

SECTION IV

Singularity and Continuity

SECTION IV: INTRODUCTION

Albert Piette

Three points are the basis of this section. They are its axioms¹: (1) Existence is the passing of hours and minutes and, at another scale, the passing of a life, (2) There is a being, an individual, an existent, an entity (several terms are possible) who crosses these moments, acting and feeling, with habits and ways of doing things, (3) Each being, at the same time as he is separate from others, is different from every other, with his observable singularity. Is it usual to describe a human being? Without a doubt, it is not usual and it is not easy either. No scientific discipline is really devoted to it. Even writers recognize the difficulty of the exercise. Virginia Woolf notes that “they leave out the person to whom things happened. The reason is that it is so difficult to describe any human being. So they say: ‘This is what happened’; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened” (Woolf 2002, 79). This section explores the epistemological, theoretical and methodological stakes of the possibility and creation of a science of existents, which would depend on the possibility of detailed observations and descriptions of them. In the multidisciplinary spirit of this book, the discussion calls upon several fields of knowledge: philosophy, sociology, anthropology and art.

With a view to this research, it might seem simple and efficient to appeal to the methodological knowledge of anthropology, particularly its live observation of ordinary situations. But throughout its history, most of the time, anthropology has not really examined human beings in their singularity and uniqueness. I am not going to highlight the already-old criticisms of anthropologists—criticisms against, as Huon Wardle reminds us, “structural understandings of character and personhood that implied ‘a systematic dehumanizing of the human subjects of study’” (Wardle 2018, 315). Many anthropologists have in fact integrated this criticism but, in their various alternative propositions, what concerns them are individuals (with a certain subjectivity and a capacity of interpretation of course) insofar as they share a situation or context, which actually constitutes the true centre of interest. One human being in particular can be observed, yet in relation to other beings or institutions, in a specific configuration, most often in order to understand social relations, activities or events. Hence, even though he is sometimes presented

¹ An axiom is defined as “an accepted statement or proposition regarded as being self-evidently true” (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary*).

as a literary or humanistic argument, the individual is not for himself the topic of anthropology, reduced to mainly social and interactional/intersubjective characteristics, or diluted among other beings.

When the objective is to observe, describe and conceive individual singularity, ethnography cannot be considered something obvious. This tension between the individual and his context, focusing on that one or this one, on one and the other, is noticeable in the texts of this section. Ideally, in order to keep the focus on an individual, the observer of the singularity should avoid: the significant addition of beings around the human entity chosen to be observed, be it; the look that crosses a human entity to look at something else, to think of other things (for example, social facts); the fragmentation–reduction to certain components (e.g., emotions, or actions, or social roles); the discontinuity of the situations that can be usually found in the narratives; and the idea of the exit of the components out of the entity, as if it was possible to work on these components outside the entity, creating thus social themes or fieldworks (social relations, a ritual, religion, illness, work, etc.). Ideally, because the description of an individual singularity is an asymptotic work.

This section is made up of three parts. The first contains two chapters that are critical, in that they question the theoretical difficulties involved in describing the singularity of a human being. They do this particularly on the basis of philosophy, sociology and contemporary art. This critical detour is necessary before entering into the theoretical and methodological texts that follow. In carrying out this critical work, Marine Kneubühler has a powerful tool, the notion of interchangeability, or rather that of non-interchangeability, which questions the foundation of the social sciences. Marine Kneubühler stresses their almost intrinsic difficulty conceiving of the singular existence of each human, as well as their tendency to postulate the interchangeability of individuals. Beyond the Durkheimian base that theorizes a society without singular persons, she highlights in Schutz's philosophy an idealization of the interchangeability of perspectives that functions as a common-sense axiom but becomes a principle of observation and description in ethnomethodology. In this connection, Marine Kneubühler points out that phenomenological anthropologists tend to understand *self and other* as *one*, and thus to always-already situate themselves within an interchangeability of individuals *and* perspectives, and therefore beyond the singular existence of each of them in favour of the social unit. Conceiving, observing and describing singularity does mean not just looking at *one* individual but also looking at him in his non-interchangeable entirety. Hence the importance of such a deconstruction of the epistemology of the social sciences also reaches into its phenomenological tradition. Where, then, is non-interchangeability hidden? To make it reappear, Marine Kneubühler proposes a social theory that starts with the singular existence of “volumes of being”, endowing each of them with a *minimal self* (Zahavi) and an *own body* (Merleau-Ponty). These are two concepts originating in phenomenology, the importance of which phenomenological anthropology has not sufficiently taken the full measure, as it immediately seeks, through various modalities, “a conceptual bridge” between individual existences and sociocultural systems (Willen and Seeman 2012, 6).

The critical dimension of Marine Kneubühler's reflections can be linked to the comparison, made by Catherine Beaugrand, between Sartre seeking to understand the existence and work of artists and writers, and artists themselves having favoured the expression of singularity and continuity. What interests Sartre in Flaubert? An existence in a domestic and historical context, presented in accordance with the progressive–regressive method, above all does not want to favour the continuity of moments, but instead establishes a back-and-forth, indeed a tension, between this contextual backdrop and the figure himself with his ability to choose and to go beyond.

