

Existence, Minimality, and Believing
 (in **What is Existential Anthropology?**)

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Just as a philosopher might wonder if all philosophy is not the philosophy of existence, an anthropologist might ask if all anthropology is not an anthropology of existence. Historians of philosophy would reply that for a long time, this discipline was a debate about essences and categories, far removed from the reality of the real-life experience of existence. Anthropologists could themselves also surmise that their discipline has its own “essences”, that is to say themes and perspectives that allow them to side-step existence: societies, cultures, social issues, representations, structures, but also, more recently, activities, actions and even non-humans¹.

In anthropology, especially in France, the impact of structuralist thought hindered the development of an existential anthropology, so virulent was its contempt for the "me", which it deemed only suitable for a "shopgirl's philosophy" (Lévi-Strauss 1961: 62). Isn't the (unfortunate) genius of anthropology, in all of its still-current manifestations, that it misunderstood, dissolved and forgot individuals in their most unique characteristic, the fact of existing?

And what if there were only one and the same answer to the two following questions: what is anthropology? What is existential anthropology? Anthropology would or should be the observation and description of the existence of human beings, of each human being in his individual singularity as he goes about living, being here-and-now and continuing, each coming from various situations and moving towards

other situations. Beyond the empirical exercise, existential anthropology would constitute "the analysis of what constitutes existence", what Heidegger called "existentiality", with a view to discovering the general characteristics of the human way of existing (Heidegger 1996: 10). But how is this to be done?

In the process of constructing an object as something, science works with the necessary filters and methodological selection. Would humans as they exist be a relevant scientific theme? Would linking existence to time, continuity and finiteness be a way of explaining this as? Let's make the bet. Then existential anthropology consists in observing individuals at instant t , as they come from elsewhere and as they continue towards other situations until they die. Existence is not the total human being as a sum of social, psychological and cultural characteristics. Existence designates the fact of existing, of being-in-the-world. Does this mean that the anthropology of existence incorporates this dimension of mortality into every field study? It is, in any case, on the horizon, more or less explicit, more or less implicit in human existence, which constantly produces apparitions and disappearances, presences and absences, engagements and disengagements, consciousness and unconsciousness.

From this perspective, I believe it would be appropriate for anthropology to effect a methodological shift: turning away from observations (often called ethnographies) focused on sets of specific situations and interactions (linked to an activity or event) and giving preference to detailed observations of separate individuals in their continuity from situation to situation—what I have called phenomenography, as we saw in the introduction to this book². The individual thus becomes the focus of the observation process. Moreover,

a good number of details are needed in order to make comparisons on ways of existing, engaging and being conscious. This point most certainly implies criticism of the social sciences and particularly social or cultural anthropology, since existential anthropology would challenge its "collectivist" methodology, focused on shared social and cultural characteristics. During a moment of presence, to exclusively note what constitutes the singularity of the culture, action or activity in progress means missing the characteristics of individual presence, in which culture and action are only a more or less thin or dense stratum of what I would call the individual's volume of being.

Anthropology has to reach the point that it is possible to say that human existence can be an empirical object in social science. Using methods and words, concepts and descriptions, it has to explain what these empirical units are like, as they are and where they are, as they exist and continue to exist. What is it like to be human? This would be the basic question of existential anthropology. It could constitute a proposal for founding or re-founding anthropology, which has been too philosophical or socio-cultural, and has almost never been sufficiently anthropo-logical, which is to say descriptive of human beings existing.

From this perspective, existential anthropology is an invitation to focus on situated beings, existences in a situation, and allow oneself to be surprised by the fact that they exist. What is this human being really like, what does he really feel, what does he really perceive, how does he really interact? And what will he be like a few moments later? How does he engage with this or that idea, value or representation? How does he believe in it? It is important to start with the numerical unit, this one, that one, to follow it as long as possible, and to keep it present even during the final writing. The individual is a numerical unit either aware

or unaware of a self, continuing, changing or not changing in terms of his various qualities or properties. He is a concrete unit attesting to itself, feeling, uniquely experiencing emotions, sufferings, acts, words, constituting an aggregate of actual and potential experiences, also with permanent properties and a system of predispositions and tendencies. By phenomenographing presence, attention is shifted onto the whole volume of being, not just the visibly acting or interacting stratum. In the continuity of his presences and his actions, what the here-and-now individual is doing and saying constitutes a partial, visible actualization in a volume of being that is also composed of other strata - actual, irrelevant elements that leave visible but unnoticed traces and have no consequences; potential elements with more or less visible, sensed and perceived traces in the scene, always ready to act and produce action, traces left by experiences, events that are more or less recent or remote, skills, abilities, various predispositions such as sociocultural predispositions; virtual elements not made explicit or conscious, such as reasons for being there and doing this or that.

Let's not delude ourselves: the map is not the territory! And yet, the ideal methodology would be to film every person on earth. The ideal methodology - certainly impossible for many reasons - would be a continuous film of the whole life of every person on earth, with his_ or her own explanation of the captured sequences. All other methodologies would be second-best, with some falling below minimum requirements. Ideally at minimum: one human being for a few consecutive hours, a whole day, a week, several selected human being observed from a few hours to several weeks, repeated at regular intervals. We should place babies at the heart of this research. Every anthropologist should have his own baby to observe and follow continuously for several years! This

approach would be continual, involving observations of the continuity of existence, as well as contrastive, comparing diverse continuities according to selected criteria such as age, cultural or social setting, psychological orientation.

Faced with the diversity of philosophical theories, I am always struck by their incompatibility, which generates debates that are difficult to resolve. Associated with a different anthropology, each of them probably contains its share of truth. I often get the impression that they are not true for all individuals and even that they are all true for the same individual but at different moments. I am convinced that what the philosophies of existence have taught us is, on the one hand, to focus on existence, therefore on the individual, but also, on the other hand, to slide the underlying anthropologies towards certain philosophers (Jaspers, Husserl or Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Sartre or Levinas) as combinable tools that can be used to describe all of the modes, modulations and modalizations of individuals as empirical units. Existence is that of an individual³, whose successive moments will justify sometimes emphasizing self-becoming, the resolute consciousness that faces up to things, sometimes emphasizing communication with others and power in extreme situations, and sometimes emphasizing theories on the solitary, desperate human with no ties to anything, who has become a stranger in the world, theories on human being as he develops in a community, or in the process of feeling conscious and of either becoming or not becoming “free”⁴. Researchers who dare to grasp individuals in the continuity of moments and situations will bring much order to the endless controversies (which establish themselves by taking advantage of the methodological spinelessness of the social sciences) between sociological and philosophical paradigms. This relates to a

proposition of Wittgenstein: “A main cause of philosophical disease—a one-sided diet: one nourishes one’s thinking with only one kind of example” (Wittgenstein 1953: fr. 593). This position is linked to my dissatisfaction with sociological theories (Durkheim, Bourdieu or Garfinkel for example), because every theory is only relevant to a certain moment, a certain place, for a certain individual, but not more... Life circumstances prove all theories right, but never all at the same time. This implies observing and taking account of the continuity of the individual’s existence, instead of a certain activity, a certain state, in a certain location, at a certain moment.

Existential anthropology would produce bridge-descriptions. They would be anthropologically compatible bridges to other descriptions realized at different scales, some larger-scale (those of sociology), some smaller-scale (with psychology, cognitive science, even neuroscience). Between existence as an effect of trajectories and utterances, ontological realities as a collective system of representations and cultural expressions, and cognitivism that omits experience, there is room for an anthropology of existences. Therefore, an anthropology that is existential aims to observe individuals, their existence, and to understand *anthropos* in general, through comparisons also with other living species, in particular with non-human primates. That is what an existential anthropology project would be. Based on meticulous descriptions and comparisons between existences and presence modalities, the objective of an existential anthropology would also be to find new “existentials”, to use Heidegger’s terminology, that is to say general characteristics of the human act of existing. This could be the strong ambition of existential anthropology.

In this chapter, I shall analyze only the presence-absence or that which I have designated the “minor mode”. It is undoubtedly an existential. My chapter consists of three acts. The first presents this universal characteristic of *Homo sapiens* : the mixture of major mode and minor mode, of presence and absence, of activity and passivity. The second act illustrates this human mode of being from examples of religious believing. The third act shall search for a genealogy of this characteristic. I find it in an hypothesis about the evolutionary origins of the capacity of believing and accepting religious statements. This would have triggered a difference between *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals. Thus, believing is a good laboratory of human minimality. At the end of these three acts, shall the human enigma of the presence-absence be resolved ?

