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Phenomenological Ontology: Turning to Practice

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Abstract: Ontology is often reduced to epistemology, that is, to yet another conceptual category for discussion. We do this because historically we are comfortable with the mental and are habituated to reducing everything to mental representation. But ontology is not rational discussion of 'what is'; it is, rather, the cultivation of contact with 'what is.' And that means practice. We shy away from practice as though it is some native witchcraft, and prefer instead to think about it. The present paper proposes that instead of merely thinking about ontology, we practice toward its realization. I call this phenomenological ontology. Ontological practice is not native voodoo-ism, nor New-Ageism, but has been part of every culture, historically submerged due to the dominance of epistemology and Kantianism. We need to get out of amnesia and rediscover ontological practice. Hence, this can also be called the practice of anamnesis, which forms a part of the discussion here. The essay outlines a 3-part ontological practice that, at the broadest level, can be derived from most source events of cultures—these are a) affective transfer, or a serious effort to connect thought and affect; b) resisting subjectification through objects; and c) recuperation of cultural memory.

Introduction

Ontology itself is practice, is it not? Is not the becoming of being, its presencing, and therefore, the *autopoiesis*, a coming to be? It is a practice without a practitioner. What then is “turning to practice” in the context of ontology? How shall we conceive of it as a separate problematic? Perhaps the problem might be clearer in its posing if we began from the other end: that is, from the fact that there is a deliberate turning away from, a refusal to admit, the *poiesis* or the presencing in the everyday. It is as though we can simply take ourselves, and everything else around us, for granted. It is as though only *techne* of whatever kind involves practice, and there is not a primal practice in the very act of being. I have attempted to speak of this to otherwise thoughtful people, only to receive blank stares in return. It is as though the problem is so close we cannot see it. But what exactly is the problem? If being is becoming, then let it be so, it is doing its job, why should anyone have to care about it? Are we then manufacturing a problem for the sake of it? I don't believe so, and let us see why that is the case.

The usual premise is that practice requires a practitioner. That might perhaps be the case in the instance of *techne* which requires a seeming agentive association: 'I' pick up a tool to put through a certain action. But ontological practice is not to be thought of in the same vein. Ontological practice is the process of continual self-clearing so that cultural accretions and civilizational miasma can be cut through. There is not here the '/' between the doer and the deed. And second, unlike civilizational *techne*, which is predicated on continuous expansion of the technological, in ontological practice there is no equivalence of progress. The psyche does not, cannot evolve, for it is not a temporal thing. It remains primitive and preternatural. So it seems paradoxical, does it not? On the one hand we are invoking something called ontological practice. And at the same time, we are saying that the psyche does not evolve through time. So what is this practice? It is nothing other than the healing of ruptures introduced historically. Settled attitude and civilizational complacency have brought upon us rifts that have spelled havoc for ontological well-being. In this sense, there are at least three major schisms that are worth our attention — these are between thought and affect, between language and the pre-linguistic, and within the subject between

self and apparatus. Let us discuss these individually as elements of transformative practice that can reset our inner ontological compass.

Elements of Ontological Practice: First Element—Recuperation of the Divide Between Thought and Affect

The first element of ontological practice we will discuss here is one that draws a bead on the rupture between thought and affect. It hardly needs arguing that modernity or the modern consciousness sees thinking as absolutely distinct from psycho-emotive energies. Gender stereotyping has further driven this opposition deeper, with the feminine psyche being associated with emotion in distinguishing it from the male, highlighting the latter's supposed predilection toward the non-emotional. Overall, this unfortunate schism has led to great damage and erosion of the sensibilities required for wholesome existence. What we need now is a kind of recuperation that is again able to bring thought and affect together in ontological rethinking, overcoming the artificial division.

