

# Peter Sloterdijk

You  
must  
change  
your  
life



Translated by Wieland Hoban

YOU MUST CHANGE YOUR LIFE



YOU MUST CHANGE YOUR LIFE  
On Anthropotechnics

PETER SLOTERDIJK

Translated by Wieland Hoban

polity

First published in German as *Du mußt dein Leben ändern* © Suhrkamp Verlag Frankfurt am Main 2009.  
This English edition © Polity Press, 2013



The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Goethe-Institut which is funded by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4921-4  
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4922-1 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Sabon  
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Group Limited, Bodmin, Cornwall

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# CONTENTS

Introduction: On the Anthropotechnic Turn	1
<b>The Planet of the Practising</b>	
1 The Command from the Stone <i>Rilke's Experience</i>	19
2 Remote View of the Ascetic Planet <i>Nietzsche's Antiquity Project</i>	29
3 Only Cripples Will Survive <i>Unthan's Lesson</i>	40
4 Last Hunger Art <i>Kafka's Artistes</i>	61
5 Parisian Buddhism <i>Cioran's Exercises</i>	73
Transition: Religions Do Not Exist <i>From Pierre de Coubertin to L. Ron Hubbard</i>	83
<b>I The Conquest of the Improbable: For an Acrobatic Ethics</b>	
Programme	109
1 Height Psychology <i>The Doctrine of Upward Propagation and the Meaning of 'Over'</i>	111
2 'Culture Is a Monastic Rule' <i>Twilight of the Life Forms, Disciplinics</i>	131

## CONTENTS

3	Sleepless in Ephesus <i>On the Demons of Habit and Their Taming Through First Theory</i>	160
4	Habitus and Inertia <i>On the Base Camps of the Practising Life</i>	175
5	Cur Homo Artista <i>On the Ease of the Impossible</i>	190
<b>II Exaggeration Procedures</b>		
	Backdrop: Retreats into Unusualness	211
6	First Eccentricity <i>On the Separation of the Practising and Their Soliloquies</i>	217
7	The Complete and the Incomplete <i>How the Spirit of Perfection Entangles the Practising in Stories</i>	243
8	Master Games <i>Trainers as Guarantors of the Art of Exaggeration</i>	271
9	Change of Trainer and Revolution <i>On Conversions and Opportunistic Turns</i>	298
<b>III The Exercises of the Moderns</b>		
	Prospect: The Re-Secularization of the Withdrawn Subject	315
10	Art with Humans <i>In the Arsenals of Anthropotechnics</i>	331
11	In the Auto-Operatively Curved Space <i>New Human Beings Between Anaesthesia and Biopolitics</i>	369
12	Exercises and Misexercises <i>The Critique of Repetition</i>	404
	Retrospective <i>From the Re-Embedding of the Subject to the Relapse into Total Care</i>	436
	Outlook: The Absolute Imperative	442
	<b>Notes</b>	453
	<b>Index</b>	487

Appamādena sampādeṭha.  
Forge ahead in vigilance!

Mahāparinibbana Sutta, 6, 7

Works, first and foremost!  
That is to say, doing, doing, doing!  
The 'faith' that goes with it will soon put in an appearance  
– you can be sure of that!

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*





# INTRODUCTION

## *On the Anthropotechnic Turn*

A spectre is haunting the Western world – the spectre of religion. All over the country we hear that after an extended absence, it has now returned and is among the people of the modern world, and that one would do well to reckon seriously with its renewed presence. Unlike the spectre of communism, which, when its *Manifesto* appeared in 1848, was not a returnee but a novelty among imminent threats, the present case does full justice to its revenant nature. Whether it comforts or threatens, whether it greets us as a benevolent spirit or is feared as an irrational shadow of mankind, its appearance, indeed the mere announcement thereof, commands respect as far as the eye can see – if one passes over the summer offensive of the godless in 2007, to which we owe two of the most superficial screeds in recent intellectual history: those of Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. The forces of Old Europe have combined for a pompous welcome celebration with a gathering of unequal guests: the pope and the Islamic scholars, the American presidents and the new rulers of the Kremlin, all the Metternichs and Guizots of our time, the French curators and the German sociologists.

This attempt to restore to religion its attested rights involves the enforcement of a protocol which demands of the newly converted and fascinated that they confess to their previous errors of judgement. As in the days of the first Merovingian, who pledged allegiance to the cross because of a victorious battle, today's children of the banalized Enlightenment are likewise meant to burn what they worshipped and worship what they burned.<sup>1</sup> In this change of direction, long-dormant liturgical intuitions come to the fore. They demand that the novices of post-secular 'society' publicly dissociate themselves from the criticisms of religion in the theorems of the enlightened centuries. During

those centuries, human self-determination seemed attainable only at the price of reclaiming the powers wasted on the world above, using them instead to improve earthly conditions as far as possible. Large quantities of energy had to be deducted from 'God' in order to get in shape at last for the world of humans. In this transference of strength lay the élan of the age that had devoted itself to the great singular 'progress'. The humanist aggression even went so far as to elevate hope to a central principle. The supplies of the desperate were to become the *primum mobile* of better times. Those who chose to advocate this first cause made the earth an immigration country in order to realize themselves there – and nowhere else. From now on, the goal was to burn all bridges to the spheres on high and invest the energy thus released in profane existence. If God existed, he would have become the loneliest figure in the universe at that point. The migration from the beyond took on aspects of a mass exodus – by comparison, the current demographically thinned-out condition of Eastern Europe seems like overpopulation. That the majority, unimpressed by ideologies of immanence, still indulged in secret excursions across the border in the time of the triumphant Enlightenment is another matter.