Act 1: Minor mode and reposit⁵

When I look at people in their successive moments, trivial presences often appear that become catalysts for decisions, generators of various consequences. These presences sometimes remain inconsequential, and often they allow themselves to be infiltrated by empty moments, secondary gestures or wandering thoughts. A moment of human presence is usually made up of a large number of details, that is to say things that are as unimportant to the people who effect them as they are to their fellow participants in a situation or to outside observers. The reality of action is, on the one hand, a body in the process of moving,

accompanied by sideways glances and peripheral gestures, and on the other hand a state of mind that often has nothing to do with the action in progress. All of these details make up the minor mode, which is neither a general action, nor a particular type of activity (Piette 1992 and 1996). It constitutes a specific modality by which an individual is necessarily present in the space and time where two or more people find themselves co-present. The minor mode widens the field of details to be described and considered. It is useful for describing the real, concrete person, getting the clearest possible view of his or her constant variations of intensity. From a theoretical perspective, it is certainly also useful for considering anthropological difference. Details are constant leitmotifs in the social sciences, as well as in ethnographic activity. But with the minor mode it is a matter of considering the detail as a detail, as something unimportant, whereas the usual semantic co-optation of the social sciences masks, overlooks, loses the status of small things by linking them to attributes that are different from those of a detail.

Details without importance. My first fieldwork on festive rituals in Belgium led me to discover, with the help of a very large number of photographs, this ever-present aspect of people in a situation - the minor mode of reality. Let us first consider that it constitutes a "lesser" way of performing actions, without the introduction of this "less" constituting a new attribute or having supplementary effects on the situation, and also without changing the act in question, which unfolds with its socially expected meanings. The minor mode is a way of being present in one's action that releases the human from the action without disengaging him. It neither adds nor removes a layer of meaning from the performed action. In the performance of human actions, the minor mode is

constant in varying doses, whatever these actions may be. It is a fact that does not attract attention. It even counts among its characteristics, manifesting itself in forms that are lesser in relation to the expected action, forms that are involuntary and unnoticed, singular and particular, and do not lead the situation's other participants to share in them.

This "less" in the action partly consists of the presence of other layers of action and attention in the present volume of being. But why "less"? One reason is that these layers present themselves in a lesser manner relative to the expected meaning of the principal action. In this case, direct observation of the action consists in separating the expected - that which is relevant in this action - from physical, gestural and cognitive signs that attest to the presence of that which is irrelevant in the action. Another reason is that the action, as it is encompassed within a set of heterogeneous details, has a characteristic dampening-effect on the ways of being that are present in the situation. This minor modality constitutes a way of being in the world, it is even specific to the *Sapiens* species through our ability to not see and do directly, head-on, exclusively, totally, to introduce a layer, a loosening stratum, to different degrees of course. I will explore this later.

One form of minor mode therefore resides in gestures and thoughts that: are different and simultaneous in relation to those that are expected in the action; are not relevant; are not noticed or barely noticed; are thus tolerated; do not imply an active, willful, strategic approach by the person executing them. In any situation in the life of society, people do what is appropriate but they also look left and right, seem to become detached, come back and then once again release themselves from the scene. They are somewhat distracted, absent,

thinking about other things. From this we can conclude that people are skilled at doing two things at once: managing the collective aspect necessarily implied by the interaction in which they are participating, and managing their own singularity through gestures, movements and thoughts that are specific to each of them. They introduce the individual detail against a backdrop of coordination⁶. The individual details present a few characteristics: they are inherent in a human being's participation in an action, they cannot be shared by others without a lapse into irrelevance, they are contained within limits beyond which they cannot pass without the risk of engendering an inopportune situation. They have no relevant effect on the interaction in progress or on a subsequent description, but are tolerated by the interactants, who implicitly dissociate them from any fault. The presence of these minor gestures does not invite one to think about the succession of different actions, but rather about the simultaneity between the action that is appropriate to the situation and the residues of other actions. In a situation, human presence would seem inconceivable and impossible without this variable dose of small details. Its agreeableness depends on them.

Is it necessary to point out that many observations and descriptions are formulated as if the world operated only in the major mode or, put differently, only with individuals who were connected to only one stratum in terms of their mode of presence? The suitable one but also inversely the one that is not. A descriptive improvement can be achieved by recognizing the presence of this minor mode.

Focusing on the minor mode enables attention to be drawn to one way (the human way) of looking, perceiving, being attentive, let's say "being in the world". Much of the minor mode resides in the following few traits. First there is the human mode of perception, which is most

often parsimonious and light in everyday situations, not involving an active, nervous or alert exploration of an object's characteristics and thus enabling its trigger effect to be blunted. Also, in various situations, people are usually surrounded by many things that are "there", things that they might see but not really observe - the minimal, even imprecise perception of which is not followed by an action. People also associate an object with various meanings or purposes, and when they use it in a situation, they may associate it with a representation that is now secondary, that from which it was previously perceived. Thus people perceive with a system of open blinders that enable them to see a prominent object without eliminating what is all around them, maintaining a kind of backdrop from which emerge things they perceive as unimportant details. They are able to be distracted without losing sight of the main object of their attention, continuing their main activity without becoming detached, without losing their concentration. Finally, they live in the world, from which things they perceive appear with a certain continuity from situation to situation, without involving the abrupt replacement of one perception by another, against a backdrop of relative stability, without the need to control and far from a state of readiness. Wandering thoughts are possible, straying far from the activity underway, thoughts concerning the past, the future or other things. These thoughts may also become critical in relation to the present act, as if it made one sense one's restriction, a problem, tiredness, a habit, and may give rise to a doubt, an inner conflict. They then cause one to leave the minor mode.

If a retailer is someone who deals in small quantities, in pieces, can ethnographers be compared with retailers? It seems to me that they too often deliver sets in bulk. Summarizing observed situations, selecting

one part of the individual that they consider relevant to the activity, paring the individual's existence down to a single activity: these are big, anti-realistic faults that can be avoided by focusing on the minor mode. The task I assign to phenomenography is precisely to deliver in pieces. This is what is implied by its focus on individuals that are separate but of course always situated. Phenomenography tracks humans' inner gaps and attempts to penetrate presences in their details. Among some of the remains of the social sciences, human beings have a curious presence that it is possible to place under the anthropological zoom lens.

Activity and Passivity. The minor mode can still teach us something about the human way of existing, by displacing the meaning of "less". It does not just concern secondary layers of presence, as I have just said, but the whole presence in the action, in which light distraction is but one element. I have proposed the term *reposito* to more closely capture the natural attitude of human beings, with four characteristic elements describing the part repose plays, and their respective opposite describing humans' work (Piette 2009 and 2011). On the basis of habits, previous experiences and mental scenarios, cognitive economy enables people to forego verifying that they have all the information and skills necessary for performing an action. Not only does cognitive economy correspond to the routinized application of sequences of actions without reference to an instruction, it also facilitates the process of social interaction, by virtue of each partner's material supports and stable identities. The opposite of cognitive economy is the work of evaluating, strategizing, justifying and scheming, all of which direct attention - sometimes obsessively - to specific fragments of reality. Docility corresponds to the possibility of preserving the present supports, rules and values, the

existing signs and points of reference (as opposed the intention or desire to change them) and the avoidance of the cognitive, emotional or moral tension that results from the ordeal of change. Fluidity corresponds to the possibility of linking opposite or contradictory information or modes of reasoning in the same situation, or in situations that closely follow one another. It illustrates the human ability to let go immediately, to accept inconsistency and shift from situation to situation. The opposite is inflexibility. Finally there is distraction, which corresponds to the cognitive ability to attribute to a being, object or event the status of a detail (without importance), to reduce it to an element of distraction without compromising the minimal attention required in the situation. It is the state of concentration or intransigence that is the opposite of distraction.

I think these concepts could be useful in order to dissect instants of individuals. In human presence, the proportioning of work and repose, of activity and passivity—indissociable from one another - is of course different for each person in a shared situation. It is important to emphasize this mixture. According to “the degree of our attention to life”, “now nearer to action, now further removed from it”, this interweaving of modes of presence produces “_diverse tones of mental life” (Bergson 2004: XIV). And over a set of successive activities, depending on what they are, a specific individual will pass through variations of proportion between work and repose. When people are very active, they remain “carried” by the interlinking of moments and the presence of points of reference and other supports. There is no active dimension (evaluating, changing, losing, scheming...) that is not accompanied by at least one of the other constitutive “repose” dimensions.