With Allan Kaprow, Lee Lozano and On Kawara, what becomes a real heuristic for observing an existence is, on the contrary, according to various representation modalities, an extreme attention to the details of gestures, of effects that activities have on oneself, and to the continuity of dates. Of course, one cannot say that Sartre's existentialism (like all philosophers of existence, see general introduction) did not show an interest, including a methodological one, in the individual. Let us say that it posits singularity more than it shows or demonstrates it. On the one hand, the individual is ceaselessly pushed back into, and on the other hand, when he tends to detach from them, this individual is part of a totalizing project that encourages the draining away of the small details of what constitutes a singular person different from others. It is the criticism that Iris Murdoch makes to the Sartrean thought (Murdoch 1953). Philippe Lejeune also points out that Sartre's goals in his biographies and autobiographies involve not respecting the chronological order which would imply a restricted way of conceiving time, conceiving the human being as a type of "freedom" which, in a situation, "invents a way out of it", and identifying the "project" of the individual "perceived as the sole direction of the individual's most characteristic ways of behaving" (Lejeune 1989, 100–103).

To explain that existentialists do not like "instants", there is ultimately a conception of time and the Heideggerian concept of existence as an "ecstatic structure", associated with the "fact of being outside of oneself" (Dastur 1998, XXX). It seems empirically regrettable that the idea according to which "the 'authentic' meaning of the temporality of a finite being springs from the future, that is, from the anticipation of death" (*ibid.*) moves away from a thought of succession of "nows" along on a timeline (Heidegger 2010, 422). It is indeed this succession of punctualities that is criticized by Heidegger, thus almost automatically suppressing any interest in the micro-continuity of the human entity from moment to moment, with its overlaps and its constancies.

In the second part, there is one conceptual proposition. One could say that it is theoretical, in that it is a way of looking, of directing attention, by selecting one's focus more or less strictly. Below all metaphysical interpretation, Henry James helps us think about this when he writes that "relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so" (James 1986: 37). Albert Piette thus practises a kind of "existential reduction". It consists in methodologically extracting a human entity from what surrounds him. Having doubts about ethnographic methods and the heuristicity of the existentialist thoughts on the "wrenching-away" that leads to look outside the individual and towards others, his objective is twofold: to offer a conceptual response to the difficulty of describing a human being in his moments, by going into non-interchangeable details; and to understand the internal structuring modalities of what he calls the volume of being, by presenting a set of "existentials", which include a certain stylistic constancy. He prefers to stress the Latin "*sistere*" (meaning to hold together, to maintain oneself, to subsist) rather than the "*ex*" and wonders what makes a being hold together. The volume of being is a concrete form observable in all regions of the world necessarily in its singular details, whatever, of course, the cultural representations of the person. Let us remember Simmel's phrase: "The image of external things possesses for us the ambiguous dimension that in external nature everything can be considered to be connected, but also as separated" (Simmel 1994, 5). In this case, according to the chapter of Albert Piette, existential anthropology would not be an existentialist reading of social life. It would be the science of separated beings, as separated, unlike sociology and social anthropology, which would be sciences of beings in relation. It is not the dynamics between separation and union which is in play in such a perspective, but the being as a separate entity, with its modes of structuring, without reintegrating it in the world with the others, to avoid this slip in a science of the links of each one with the others.

Finally, this section includes two chapters more directly revolving around methodology. Here we are concretely confronted with the asymptotic dimension of the quest for singularity. It is a type of shadowing—with no camera, over a long period, creating a close relationship of trust, which Jan Patrick Heiss practised with Musa, a Nigerian farmer. This type of shadowing involves “participation in a specific field-subject’s daily life and the development of a relationship that qualifies as ‘being with this person’”, but necessarily with interruptions in observation. It is based on this type of method that he describes Musa’s skills, character, desires, moods, ideas and values, contained in what he calls a “gestalt”, which recalls the volume of being. While pointing out that he does not use any theory, Jan Patrick Heiss concludes that individuals are “wholes with their own structure, and their features are systematically integrated”. He makes it clear that what he has in his sights is indeed Musa, but that he does not want to describe him as an individual independent from his material and social relationships, which are also other structural elements of his life. The scale of description and analysis is not that of details of successive moments, while the individual’s context, environment and relations take on a certain importance in describing him. Also using shadowing, Gwendoline Torterat is convinced that the micrological use of audio-visual technology is necessary for describing the reality of beings and avoiding grand narratives. It is also in contemporary art, particularly experimental cinema with its concern for representing duration and continuity, that she finds her heuristics, mentioning for example Mekas, and Warhol with his “anti-films”. Gwendoline Torterat gives a detailed presentation of what she calls an “existence-specific focusing”: from the first contact with the individual, to the analysis modalities, to the manipulation of the camera and the framing choices, with the aim of following—or more precisely preceding—the observed person. In order to capture as many of an individual’s elements as possible, particularly sensations and feelings, Gwendoline Torterat insists on a methodological mixture of film and explicitation interviews.

While offering conceptual and methodological propositions, this section also shows the difficulty of sustaining the focus on singularity and continuity all the way to the end. Theoretical presuppositions and methodological resistances are deep-seated, and in the face of them, each individual is not far from resembling the boulder of Sisyphus. To observe an individual in his singularity is in tension with the project of the social sciences and of ethnography, but is it not legitimate to also wonder if existentialism does not contribute to the volatilization of reality, including the concrete individual, precisely through its fear of looking at him and thus taking the risk to lock him up? Some reflections in this section move in this critical direction. The warnings of the philosophies of existence remind us that existence cannot be integrated into a system, that it evades abstraction or that it is a contingency that cannot be reduced to categories and classifications. The aim of a science of existents cannot forget this, but overstating the fact that reality is indeterminate and inaccessible can prevent it from being taken seriously, and risks diminishing the empirical stakes in the description of a human being. These are also questions that this section raises and attempts to address, with different answers. When Merleau-Ponty evoked the crisis of philosophy in the 1930s, he noted that one of the lost causes was existence. And he added that “we are not ‘equipped’ to conceive existence, and all of the work remains to be done” (Merleau-Ponty 1997: 39). Let us say that a few years later, our “equipment” still needs to be completed.

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Section IV: Introduction

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