With this very brief allusion to the problem, I am going to launch into the practice part somewhat abruptly due to reasons of space. In attempting a description of what may be called the recuperative function, I can find nothing better to begin with than Julia Kristeva's writings, although imaginably she would not describe herself as an ontologist, but perhaps precisely because of that. Where else other than in the hidden layers of the psyche can we find traces of the ontological longing—and hence the possibilities of discovery—so well described by psychologists such as Carl Jung, R. D. Laing, Julia Kristeva, and others. Hence, in this section, I will rely heavily on the latter's insightful labors for help in bringing out the truth of this element. In the need to go beyond conventional intellectualism, Kristeva writes:

In the aftermath of the crisis of religion...the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave rise to new forms of thought that were to become the "human and social sciences" or, more simply, the "humanities." These disciplines progressively filtered into the university, notably the American university...committed to the radical overhaul of thought. In taking over from theology and philosophy, the humanities replaced the "divine" and the "human" with new objects of investigation: social bonds, the structures of kinship, rites and myths, the psychic life, the genesis of languages, and written works. We have by these means acquired an unprecedented understanding—one that disturbs complacency and hence meets with resistance and censorship—of the richness and risks of the human mind. Still, as promising as these territories are, thus constituted they fragment human experience; heirs to metaphysics, they keep us from identifying new objects of investigation. Crossing boundaries between compartmentalized fields does not in itself suffice to construct the intellectual life that we need now. (Kristeva 192-193)

With the fall of religion, which had become a burlesque of its hierophantic beginnings, new forms of study other than the theological sprang up, in the pursuit of a "radical overhaul of thought." The typical opposition between the divine and the human, or between the temporal and the eternal, that had given birth to such vast literature and social mores, was now increasingly replaced by the opposition between superstition and enlightenment, or between medievalism and progress. Historical and anthropological studies took their place at the universities alongside the sciences. All of this gave unprecedented and reflexive understanding of the human that went well beyond the artifices of institutionalized morality, and its leash on what could be properly constituted as knowledge. It is not as though

the Church fathers did not know what Galileo knew (“it moves”), but they did not think it fit knowledge for the ordinary public. Now that knowledge became available for everyone, along with its risks, the possibilities began to roll out rapidly in multiple directions. And to put matters in a nutshell, knowledge began to fragment and proliferate in a manner that cut it off from its own origin. Thus unmoored, knowledge apparatuses made profound discoveries, but at the same time produced alienation, since meaning, or the sense of wholeness, could not be regained. Meaning lies only at the origin, in its recapitulation, but the view of the origin was lost in the relentless forward movement of the will-to-knowledge. Kristeva continues:

What matters is that from the outset the thinking subject should connect his thought to his being in the world through an affective "transference" that is also political and ethical. In my own case, the clinical practice of psychoanalysis, the writing of novels, and work in the social domain are not "commitments" additional to my theoretical and scholarly work. Rather, these activities are an extension of a mode of thinking at which I aim and which I conceive as an *energeia* in the Aristotelian sense: thought as act, the actualization of intelligence. In my experience—to take the most relevant instance—the interpretation of texts and behavior, notably in the light of psychoanalysis, opens up a new approach to the world of religion. The discovery of the unconscious by Freud showed us that far from being "illusions"—while nevertheless being illusions—religions, beliefs, and other forms of spirituality shelter, encourage, or exploit specifiable psychic movements that allow the human being to become a speaking subject and a source of culture or, conversely, a source of destruction. The reverence for law, the celebration of the paternal function, and the role of maternal passion as the child's sensorial and prelinguistic support are examples of this process at work. (Kristeva 193)

Obviously, ontological experience lies beyond the fragmentation of the intellect; the beholding of primal connections resides beyond the image and the representation. We have to set our sights on the nature of the fracture that set out two separate domains—thought and affect, the objective and the subjective, or the intellect and intuition. This split paid huge dividends in terms of a specific becoming of the species, but it, at the same time, dried up the primal connection with the source of its becoming. For the thoughtful subject, it is now a matter of great importance and urgency that an attempt be made toward what Kristeva calls “transference,” or the movement beyond the fracture. Another name for this transference might be religiosity, once we can shake off the peculiar baggage that accompanies the latter term. We must carefully note that it is “religiosity” and not religion that is the reference above—the former is an ontological longing, a sense of the non-temporal that has little to do with organized rituals. The primal connection between thought and affect results in a flash of *energeia* or the source of our becoming that is beyond the symbolic order. But recuperative processes must precede such primal relief. Again, Kristeva:

