

SINGULARITY, FORM, AND STRUCTURE: WHEN METAPHYSICS HELPS IN DESCRIBING A VOLUME OF BEING

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The bonds between ourselves and another person exist only in our minds. Memory as it grows fainter loosens them, and notwithstanding the illusion by which we want to be duped and with which, out of love, friendship, politeness, deference, duty, we dupe other people, we exist alone. Man is the creature who cannot escape from himself, who knows other people only in himself, and when he asserts the contrary, he is lying.

Marcel Proust, *The Fugitive*

Let us imagine a situation, any situation, in which ten, fifteen, twenty people interact: a seminar of researchers, a place of worship, a train station, a restaurant, etc. The observer observes the interactions, stopping his observation at the end of the situation. He will come back another time. Imagine another observer observing a single person and continuing to observe him or her after this situation, and so on from one situation to another. Let us imagine that each person would be observed in their continuity, their temporal sequence, each separately. Such a view is very different from ethnographic explorations where humans are grouped, or in any case shown in interaction.

In *Le Volume humain*, a book published in 2017 and based on a twelve-hour continuous, uninterrupted film (co-directed by Catherine Beaugrand)

of one of my days, I attempted a double description. The first level is continuous (Piette 2017). For 130 pages, my description concerns the succession of acts during these twelve hours: I do this, I do that, I say this, I say that. I give a fair amount of detail, decoding image after image. The second level specifies my feelings, moods, and thoughts. This level also identifies the stylistic continuities in this or that gesture and in body postures at different moments. It also indicates the mood. The description of these twelve hours, on these two levels, constitutes about 230 pages. I consider that such descriptions, which are raw documents, far from being narratives, should be the ultimate aim of anthropology – what I have called the “anthropologicality” of anthropology (Piette 2019; Glowacki 2019).

Two extracts from this description:

Samuel starts filming – it’s 6.38 a.m. – as I pour coffee into a cup. I am standing, leaning towards the cup, next to the table. Grey waistcoat, white shirt, blue trousers. I move my chair slightly. I take the bag of cereal from the packet, then pour it into a bowl. Sniffles. Then I pour milk, much more on the cereal, a little into the coffee.

I move the chair slightly again. I sit down. I look at Samuel. I drink some coffee and start to eat. With my right hand, the spoon goes from the cereal to my mouth. I move towards the spoon. Left hand to wipe mouth, arm stretched out on the table with fingers closed, wrist and hand slightly raised. I look towards the cupboard (to my left), then in front of me. I move my small plate and bowl a little. Left hand, then right hand in front of mouth, twice, as if wiping or hiding mouth. I lightly touch my cup.

And so on for 12 hours.

Constitutive of a stylistic continuity are various gestures and mimicry that have been created and repeated in the course of various experiences, which continue to be repeated. They can be thought of as independent of social influence and not as marks of a social class. They thus produce recognisable forms, even if, within each of these, random variations arise *hic et nunc*. “It’s all you,” “It’s all you,” some will say, recognising in these gestures, in these movements or mimicry, a singular mark, the identity of a form or a movement, beyond variations. It is thus possible to take a comparative look at a set of images – without necessarily making use

of research or systematic methods in the anthropology of gestures or in non-verbal communication. What emerges for each type of gesture concerned is a stylistic form. In the following sentences, the “so” refers of course to what is shown in the film images, from which the description is made. Is another person standing naturally, with their trunk tilted to the right side in this way? Do they point their outstretched index finger downwards in this way? Form a more or less circular figure with their fingers? Cross their hands in this way with their arms raised? Seem to rest their face on their raised hands and arms? Point with their index finger, especially the right one? Lift their right hand and arm with their elbow on the table? Clench one or both fists in this way? Hold their arms out in front of them in this way? Put their hand on their chin, mouth, or cheek, spreading their fingers? Touch their forehead or the top of their head in this way, while bowing or not bowing their head?

In the same way that literality concerns the word-to-word of text, the anthropologicality of description resides in what it says about what the human being does literally: their step-by-step, successive instants. This step-by-step is the reality that confronts each observer, but most often the observer remembers it only vaguely – not necessarily noting everything but limiting themselves to specific moments, chosen according to the theme of study.