In the meantime, quite different drives have gained the upper hand. The situation is governed by complicated perceptions of human chances. Once it gained an awareness of itself, the Enlightenment revealed its own paradoxes and progressed to regions where life, to quote a well-known storyteller, 'becomes complex and sad'.<sup>2</sup> Only tired leftovers of the former unconditional forward impetus have remained in use. Things need only advance a little further and the last of the enlightened hopeful will withdraw to the countryside like the Amish of postmodernism. Other eternal progressives follow the calls of non-governmental organizations that have devoted themselves to saving the world. For the rest, the signs of the times point to revision and regress. More than a few disappointed parties seek to cling to the producers and distributors of their progressive illusions, as if there were some consumer protection for ideas to which they could appeal. The legal archetype of our age, the compensation lawsuit, extends to broad areas of life. Have its American varieties not taught us that one has to demand exorbitant sums at the outset in order to receive a vaguely satisfactory compensation at the end of the lawyers' war? The descendants of those expelled from heaven openly seek handsome reparations – in fact, they dare to dream of epochal compensations. If they had their way, the entire expropriation of the world above would be reversed. Some newly religious entrepreneurs would like nothing more than to put the disused sites of metaphysical

production back into operation overnight, as if we had simply been through a recession.

European Enlightenment – a crisis of form? An experiment on a slippery slope, at any rate, and from a global perspective an anomaly. Sociologists of religion put it quite bluntly: people keep believing everywhere else, but in our society we have glorified disillusionment. Indeed, why should Europeans be the only ones on a metaphysical diet when the rest of the world continues to dine unperturbed at the richly decked tables of illusion?

Let us recall: Marx and Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto* with the intention of replacing the myth of a spectre named communism with their own aggressive statement of true communism. Where the mere fear of ghosts had predominated, there would now be a justified fear of a real enemy of existing conditions. The present book likewise devotes itself to the critique of a myth, replacing it with a positive thesis. Indeed, the return of religion after the ‘failure’ of the Enlightenment must be confronted with a clearer view of the spiritual facts. I will show that a return *to* religion is as impossible as a return *of* religion – for the simple reason that no ‘religion’ or ‘religions’ exist, only misunderstood spiritual regimens, whether these are practised in collectives – usually church, *ordo*, *umma*, *sangha* – or in customized forms – through interaction with the ‘personal God’ with whom the citizens of modernity are privately insured. Thus the tiresome distinction between ‘true religion’ and superstition loses its meaning. There are only regimens that are more and less capable and worthy of propagation. The false dichotomy of believers and unbelievers becomes obsolete and is replaced by the distinction between the practising and the untrained, or those who train differently.

Something is indeed returning today – but the conventional wisdom that this is religion making its reappearance is insufficient to satisfy critical inquiries. Nor is it the return of a factor that had vanished, but rather a shift of emphasis in a continuum that was never interrupted. The genuinely recurring element that would merit our full intellectual attention is more anthropological than ‘religious’ in its implications – it is, in a nutshell, the recognition of the immunitary constitution of human beings. After centuries of experiments with new forms of life, the realization has dawned that humans, whatever ethnic, economic and political situation might govern their lives, exist not only in ‘material conditions’, but also in symbolic immune systems and ritual shells. It is their fabric that we shall discuss in the following. Why their looms are referred to with the coolly rational term ‘anthropotechnics’ should become self-evident in the course of their description.

I would like to take the first step in justifying our interest in these matters by recalling Wittgenstein's well-known demand to put an end to the 'chatter about ethics'. It has meanwhile become possible to reformulate that part of the ethical discourse which is not chatter in anthropotechnic terms. Since the 1840s, the work on this translation has – albeit under different names – formed the confused centre of modern 'cultural studies'. The ethical programme of the present came into view for a moment when Marx and the Young Hegelians articulated the theory that man himself produces man. The true meaning of this statement was immediately obscured, however, by another chatter that presented work as the only essential human act. But if man genuinely produces man, it is precisely not through work and its concrete results, not even the 'work on oneself' so widely praised in recent times, let alone through the alternatively invoked phenomena of 'interaction' or 'communication': it is through life in forms of practice. Practice is defined here as any operation that provides or improves the actor's qualification for the next performance of the same operation, whether it is declared as practice or not.<sup>3</sup>

Anyone who speaks of human self-production without addressing the formation of human beings in the practising life has missed the point from the outset. Consequently, we must suspend virtually everything that has been said about humans as working beings in order to translate it into the language of practising, or self-forming and self-enhancing behaviour. It is not only the weary *Homo faber*, who objectifies the world in the 'doing' mode, who must vacate his place on the logical stage; the time has also come for *Homo religiosus*, who turns to the world above in surreal rites, to bid a deserved farewell. Together, workers and believers come into a new category. It is time to reveal humans as the beings who result from repetition. Just as the nineteenth century stood cognitively under the sign of production and the twentieth under that of reflexivity, the future should present itself under the sign of the exercise.