My analytic practice has convinced me that when a patient comes for psychoanalysis, he is asking for a kind of forgiveness, not to ease his malaise but to find psychic or even physical rebirth. The new beginning made possible through transference and interpretation I call *for-giveness*: to give (and to give not just to oneself) a new self, a new time, unforeseen ties. In this context, we recognize the complexity of the internal experience that religious faith cultivates, but we also bring to light the hate that takes the guise of lovers' discourse, as well as the death drive channeled to merciless wars and political vengeance. A new conception of the human is in the process of being

constituted out of contributions from fields in the humanities where transcendence is considered immanent. The new conception is of the human as synonymous with the desire for meaning, and of that desire as inseparable from pleasure, which is rooted in sexuality and which decrees both the sublimity of culture and the brutality of "acting out." The intellectual today is confronted with a difficult, historic task commensurate with our now-difficult juncture in the history of civilization. The task is neither more nor less than to coax this new type of knowledge to emerge progressively. By positioning ourselves at the interface of the diverse disciplines of the humanities, we give ourselves the opportunity to clarify, even if only a little, the enigmas we have still to comprehend. (Kristeva 193)

The recuperative function begins when the subject reaches the limits of becoming within the thought/affect divide, and whether due to pathological breakdown or otherwise, seeks to find a terrain beyond. It is a kind of death when the subject reaches the boundary values of the current domain and seeks a form of rebirth beyond the arbitrariness and pain of division. All the stupidities and contradictions of the past begin to hurt and the subject seeks a sort of forgiveness, a release, and a passage to a different becoming. There is an acuteness to this search which involves the whole being, a coming together of thought, affect, and corpus sensorium that in itself makes it a practice. Kristeva notes that a new kind of knowledge is needed which recognizes the desire for meaning and reconciles it with the meaning of desire without sublimation. A freeing of the potentialities and the possibilities of the historical moment is synonymous with the profound unification within the psyche of the so-called transcendent and the immanent. This is the recuperative function of ontological practice.

Second Element—Refusing the cycles of Desubjectivation and Resubjectivation

The second element of ontological practice is what I am going to call the transjective function. It is closely related to the above, and helps to recognize and resist the cycles of desubjectification and resubjectification by means of cultural apparatuses that, as a matter of routine, produce the schizoid subject and a distorted ontology. The transjective as a notion dodges past the subject/object divide producing an alternate moment. Agamben delineates the problem.

Contemporary societies present themselves as inert bodies going through massive processes of desubjectification without acknowledging any real subjectification... And the triumph of the *oikonomia*, that is to say, of a pure activity of government that aims at nothing other than its own replication in an era in which it confronts the most docile and cowardly social body that has ever existed in human history — the harmless citizen of postindustrial democracies (the Bloom, as it has been effectively suggested he be called), who readily does everything that he is asked to do, inasmuch as he leaves his everyday gestures and his health, his amusements and his occupations, his diet and his desires, to be commanded and controlled in the smallest detail by [governmentalized] apparatuses. (Agamben *What* 22-23)

The institutionalized subject of contemporary societies is everything and more than what Max Weber had feared. The former lives more or less happily within the "iron cage" of governmental apparatuses within a bureaucratized society. The perfect consumer obediently consumes whatever is thrown at him and even works out the trite logic of such consumption.