The challenge is to maintain a total filmic and written continuity in regard to a human being, without losing the slightest moment, and thus to keep the focus on the entity. Looking at a human being in the continuity of his situations, from moment to moment, shifts the gaze, precisely by focusing it more on the human being himself than on his link to the situation, the environment, objects, or other humans. It is as if the continuous gaze helps to fix and de-situate the individual, who remains in the foreground as the central figure, the one to be looked at.

In this case, the background is blurred. There are in fact no descriptions of other people, except, at most, a possible indication of what they say. It is a human entity that is the focus of analysis, with its own components, leaving a very secondary place to others... It is thus a question of not putting the chosen human being back into collective issues and life stories. In this sense, insofar as film allows a close-up of the individual, and the researcher deciphers and analyses in detail the uninterrupted continuity of the individual's modes of presence, this experimentation constitutes a methodologi-

cal break that avoids the impressionism of descriptions. I consider that the literary exercise of notetaking without images (as in the portraits drawn by anthropologists) contributes to a certain loss of the human entity.

Of course, in my descriptions, a thread of connection with the moment and the situation always remains, even if thin, because a human being is not in levitation. He or she is always somewhere. But, while the background scrolls behind the human being, I notice a kind of block of singularity which contains more than the acts in the situation.

It is thus the human being in his or her succession of moments who is the focus of my precise and detailed description and analysis – the human being and not the interactions, the tensions, the relations. To put it more radically, once I have sufficiently identified the contextual elements, the idea is to cut out, literally or figuratively, the human entity by following its outline, without necessarily gluing it to another support. This is the challenge of keeping the symbolic strength of the cut-out: not to glue or re-paste the extracted being and put it back into the various relationships in the situation.

These descriptions are not perfect, and they only cover twelve hours. They were a test, an experiment, which I tried on myself. I would like the experiment to involve as many individuals as possible. Ideally, such descriptions would contain the whole of one's existence, from the first moment to the last. Starting from this ideal, it is easy to see the lacunae in ethnographies that lose sight of the hours, minutes, seconds of every day of each individual "anyone," as Nigel Rapport would say (2012).

Describing is not simply writing. The Latin *de-scribere* means the act of copying, transcribing, delimiting, determining. The *de-* indicates detachment, distance, separation. It means that in order to describe one must first have something or someone to look at, in the strict sense of the term.

The first condition of the descriptive requirement is to associate an individual with the entity that constitutes him or her, without adding anything. Anthropology, in its analyses and descriptions, has always significantly added elements to a possible human entity, based on local theories: on anthropology's – let us say – culturalist or sociological spirit, but also on its phenomenological inspirations, which are fond of recognizing a being in the world, of not dissociating it from other individuals and from institutions, situations, or contexts.

Conveyed by story rather than by description, an individual who is with, or turned towards, the world and others recedes into the background with the others, objects, persons, deities, and animals that populate the “with.” By not pushing the extraction of human entities to the end – by diluting them with different degrees in what surrounds them – by keeping them immersed in others, and moreover in discontinuous situations, anthropology misses or brackets the description of the singularity of each human being, except occasionally for literary purposes, as if to give the appearance of an “incarnated” ethnography. This is a characteristic of many portraits in anthropology.

In reality it appears that the following things should be avoided:

- the significant addition of different entities around the human being chosen to be observed, be they individuals, objects, or contexts;
- “perspection”: the regard that crosses over a human being to look at something else. In this “pictorial” sense, perspective requires looking at an individual (by crossing over him or her) in order to think of other things, beyond the individual, and in spatial relation. In contrast, I use the term “contraspective,” which suggests that a human being should be closely observed in their entirety, in all their aspects, by facing the individual and keeping them at the same scale;
- fragmentation-reduction to certain components (for example, emotions, actions, or social roles, but rather looking at a whole);
- the discontinuity of situations according to the choice of the anthropologist. I believe that the discontinuity of situations implies not giving priority to the human being themselves – this one;
- the idea of the exit of components of the entity, as if it were possible to work on these components outside the entity, creating thus social themes or fieldworks (social relations, a ritual, religion, illness, work, etc.).