Supports and repose combine to generate different modes of presence. Tranquility develops from a mode that is perceptive or even infra-perceptive of reference points and spatiotemporal signs, against a quite stable backdrop, sometimes experienced as such, with the possibility that unimportant details could emerge. In a familiar situation, some points of reference and signs are new, or at least different, and others are found to be lacking relative to previous situations, though the difference is still absorbed in the economical mode, against a backdrop that is still well-anchored. It is when the at least partial disintegration of this backdrop is sensed—with the imposed or created absence of certain supports—that tiredness arises and reduces the possibility of distractions. There follows an attentive, concentrated tension of (re)construction, judgment and evaluation. Then it is as if the backdrop were withdrawn, giving way to the nearly exclusive prominence of this or that fragment of attention. It appears to me that it is essential to perceive the constant, tangled play of these modes of presence in terms of the mobility of supports that either remain, go away or are recreated. Even though one or two supports are lacking, others remain. At the height of conflict, alienation, anxiety, rupture, people can and must find forms of repose, and find them in order to continue, to survive. When cognitive economy gives way to the struggling determination of the senses, and docility gives way to instability, and fluidity to rigidity, and distraction to intransigence, tiredness can only be either isolated, in which case it is quickly absorbed, or diffuse in which case it is still permeated in different doses by various rules, points of reference or signs supporting the situation. These different forms of support and repose, as well as their respective opposites, constitute a descriptive framework for understanding and representing the movement of the sequences of

human actions in situations that link from one to the next, between repose and work, between tiredness and tranquility, between tension and familiarity.

What does a person do when he or she is with others in a so-called collective action at a given moment? A lot, but most of the time not really all that much: being there and doing what is necessary, without much mental or physical effort, out of habit, with economical perception, varying according to the situation of course. Most human actions develop in a situation without requiring more than this from the people who are there: only the minimal integration behavior, I would say. These are expected behaviors whose obviousness reflects previous commitments, intentions or decisions. And at the same time, most of the time, these too go without saying, also reflecting prior situations, as we have just seen. Very visible externally, the stratum of minimal integration behavior often intrudes little upon the immediate presence experienced by the person. It is executed all the more lightly insofar as the corresponding actions are routines, linked to known rules, to co-present objects or resource-persons.

But precisely in addition to this stratum, as I have pointed out, human presence also includes remains, the volume of remains. In fact, taking a good look at minimal integration behavior in a single situation, no two behaviors are really alike. There are of course different styles and social tendencies surrounding one same gesture, but more importantly, in parallel with the execution of the behavior there are remains that are thus characterized because they do not jeopardize the minimum integration behavior. These are gestures peripheral to the expected action, thoughts heterogeneous to it, the absence of an inner state in relation to gestures that are simply conformant. But they are also

personalized, sometimes emotional evocations, stemming from what is being done or said, isolated feelings that an experience is unfulfilling, or it could even be an impression of constraint or a brief critical doubt about what is happening. Whereas the minimal integration behavior is highly visible to everyone, remains are often invisible to other individuals; in any case they are not interpreted as a sign of anything. On the other hand, expected behaviors can be (though not always) less present in inner experiences than remains, which are sometimes strongly auto-perceived and felt (at least some of them) in the course of the action, but not enough to jeopardize the successful unfolding of the situation.

Collective life in a given situation is therefore also the suspension of the search for these requirements, acceptance of the undecidability of what other people think⁷. And in each case there is a shared minimum and varying volume of remains, which are more or less indistinct for the others, and are viewed as irrelevant. The situation's participants achieve minimal integration behavior through the reciprocal establishment of visibility. The presence of remains is also shared but in an invisible way, at least without being recognized or hardly being recognized, and their contents being different for each person but not made explicit between the people. Thus, integration behavior is minimal but the remains are minimal as well, since they do not produce any change and are not experienced as differences between people. Minimality is very much a crucial principle of sociological operation. It enables a large volume of remains to exist alongside the gestural and mental minimum of social presence.

The subject of the social sciences in general most often concerns minimal integration behavior, at most certain remains that are

precursors of change in the course of events, such as doing something under the effect of restriction, in critical doubt, with a present strategic aim. A phenomenography of the remains stratum implies not isolating the shared minimum of modes of presence and treating it as if it were the sole, maximal volume of presence, but also analyzing the volume of mental and gestural remains that exists alongside the shared social minimum. An instance of successful coordination requires suspending all requirements beyond the completion of a minimal substratum that is itself accomplished minimally, with perceptual and cognitive economy through habits and routines, in lightened co-presence with objects and resource-persons, against a background of rules and norms that are both general and nonetheless virtually present, also against the background of a still possible "ordeal" and of the existence of intense engagements that are more or less remote in time and space. There is another minimum, that which, through successive presence in instants, makes it possible to keep living when confronted with an a dreadful situation, when a tragic event (nearly) fills people's whole situation and presence. Continuity, from instant to instant, situation to situation, is achieved through the extraordinary conjunction between the tragic—dominant, anchored and almost fixed—and these more or less "secondarily" present remains able to throw links between moments and situations and thus keep the person advancing. The effect of continuity is directly linked to the availability, next to the human presence, of nearly inexhaustible, constantly revitalizing supports. They are made up of reference points, signs and rules, as I have pointed out. They are people or objects, spatiotemporal indicators, in the foreground or as a backdrop to the situation. There are therefore several types of minimum:

- the social minimum, that is to say the execution of what is expected

in a situation with several people against a backdrop of rules, laws and habits,

- the minimum of human presence, in which cognitive engagement can be very economical and inner engagement can be unnecessary,

- the minimum of remains, those that stay in the sidelines and do not get overwhelmed by more or less total types of situation (dreadful ones in particular), those very remains that link together the continuity of existence.

Humans possess a special skill for modalizing their presence by constantly injecting nuance, by creating mixtures of being, by fluidly shifting between modes and situations and also by establishing degrees of consequence that make people, their activities and their spaces appear more or less important. By living with gods, institutions and animals, people create new supports for themselves—supports for repose—giving themselves an even better chance of living in the minor mode. As if we in fact had a strong sign of their specificity, humans inject this modal characteristic into the lives of their close day-to-day companions—let's call them para-humans since they exist alongside us—who, with their own ability to minimize, make it all the easier for the humans to relax when they are at their side. The human being who personifies animals or humanizes machines bestows upon them a "pliable ontology". As a minimal being, he is so specifically minimal that his minimality permeates the being of para-humans, such as dogs, whose own minor mode expressions were shown by Marion Vicart (2014), through the imitation of humans and/or the tranquillization of their lives at their sides. The existence of para-human companions therefore proceeds through the minimization of their modes of presence, achieved to different degrees in each of them. One constant characteristic of

institutions, gods, domestic animals, social groups, etc. consists in their restrictive, negative presence, dare I say in the minor mode. The potential pressure of their active side (which is obviously real and I do not intend to claim it does not exist) is thus counterbalanced by various restrictive modes of existence. The omnipresent god is also invisible, often faded, and even raises doubts about his existence. Political institutions such as states are very structuring but are particularly virtual. Groups, which are also structuring, are particularly irregular and polymorphous. The social (that is to say social predispositions), which can be real and active, is particularly potentialized and often implicit. Domestic animals, which are interactive, are contingent, passive and often neutralized in everyday situations. Humans seem to understand their anthropological specificity—minimality—in the world of the living because they externalize and accentuate it in para-humans' existence and through different ways of being co-present with them. What is the source of collective life? In each situation, co-presence develops around three essential elements.

- the continuity of present beings: that of humans who have their own reasons for being there, with their skills and abilities, in accordance with a variable number of past situations; that of para-humans, particularly that of prominent objects in the scene in question, themselves deriving from a long continuity;
- the minimality of the person who, in the situation, employs most of his necessary skills and abilities more or less automatically, disregarding questions about the origins of the continuity of each participant, whether human or non-human;
- the virtuality of a set of para-human entities, which are there without really being there, like collective beings that, in their own way,

are present in this or that situation object.

Continuity, minimality, virtuality: could these be key elements that make it unnecessary to seek other principles to explain social life? At any rate, the obviousness of presence and co-presence defined in this way seems to me essential in this life together. It would be a worthwhile challenge to try re-describing the world and its scenes by determining the minimal portion of actions and presences they require, as well as the part played by the infiltration of irrelevant details and the minor mode. In an obvious way, this kind of perspective reintroduces the modalities of adherence and engagement by which people relate to representations, to systems of collective representations—sometimes called ontologies—those adherence modalities too often set aside in that “ontological turn” we discussed in the introduction to this book.