He will tell you, for instance, why he takes selfies at every turn, or how he daily makes Facebook posts about his girlfriend or his pug, and what he tweets about his favourite celebrity at each opportunity. This does not just happen – it requires systematic and calculative rechannelling of our native credulousness that was once oriented toward the Open. The loss of the ontological leads to endless repetition, and society and government come to have no other objective other than pure reproduction. To caricature, our prompts are others' "tweets," and who are, in turn, prompted by our "tweets," and so on, in an endless proliferation that masquerades as social existence. Returning to Agamben:

The boundless growth of apparatuses in our time corresponds to the equally extreme proliferation in processes of subjectification. This may produce the impression that in our time, the category of subjectivity is wavering and losing its consistency; but what is at stake, to be precise, is not an erasure or an overcoming, but rather a dissemination that pushes to the extreme the masquerade that has always accompanied every personal identity... It is clear that ever since *Homo sapiens* first appeared, there have been apparatuses; but we could say that today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus.... At the root of each apparatus lies an all-too-human desire for happiness. The capture and subjectification of this desire in a separate sphere constitutes the specific power of the apparatus. (Agamben *What* 15)

It is not only that we are stripped down to bare life within the arc of institutionalized apparatuses. We are also reconstituted in specific ways in which we repeat the formulas and the shibboleths appropriate to our time, station, and surrounding apparatuses. All identities are masquerades no doubt, but the contemporary self is an extreme form that has even carved out a politics of identity based on difference. Its reference point is always a governmental machinery or a bureaucratic apparatus—a constitution, a penal code, a marital law, or some social institution, in general. The principal thing involved in all of this is the capture, pasteurization, domestication, and subjectification of desire. The latter is given a shape and a hegemonic goal that looks benevolent and apparently beneficial.

[E]very apparatus implies a process of subjectification, without which it cannot function as an apparatus of governance, but is rather reduced to a mere exercise of violence. On this basis, Foucault has demonstrated how, in a disciplinary society, apparatuses aim to create--through a series of practices, discourses, and bodies of knowledge--docile, yet free, bodies that assume their identity and their "freedom" as subjects in the very process of their desubjectification. Apparatus, then, is first of all a machine that produces subjectifications, and only as such is it also a machine of governance... apparatuses can be reduced to the question of their correct use. Those who make such claims seem to ignore a simple fact: If a certain process of subjectification (or, in this case, desubjectification) corresponds to every apparatus, then it is impossible for the subject of an apparatus to use it "in the right way." (Agamben *What* 20)

The machineries of contemporary disciplinary societies have managed a most extraordinary thing—to keep our gaze fixed on a horizon without letting our discontents boil over into revolutionary pathways. Everyday language plays no small part in this minute-by-minute gentle coercion. Even emails include terminal phrases like “thank you for your understanding...” Our agreement to forego our disagreement is taken for granted in advance. We are struck mute by our supposed “understanding.” But the transjective is thus conceived

because it refuses the cycles of desubjectification/resubjectification through the apparatuses of entrapment. It grasps the de-constitution and re-constitution process from the point of a stillness lent to it not by the arrogance of a superior knowledge, but by an immediate perception of futility—the sense of loss of meaning that is innate. A sensitive observer can practice or experience the transjective function once s/he is in close proximity to her/his thoughts through affective transference discussed earlier. The first and second elements are thus closely complementary in our conception of ontological practice, and so will be the third, as we are to see next, creating an important praxis of triangulation.

Third Element—the Practice of Anamnesia, or Re-remembering Nothing/Being

The third element of ontological practice as conceived here is the anamnestic function, that allows us to glimpse beyond the contemporary amnesia to a recovery of the reality that is deeply forgotten. Human consciousness floats like a little cork on a vast ocean of forgetfulness. Philosophers, writers, musicians, artists, and even scientists have often told us how their notions and compositions came to them as a fragment of remembrance. It may not be presumptuous to say that the little we know, seems to be in part the recall of some primeval (trans-civilizational) collective memory that is lost to us as part of a vast ontological amnesia.

