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A GOATS STORY. POSTCARDS FROM THE “METAMORPHIC ZONE”

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE CAVALLIN*

Abstract To bridge the Great Divide between subject and object, Bruno Latour uses the notions of 'agency', which neutralises this division, and 'metamorphic zone', as the place where 'performances' of an anonymous agency are translated into 'skills' of an identified agent. But in literature, as the repressed often returns in defence formations, this translation tends to describe agents in the distorted guise of subjects – i.e. as persons or characters. This article proposes to re-evaluate the notion of agency in the light of the notion of form, and thus explore a way to shunt the anthropomorphic bias where still dwells the spectre of our thwarted modernity.

Keywords Metamorphic zone, agency, Bruno Latour, modernity, object/subject.

For the last six months, I have been working with two authors, Florence Debove and Violaine Bérot, one of whom is a summer shepherd and the other used to be a goat breeder. We are trying to write fragments of new bucolic songs together and tell the story of their daily lives in mountains gradually transformed into walkways for hikers in search of wilderness and legendary predators. The idea behind *Pastorales*¹ is to take a fresh look at the European tradition of pastoral poetry in the new context of climate change and in the light of the critical relationships between humans and other animals brought about by this new context. Listening to Violaine and Florence talk about their sheep, their goats and their dogs taught me a lot, and made me think about the new ways in which ecological humanities and the "littératures du vivant" propose to represent non-human beings. They advocate attempts to 'give voice' to beings that are deprived of it, to unearth the old figures of personification and prosopopeia, to use anthropomorphism as a way of counteracting anthropocentrism, to represent Nature "in the active voice" (Plumwood²) and to "redistribute" agentivities (Latour³). The generally

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¹ V. Bérot, F. Debove, J.-C. Cavallin, *Pastorales*, Marseille, Wildproject (April 2024).

² Val Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice," *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 46 (May 2009).

³ Bruno Latour, "Comment redistribuer le Grand Partage," *La Revue du Mauss*, n° 1 (1988).

accepted strategy is to promote the notions of 'agent' and 'agency' in order to abolish the *summa distinctio* between 'people' and 'things', 'subjects' and 'objects', and emancipate living things – animals, plants, places – from the latter paradigm. The 'living' becomes 'active' again, and can no longer be reduced to the blind determinism of secondary causality and the laws of nature. Animals and plants are no longer complex machines on automatic pilot, passively carrying out their genetic routine. The actantial charts of literary texts are complicated by a profusion of non-human agentivities and new '*agencements*' replacing the molar actors of classical heroism with agentic networks.⁴

This general reform, however salutary, seems to be only partly reflected in the relationships that 'my shepherdesses' (as we say in jest) have with animals and in the way they write about them. They do not anthropomorphise them, they never make them speak, their many anecdotes are quite rarely accounts of agentivity, and the indisputable mixture of "empathy and recognition"⁵ that they feel both for their bitches and for their herds seems much more complex, more ambiguous and richer than the recognition of a 'person' status. It seems fairly obvious that, in the singular context of protection and care induced by their profession, the animals' 'power to suffer' (*potentia patiendi*) is at least as important as their 'power to act' (*potentia agendi*) in their relations with them and their experience of them. Violaine's and Florence's accounts helped me to formulate the unease I had always felt, even in the face of Bruno Latour's most fascinating texts, about the notion of 'agency' as the sole criterion for ontological and ethical recognition of the multitude of living beings or, in Montaigne's beautiful language, 'la presse des créatures'. The fact that *potentia agendi* is the only qualifying character is indicative of an ideological bias that privileges action, the capacity to act freely, to emancipate oneself, etc. This is, of course, a drift in the notion of *agency*, but it is a common drift that exacerbates the effects of another equally common drift: the error of always representing an *agency* in the guise of a 'person' (personification) or a 'subject' (egomorphism). It is this error in logical type – I promote the notion of agent in order to neutralise the subject/object alternative, but I shape and represent any kind of agent in the guise of a subject (the positive pole of the alternative I claim to overcome) – that pastoral daily life and experience invite me to challenge.

