent acquisitions for an individual. One can take this as a creative metabolization of experience, which finds itself incorporated and to have taken the path from relation to possession/predicate.

Say you have found a rare capacity to feel sympathy for a stranger's predicament thanks to an elusive combination of the right circumstances, for instance your day went unexpectedly well, and that stale aura of personal dissatisfaction lifted off your shoulders a bit, making you particularly open to connect with others. Valéry seems to imagine this and similar types of experience turning into ever dependable functions, only needing wilful insertion. A sort of characterological alchemy, which can create both heaven and hell for the one who holds its key, as the contrary scenario of somebody cutting in front of you in the line will make you a "gift" or aptitude for permanent impotent anger.

By the same token, namely the regularizing tendency of dependability in function, the same person whose experiences turn into functions may become the master of circumstance, and in Valéry's parlance a "scientific being par excellence". After all a good part of science is ensuring the repeatability of a set of circumstances to isolate acting causes, and this seems to be exactly what is done by this imaginary person--experiences in their unpredictable arrival, magically turning into an

infinity of capacities.

Not so unexpectedly, in an example of a certain rationalist inspiration that characterizes a good part of his work, Valéry takes the intellect as an emblem of this whole relation of commutability, the single main function to collect and appropriate all the experiences, giving them the form of permanence. One ring to rule them, yes.

Seeing the way Valéry leads perhaps an initially more enticing and fruitful reflection toward a familiar image of intellectual mastery over experience, one can of course ask whether this would not mean making up for what one loses in the freshness of experience in nothing more than the lack of this freshness. Even without being unjust toward the merits of intellect, one can concede a possible form of the conjunction between experience and function to be subtractive and destructive of value, ensuring the absorption of experience by a kingdom of functions, which works like a hypertrophied a priori in setting the terms of every transaction with the world. As Valéry is not charting the other side of the commutability, one can well imagine the exchange working in expense of experience.

Before exploring another possible form of this commutability which can restore a certain balance, it bears noting that Valéry's thought experiment has precursors, and thus historically privileged domains on which it finds formulation. These domains are partly postKantian and partly naturphilosophical. To be more specific, it is not wrong to argue that Valéry revives a problem whose real jurisdiction falls between a thought of metaphysical organ and a thought of metaphysical experience.

Among Valéry's many overlaps with the kindred spirit Novalis, an interest in a generalized sense of organs-instruments figures large. Especially, both approached language as a vital instrument or organ for exploring and maintaining the possibility of thought. Thus one cannot read Novalis' declaration that "Everything can become an experiment—everything an organ" and not see an earlier iteration of Valéry's thought experiment, which differs from the Novalis fragment only through a more rationalist twist. In a positive vein the quote by Novalis already brings a necessary reversal to the imaginary commutation Valéry establishes: instead of resulting in a loss of experience through the regularizing thrust of function, it envisions a becoming experimental of the organ, a trojan horse of wonder and experiment to transmute everyday function itself, a side of the equation never sufficiently stressed by Valéry.

Positioned this way, in its striking resemblance to Novalis' earlier utterance about the organ-experiment, Valéry's translation between experience and functions may also turn out to imply a question of possibility. After all isn't talking about function absorbing experience also talking about a congelation of the possibility immanent in the experience, which turns into an inalienable acquisition? An inalienable acquisition which used to be known as the a priori... As Jean Wahl wrote about some of Novalis' other affirmations--poetic realization of the universe for instance-- "experience shows us in itself the presence of the a priori, of the magical, of the voluntary." As a priori becomes a matter to be negotiated in experience, it loses something of its universality and rigidity. On a similar note, Leif Weatherby in his turn notes that Novalis "insists on the history of possibility... indeed on the possibility of possibility", provided it also incorporates the sense of "the history of the a priori".

The thought experiment's scenario of a function acquiring experience thus makes provision for nothing less than a historical structuration of the a priori, those necessary, binding, and precisely inalienable determinants of any access to the world. Considering how both Valéry's function, and Novalis' organ suggest certain links with a naturalism of cognition, it would not be a stretch to find here a transfigured a priori, anticipating the dreams of certain physiologists who unwittingly made common cause with these poets with heightened clinical sensibilities. In Warren McCulloch's account, the German physiologist Rudolf Magnus took the a priori as "the mode of action of those mechanisms which worked to determine the three - dimensional nature of our world, its axes and Angles, and which give us a feeling for speed and acceleration, from which we have largely derived our concept of time".

The underspecification and the lack of acknowledgement of a historical dimension here might be remedied by the ambitions of another doctor like Joseph Knoll, whose philosophical proclivities must have been closer to the concerns of traditional empiricism, with the premium it places on questions of habit. According to Andrew Lees, Joseph Knoll conducted experiments on the way "novel experiences" get transformed into "acquired drives and ingrained habits", fulfilling Valéry's rather than Novalis' preferred emphasis on the ambiguous scenario of translation. In other words, seeing Knoll's experiment in the light of Valéry's fiction of metabolized and functionalized experience, may also make Valéry's acquired "function" and experientially transformed a priori communicate with a problem of habituation. In fact What conceivable physiological function is there, independent of repetition, and what repetition independent of habit?