But let us descend into the problem in a gentle and circumspect manner before we can say anything that is persuasive and useful. We have to investigate what we mean by amnesia in the present context, its historical nature, and phenomenological consequence. We must also distinguish between different orders of amnesia—the part that is existentially pragmatic, and that which keeps us in the dark about the *mythopoeic* aspect of our ontology. It is not being suggested that we have to achieve some sort of balance in our forgetfulness—that would be too naïve. Rather, forgetfulness being part of the order of things, we have to actuate a phenomenological *conatus* that keeps us from being snowed under the existential clutter. Let us examine each of these notions in turn, following Buglaj's "The Amnesia Manifesto":

The totality of human existence is circumscribed by amnesia: the amnesia of a *prehistory* entirely unrecorded, and the amnesia of a possible (thereby in itself a presence) *posthistory* when a human race, by its own hand or because of a natural catastrophe, would be extinct. The written history of mankind began barely five thousand years ago, and from that point back to [our] inception, we have a vast gap in our collective memory... [Superficially] the problem of memory appears in large measure to be resolved. Writing and modern mnemotechnical inventions such as cameras, tape recorders, movies, videos, and computers, scrupulously document fragments of our lives, dreams, and fears. Yet the waters of amnesia that run beneath us, as the scribes of Loen stated, will always be with us. Our words, our gestures, our dwellings and all the supranature we have built will always be set on a sea of amnesia. Amnesia can be considered, as the scribes affirmed, terrifying and destructive, comical and beneficent, a state of emptiness or a state that poetically alludes to all things. Amnesia is a physical phenomenon and implies a metaphysical entity. (Buglaj 1)

No matter how many memory devices are constructed, our memory will always be found to be deficient, floating on a "sea of amnesia." Our attempt to create an uninterrupted history of ourselves is severely handicapped by the limitation of the process itself. Most

knowing is a discontinuous process as is apparent from a survey of the history of ideas—a sudden discursive shift seems to occur at historical intervals, coming from nowhere, changing an existing paradigm, a surge of thought that overwhelms, giving no clue about its own appearance. And in pondering over this, it would be an error to think only of positivist knowledge. There has been through history and pre-history surges of the psychic-phenomenological, sometimes called religious experience, that bring with it an unmistakable recall of the origin—a sign itself of the normal forgetfulness of source events. In other words, memory is inter-rupted, or ruptured variously. But the forgetfulness could be part of larger cosmic processes within which we are enmeshed.

There is...something that frees us, in forgetfulness. If we had flawless memories, our existence would be unbearable. On the other hand, the interior world of an amnesiac is one of confusion, bewilderment, and terror - a world we cannot completely imagine but which we can intuit in our daily lives. Amnesia is certainty: it is an undeniable presence and essence of our personal and collective worlds. It evokes - particularly in our day - the human condition, more than ever so tenuous and precarious. The arts of amnesia are an exaltation of the miracle of human life, which survives, as the scribes said, "as a leaf on a sea of amnesia." To see that leaf vividly, we must look at the waters of forgetfulness. Thus we will pierce the blinding dome of our technological supranature, that thick covering of presences and memories, of facts and documentation, that can prevent us from conceiving ourselves in the total context of the universe. Amnesia can erase all things, as Plutarch said, and all things can be within it. It suggests the elemental void of the *creatio ex nihilo*; for some, it may evoke the vacuity of Nirvana, but such notions are fundamentally colored by nonhuman or superhuman assumptions. (Buglaj 2)

Whether amnesia is part of a divine plan to clear the way for present becoming we cannot say. While we might need amnesia to survive—the burden of complete memory would be too much—we also need at the same time to acknowledge that we have forgotten or turned away from essence. Amnesia is important in order to forget the trivial details of life and the unnecessary memories of so many yesterdays that clutter the mind, making us insensitive to the present. But this necessary amnesia must not be mixed up with the other amnesia—the amnesia of essence. Without the anamnesis, there is the foolish arrogance of knowledge. The loss of memory alluded to in anamnesis is not the everyday memory of small things that are best forgotten, but the existential memory of our coming to be and ceasing to be, the world as appearance, and the phenomenological platform of our expression as a species.