The stakes in this game are not low. Our enterprise is no less than the introduction of an alternative language, and with the language an altered perspective, for a group of phenomena that tradition tended to refer to with such words as 'spirituality', 'piety', 'morality', 'ethics' and 'asceticism'. If the manoeuvre succeeds, the conventional concept of religion, that ill-fated bugbear from the prop studios of modern Europe, will emerge from these investigations as the great loser. Certainly intellectual history has always resembled a refuge for malformed concepts – and after the following journey through the

various stations, one will not only see through the concept of ‘religion’ in its failed design, a concept whose crookedness is second only to the hyper-bugbear that is ‘culture’. Then one will also understand why, in the light of the altered expositions, it would be equally futile to take the side of the negative bigotry that has presented itself in our climes for almost two centuries as a simplistic atheism – a Gessler’s hat<sup>4</sup> that elegant intellectuals were happy to salute every time they passed it, and not without taking the opportunity to claim for themselves the distinction ‘intellectually honest’, or sometimes ‘critical’ or ‘autonomous’. Now it is a matter of turning the whole stage by ninety degrees until the religious, spiritual and ethical material becomes visible from a revealing new angle.

Let me repeat: the stakes are high. We must confront one of the most massive pseudo-evidences in recent intellectual history: the belief, rampant in Europe since only two or three centuries ago, in the existence of ‘religions’ – and more than that, against the unverified faith in the existence of faith. Faith in the existence of ‘religion’ is the element that unites believers and non-believers, in the present as much as in the past. It displays a single-mindedness that would make any prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome green with envy. No one who overcame religion ever doubted its existence, even if they opposed every single one of its dogmas. No denial ever confronted the denier with the question of whether its name was justified, and whether it had any lasting value in such a form. It is only because society has grown accustomed to a comparatively recent fiction – it did not come into use until the seventeenth century – that one can speak today of a ‘return of religion’.<sup>5</sup> It is the unbroken faith in religion as a constant and universal factor which can vanish and return that forms the foundation of the current legend.

While psychoanalysis relied on the return of repressed feelings as its central theorem, an analysis of ideas and behaviour such as the present one is based on the return of what is not understood. Rotation phenomena of this kind are inevitable as long as the element that was there disappears and resurfaces without being adequately understood in its particularity. The aim of getting to the heart of the matter oneself can only be made fruitful if one neither affirms nor rejects the object of examination, and begins instead with a more fundamental explication. This is a project that was set in motion by a vanguard of researchers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, albeit using methods whose inadequacy has long been apparent – I am thinking of such authors as Feuerbach, Comte, Durkheim and

Weber. In their investigations, at least, so-called religions gradually gained clearer profiles as symbolically structured behavioural systems – though none of them sufficiently formulated the practice nature of ‘religious’ behaviour and its foundation in autoplasmic procedures. It was only the later Nietzsche, in his dietological reflections of the 1880s – recall the corresponding pages in his self-crucifixion text *Ecce Homo* – who offered points of departure for a doctrine of life practice, or a general ascetology. Though they have been misunderstood by inattentive readers as a withdrawal of philosophy to the apothecary level,<sup>6</sup> whoever studies them sufficiently closely can discover in them the seminal ideas for a comprehensive theory of practising existence.

The translation suggested here of the religious, spiritual and ethical facts into the language and perspective of the general theory of practising defines itself as an Enlightenment-conservative enterprise – a conservatory one, in fact, in the matter itself. It rests on a twofold interest in preservation: firstly, it declares its allegiance to the continuum of cumulative knowledge that we call Enlightenment, and which, despite all rumours of having entered a new ‘post-secular’ state, we in the present continue as a context of learning meanwhile spanning four centuries; and secondly, it takes up the threads, some of them millennia old, that tie us to early manifestations of human knowledge about practice and animation – assuming that we are prepared to follow on from them in an *explicit* fashion.