These are some of the theoretical foundations that I would like to make explicit now. It seems to me necessary to reflect on these conditions for describing a human being. These conditions imply the construction of a unified model. I present some of the necessary elements here. They become the levers I use to help describe a human being. With this aim, I make use of the notion of a “volume of being.”

The human organism is undoubtedly a volume, as Francis Hallé says, in distinguishing animals from plants, which are more like surfaces (Hallé 2002: 44–47). It is in the organism that the existential unity that I call a “volume of being” takes shape, without being literally a volume. But the term is not completely a metaphor either.

A volume of being is, as its name indicates, a container with, for content, a set of components which I call “voluments”: actions, emotions, know-how, social indicators, and stylistic features proper to the being in question. Voluments do not include biological or anatomical elements. The notion of volume does not mainly connote an amplitude but rather a unit, a consistency which holds together, which retains the volume, and not something which could inflate and take on amplitude.

The mathematician René Thom, author of the theory of catastrophes, reminds us of what he considers to be “an obvious fact”: that “a living being is a global structure” (Thom 2018: 151). A volume of being could be considered as “a totality organized by a system of internal relations satisfying formal ‘laws’” (Petitot 2004: 18) – an existential structure, shall we say, with its own grammar.

A volume of being is a form (close to the meaning of *morphè*), with its edge, clear and constant: “What is usually called a form,” writes René Thom, “is always, in the final analysis, a qualitative discontinuity on a certain continuous background” (2009: 35). Thom suggests the notion of “salience” should be used to distinguish the figure in relation to its background (*ibid.*: 104), separated from the surrounding space (*ibid.*: 22). A human being takes up “some part of space” and lasts “for some period of time” (Thom 2018: 1).

We can find this idea in Aristotle: “Given that there are some things that are separate and some that are not separate, it is the latter that are substances” (Aristotle 2004: 1071a); “the extreme point of a particular, the first point outside which no part of the thing can be found and inside which all parts of the thing can be found” (*ibid.*: 1022a). There is indeed an entity to look at, in itself and not in its relation between an inside and an outside.

This idea seems to me to differ from the following:

- from what Heidegger writes about the being that “lies in its to be” (Heidegger 2010: 42), stating that “the characteristics to be found in this being are thus not present ‘attributes’ of an objectively present being which has such and such an ‘outward appearance’” (*ibid.*: 42). For Heidegger, what is important is the action of the being moving towards something else; it is not the entity and its stability under the variations of behaviours (*ibid.*: 114);

- from Husserl, when in his operation of “reduction” he reproaches the sciences for being concerned with such “individual entities, relative to a determined spatiotemporal position” (Perreau 2008: 79) and does not accept that knowledge remains focused on the “this there”, that is to say, “what the individual has that is unique in a given place and a given moment” (ibid.: 80). For Laurent Perreau, this means that such a discourse “invalidates in a systematic way the individual as individual to authorize the majesty of essence”;
- from Merleau-Ponty, because in my analysis, when it is a question of extracting the human being from their links to others and contexts, the point is not to rethink the human being from the outset and mainly in connection with others and situations, in order then to search for the “intentional threads which attach us to the world”, and to bring them, as Merleau-Ponty writes, to “our notice” (Merleau-Ponty 2005: xv).

I have mentioned only a few points (the question of the entity, singularity, and relations), among others; what I want to say is that with the objective of observation and description, the affiliation with phenomenological or existential philosophies is not always self-evident, in spite of their considerable contributions in regard to the theme we are considering here.

In any case, starting from the form can help in thinking about entity, contour, unity, structure, and stability. The question then becomes the following: how does a human being remain a form, in spite of the micro-deformations, the links, the weavings, the relations, and the intersubjectivities? From the consistency of its entity, the volume of being is confronted with partial and fragmentary modifications. The theory of catastrophes that René Thom proposed is interesting because it is in reality a theory of the stability of diverse forms facing perturbations. “Everything exists, as a unique and individuated thing,” writes Thom,

only insofar as it is able to resist time – a certain amount of time. All existence is the expression of a conflict between the erosive, degrading effect of duration (everything flows, said Heraclitus), and an abstract principle of permanence (of genesis) that ensures the stability of the thing and that I call, after Heraclitus, its logos. The most permanent entities, the most stable, are of spatial and material nature. (Thom 1990: 103)

Without this stability, in spite of and with the alterations, we would be confronted with indistinct beings, flows without consistency – of which some anthropologists, not hiding their Deleuzian affiliation, are fond.