Amnesia is everything and nothing, qualities which have been attributed to divinities. But this divinity (unlike Mallarme's mystical silence) does not dwell in a distant or recondite heaven, but rather within us. She is a void and a plenitude in our lives. Memory emphasizes our differences; amnesia illuminates our similarities. Amnesia does not imply the negation of our memory; it implies the expansion of our consciousness. The written record of mankind is the work of amnesia as much as it is of memory. A weave of words, of images and traces, testimonies and fables. Amnesia has always been relevant to our destiny. History records references to psychological, social, and cultural amnesia. Through the webs of memory, we can see the fables of the fountains of amnesia, fresh and sublime, humorous and joyful, traditional and new - a new vision of art, language, and reality. We who feel inspired to write, paint, create music, act, dance, or produce films with the gestures of

everything we have lost and can never recover or recall sign our names as testimony of everything that has vanished in us. Plato, in the fourth century B.C., amazingly coincided with this belief in his notion of anamnesis. For Plato, amnesia offered an epistemological explication: our learning in life is the shedding of the forgetfulness that overtook us at birth. All knowledge is a remembrance of the ideal realm that our soul knew before it came into this world. (Buglaj 2)

Amnesia leads us to create new worlds of the imagination—art, literature, music and all other creations of culture are possible due to amnesia followed by partial recollection. In full presence there would be no supplemental dimension for creativity, for everything would be given all at once. Nevertheless, this recollection must occur within the humility of acknowledgment, and not be mistaken for something independent. Hubris is the direct result of such misunderstanding. Our knowledges are not independent of us, and hence not there for objective exploitation. Seeing the world as something independent makes for the dangerous illusion that it is an external discovery and an object of conquest. Rather, the world-as-object appears to us as such only because of an arbitrary limit placed on consciousness. The ontological knowledge that the world is primordial memory, and its availability to consciousness at different historical moments are mere contingent fragments rather than anything ontological must form the background of all knowing. It changes the very temper of how we deal with the world and find ourselves-in-the-world.

Now we come to the final point of this piece. Selective memory, knowledge, its symbolic coding, and its transmission has become the central cultural endeavor of civilizations. Within that larger process are there specific moments that can aid anamnesis? We are familiar, for instance, with the manner in which experience is codified, while the source event retreats from social memory and becomes part of the sea of amnesia. But can we reverse the process and move from the encoding to the energy it symbolizes? In order to address this question at some depth, we need to make an excursus into some aspects of the symbolic order that stand in for the world. I turn to Aby Warburg, the art historian who explored how cultural creations are imposed upon primal reactions within the mythopoeic imagination. For his work, Warburg needed a psychological conception of historical collective memory, resolving therefore to

make use of the psychology of primitive man—that is the type of man whose reactions are immediate reflexes rather than literary responses—and also take account of the psychology of civilized man who consciously recalls the stratified formation of his ancestral and his personal memories. With primitive man the memory image results in a religious embodiment of causes, with civilized man in detachment through naming. All mankind is eternally and at all times schizophrenic. Ontogenetically, however, we may perhaps describe one type of response to memory images as prior and primitive, though it continues on the sidelines. At the later stage the memory no longer arouses an immediate, purposeful reflex movement be it one of a combative or a religious character—but the memory images are now consciously stored in pictures and signs. Between these two stages we find a treatment of the impression that may be described as the symbolic mode of thought. (Warburg cited in Mali 134-135)

Schizophrenia separates man from beast. The collective psyche of the so-called human is essentially schizoid, torn between two poles—the immediate and the symbolic, or the pagan and the civilized. The development of the symbolic order passes through memory

images that begin to be stored in signs. The anamnestic question before us is: can memory any longer arouse the primitive energies that it has encoded in signs and forgotten? Can the sign break open and induce the original response that transcends the schizophrenia? This possibility is perhaps what Warburg referred to as the "posthumous life of paganism," meaning that the latter might continue to live covertly after its apparent disappearance, waiting for a trigger.