With this, we have introduced the key term for everything that will be read in the following: the world ‘explicit’, applied to the objects in question, contains the present book *in nuce*. The aforementioned rotation of the intellectual-historical stage means nothing other than a logical manoeuvre to render explicit circumstances that, in the masses of tradition, are present in ‘implicit’ – that is, inward-folded and compressed – forms. If Enlightenment in a technical sense is the programmatic word for progress in the awareness of explicitness, one can say without fear of grand formulas that rendering the implicit explicit is the cognitive form of fate. Were this not the case, one would never have had cause to believe that later knowledge would necessarily be better knowledge – for, as we know, everything that has been termed ‘research’ in the last centuries has rested on this assumption. Only when the inward-folded ‘things’ or facts are by their nature subject to a tendency to unfold themselves and become more comprehensible for us can one – provided the unfolding succeeds – speak of a true increase in knowledge. Only if the ‘matters’ are spontaneously

prepared (or can be forced by imposed examination) to come to light in magnified and better-illuminated areas can one seriously – which here means with ontological emphasis – state that there is science in progress, there are real knowledge gains, there are expeditions in which we, the epistemically committed collective, advance to hidden continents of knowledge by making thematic what was previously unthematic, bringing to light what is yet unknown, and transforming vague cognizance into definite knowledge. In this manner we increase the cognitive capital of our society – the latter word without quotation marks in this case. In earlier times, one would probably have said that conceptual work leads into a ‘production’. Hegel went so far as to say that the truth is essentially a result – and thus, inevitably, only appears at the end of its drama. Where it reveals itself in a finished state, the human spirit celebrates the Sunday of life. As I do not wish to examine the concept of the concept here, and have other things in mind with the principle of work, I shall content myself with a somewhat less triumphant, but no less binding thesis: there is nothing cognitively new under the sun.

The novelty of the new, as noted earlier, stems from the unfolding of the known into larger, brighter, more richly contoured surfaces. Consequently, it can never be innovative in an absolute sense; in part, it is always the continuation of the cognitively existent by other means. Here, novelty and greater explicitness amount to the same thing. We can therefore say that the higher the degree of explicitness, the deeper the possible, indeed inevitable disconcertment caused by the newly acquired knowledge. I have previously accepted as a conventional fact that this table is made of cherrywood; I acknowledge with the tolerance of the educated that the cherrywood consists of atoms, even though these oft-cited atoms, these epistemological contemporaries of the twentieth century, possess no greater reality for me than unicorn powder or Saturnian influences. That these cherrywood atoms dissolve into a mist of sub-atomic almost-nothings upon further explication – this is something that I, as an end consumer of physical Enlightenment, must accept, even if it goes decisively against my assumptions about the substantiality of substance. The final explanation illustrates most emphatically how the later knowledge tends to be the more disconcerting.

Among the wealth of cognitive novelties under the modern sun, none are remotely comparable in their far-reaching consequences to the appearance and propagation of immune systems in the biology of the late nineteenth century. From that point on, none of the scientific integrities – animal organisms, species, ‘societies’ or cultures – could



remain the same. Only hesitantly did people begin to understand that the immune *dispositifs* are what enable systems to become systems, life forms to become life forms,<sup>7</sup> and cultures to become cultures in the first place. It is only by virtue of their immunitary qualities that they ascend to the level of self-organizing unities, preserving and reproducing themselves with constant reference to a potentially and actually invasive and irritating environment. These functions are performed to an impressive degree in biological immune systems – whose discovery resulted from the investigations of Ilya Mechnikov and Robert Koch’s student Paul Ehrlich at the end of the nineteenth century. There one finds the baffling idea that even relatively simple organisms like insects and molluscs have a native ‘foreknowledge’ of the hazards that accompany a typical insect or mollusc life. Consequently, immune systems at this level can be defined *a priori* as embodied expectations of injury and the corresponding programmes of protection and repair.

Viewed in this light, life itself appears as a dynamics of integration that is equipped with auto-therapeutic or ‘endo-clinical’ competencies and refers to a species-specific space of surprise. It has an equally innate and – in higher organisms – adaptively acquired responsibility for the injuries and invasions it regularly encounters in its permanently allocated environment or conquered surroundings. Such immune systems could equally be described as organismic early forms of a feeling for transcendence: thanks to the efficiency of these devices, which are constantly at the ready, the organism actively confronts the potential bringers of its death, opposing them with its endogenous capacity to overcome the lethal. Such functions have earned immune systems of this type comparisons to a ‘body police’ or border patrol. But as the concern, already at this level, is to work out a *modus vivendi* with foreign and invisible powers – and, in so far as these can bring death, ‘higher’ and ‘supernatural’ ones – this is a preliminary stage to the behaviour one is accustomed to terming religious or spiritual in human contexts. For every organism, its environment is its transcendence, and the more abstract and unknown the danger from that environment, the more transcendent it appears.

Every gesture of ‘suspendedness’ [*Hineingehaltensein*] in the open, to use Heidegger’s term, includes the anticipatory preparedness of the living system for an encounter with potentially lethal powers of irritation and invasion. ‘The creature gazes into the open with all its eyes’, Rilke states at the beginning of the eighth *Duino Elegy* – life itself is an exodus that relates inner matters to the environment. The tendency into the open emerges in several evolutionary steps: though vir-

tually all organisms or integrities transcend into the first-level spaces of surprise and conflict that are assigned to them as their respective environments (even plants do this, and animals all the more so), only very few – only humans, as far as we know – achieve the second level of transcendent movement. Through this, the environment is de-restricted to become the world as an integral whole of manifest and latent elements. The second step is the work of language. This not only builds the ‘house of being’ – Heidegger took this phrase from Zarathustra’s animals, which inform the convalescent: ‘the house of being rebuilds itself eternally’; it is also the vehicle for the tendencies to run away from that house with which, by means of its inner surpluses, humans move towards the open. It need hardly be explained why the oldest parasite in the world, the world above, only appears with the second transcendence.