I thus re-examine one of the dominant subjects in the history of philosophy: to think about the permanence and change of beings. This question appeared at the beginning of philosophy. My intent is to look closely at this double dimension on the scale of the moments of each human being: the modalities of change and permanence as well as the principles that structure them. Whether one insists with Heraclitus on the movement of contrary elements, while recognizing, as he does, an organizing logos, or one thinks, with Parmenides, above all of unity and identity but without ignoring alterations, the empirical question arises each time: how does this happen in practice? What are the components that are affected, what are the components that are not affected by what happens, and what is the articulating or unifying logic that causes an individual to exist on the basis of what constitutes him?

I quite like the image of the ball that is summoned by Parmenides at the foundation of philosophy. This image is one of the strong points of his argument, reminding us that there is an entity to grasp and observe, a “being.” Undoubtedly, Parmenides does not designate any being in particular, for example, a human being. But the characteristics of the being in question are evocative. Parmenides presents a being as non-divisible, in one piece, all alike, “in the coils of huge bonds,” and he adds that “strong necessity holds it in the bondage of a limit, which keeps it apart,” remaining the same, “like the volume of a spherical ball, and equally poised in every direction from its center,” without more being or less being here and there (Coxon 2009: 72–78). Of course, the human ball is not perfect, nor complete. But the image helps us to think about it – to fix the glance.

Thus, rather than working on the relational couplings – the entity with the other elements of the background – and diluting it, each of the entities, with its way of resisting alterations, is the object of focus separately, in a kind of existential homeostasis.

Simmel can help us to specify what is meant by a “relation” (for the social sciences), and *a contrario* what I call “relateity” (for an existential anthropology) from the Latin meaning of the supine *relatum* of the verb *referre* (meaning to go back, to return to oneself), especially as Simmel was undoubtedly

the sociologist who thought most effectively about the individual considered as irreducible to collective life. The individual elements “remain,” he writes, “in their discreteness” (Simmel 1910: 373). They are “psychic centers, personal unities” that “resist that absolute merging in the soul of another person” (ibid.: 375).

It is logical that as a sociologist, Simmel asks about the conditions of a society made of individual elements, while I ask about the conditions of remaining an entity that is constantly co-present with other entities. Specifically, Simmel asks about “the conditions residing a priori in the elements themselves, through which they combine themselves actually into the synthesis ‘society’” (ibid.: 376). I perceive there the sociological leitmotiv sliding its focus towards the opposition or the relation between individual and society. It is indeed the “social being” (ibid.: 387) that Simmel wants to think about. The “closed organic whole” (ibid.: 386), according to his strong expression, is also a member of social life and, in fact, is considered in its relations with the “outside” or with the “society.” Simmel proposes an analysis of the tension between a part carried towards the outside, as if, as he writes, there were an advance, an exit, and an interior part, between a being for the society and a being for himself.

Relateity does not address the tension between a “closed organic totality” and the fact that the individual is in society – which would be, according to Simmel, “two logically antithetical determinations” (ibid.: 387). Relateity is about structuring rather than about an opposition between two logics. It is not a tension or an oscillation between psychological elements and social elements – the ones staying inside, the others going outside – but rather a structuring between different components (voluments) within the volume, all staying inside.

Indeed, this aspect of the volume of being should not be lost from sight: there is not really an exit towards the others but only an attempt, which is always already restrained. The volument does not go towards, it remains within. The movement of the action is necessarily realized in such a way that it expresses this restraint.