If Warburg could present the problem of the *Nachleben des Heidentums*, the "posthumous life of paganism," as the supreme subject of his scholarly research, this is because he had already understood, with a surprising anthropological intuition, that "transmission and survival" is the central problem of a "warm" society such as the West, insofar as it is so obsessed with history as to want to make it into the driving force of its own development. Once again, Warburg's method and concepts are clarified if one compares them to the ideas that led Spitzer, in his research into semantic history. To accentuate the simultaneously "conservative" and "progressive" character of our cultural tradition, in which apparently great changes are always in some way connected to the legacy of the past (as is shown by the striking continuity of the semantic patrimony of modern European languages, which is essentially Graeco-Roman-Judaeo-Christian). From this perspective, from which culture is always seen as a process of *Nachleben*, that is, transmission, reception, and polarization, it also becomes comprehensible why Warburg ultimately concentrated all his attention on the problem of symbols and their life in social memory. (Agamben *Potentialities* 93-94)

The desperation to leave behind paganism has always been the core driving force of Western civilization. Contemporary distinctions between the developed and the backward obviously derive from this anxiety. The modern human feels that the primitive past is a closed chapter and we have crossed the Rubicon, as it were. However, even on casual examination, not to speak of the historical horrors and street-level mayhem witnessed daily, it would appear that nothing could be further from the truth. The "semantic patrimony" of the Judeo-Christian tradition notwithstanding, the unimaginable subtlety of whose symbolic development has managed to drown out the primeval in the sea of amnesia, the blind plunder of bodies and elements betrays the neurotic insecurity beneath the grease paint of culture. Turning once more to Warburg, who overcame a spell of madness to go ever deeper into the symbolic relation, we begin to glimpse the conditions for an anamnestic function to become operative. In order to further his investigation into symbols and their life in social memory, Warburg relies on the work of Richard Semon, the evolutionary biologist and memory researcher who spoke of "engrams" or memory traces left behind throughout the nervous system of a receiving entity.

Ernst Gombrich has shown the influence exerted on Warburg by the theories of Hering's student Richard Semon, whose book *Mneme* Warburg bought in 1908. According to Gombrich, Semon holds that memory is not a property of consciousness but the one quality that distinguishes living from dead matter. It is the capacity to react to an event over a period of time; that is, a form of preserving and transmitting energy not known to the physical world. Any event affecting living matter leaves a trace which Semon calls an "engram." The potential energy conserved in this "engram" may, under suitable conditions, be reactivated and discharged—we then say the organism acts in a specific way because it remembers the previous event. The symbol and the image play the same role for Warburg as the "engram" plays in Semon's

conception of the individual's nervous system; they are the crystallization of an energetic charge and an emotional experience that survive as an inheritance transmitted by social memory and that, like electricity condensed in a Leyden jar, become effective only through contact with the "selective will" of a particular period. This is why Warburg often speaks of symbols as "dynamograms" that are transmitted to artists in a state of great tension, but that are not polarized in their active or passive, positive or negative energetic charge; their polarization, which occurs through an encounter with a new epoch and its vital needs, can then bring about a complete transformation of meaning. (Agamben *Potentialities* 95)

For Semon, memory was a trans-physical phenomenon—a mode of conserving and discharging energy not known to the physical world. For Semon this mode of conservation could be inherited. Warburg drew from this his idea that the energetic charge contained in a powerful experience or a source event could be preserved in a symbol and be discharged by specific social triggers. For instance, an artist may be the vehicle of such an engram, or dynamogram as Warburg called it, that produces in him a state of high creative tension. This tension may be discharged in accordance with the mood of an age, producing an expression.