I shall refrain from touching on the consequences of these reflections for the human realm at this early stage. For now it is sufficient to note that the continuation of biological evolution in social and cultural evolution leads to an upgrading of immune systems. In the case of humans, we have reason to expect not only a single immune system – the biological one, which is the first in evolutionary terms, but the last in terms of its discovery history. The human sphere contains no fewer than three immune systems, which function layered on top of one another in close collaborative interaction and functional augmentation. In the course of man’s mental and socio-cultural evolution, two complementary systems have developed for the pre-emptive processing of injuries: firstly the socio-immunological methods, especially legal and solidaristic ones, but also the military ones by which people resolve their confrontations with distant and foreign aggressors and insulting or harmful neighbours;<sup>8</sup> and secondly the symbolic or psycho-immunological practices on which humans have always relied to cope – with varying success – with their vulnerability through fate, including mortality, in the form of imaginary anticipations and mental armour.<sup>9</sup> It is one of the ironies of these systems that their dark sides are capable of explication, even though their existence depends on consciousness from the start and they consider themselves self-transparent. They do not function behind the backs of subjects, being entirely embedded in their intentional behaviour – nonetheless, it is possible to understand this behaviour better than it is understood by its naïve agents. This is what makes cultural science possible; and it is because a non-naïve approach to symbolic immune systems has itself become vital to the survival of ‘cultures’ today that cultural science is necessary.<sup>10</sup>

## INTRODUCTION: ON THE ANTHROPOTECHNIC TURN

In this book, we will naturally be dealing primarily with the manifestations of the third level of immunity. I gather material on the biography of *Homo immunologicus*, guided by the assumption that this is where to find the stuff from which the forms of anthropotechnics are made. By this I mean the methods of mental and physical practising by which humans from the most diverse cultures have attempted to optimize their cosmic and immunological status in the face of vague risks of living and acute certainties of death. Only when these procedures have been grasped in a broad tableau of human ‘work on oneself’ can we evaluate the newest experiments in genetic engineering, to which, in the current debate, many have reduced the term ‘anthropotechnics’, reintroduced in 1997.<sup>11</sup> What I have to say on this matter from today’s perspective will be woven *ad hoc* into the further course of this study. The tendency of my position is already manifest in the title of this book: whoever notes that it reads ‘You Must Change *Your* Life’ rather than ‘You Must Change *Life*’ has immediately understood what is important here.<sup>12</sup>

The hero of the following account, *Homo immunologicus*, who must give his life, with all its dangers and surfeits, a symbolic framework, is the human being that struggles with itself in concern for its form. We will characterize it more closely as the ethical human being, or rather *Homo repetitivus*, *Homo artista*, the human in training. None of the circulating theories of behaviour or action is capable of grasping the practising human – on the contrary: we will understand why previous theories had to make it vanish systematically, regardless of whether they divided the field of observation into work and interaction, processes and communications, or active and contemplative life. With a concept of practice based on a broad anthropological foundation, we finally have the right instrument to overcome the gap, supposedly unbridgeable by methodological means, between biological and cultural phenomena of immunity – that is, between natural processes on the one hand and actions on the other.

It has been stated often enough in endless discussions on the difference between natural and cultural phenomena – and the methods of their scientific investigation – that there are no direct routes from the one sphere to the other. The demand for a direct connection, however, is a superfluous nuisance to which one should pay no heed. It is revealing that it is made primarily by those who claim a reservation, enclosed by metaphysical fences, for what are known here as the humanities.<sup>13</sup> Some defenders of the world of the spirit seek to make the divide between natural events and works of freedom as deep

as possible – if need be, down to the very depths of an ontological dualism, supposedly to preserve the crown colonies of the intellectual from naturalistic interference. We will see what is to be thought of such efforts.

In truth, the crossing from nature to culture and vice versa has always stood wide open. It leads across an easily accessible bridge: the practising life. People have committed themselves to its construction since they came into existence – or rather, people only came into existence by applying themselves to the building of said bridge. The human being is the pontifical creature that, from its earliest evolutionary stages, has created tradition-compatible connections between the bridgeheads in the bodily realm and those in cultural programmes. From the start, nature and culture are linked by a broad middle ground of embodied practices – containing languages, rituals and technical skills, in so far as these factors constitute the universal forms of automatized artificialities. This intermediate zone forms a morphologically rich, variable and stable region that can, for the time being, be referred to sufficiently clearly with such conventional categories as education, etiquette, custom, habit formation, training and exercise – without needing to wait for the purveyors of the ‘human sciences’, who, with all their bluster about culture, create the confusion for whose resolution they subsequently offer their services. It is in this ‘garden of the human’ – to recall a well-chosen non-physical formula by the physicist Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker<sup>14</sup> – that the following investigations will find their objects of examination. Gardens are enclosed areas in which plants and arts meet. They form ‘cultures’ in an uncompromised sense of the word. Whoever enters the gardens of the human encounters the powerful layers of orderly internal and external actions with an immune-systemic tendency above biological substrates. In the face of the worldwide crisis of cultures, which also includes the ghostly neo-religious episodes mentioned at the start, it is more than a mere academic pleasure if the explication of this domain is placed on the agenda of civilization parliaments.<sup>15</sup>