And this has nothing to do with a kind of moral control of oneself in relation to its opposite, as in, for example, the expression or non-expression of emotions. To look at relateity is to look at the intrinsic mode of presence of the volume – a way of performing such an act, and of keeping it at the same time, in a kind of withdrawal that is intrinsic to it. This is true for the perfect egoist as well as for the most generous person. Actions, emotions, gestures, and moods do not leave the volume of being.

Moreover, and in reality, each time a volume of being says or makes something, they express that it is they who say or make the thing, by their mimicry, gestures, accent, and the expression of their character. These are elements which constitute the being's style, their mode of being, their consistency. The volume of being holds its volume in doing and speaking. This movement is always taken in an "anchoring" to the entity, in their physical separation, but also by their own style (their own way of doing and speaking). In a volume of being, with all that is simultaneous and mixed, there is also "lessereity" as a mechanism of filtering and lightening. Lessereity is especially constituted by expressions of detachment, absence, wandering thoughts, peripheral gestures, a capacity not to think about something, to forget, to think of other things, to pass to other things in the fluidity of the succession of situations. Lessereity protects singularity and forces the anthropologist to look at the details – which are necessary in a description of a mode of presence. These details also indicate the "return" of the entity to itself, in diffuse distance from the collective dimension of the situation. To aim at both the continuity and the entirety of a volume of being, it is necessary to see in parallel the play of permanent lessening which is revealed in the small details. There is thus a strong descriptive requirement.

In this theoretical programme, several points are important.

Actions, desires, words, and social indicators, which are so many components of the volume of being, present differences in their origins or their expressions, but they have become "of the volume", which precedes them and which pre-exists their deployment – they are mixed in this volume and on the surface of it. I repeat, it is not possible to detach them from the volume. No one has ever seen an action, gesture, or an emotion walk or fly, or be exchanged for other actions, gestures, or emotions. The volume is an entity that can only be fragmented for the purposes of analysis, and this is not a good solution but an issue of existential anthropology. A volume of being cannot then be comparable to a social system, a society, or a culture whose parts, human individuals, objects, and other materialities, are separate and mobile. The volume of being is a specific structure, which does not allow its voluments to leave – they are retained there – and whose block of stylistic singularity impregnates and connects them. What is released or detached from the volume is not the voluments themselves but the traces or the echoes left by the volume itself and the possible effects on other

volumes, appropriable by themselves. Thus, a human being is a numerical unit but also a non-divisible whole.

Does the volume of being have ligatures, intraligatures? Yes, it does... and I remember Parmenides. Certainly, there is no central I or ego in a volume of being animated by the structured diversity of its voluments, but the volume of being is not solely a physiological unity, because there is indeed an existential “gathering,” with ligatures, with the relateity and mechanisms of impregnation, at any moment. This “being-to-self” is not a mode of being of a moment, of a situation, next to other modes which could be turned towards the others. Whatever it does, a volume of being remains in itself, standing, sitting, running, walking, speaking, writing, making something, or participating in a collective life. This is structurally the case.

The existential grammar of a volume of being in functioning with ligatures would be as follows:

- those that retain the voluments in the volume, as we have just seen, with the relateity;
- those that connect the voluments in the volume: an action with an emotion, a thought, know-how, a habit, a gesture, a mood, etc. In just a few minutes, the voluments have many associations or connections between them. These are intra-connections;
- those that regulate and contain them, control the intensities, including of what happens;
- those very important ones that consist in impregnating, with repetition and regularity, acts, words, emotions, and moods. They range from mimicry, the gestural forms, to tendencies of character and temperament. It is these stylistic traits that indicate singularity.

There is a first corollary. To describe Individual X, Volume X, is not to describe an action, an experience, or a gesture; it is to describe the action, experience, or gesture of X, with the details characterizing it. Most of the time, there is an almost natural erasing of the singularizing stylistic details that make X not interchangeable with Y. To describe Individual X is to push the case study to the extreme, since it is a question of observing and describing X as X, in the continuity of the moments. This implies not solely working on one individual but also looking at the details, without putting the entity into perspective.