Rewinding to that point where I situated Valéry's fiction in a locus between metaphysical organ and metaphysical experience, it is now time to provide the remaining coordinates of this attempt at conceptual mapping, which are supplied from the metaphysical experience side. This is also a simultaneous return to Novalis' symmetrical reversal, raising the issue of bestowing on everyday functions a refreshingly experimental character. As there may not in fact be a better way to introduce experiment to everyday organs and functions than art, here I turn to an insight on metaphysical experience in its relation to art.

Commenting on the difficult question of Adorno's investment in the category of metaphysical experience, Jay Bernstein elucidates the stakes of that strange association Adorno makes between art and the survival of metaphysical experience in a disenchanted Post -World War II world. Bernstein notes that the art Adorno champions fits this picture as an unremittingly materialist twist on metaphysical experience. What is striking is that Bernstein also relies on this strange idea of a "possibility of possibility", seeming to arrive at a similar constellation of interests as Weatherby, who mentions the term around organs however: "the question of aesthetic semblance is the question of the possibility of possibility, of a conception of possible experience that transcends what is now taken to be the parameters of possible experience" (Bernstein). It all but needs a tiny prodding to argue for the noncoincidental nature of this convergence on the possibility of possibility.

Whereas Weatherby, through Novalis, assigns the status of the possibility of possibility to historically thus experientially transformed metaphysical organs for knowing and feeling, Bernstein and Adorno assign the same status to the way the aesthetic serves as a medium of experience exceeding the demands and regimentations of a legislating understanding. After this necessary detour, we are in a position to read Valéry's thought experiment as a potential contribution to any reconciliation between a thought of organs and functions, and a thought of metaphysical experience.

The organs and functions dreamt by science fiction or speculative fiction for instance, would not be outside the ambit of the manoeuvre intended here. A classic for this genre like Ursula Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* offers a great example of this author's own prolonged exploration of relationally inflected mental powers, functions subsuming experiences and themselves becoming experimental in turn. In a brilliant yet characteristic reversal for Le Guin, a not-so technologically developed civilization has at its disposal an equally valuable function or power non-obtainable by technological means, honed collectively by successive transmissions and apprenticeships. Here this function-experience/organ-experiment is called foretelling, which involves making an art or

controllable skill of an experience of unnaccountably accurate presentiment. The beneficiaries of this skill is a group belonging to Le Guin's fictional religion Handara, known simply as "Foretellers", and their power, well appropriately it's called a hunch, as Le Guin writes, a hunch that is "domesticated".

Le Guin's narrator tells us: "We have NAFAL ships and instantaneous transmission and mindspeech, but we haven't yet tamed hunch to run in harness; for that trick we must go to Gethen...They have tamed and trained the hunch". Now isn't an axis of difference such as wild vs. tamed indicate a favorable ground on which to take up the distinction and mediation furnished by Valéry in experience and function? There is in fact not much of a difference between making a function of an experience without bestowing the style of an experience on the resultant function, and domesticating an experience. Thus, any organology open to a transaction and commerce with metaphysical experience needs to find a way to a non-domesticating relation to it.

Remarkably Le Guin has other equally illuminating examples for this interest, and from *The Word for World is Forest's* waking dreams, to *Lathe of Heaven's* effective dream, the skill landscape of her writings is as rich as can be, offering favorable ground for reciprocal constitutions between a thought of metaphysical experience and that of a metaphysical organ. The type and register of talents and capacities across which she exercises her imagination could be called a "nonmodern" constellation (Latour through Pickering), and she is very comfortable with notions such as biofeedback, and other forms self-tracking with pragmatic orientation to different subjectivations.

To set parameters for later research, a final example can be found in Brion Gysin's *Dreamachine*, and the story of its invention. If Valéry imagined his outlandish thought experiment to fashion functions from the most insignificant of experiences, Gysin attributed a serious, albeit nonmodern transformative valence to his own experience, which he tried to build into a function in the end:

Gysin was traveling by bus from Paris to La Ciotat, an artists' colony on the Mediterranean, near Marseilles, to spend the Christmas and New Year holidays with friends. As the bus passed through a long avenue of trees Gysin, closing his eyes against the setting sun, encountered "a transcendental storm of color visions." He recorded the experience in his journal: "An overwhelming flood of intensely bright patterns in supernatural colors exploded behind my eyelids: a multi-dimensional kaleidoscope whirling out through space. I was swept out of time." ...Gysin immediately wrote Burroughs, a close artistic collaborator, with an account of his fall out of rational space. Burroughs replied portentously: "We must storm the citadels of

enlightenment. The means are at hand.”

The means, Gysin determined, would be to develop a machine to harness the visionary potential of flicker, a device that would make illusory experience available at the flick of a switch: a Dream Machine (From John Geiger's Chapel of Extreme Experience).

Coda

One can certainly locate a function-experience equivalence in the internet phenomenon of youtube videos tailored for the induction of "Autonomous sensory meridian response"..an obscure and appropriately erratic experience whose prospects are rising, largely thanks to the very fact that it is finally named.

For further inquiry see Giulia Peoria's piece in Restless Compendium.

<http://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783319452630>

And for an interesting theoretical framework that was informative for this sally of the mind:

Andrew Pickering, The Cybernetic Brain

<http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/C/bo8169881.html>

Drugs...

traumas...

intellectual intuitions...

contact...

wish and velleity...

prayer...