For internal reasons, a practice-anthropological study cannot possibly be carried out in a detached, unbiased fashion. This is because sooner or later, every discourse on ‘man’ exceeds the limits of mere description and pursues normative goals – whether these are revealed are not. At no time was this more clearly recognizable than in the early European Enlightenment, when anthropology was founded as the original ‘civil science’. At that time, the new science of human beings began to push itself in front of the traditional disciplines of

logic, ontology and ethics as the modern paradigm of philosophy. Whoever entered the debate on man did so in order to assert – as a ‘progressive’ – the equation of citizen and human, either with the intention of abolishing the nobles as secessionists of humanity or elevating humanity as a whole to nobility, or – as a ‘reactionary’ – to portray man as the originally sinful, corrupted and unstable animal that one should, for one’s own sake, never release from the hand of its taskmasters – or, mediievally put, its *correctores*.

The insurmountable bias of anthropological theory is closely interwoven with the nature of its object. For, as much as the general talk of ‘man’ may be infused with an egalitarian pathos, whether it concerns the real or stated equality of humans against their biological background or the virtual equal value of cultures before the court of survival-worthiness – it must always take into account that humans are inescapably subject to vertical tensions, in all periods and all cultural areas. Wherever one encounters human beings, they are embedded in achievement fields and status classes. Even the outside observer cannot entirely escape the binding nature of such hierarchical phenomena, as much as they might try to view their tribal idols in isolation. Quite obviously there are certain meta-idols whose authority exceeds cultural boundaries – clearly there are universals of achievement roles, status recognition and excellence from which no one can be emancipated, neither in their own context nor in a foreign one, without finding themselves in the position of the barbarian.

Fatally, the term ‘barbarian’ is the password that opens up the archives of the twentieth century. It refers to the despiser of achievement, the vandal, the status denier, the iconoclast, who refuses to acknowledge any ranking rules or hierarchy. Whoever wishes to understand the twentieth century must always keep the barbaric factor in view. Precisely in more recent modernity, it was and still is typical to allow an alliance between barbarism and success before a large audience, initially more in the form of insensitive imperialism, and today in the costumes of that invasive vulgarity which advances into virtually all areas through the vehicle of popular culture. That the barbaric position in twentieth-century Europe was even considered the way forward among the purveyors of high culture for a time, extending to a messianism of uneducatedness, indeed the utopia of a new beginning on the clean slate of ignorance, illustrates the extent of the civilizatory crisis this continent has gone through in the last century and a half – including the cultural revolution downwards, which runs through the twentieth century in our climes and casts its shadow ahead onto the twenty-first.

As the following pages deal with the practising life, they lead – in accordance with their topic – to an expedition into the little-explored universe of human vertical tensions. The Platonic Socrates had opened up the phenomenon for occidental culture when he stated *expressis verbis* that man is a being potentially ‘superior to himself’.<sup>16</sup> I translate this remark into the observation that all ‘cultures’, ‘subcultures’ or ‘scenes’ are based on central distinctions by which the field of human behavioural possibilities is subdivided into polarized classes. Thus the ascetic ‘cultures’ know the central distinction of complete versus incomplete, the religious ‘cultures’ that of sacred versus profane, the aristocratic ‘cultures’ that of noble versus common, the military ‘cultures’ that of brave versus cowardly, the political ‘cultures’ that of powerful versus powerless, the administrative ‘cultures’ that of superior versus subordinate, the athletic ‘cultures’ that of excellence versus mediocrity, the economic ‘cultures’ that of wealth versus lack, the cognitive ‘cultures’ that of knowledge versus ignorance, and the sapiential ‘cultures’ that of illumination versus blindness.<sup>17</sup> What all these differentiations have in common is the espousal of the first value, which is considered the attractor in the respective field, while the second pole consistently functions as a factor of repulsion or object of avoidance.

What I here call attractors are, in their mode of effect, the yardstick for vertical tensions that provide orientation in mental systems. Anthropology can no longer ignore the reality of such elements unless it wishes to talk around the decisive vectors of the human condition. Only from the angle of the attractive forces acting ‘from above’ can one explain why and in what forms *Homo sapiens*, whom the palaeontologists deliver directly to the entrance of the humanities faculty for us, was able to develop into the upward-tending animal described more or less in unison by the historians of ideas and world travellers. Wherever one encounters members of the human race, they always show the traits of a being that is condemned to surrealist effort. Whoever goes in search of humans will find acrobats.