Act 2: Believing, a laboratory of the minimality

Now let us try to observe some figures of the minimality in everyday situations. The experience of believing is a very good fieldwork for such an analysis. In the social sciences of religion, the temptation to over-interpret jeopardises the description and analysis of beliefs, or more specifically modes of believing. Religious beliefs are often treated as synonymous with homogeneous, shared cultural representations, as if adherence, acceptance and the mode of belief were self-evident.

Numerous examples taken from diverse cultural contexts illustrate the minor mode of beliefs. Half-believing, believing contradictory things, believing while being sceptical, floating between wonder and credulity, being able to change “programs of truth”, hesitating or remaining

indifferent when facing the choice between truth or fiction: this is the multiplicity of attitudes and modalities of belief that Paul Veyne (1988) highlighted remarkably in his analysis of Greek myths.

It is therefore a matter of setting aside the usual image of people adhering to beliefs either in conformance with or in spite of those instituted by society, being conscious and logical within themselves, always being serious in the actions they perform, and therefore always being over-interpreted in relation to events they most often experience simply and mundanely. The point is not to replace this with the image of unbelieving, unconscious, inconsistent people who lack serious action, but rather that of people who believe without believing (Mair 2012).

The work involved in a large-scale ethnographic study and the notion of culture are such that individual differences risk being disregarded—overshadowed by the cultural representations thus collated. Matching an individual's beliefs with representations that are public, pervasive or orthodoxly organised, and linking these to the coherence of a singular cultural entity distracts attention from concrete behaviours and actions. This is not only to ignore individual variations but also to assume that individuals have full access to entirely transparent representations.

An approach focused on particular variations and individual expressions is needed if one is to get closer to modes of belief and moments of believing. This exercise must be read as a consideration, a sort of dissection of “what goes on” when people are believing. It aims to present theoretical reference points with a view to establishing an anthropology of hesitant and fragmentary modalities of belief. The examples provided are mainly drawn from my study in Catholic parishes of France (Piette 1999). Close observation and personal interviews

enabled me to obtain the data that follows. I shall go into individual details of acts of believing, at different levels. A set of characteristics shall appear. It would be important to make other phenomenographic explorations in different religious universes and to compare them.

Belief statements. "Jesus is alive." "The spirit of the Lord is present among us." These are the statements one usually hears in Catholic religious ceremonies. They have at least three characteristics (Boyer 1994). They contradict individuals' intuitive expectations and ordinary anticipations, such as when they attribute the quality "alive" to a person who is known to be dead. They are composed of notions or concepts that have a certain complexity for those who utter them—the "believers" themselves—and are vague in meaning (such as the notion of spirit, the idea of presence, and many others), making them sources of doubtful interpretations and persistent controversies. Finally, they do not imply—again, for the "believers" themselves—a necessary link to other statements or behaviours that would seem to follow from them logically and directly. Would any Catholic asserting Christ's "real presence" be prepared to search for physical traces of this? Dan Sperber uses the term "semi-propositional" to describe the contents of a mental representation that is incompletely established (Sperber 1985). The believer does not fully pursue the propositional logic by which a representation identifies one and only one proposition. Since it opens an array of interpretations that might clarify this content (without there being any single "right" interpretation), semi-propositional representations allow a kind of loosening in face of vague contents that are not taken literally (ibid: 71-73). The individual does not receive this semi-propositional content as a fact but as a representation that involves a certain mental vagueness,

which does not prevent him from having confidence in both the authority that issues the statement and the orthodoxy of its representation.

Every act of believing is linked to some cognitive vagueness. From the remarkable mind map (which can be interpreted as a set of semi-propositional representations) of an octogenarian subscribing to the idea of the immortality of the soul but wishing to delay Heaven as long as possible, while at the same time desiring to live on in the memory of his descendants, while at the same time asking that his loved ones place a valued object in his final resting place and that they not forget to look after his grave, Paul Veyne extracts the gist : “one believes in Heaven, one is afraid of being a corpse, one feels one's future death will be a kind of sleep, one does not want to be neglected or forgotten like a dog” (Veyne 1992: 249). According to Veyne, “only the first of these four modalities is influenced by religious beliefs; but, even in a population that believes in the Resurrection, the three other experiences persist”. He explains: “it would be a mistake to believe that religion is coextensive to culture; some attitudes to the beyond vary according to beliefs, but only some; faith in personal immortality did not prevent Christians from also wanting to survive in their descendants...” (ibid: 247-249). Someone slides a few photos into a coffin just before it is closed. He knows that the corpse will not be able to use these objects but he offers them anyway... At the moment of the gesture, it is impossible to mentally strengthen this act of believing without at the same time summoning one's critical knowledge. The individual prefers to keep his semi-propositional representations below the level of consciousness; this is the minimal internalisation that makes it possible to manage incompatibilities in this case.

Telling ones' beliefs. Responding to the researcher: “Yes, I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God” does not amount to “being in the middle of believing”. It is the conveying of an “opinion” or “piece of information”—in this case about one's own religious ideas. It appears that the phrase itself can constitute a bad model for conceiving of belief: it is based on the association of “precise verbal expression to convictions that lack the hard edges verbalization endows them with” (Dennett 1987: 21). But at the same time, the positive answer clearly shows that the interviewee thinks various realities (God, the resurrection) really exist. Believing is not just playing along for the duration of a book or film. It is also retaining the thought after the religious celebration is over, and possibly expressing it to the anthropologist.

The responses and comments that the believer offers the anthropologist do not make the meaning of his beliefs clear. These rather constitute a set of supplemental remarks in a specific type of situation. Their distinctive features must therefore be identified. They will help us understand the management of religious statements in actuality. With this in mind, I have questioned Catholics about the idea of resurrection, not to get them give me the key to their beliefs, but to find out the modalities by which they link together belief statements. The interview imposes a certain bias since they are asked for “information” on life after death and the resurrection. It is up to them to respond and make a series of statements. What do we find? The responses revolve around the idea of a spiritual life after earthly life, and this possibility is presented as a “mystery” that is capable of uniting the spirits of all people and creating a world of “peace and light”. Spiritual life is described as a state of “love to the highest degree”: it is to live “in

God's love". The foundations of the possibility of this spiritual life are the qualities of God: "he is infinitely powerful and he will offer us something unexpected"; "he is someone good fighting to destroy evil. This absence of evil is impossible in this world. There is a future for humanity outside of our way of thinking and our space"; "I have strong faith in the goodness of a God who creates, and real happiness means penetrating beyond death"; "God loves people to the point that he can do all..."

The terms used to suggest this spiritual life (love, peace, happiness) are polysemic and rather vague. Most often, there is an explicit refusal to imagine and describe what lies beyond death: "I'm not trying to imagine it. You shouldn't try to find it in a human model"; "I don't really have a conception". Based on their certainty that "another" world exists, its qualities can be a matter of indifference: "maybe it's bad, but I don't care"; "I admit it's not something I'm worried about".

When respondents give more precise information about this other world, one of the recurring characteristics of their mode of expression is the presence of mental restrictions that modalize and even deny the described quality: "The resurrection of Christ means something, but I don't understand it"; "I think there's something there, maybe"; "I believe in the communion of saints. But no one ever said anything about it". In fact, modalizing has just as much of an impact on the metaphorical interpretation of the other world as it does on the literal interpretation. It is as if both interpretations could not be pursued to their conclusion. Thus, the metaphorical version is sometimes strongly expressed in a way that would appear to deny postmortem resurrection: "The resurrection means that dead people are still around, even today; it's that I'm talking about them. What we experienced together left traces that still affect

me. The resurrection means that the link existing between us is stronger than death”. But this sort of interpretation comes to a halt as soon as it runs up against “trust in God”, and the respondent recognises the inadequacy of words to explain it: “We have no images to describe it. It's a bit like if a blind person had to describe the world. But I believe that those who have passed away will be in a position to explain it to us”. So there is “something”...

It is important to stress that mental restrictions also affect the literalist interpretation that Catholics use to express the idea of the resurrection of the body and of being reunited with loved ones in a specific place. Several types of modalization can be identified:

- incomprehension, or at least the professed inability to know: “It's an open question. Christ said nothing explicit on the subject. I'm no intellectual myself”; “on the resurrection scenario, nothing can be said”; “Personally, I've never delved into those questions. I had seminary friends who did, but they all let it drop”; “I don't understand”.

- doubt tinged with hope: “It think there's something, maybe. I hope so”.