For Warburg, the attitude of artists toward images inherited from tradition was therefore conceivable in terms neither of aesthetic choice nor of neutral reception; rather, for him it is a matter of a confrontation—which is lethal or vitalizing, depending on the situation—with the tremendous energies stored in images, which in themselves had the potential either to make man regress into sterile subjection or to direct him on his path toward salvation and knowledge. For Warburg, the symbol thus belongs to an intermediary domain between consciousness and primitive reactions, and it bears in itself the possibilities of both regression and higher knowledge. It is a *Zwischenraum*, an "interval," a kind of no-man's-land at the center of the human. And just as the creation and enjoyment of art require the fusion of two psychic attitudes that exclude each other ("a passionate surrender of the self, leading to a complete identification with the present—and a cool and detached serenity which belongs to the categorizing contemplation of things"), so the "nameless science" sought by Warburg is, as one reads in a note of 1929, an "iconology of the interval," or a "psychology of the oscillation between the positing of causes as images and as signs." (Agamben *Potentialities* 95)

The question of symbol in art therefore appeared very differently to Warburg. It was not about style or form or some aesthetic choice of the artist. For Warburg, art appeared as a confrontation with the primordial energies symbolically encoded and released either to the peril of the artist or toward his salvation. It was essentially a path beyond the schizophrenia of humanism. For the ordinary person, the anamnestic possibilities of the symbol rests in a no-man's land, an interval whose possibilities are always dormant in the collective psyche. One could even say that the ordinary person is raised to the intensity of the artist once s/he entered what Warburg referred to as the "iconology of the interval." This interval is a space in which there can occur a fusion, a disjunctive synthesis of passion as symbol and the ego as sign. I see this as a decent formulation of the third element of ontological practice.

Concluding Murmur

The three elements of ontological practice—the recuperative function, the transjective function, and the anamnestic function—are closely related, complementary, and bound by an

initial recoil from accepting the inevitability of the status quo. They are the insight-product of an insistence that representation is not all. All three are allied in the psychic-phenomenological domain—the awakening to the forgotten side of existence. Together these produce a rightful murmur in the heart that de-mystifies the press of contemporary habituation and thereby creates new spaces for action. We do not sit around moping and crying for better social conditions. We find that action of a certain kind is in our own hands as we make our lives into a stage for new reckonings. For too long epistemological preoccupations have dominated the front stage especially in academia—through knowledge and knowledge alone we have tried to create a liveable social order along with tenable aspirations. And we have failed miserably. I do not think it is necessary to go into the litany of failures here; among the original thinkers, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, and Herbert Marcuse have already done that for us very comprehensively, not to speak of the mountain of secondary literature that exists on the subject. The point here is that the ontological has been dismissed as primitive or Eastern or something worse. Some thinkers including Giorgio Agamben have traced this split between ontology and epistemology to the split between being and doing in early Church practices. The Church Fathers “spirited” away the ontological (Holy Spirit etc.) from the ordinary concerns of running the world (*Oikonomia*). We were left with moral rules to follow and rituals to practice, and that was all. Kant sealed it for modernity by asserting that the ontological was beyond human sensibilities. But empirical knowledge of extensionality was already emerging as the dominant theme, with or without Kant, laying the ground for modernity.

Nevertheless, the repressed eventually finds its way, as we know. In the case of this oblivion-ment, the reactive processes have led to a range of reactions, including wild-eyed cults, exploitative gurus, New Age practices, and even psychological illnesses as testified to by famed psychologists such as Carl Jung and R. D. Laing. It seems there is no escape from the ontological—hence we might as well pay careful attention to the ever-present murmur of the question of Being. We could derive for ourselves practices that spring from the source events of our cultures. My modest attempt in the above lines has been to point toward a certain general direction for our efforts that could be discussed within the confines of academia without seeming to be theological or doctrinal. These practices bring us to a point of singularity that is independent of the state of society or the state of knowledge. They strive to give us a very different glimpse of ourselves that has nothing to do with the temporal and spatial image that we hold of ourselves. Our schismogenic treatment of affect, *through* apparatus, and *in* amnesia has become a species-wide issue, whether one came out of the East or the West, and whether one identified with contemporaneity or rejected it.

Ω

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