The reference to the pluralism of central distinctions is not meant only to draw attention to the multifarious ‘cultures’ or ‘scenes’. Such a pluralism of central distinctions also implies an explanation of how, in the history of ‘cultures’, especially in their more intense and creative phases, there could be superimpositions and mixtures of initially separate areas, reversals of values and intersections of disciplines – phenomena, then, that underlie the forms of spirituality and sophistication still attractive today. It is because the central distinctions can migrate from their original field and settle successfully in foreign

zones that we have the spiritual chances which still fascinate us as the higher and highest possibilities of human beings: these include a non-economic definition of wealth, a non-aristocratic definition of the noble, a non-athletic definition of high achievement, a non-dominatory definition of 'above', a non-ascetic definition of perfection, a non-military definition of bravery and a non-bigoted definition of wisdom and fidelity.

To conclude these preparatory remarks, I would like to say a few words on the partiality of the present book and warn of a misunderstanding that could easily occur. The following investigations take their own result as the point of departure: they testify to the realization that there are objects which do not permit their commentator a complete *epoché*, no withdrawal into disinterestedness, even if the project is theory – which presupposes an abstinence from prejudices, caprices and zealous obsessions. We are dealing here with an object that does not leave its analyst alone; it would not be appropriate to the topic if the author were to remain entirely behind the fence of non-intentionality. The matter itself entangles its adepts in an inescapable self-referentiality by presenting them with the practising – the 'ascetic', form-demanding and habit-forming – character of their own behaviour. In his treatise on the battles between the gods underlying ancient Dionysian theatre, the young Nietzsche notes: 'Alas! The magic of these struggles is such, that he who sees them must also take part in them!'<sup>18</sup> Similarly, an anthropology of the practising life is infected by its subject. Dealing with practices, asceticisms and exercises, whether or not they are declared as such, the theorist inevitably encounters his own inner constitution, beyond affirmation and denial.

The same applies to the phenomenon of vertical tensions, without which no purposeful practising is possible. With reference to tensions of this kind, the theorist will do nothing to fend off their bias – aside from the usual willingness to clarify that which causes it. Anthropological study understands an affection by the matter itself as a sign of its philosophical orientation. In truth, philosophy is the mode of thought shaped by the most radical form of prejudice: the passion of being-in-the-world. With the sole exception of specialists in the field, virtually everyone senses that anything which offers less than this passion play remains philosophically trivial. Cultural anthropologists suggest the appealing term 'deep play' for the comprehensively absorbing preoccupations of human beings. From the perspective of a theory of the practising life we would add: the deep plays are those which are moved by the heights.

Finally, a word of warning about the misunderstanding that, as stated above, could easily occur. It follows from the fact that at present a large number of people with ‘religious’ interests are taking part in a large-scale anti-naturalistic mobilization that seeks to fend off the alleged and genuine interventions of the reductive sciences in the hallowed regions of what is experienced and qualitatively felt. It is immediately clear how the arguments against naturalism serve an early epistemological defence of the facts of faith. Whoever transfers what they experience to an inner fortress that cannot be conquered by the scientific Saracens of today or tomorrow can, initially at least, believe they have done enough to place these delicate treasures under philosophical protection. This at least secures the conditions of the possibility of religiosity, if not the actual tenets of faith. The criticism levelled at naturalists – represented mostly by assertive neurologists today – rightly on the whole, concerns the tendency, conditioned by their field, to view the facts of consciousness in functional distortion and external reflection, without being able to do justice to the irresolvable single-mindedness of the ideational elements that appear in the first-person perspective.

To those who deal with these thought figures,<sup>19</sup> I would like to say that at their core, the following investigations serve neither naturalistic nor functionalistic interests, although I consider it desirable to keep open the possibility of drawing on the results of such research from the ‘spirit side’ too – especially under the aforementioned immunological aspect. If my intention leads to a defamiliarization or, at times, a provocative re-description of the objects of analysis, it is not because external systems of logic are applied to them – as one can observe when neuroscientists talk about Christology<sup>20</sup> or geneticists discuss the DNA of monotheists.<sup>21</sup> The defamiliarization resulting from my theoretical exercises, if it is perceived as such, rests entirely on internal translations by which the internal anthropotechnic languages are made explicit in the spiritual systems themselves. What I refer to here as ‘internal languages’ are, as can be shown, already contained in the countless ‘religiously’ or ethically coded practice systems, so making them explicit does not cause any foreign infiltration. With their help, the things inherently expressed by the holy texts and time-honoured rules are restated in a closely connected alternative language. Repetition plus translation plus generalization results, with the correct calculation, in clarification. If there is such a thing as ‘progress in religion’, it can only manifest itself as increasing explicitness.