- irony usually expressed through laughter, in response to the request for a description of the resurrection, particularly in relation to being personally reunited with loved ones.

- the rejection of one's own past belief: “I used to believe in the physical resurrection. But now I'm less categorical”.

- the appeal to theological knowledge: “In Jewish anthropology, the resurrection of the flesh does not mean the revival of the dead.”

There are also denials—sometimes adamant—of the literalist interpretation of the resurrection: “That's one part of the credo I'm

sceptical about. I don't believe in the resurrection in the flesh"; "the way it works isn't that bones are taken out to put a guy back together. Heaven can't be conceived in terms of astrophysics"; "I struggle against the idea that the resurrection is a revival of corpses". At most, these literalist images can be pedagogical means of reassurance: "one of our children became very distressed about death. He was completely reassured the night I told him that there is a place where we all find each other, and that existing links are not broken. You know, the hackneyed image".

But these denials, like the metaphorical interpretation and the literalist version, are not pursued to their conclusion because they are positively re-modalised in connection with ideas of love and spiritual happiness, which make it possible to reconnect to the hope of reuniting with loved ones and maintaining interpersonal bonds after death. We are therefore seeing a process of distinguishing between what life after death can and cannot be. These are the most frequent statements: "There can be no resurrection without the communion of saints. I often wonder how I'll find my father. I can't imagine him without his caresses, the look in his eye. He expressed so many things through caresses with the backs of his fingernails. I believe I'll find him. Not his fingernails but his heart and his tenderness"; "I don't think we'll be any different. Except for our bodies"; "people's faults will be gone. I think that with my husband, I'll no longer have a husband-wife relationship, but we'll still have a special bond"; "God placed within us relationships and connections that make us who we are. He's not going to demolish what he put into us. So we'll rediscover these connections after death. We won't find ourselves sitting together side-by-side, with reassembled families and people who recognise each other. The relationship will have a more spiritual form, love will really be the essential thing"; "The

resurrection doesn't mean leaving the tomb; I don't see billions of people resuscitated with their bodies but I believe there will be a dimension that goes beyond myself, my abilities. It is something exceptional within God's love, with all other people. There is no loss of humanity. We will all be there.”; “I'm sure I'll find them; I won't recognise them but I'll see them through the resurrected Christ. My faith makes me believe that there is something eternal in everyone”, “I know I'm destined to exist in God. It's so amazing that those dearest to us can never be absent. That's the highest degree of love. But I don't know if our loved ones will see us. Christ wasn't recognised”.

These are various modalities used by Catholics when they speak about death and the resurrection—that is, how they deal with a set of signifiers (containers) about which there is no strict agreement on the corresponding signifieds (or contents):

- the maintenance of the division between a material world and a spiritual world whose possible existence one believes in
- irony in relation to the idea that there is no guaranteed content and that most people seek content or keep content in their heads
- the rejection of the notion of revived bodies
- taking the question seriously, while expressing regret about the uncertainty of answers
- dual language, which involves speaking in one way with some people, another way with others (at a public meeting: “no, the resurrection is not the revival of dead people”, behind the scenes (it was a dinner): “I can't do away with the image of Christ leaving the tomb”, then making fun of himself for this admitted contradiction; also the dual

language of irony (or dismissiveness) behind the scenes and liturgical assertions in public)

- the institutional authority of the priest, sometimes applied in liturgies, sometimes reasserted during discussions (as opposed to self-disqualifying attitudes)

- the simultaneous assertion, on the one hand, that representations have limitations when applied to transcendent and inexpressible realities and, on the other hand, that these are a pedagogical necessity

- the logic of uncertainty, that is, a dialectical logic that expresses, according to different modalities, the life and non-life of the dead (it isn't material but it's real; it's not about physically finding the people we've loved, but it's...)

- the idea that the answer to questions about contents is not important, the implication being that the religious lies elsewhere.

Believers seem to be torn between literalist discourse of the kind that institutional discourse never really escapes—and which in any case retains ambiguity (with the notions of “real presence”, “transubstantiation”,...)—and their desire to be in God's presence. On the one hand, there is “belief” in this materiality of resurrected life, which they do not want to believe in... and at the same time they give the impression that they don't dare not believe in it, or at least that they believe that they believe in the beyond. On the other hand there is love, the simple desire to love, to express it and to be in the presence of the loved person... perhaps in hope of “something” more. Hence the almost infinite mental restrictions and successive denials when they are questioned—what Bruno Latour aptly called the “floundering” of people

getting tangled in contradictions, denials, and denials of denials (Latour 2013).

Metaphorical sentences are literally false. Believing cannot consist in approaching religious statements as metaphors, as literally false. Of course, believers do not perceive these statements as literally completely true, but they do not consider them literally false either. This is their extraordinary specificity. The act of believing is part of this uncertain oscillation: “It’s not literal, so is it a metaphor? No. But neither can it really be literal... without consequently being a metaphor”. Believers perceive religious statements as neither realistic, associated with a reference and a precise reality, nor as unrealistic, without any referential counterpart. They are not one, not the other, not both, but nothing exclusively. Believing consists in referring to religious statements, thinking or feeling that they are not metaphorical expressions, but not really accepting the literality of their contents. This oscillation, this hesitation and this mental interspace are fascinating. They make up the act of believing. This does not mean that there are not occasional moments when believers make more distinct stops at doubt or certainty, when they keep their acceptance or their modulation in their background thoughts, as we will see. To believe is to enter into this oscillation.

This is a crucial point. As we will be discovering, the rules governing the links between belief statements show that every answer given is part of a constantly rebounding movement in the course of which each statement gives way to the next while constituting a critical axis relative to the previous one. This is what happens situationally: a movement of reversal and perpetual hesitation between various conceptions of the resurrection of the dead: it’s literal, no it’s not literal,

it's symbolic; no it's not symbolic, it's more than that; no it's not literal, but it's...; and so on. This proceeds according to a movement that asserts, that denies, that questions the relevance of one point of view or another, or unites them in their complementarity... And it seems to be continually tested by a problem to resolve. Because how is one to state that rather paradoxical proposition “Jesus, son of God, dead and alive...”, which would be hard for anyone to understand, other than through this game of reversals, hesitations and juxtapositions between contradictory points of view?

Acts of believing. There are other situations in which semi-propositional statements are spoken, recited or chanted. In religious ceremonies, many assertions like “Jesus lives” are made, often in association with declarations of love or fidelity, or with expressions of praise. They are devices for establishing co-presence with the absent, who is made present in the statement through the aforesaid declaration or through every entity (object, icon, holy bread) that represents the addressed being (Piette 1999; Finch 2009). Just as internal dialogue is a way of preserving the presence of an absent person, prayer or declarations of love are specific modalities for remaining in the presence of the divine being.

According to this perspective, semi-propositional statements constitute possible points of departure—within a specific spatial-temporal situation—in a process of emotional evocation which activates the presence of the absent being according to various modalities. We know that no ritual necessarily implies, by virtue of its performance, a mental attitude that corresponds with it perfectly, and implies even less an unproblematic adherence to any explicit or implicit meaning of the rite. Bourdieu often states that rituals are performed because “that's what is

done” or “it has to be done” and one has no choice but to do it, without needing to know what the rituals mean (Bourdieu 1992 [1981]: 18). But if, like Bourdieu, one moves the act of believing away from mental representations in order to make it a product of infra-verbal and infra-conscious dispositions, this leaves no room for analysing forms of adherence and the experience of human beings in the process of believing, or more specifically the believers' modes of interactional presence. This co-presence of humans and gods, inserted into a particular context, according to specific circumstances, and mediated by objects, can take on different expressions. It can also appear outside of collective contexts. In any case it is a temporary meeting between a prevailing semi-propositional representation and an emotional disposition or intellectual process proper to the individual who is present in the situation. I would say that this momentary encounter is a state of belief, more specifically an act of believing. Here is a non-exhaustive list of modalities of the act of believing:

- Addressing the divine being. A man and woman are in front of a closed chapel containing a Virgin Mary; the man removes his hat; they both mumble a few prayers for two or three minutes before leaving. Here there would be a “state of body” to borrow Bourdieu's term, a “bodily hexis” and a “linguistic habitus” in a way that would seem self-evident, but I would add that it is only a temporary state. They are in the middle of believing.

- Personal presence. Alone alongside other worshipers during a ceremony, a young man weeps during the story of the Last Supper and the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. The semi-propositional content of the priest's statement invites this individual, according to his own interpretation and his personal

evocation, to experience “transubstantiation”. He is in the middle of truly believing that Jesus is present.