To the meaning of *morphè*, I join that of *eidos*. Aristotle himself notes that “Man is a principle of man at the universal level, but there is no universal man in reality; rather it is Peleus that is the motive cause of Achilles and your father that is yours” (Aristotle 2004: 1071a). I would add that Achilles

is also the principle of Achilles from the components, the tendencies, the modes of being, determining, causing, infiltrating, impregnating his gestures, his words, his actions. Here we again have this principle of organization of the substance, the “form” which confers structure and unity.

It becomes possible thus to look for what is constant in each singular: the constants in the organization and the structuring of this one. Singularity has its constants: these should even be the first constants to be sought from observations and descriptions of singulars in their continuity. This makes a comparative science of singularities possible.

There is a second corollary. Ligatures hold and restrain. By insisting thus on such characteristics of the volume of being, I perceive a difficulty in accepting the definition of existence in conformity with the etymology of the word: as Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “*Ex-istence*, that is, the being-outside, the being out-of-itself” (2018: 99). He insists on the

moveable play of reflections and angles, an essential instability that is always effacing or transforming itself. This ‘essential’ instability is equivalent to the absence of an essence, to the absence or incessant stripping away of a substance that is stable, permanent, and self-contained. This stripping away of the essence is called existence (ibid.: 99).

I am very bothered by this analysis and by the valorization of the “ex,” which in my opinion, by connoting an exit from oneself, of a wrenching contrary to ideas of substance and permanence, generates a descriptive non-heuristic to capture the basic entity of anthropology. I see in it a risk of volatilizing reality. I prefer to insist on the *-sistere* and to ensure a necessary heuristic for the detailed description of each singularity, in its details, in such a way as to present it as not interchangeable with another.

Conversely, in light of such an “exism,” I would say that the human being is not ahead, beyond, or outside of himself. He or she is a volume, by definition, a stable one, despite his or her variations, in his or her continuity and restraint. Let us say that the volume is, by its stability and its capacity to retain or hold its acts, an in-sistance, even when it tries to express something or to act – when it feels an imbalance. This characterization typically reveals the stake of the notion of volume: to “firm up” the notion of existence, as one of the conditions for capturing and observing it.

One issue of this analysis is the difference between social science and human science – the science of the collective phenomena and the science

of human entities (which is not the science of psychisms). Sociology and social and cultural anthropology are part of the social sciences. As it is difficult to dissociate the study of human entities from the field of anthropology, I thus reserve this focus on the human entity for existential anthropology. “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). I would say then that, for my purpose, existential anthropology is the science of separated beings, as separated; it is unlike sociology and social anthropology, which is a sociology that would be the science of beings in association, in relation, as they are in this openness of the link. It is not the dynamics between separation and union that is in play in such a perspective, but the human being as a separate entity and as one that remains thus, with their modes of structuring; the human being is not reintegrated in the world with other human beings – to avoid this slip into a science of the social, of each one with the others. The description can then begin: there is a human being, before us, to be described.

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/// Abstract

In the form of a short essay, this paper questions the conditions for describing the human individual as an entity with its own contour. The author criticizes the classical expressions of social anthropology, whose observations and descriptions tend to dilute the human being. The author turns to Parmenides, Aristotle, and the mathematician René Thom to find grounds for describing the human being as a singular entity. On the other hand, in the notion of a volume of being, he finds a decisive lever allowing him to synthesise his theoretical proposal.

Keywords:

ball, form, individual, description, existential anthropology

/// Abstrakt

Jednostkowość, forma, struktura. Kiedy metafizyka pomaga myśleć o opisie wolumenu bytu

Artykuł skonstruowany w formie krótkiego eseju stawia pytania o uwarunkowania opisywania jednostki ludzkiej jako podmiotu o wyraźnym kształcie. Krytykuje klasyczne sformułowania antropologii społecznej, które zwyczajowo rozmywiają człowieka w swoich obserwacjach i opisach. Autor przywołuje myśli Parmenidesa, Arystotelesa i matematyka Reného Thoma, aby znaleźć podstawy do opisu człowieka jako jednostkowego bytu. Zarazem jednak w pojęciu wolumenu bytu znajduje klucz pozwalający mu na syntezę jego propozycji teoretycznej.

Słowa kluczowe:

kula, forma, jednostka, opis, antropologia egzystencjalna

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