# The Planet of the Practising



## THE COMMAND FROM THE STONE

### *Rilke's Experience*

I will first of all present an aesthetic example to explain the phenomenon of vertical tensions and their meaning for the reorientation of the confused existence of modern humans: the well-known sonnet 'Archaic Torso of Apollo', which opens the cycle *New Poems: The Other Part* from 1908. Beginning with a poetic text seems apposite because – aside from the fact that the title of this book is taken from it – its assignment to the artistic field makes it less likely to provoke those anti-authoritarian reflexes which follow almost compulsively from any encounter with statements made dogmatically or from above – 'what does "above" mean anyway!' The aesthetic construct, and nothing else, has taught us to expose ourselves to a non-enslaving experience of rank differences. The work of art is even allowed to 'tell' us, those who have run away from form, something, because it quite obviously does not embody the intention to confine us. 'La poésie ne s'impose plus, elle s'expose.'<sup>1</sup> Something that exposes itself and proves itself in this test gains unpresumed authority. In the space of aesthetic simulation, which is at once the emergency space for the success and failure of the artistic construct, the powerless superiority of the works can affect observers who otherwise take pains to ensure that they have no lord, old or new, above them.

Rilke's 'Torso' is particularly suited to posing the question of the source of authority, as it constitutes an experiment about allowing oneself to be told something. As we know, Rilke, under the influence of Auguste Rodin, whom he had assisted between 1905 and 1906 in Meudon as a private secretary, turned away from the art nouveau-like, sensitized-atmospheric poetic approach of his early years to pursue a view of art determined more strongly by the 'priority of the object'. The proto-modern pathos of making way for the object

without depicting it in a manner ‘true to nature’, like that of the old masters, led in Rilke’s case to the concept of the thing-poem – and thus to a temporarily convincing new answer to the question of the source of aesthetic and ethical authority. From that point, it would be the things themselves from which all authority would come – or rather: from this respectively current singular thing that turns to me by demanding my full gaze. This is only possible because thing-being would now no longer mean anything but this: having something to say.

In his field, and with his means, Rilke carries out an operation that one could philosophically describe as the ‘transformation of being into message’ (more commonly, ‘linguistic turn’). ‘Being that can be understood is language’, Heidegger would later state – which conversely implies that language abandoned by being becomes mere chatter. When, and only when, being contracts in privileged things and turns to us via these things can we hope to escape the increasing randomness, both aesthetically and philosophically. In the face of the galloping inflation of chatter, it was inevitable that such a hope would draw in numerous artists and people of ‘spirit’ around 1900. In the midst of the ubiquitous dealings with prostituted signs, the thing-poem was capable of opening up the prospect of returning to credible experiences of meaning. It did this by tying language to the gold standard of what things themselves communicate. Where randomness is disabled, authority should shine forth.

It is clear enough that not every something can be elevated to the rank of a thing – otherwise everything and everyone would be speaking once more, and the chatter would spread from humans to things. Rilke privileges two categories of ‘entities’ [*Seienden*], to express it in the papery diction of philosophy, that are eligible for the lofty task of acting as message-things – artifices and living creatures – with the latter gaining their particular quality from the former, as if animals were being’s highest works of art before humans. Inherent to both is a message energy that does not activate itself, but requires the poet as a decoder and messenger. This underlies the complicity between the speaking thing and Rilke’s poetry – just as, only a few years later, Heidegger’s things would conspire with the ‘legend’ of a contemplative philosophy that no longer wants to be a mere scholastic discipline.

These somewhat accelerated remarks outline a framework in which we can attempt a brief reading of the ‘Torso’ poem. I am assuming that the torso mentioned in the sonnet is meant to embody a ‘thing’ in the eminent sense of the word, precisely because it is merely the

## THE COMMAND FROM THE STONE

leftover of a complete sculpture. We know from accounts of Rilke's life that his stay in Rodin's workshops taught him how modern sculpture had advanced to the genre of the autonomous torso.<sup>2</sup> The poet's view of the mutilated body thus has nothing to do with the previous century's Romanticism of fragments and ruins; it is part of the breakthrough in modern art to the concept of the object that states itself with authority and the body that publicizes itself with authorization.

### ARCHAIC TORSO OF APOLLO

We never knew his head and all the light  
that ripened in his fabled eyes. But  
his torso still glows like a gas lamp dimmed  
in which his gaze, lit long ago,

holds fast and shines. Otherwise the surge  
of the breast could not blind you, nor a smile  
run through the slight twist of the loins  
toward that centre where procreation thrived.

Otherwise this stone would stand deformed and curt  
under the shoulders' transparent plunge  
and not glisten just like wild beasts' fur

and not burst forth from all its contours  
like a star: for there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your life.<sup>3</sup>

Whoever absorbs anything vaguely concrete upon first reading has understood this much: the poem is dealing with perfection – a perfection that seems all the more binding and mysterious because it is the perfection of a fragment. It is reasonable to suppose that this work was also an expression of thanks to Rodin, his master in his Paris days, for the concept of the autonomous torso, which he had encountered in his workshop. The reason for the existence of the perfection conjured up in these fourteen lines is that it possesses – independently of its material carrier's mutilation – the authorization to form a message that appeals from within itself. This power of appeal is exquisitely evident in the object evoked here. The perfect thing is that which articulates an entire principle of being. The poem has to perform no more and no less than to perceive the principle of being in the thing and adapt it to its own existence – with the aim of becoming a construct with an equal power to convey a message.

Rilke's torso can be experienced as the bearer of the attribute 'perfect' because it brings along something that permits it to snub