- Perception and vision. This is the individual who, in a particular state of grace, sees the divine being (Jesus, the Virgin Mary...), which he can describe according to particular traits. This individual believes that the divinity really exists. Triggered by a particular emotional process, this “vision” is not independent of the content of prevailing semi-propositional representations.

- Link to an emotion. A human being, convinced that the “final judgement” does not exist but conscious of having made a serious mistake, is haunted by fear of his fate to the point of asking a religious authority for forgiveness. Another, alone in a house in which a dead person lies, associates the slightest nocturnal sound with a manifestation of the dead person in a particular form. Even if he is convinced that ghosts do not exist, this type of emotional reaction connected with latent semi-propositional content (“ghosts exist”) constitutes a state of belief, though certainly an ephemeral one. In these cases, the individuals believe X anyway.

- Inevitable gesture. A person who, as mentioned above, slips personal mementos like photographs into a coffin before it is closed, to accompany the deceased. There is tension between the unshakeable need to preserve a connection with the deceased by means of the object, and awareness of the pointlessness of this gesture (and he does not want this awareness to become too vivid). The person does not really believe that X.

- Positive mental connection. The operation usually takes place outside of the actual ritual. It enables the individual to mentally construct, from latent representations, the image of a situation that he either hopes for

(being reunited with his parents after death) or fears (the burning of his body in hell...). This type of connection can be associated with a deciphering of everyday events, in which the believer finds communicative “signs”.

Shifts. A believer's everyday life is no doubt structured by a dynamic between all of these synchronisations between himself and the divinity. Someone who truly believes with regularity will probably frequently produce positive mental connections, as will someone who believes X is really. But it will also sometimes happen that this person believes X anyway, or also that he does not really believe X. Phenomenographic methods are important for these explorations.

When observing these everyday lives, the attention is necessarily drawn to an element that I consider crucial: the principle of shifting from the moment when the individual enters into a state of belief (in which he “performs” his ephemeral act of believing) to the collapse of this state due to ordinary distractions and wandering thoughts, even scepticism and irony. This is what Paul Veyne calls “quotidian mediocrity”: “[it] is precisely the result of this plurality, which in some states of neurotic scrupulosity is sensed as hypocrisy. We move endlessly from one program to another the way we change channels on the radio, but we do it without realizing it” (Veyne 1988: 16). From a 100% possibility, there is a quick drop to 5% or 0%... Indifferent to inherent contradiction, the belief makes this flexibility all the easier, without in any way compromising the individual's sincerity.

One point should be stressed. Analysis of this everyday live reveals that these statements are not affected by subsequent empirical

refutations or by the absence of practical consequences. As Paul Veyne says, those who can positively connect with the semi-propositional content that places gods in the heavens would be astounded to see them in the sky, and it would be completely ridiculous if they hoped to see gods from the window of a plane. If a believer, having seen Jesus appear before him, went out in search of empirical evidence of the appearance, he would be abandoning the state of belief or act of believing. He would even be taking a positivist approach, as if he were incapable of imagining a world beyond the objective one. And if a human being goes to his family tomb to introduce his newborn to deceased family members, does he really believe that they will be able to see the baby? “No”, he would later say to someone who asked him about it. “But maybe a little”, at the moment of the act, which is brief and cannot be fully thought through to its conclusion. Does the human being know whether or not he believes? “Lethargic indifference”, Veyne replies (*ibid*: 27), reminding us that people know very well what they should keep below the level of consciousness. These are instances of “eschatological inconsistency”. They say a lot, not just about the relationships between belief statements (particularly about the beyond) and the incompletely pursued logical and/or practical consequences of the act of believing, but also about the relationship between specific behaviours and their corresponding mental attitudes. And none of this pertains to any sort of weak faith.

Personal encounters with the divine being or positive mental connections can lead from one to another and back again. In the course of a person's day, they are only limited, ephemeral moments. But the shifts away from these states of belief also have their own modalities, which can shed light on the Veyne's remarks. Let us look at a few of them.

1) The most common is no doubt detachment between the state or act of belief and other situations into which the person can shift—what could be called the severance principle. At church, a person who has a mental inspiration or positive mental connection about the semi-propositional content according to which Jesus Christ was resurrected forgets this content on Monday morning or even only a few minutes later.

2) A completely different context: when people read their horoscope (the appetite for optimistic information about the future or fear of an unfavourable situation constitute an ephemeral act of adherence to semi-propositional content). One possible reaction, stimulated by a minimal amount of critical thinking, is scepticism and even an ironic wink of the eye, right after reading the statement in question. As we have seen, for believers, this sort of irony and scepticism are just as likely to generate ironic or doubtful attitudes about the idea of being reunited with loved ones (Pelkmans 2013).

3) Hesitation associated with distraction or indifference is another modality, this time the management of the co-presence of adherence and critical distance. A believer at church listening to the priest's words, looking at others standing and leaning, hesitates, dramatizes the ritual gesture, attempts to get into “sync”, thinking that he has to get into it... like the others. Can we not relate this situation to the state of “pluralistic ignorance” in which participants can find themselves during a ceremony: each, based on his own attitude—on his not entirely satisfying act of believing—keeps quiet about his spiritual dissatisfaction, simulating an optimal experience (in the characteristic way of getting caught up in the situation), thinking others are experiencing the moment perfectly and genuinely. All of these people, also thinking they are alone in lacking a

relationship with God, can produce the same narrative of a successful experience and go along with the crowd, each of them thinking he was the only one pretending... and so on (Stark and Bainbridge 1985: 272-273)

4) At a higher level of consciousness than in the previous situations, the object of the act of believing (for example expecting the arrival of extra-terrestrial beings) runs up against reality (they did not come, it was not realised). In this case the act of believing can, in other situations, alter into a firm conviction that is asserted, detailed, dogmatised and made the subject of a demand for respect.

5) Searching for proof is another way of effecting the shift from the state of belief to another situation. Depending on various mental attitudes, it consists in searching for traces of a UFO landing, taking photos of the sky that could confirm the appearance of the divine being, developing physical theories to demonstrate the reality of what people report in accounts of near-death experiences. It can also quite simply be a matter of reading the history of the life of Jesus or visiting landmarks of the beginning of Christianity. These proofs do not just concern the credibility of witnesses, they are also about demonstrating the authenticity of testimony content, employing experimental approaches that are sometimes complex.

6) The very isolated moment of the state of belief is reflected in an array of everyday behaviours, attitudes and rules for living, for example in charitable acts. These behaviours, directly attributable to the intensity of a past act of believing or indirectly associated with an interest in one or another semi-propositional representation kept at the back of the mind, can also demonstrate a skill for deciphering signs in life's small events.

7) The rhetorical use of the divine metaphor can take on different forms. It is used ironically, without any real comparison to the religious referent, such as when journalists or fans comment on the exploits of a football player. In “new age” groups, divine appellations (“cosmic energy”, “universal spirit”) can be used as relevant metaphors, not so much for their underlying truth as for the dynamism, security and meaning they can bring. But this is just as possible with religious beliefs⁸.

An existential theory of ordinary religion. No one says that Alice, the one who went to Wonderland, exists. The believer says that God exists. This statement points to all of the specificity of divine beings and belief. In a way, if there were nothing but religions with various messages and gestures directed at God, one would almost be tempted to categorise gods as fictional characters. But unlike the latter, God continues to “exist” and be present in various ways before and after the ritual, before and after the reading of a story. On the subject of divinities, people are quite capable of saying in all seriousness that they exist. Believing is not just playing along, doing the “done thing” during a ceremony, it’s also attributing a non-fictional status to the divinity outside of the ceremony. This is a first “little more”. But there is another one: underlying all social validations, transmission rationales and personal accounts, belief constitutes a private and mental experience. Believing means doing it and a little more. A strong characteristic of belief resides precisely in this “a little more”, several levels of which make up belief and particularly the believer: the reality, outside of the human world, of existences that are not confirmed and not confirmable; moments of co-presence with these entities—a co-presence that is sensed or simply automatized; isolated moments of acceptance felt at the thought of these existences, or

proclaimed acceptance; the day-to-day dynamics of this acceptance and co-presence. This particular “a little more” is crucial: actual sensed and felt moments of acceptance, their micro-quotidian occurrence, their mental experience in real life. The act of believing as a moment of acceptance is this extra, and it is hard to reach. The social sciences risk overlooking it, dissolving this moment into rituals, representations, statements or social rationales. But this is the risk that an existential anthropology of belief must avoid. At certain moments, individuals who trust the orthodoxy of the church can genuinely believe in the resurrection of Jesus. They can have positive mental connections with this semi-propositional content. At other moments they can be ironic about their attitude, or search for historical proof of the resurrection of Jesus, or hesitate about how their belief should be formulated between metaphor and literality. After a critical process, they might retain only the main core of church dogmas and only believe in the existence of God by means of positive mental connections. They may also either believe anyway that Jesus was resurrected, or not really believe it. A religious statement can also become a kind of floating idea disconnected from the church's authority. At this idea, he may believe X anyway, perhaps really believing and also metaphorically adapting its formulation when speaking about it. In different cases, it can also resonate in various ways through actions and interpretations of everyday events.

The difficult phenomenography of acts of believing requires that one always look at the subtle complexity that results from the interweaving between statements of belief, different modalities used for approving them (really believing, not believing, believing anyway) and forms of shifting (into distraction, scepticism, irony, the search for proof, detachment).

I would like to draw attention to the impact of negation in order to understand the reality of religion. Passing in front of a positive pole, a believer is immediately driven to a negative pole according to a process of oscillation marked by back-and-forth movements and hesitation. Is the person acting like there is a visible, tangible divine being before him? But he does not see the divinity and cannot touch him; it is even pointed out to him that the mediation is not really God, only a trace to which he should not become attached, and he is told that he must keep searching. Will our individual then start thinking that there is “nothing at all”, nothing real, only spectacle and fiction? But this fiction itself comes with the message that it is not really a fiction and that the divine being is represented by a diverse array of signs. Religious activity thus finds itself in a permanent in-between. People, like gods, can only exist there on the move, in oscillation, in a state of minimality. This is what an existential exploration of French Catholic beliefs and acts of believing enabled me to see.

Act3: The genealogy of a mode of existing

I have just illustrated the minimal mode of existing from religious believing. We know human beings are (almost) always like that, minimal, hesitant, accepting the contradictions, passive, docile, not really lucid in the everyday life, of course with different proportions. Why are humans are like that ? I would hypothesize that this minimality is specific to *Homo sapiens* and was absent in Neanderthals, another species of *Homo*. Here there arises what I consider the quintessential anthropological enigma: “Despite these afflictions, man wants to be happy, and only

wants to be happy, and cannot help wanting to be happy. But how shall he go about it? The best thing would be to make himself immortal, but as he cannot do that, he has decided to stop himself thinking about it". This is what Pascal wrote (Pascal 1997: 37). What happened⁹? What has caused people exist as they do, in their characteristic absence-presence, traversing a state of anxiety but as light as ever? Because how to exist in the attachment to his or her own life, to the details of his or her singularity and that of a few others, a singularity that is no more than a detail considering the reality of the more or less remote disappearance of the universe, a disappearance that no one is really unaware of. Let us attempt a both speculative and empirical account of this story of existential prehistory¹⁰. In my hypothesis, we find again the act of believing, especially its possible impact on the human mode of existing.

According to evolutionary psychology¹¹, the cognitive hybridity stage consists in mixing information and/or activities from different spheres. To put it briefly, the functioning of the brain became more pliable, separating into modules linked to separate categories of activity and information—an advantage that Neanderthals did not enjoy. The still-debated data on Neanderthals most significantly indicates that they had different sites for each activity: a hunting place, a butchery site, a cutting-up area. There were different scenarios that did not intersect: meat would be cut somewhere near the hunting site and then transported, or the animal would be transported directly to the habitat to be processed on-site. And in that case, archaeological discoveries of tools seem to confirm that Neanderthals separated activities into different small spaces¹². Whereas *Homo sapiens* were at this time developing multiple conjunctions between spheres of activity: sharpened bones or stones for marking a social affiliation using a natural or

technical element, tools made of ivory or stone, statuettes mixing the body parts of humans and animals, the organization of the habitat on a central site where various technical and social exchange activities could be run, or at least the setting up of specialized areas for work, after which workers returned to the camp in order to favor social contacts. This cognitive hybridity is also evident in the production of contradictory statements, expressing for example an equivalence between the living and the dead: the dead person is alive.

The act of believing is an acceptance that attributes an existence to certain entities or to that which is referred to in statements. "The dead alive! What if it's true?" occasionally becomes plausible, according to varying degrees of acceptance, and is probably associated with a set of rules and prohibitions in relation to the new entity. What is at play in this mechanism, generated by an unbelievable proposition that reflects a moment of belief? It is not just an occasional thought that "it is thus true", an acceptance at this or that slightly "bizarre" statement, it is also—and this is crucial, we have seen it above—an acceptance of not having a clear understanding of what is implied, evoked by the contents of this proposition and the whole world it reflects, not thinking too much about it, suspending one's critical sense and therefore preserving a kind of cognitive loosening (Sperber 1985)¹³. It is the cognitive fluidity stage.

The moment that lies at the root of belief as a mental act is decisive. Neanderthals certainly had their graves, with protected skeletons, intentionally separated skulls, stone or limestone slabs placed on the body. What more is there in the graves of *Homo sapiens*, who were contemporary with them, who even preceded them? There are numerous interpretations that see animal bones as offerings to the dead, despite the fact that researchers have repeatedly called for caution¹⁴. But recent,

highly technical studies of various objects discovered in Neanderthal graves have raised new doubts about most of these interpretations, reducing the number of "positive" or indisputable facts nearly to zero (Soressi and D'Errico 2007 and D'Errico 2009). Etched and pierced bones discovered in several Neanderthal graves have developed these marks as a result of natural processes. Regular incisions found on stones are not the work of humans, and pollens that some have linked to litters of flowers were transported by animals¹⁵. And although one or another offering had to have been recognized as such in Neanderthal graves, they may have had only a sentimental value, without involving the idea of a gift to a still-living dead person.

For our purposes, the unquestionable presence of an offering, for example about 90,000 years ago in Qafzeh (*Homo sapiens* graves), raises the possibility (not the certainty) of fluidity as a new cognitive operation. The offer of an object to the dead did not imply acting as if the dead person were still the living person they had known, momentarily activating a kind of respect, and it did not mean giving the dead a presence in the realm of the living through a sign of its body - Neanderthals were able to do that¹⁶. It was more about representing the dead person as the still-living recipient of a gift. In that case, the dead person was no longer present as a dead person in the sense of a former living person, but as still alive. Living where? It would of course be premature to think that this constitutes a representation of another world, towards which death was a passageway. But the offering of specific objects at least suggests that it was no longer only a matter of acting as if the dead were still alive, but rather of thinking that the objects were being given to a dead person as a revived person. It therefore meant acting as if he were once again alive, starting a new life "elsewhere". It is

thus that the power of language made of arbitrary, combinable signs is reintroduced. By disconnecting signs from that which was perceived there and then, language made it possible to create a world detached from concrete situations and speak about unrealistic and unbelievable things that do not necessarily exist.

By making the suggestion "what if it were real!", was our individual not able to enjoy feelings of wellbeing, comfort, reassurance and relief in face of a real absence (Clément 2006) ? From this point of view, it is not difficult to imagine how this act of believing could have a positive, selective effect on the evolutionary process. By individually imagining that other world or invoking it a ritual setting, "living" it, imagining it repeatedly and regularly: this is the cognitive process of believing. It consists in accepting an incredible statement: "the dead person is still alive". It is to believe in an imagined, described world, and doing so according to various types of acceptance: believing X a little, believing X anyway, wanting to believe that the person is still there while knowing that he is not, etc. A new state of mind would appear to be emerging: the cognitive loosening linked to the attitude of not pushing certainty all the way, accepting uncertainty. There are three components to the cognitive mechanism that gives rise to a moment of belief, as highlighted by Dan Sperber (ibid.): an ability to mentally simulate another reality disconnected from ordinary life situations, another world that would be possible if the "living dead" proposition were true; the possibility of thinking even occasionally that something is really true, mentally accepting this or that element of this new simulated world; a resolution not to have a clear understanding of what is implied and evoked by the contents of this proposition and of the whole world it reflects, not to

think too much about it, to suspend one's critical sensibilities and therefore remain in a kind of cognitive vagueness¹⁷.

Thus contradictions within religious statements do not generate a dissonant effect to be reduced, but rather a cognitive loosening that indicates the suspension of various things: certain logical conjunction constraints (but not all, as Pascal Boyer showed); practical conjunction constraints ; questions about the visibility of the divinity, about his specific intentions; answers to the question of his existence; the demand for a total agreement that one knows is not possible because of different individual representations. I think that, as we have just seen, a tolerance of cognitive vagueness arises from the relationship of credulity towards religious statements and is able to extend to other day-to-day activities. And this is crucial. Allowing for the possibility of creating unconfirmed and unconfirmable things is to believe. This can generate tension, but by virtue of the beneficial effect of the believed idea, it can also generate loosening and significant advantages in social life: compromise, tolerance, acceptance, distance, looking the other way¹⁸.

Conversely, could one not assume that Neanderthals went out of their way to filter plausible information, and trusted only a few expert individuals whose competence had been proven, rather than people who wanted to dominate by force (Coubay 2012)? This form of rigidity could have generated problems in cases where verifications revealed failures to meet expectations. Was it difficult for them when they did not practice “epistemic vigilance”, for example when they could not evaluate the source of a piece of information? Was it difficult to practice “trust”, particularly in cases where it was impossible to evaluate sources and when the communication chain was too long? Did they have problems practicing social consensus? As we know, children are susceptible to the

choice of the majority; would Neanderthals have been uncomfortable with “conformism” if verifications were not possible? Could they have considered ideas shared by the majority “superior”? I am inclined to think so, and to think that it was later, as I have shown, that things eased up, with the minor mode enabling humans to accept the presence of beings and information that were external and contradictory, but did not disturb the activity in progress, and also accepted the constant shifting of meaning, without requiring a solution, an agreement, closure, as well as the erection of separators, sometimes very tight ones, around a situation or event, outside of which behaviors and thoughts seemed inconsequential, as if forgotten. This mode of conscience that veils, that does not make you see things head-on, that reduces the acuteness of presence seems not so much to be something that accompanies immediate perception, the representation of images or the unconscious performance of habitual actions, but rather accompanies the underuse of the superior type of thought linked with consciousness of the self and of time¹⁹.

Human minimality became all the more possible ten or fifteen millennia ago as social life became more and more structured by the material marking of social roles, which gave them more stability, and also by sedentary life surrounded by fields and herds. But minimality was also all the more necessary because this new sedentarization, entailing a social life that was more intense and therefore more conflictual, needed to be balanced on a foundation of stable (but arbitrary) norms and rules, which were increasingly appealed to and became more and more visible as they were committed to diverse media. These humans knew they belonged to a specific group and sometimes lived as such but rarely gave any thought to this fact. In these situations, it was a matter of behaving

“as if”, while well aware that... Basically, what *Homo sapiens* started to learn was to not be maximal, that is to say, to introduce layers of shock absorbers into consequential actions and situations. One can imagine how these new characteristics would have gradually affected neuronal operation, as well as modes of attention and perception, for example by increasing their lability and fluidity simply by not being step with them because the new characteristics were intrinsically labile. The minor mode would thus be more than compatible with neuronal and attentional processes. If this is the case, cognitive tiredness would be even more likely in other *Homo*, like Neanderthals with little or no minor mode. It is as if the acceptance of contradictions released this minor mode and gave humans the possibility of strong adaptive advantages, in how they expended energy and in their creative potential. Minimality established itself as a tendency retained by evolution, extending to other human activities. The minor mode resulted from a tendency selected by evolution insofar as it was advantageous in relationships, as a shock absorber and relaxer under the pressure of situations and significant confrontation.

Accounts of the history of life and evolution are only retrospective selections of events, based on various sets of assumptions. The account I have presented does not escape this. It is obviously very difficult to make an objective selection that guarantees relations of cause and effect. But, as Guillaume Lecointre (2009) points out, it is important that the account not hinder a proper understanding of evolution. Can the account I have just presented help clarify what I consider one of the major anthropological questions: how do *Homo sapiens* exist in the world, and by contrast how did Neanderthals exist?

Sapiens became quotidian and Neanderthals never really were; they were “thrown-towards-death”, Heidegger would say, without any way to escape! They are a drastic illustration of the “misery” of the human condition, and we are the quotidian species. Just as it has been said that life dazes children, I would say that *Homo sapiens* continued to exist by becoming dazed compared with Neanderthals. The minor mode, that “unthought” of anthropology, certainly is a major characteristic of human existence. By giving detailed attention to the existences, existential anthropology also says something about anthropological differences.

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Notes

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² With a very different meaning and methodology, phenomenography is sometimes characterised by the educational sciences as research (through interviews) on forms of categorisation. See Gloria Dall’Alba and Biörn Hasselgren (1996).

³ Thus Nigel Rapport’s anthropology, which targets individual existences, seems to be too directly associated with a Nietzschean philosophy. Because when are concrete, living humans really Nietzschean? Sometimes. Only from time to time (Rapport 2003).

⁴ Hence the importance of Heidegger’s theory of existentials, as long as they are flattened, without being organised into hierarchies such as propriety-impropriety, authenticity-inauthenticity.

⁵ In French, the term “reposité” simultaneously indicates the idea of repose and the idea of counting on something.

⁶ One of the central ideas in the work of Michael Jackson is also the tension between the sociocentric dimension and the egocentric dimension. See for example Michael Jackson (2013).

⁷ It is particularly in the religious “field” that hesitation, the constant transfer from situation to situation, as well as minor modes of believing appeared to me to be central. See Piette (2003).

⁸ Therefore it does not seem relevant to me to separate systems of representations (or of interactions), sometimes called “ontologies”, from modalities of believing and adhesion.

⁹ From this perspective, the question of the minor mode of monkeys and apes seems to me to be a beautiful theme for observation: signs of absence during an activity, not responding and being indifferent to an appearance, doing two things at once like making a tool and scratching, thinking about another situation during an activity. Out of all of these, what can monkeys and apes do? Wandering thoughts? Do they have them? A side activity during another principal activity? If they have an ability to be indifferent, when does it arise? After a more or less brief look of vigilance?

¹⁰ Let us indicate that social anthropologists’ interest in the question of origins is more and more rare. See Alan Barnard (2012).

¹¹ On this point, the work of Steven Mithen is conclusive. See *The Prehistory of Mind* (1996). However I prefer the term “hybridity” to designate this operation of mixture and conjunction. See also Mithen (2009) and Carruthers (2002).

¹² See also Ian Tattersall (1998, from p. 135) , And also the very critical interpretation of Gargett (1999).

¹³ It is worth mentioning the point of view of Pascal Boyer, who, when he presents the characteristics of religions (existing separately in other areas of activity) does not mention vague modes of adherence. See Boyer and Bergstrom (2008). It should also be noted that the cognitive anthropology tradition often shows little interest in the link with archaeological and prehistoric data.

¹⁴ See also the new synthesis of Paul Pettitt (2011a and 2011b).

¹⁵ About this point, see the debated hypothesis of Jeffrey D. Sommer (1999).

¹⁶ The reader can find information and comments (and also a more exhaustive bibliography) about the evolution (from the apes to *Homo sapiens*) of the attitudes towards the dead in Piette (2013)

¹⁷ From this perspective I should emphasise that the discovery of a certain offering does not necessarily imply a belief as a mental act, like an act that expresses acceptance. This assumes a counterintuitive statement that itself assumes the possibility of mixing pieces of different information, something that Neanderthal man would have lacked, for example in his organisation of space. Moreover, modular hypothesis were decisively refuted (which is not the case today), this would not rule out the preservation of the hypothesis of the non-believing Neanderthal. And ultimately, admitting that Neanderthals believed does not refute the idea that they did not sufficiently minor their existence, as Sapiens did. Then where would their minorisation come from? From a better implementation of the act of believing, especially its cognitive effects, from the creation of more sociological points of reference, etc. For me, the most important question is this: was the act of believing, as a specific cognitive act, through its strong implementation in Sapiens, able to generate a way of being which we know is so specific to humans? What are we to think of this scenario, if it is true and also if it is not entirely true? See also Wynn and Coolidge (2004) and Coolidge and Wynn (2009).

¹⁸ This is the hypothesis I have developed: see Piette (2013).

¹⁹ It is meaningful to notice that Robin Dunbar does not see indices of religious beliefs in Neanderthals' graves. He links religion to a collective and coercive aspect, which would not be present in Neanderthals' lives. According to him, the absence of this coercive aspect would have been a key element in Neandertals' extinction, contrary to *Homo Sapiens*. On the opposite, I link the impact of the religious statements (specific to *Homo Sapiens*) not to this coercive aspect but to an effect of cognitive loosening, the absence of which would have been determining in Neanderthal's extinction. See Dunbar (2004).