The best procedure is to start again from the 'metamorphic zone', i.e. the very place where, according to Latour, the specific agency of the phenomena studied – their civil status as agent – is decided. Attention to what happens in this metamorphic zone enables us to "better register the agentivity of things."⁶ The problem is whether all the 'things' that exist can be

⁴ "To be a subject is not to act autonomously in front of an objective background, but to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy." (Bruno Latour, "Agency at the time of the Anthropocene", *New Literary History*, no. 45, 2014 - Henceforth noted AA).

⁵ Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature. A Necessary Unity* (New York: Dutton, 1979), 8.

⁶ Bruno Latour, "How Better to Register the Agency of Things", Tanner Lectures, Yale University, 26th and 27th of March 2014 (<http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/137-YALE-TANNER.pdf>). Henceforth noted RA.

perceived and described according to the single criterion of their agentivity. Aren't some 'things' beyond the reach of this radar, or distorted by the way it records and identify them ? In his *Enquête sur les modes d'existence*,⁷ Latour offers a very detailed analysis of the different types of reality, i.e. the plurality of 'beings' (*res*) and their specific "modes of existence":⁸ 'beings of fiction' (novelistic characters) do not exist in the same mode as 'beings of metamorphosis' (psychogenic powers), 'beings of law' (legal personalities), 'beings of religion', 'beings of technology', and so on. And the "constitution des Modernes" is obviously wrong when it claims to subject these different "modes of existence" to the verification protocols used for the sole evaluation of "beings of reference" (scientific objects). A faun, a molecule, a mountain, a consuming passion, the law of gravitation, Anna Karenine, a ghost, a virtue – none of these 'beings' exist more or less than the others, but each exists according to its own specific 'mode' and must be looked at and sized up according to its own regime of veridiction. This plural ontology, inspired by the pragmatism of William James and Nelson Goodmann, allows Latour to deploy a complex pluriverse of realities, each existing according to its own register and legality. However, in order to 'register' the different entities that populate the pluriverse of the *Enquête sur les modes d'existence*, Latour seems content with the sole notion of agency. He places beings of all kinds and natures on the same Procrustean bed. So, on the one hand, we have a multi-realism⁹ of great ontological richness and, on the other, a somewhat simplistic perceptual monism whose measuring instrument records only the 'activity' of the things and phenomena under study.

In Latour's lesson, recording the agency of a thing makes it possible to move from an (anonymous) set of "performances" to the outline of a being endowed with "competences"

⁷ Bruno Latour, *Enquête sur les modes d'existence. Une anthropologie des Modernes* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012).

⁸ The question is not to know whether ghosts exist or not (both answers are valid and/or wrong), but to define their mode of existence, i.e. the regime of discourse that allows us to speak of them. According to Latour, since modern constitution recognises only the referential regime of scientific knowledge as a test of Truth, and confuses this specific type of veridiction with Reality (the principle of the 'Double Click', *ibid*, 103), it is unable to acknowledge and represent a multitude of beings that we encounter and deal with on a daily basis, but which slip through the cracks of its Objectivity complex.

⁹ I use the term 'multirealism' as a counterpart to the term "multinaturalism" used by Viveiros de Castro to describe Amerindian animism. For the author of *Métaphysiques cannibales*, this multiplicity of natures is in direct opposition to Western "naturalism" (a plurality of cultures standing out against the backdrop of a single nature). The multirealism of the *Enquête sur les modes d'existence* attempts to challenge or put in its place the Descolian notion of "naturalism": it only describes the « constitution des Modernes », i.e. the way in which they represent truth to themselves, while their practices admit a non-naturalistic plurality of modes of existence of things. On the notion of 'multinaturalism', see: Eduardo Viveiros De Castro, "Perspectivisme et multinaturalisme en Amérique indigène", *Journal des anthropologues*, vol. 138-139, n°3-4 (2014).

capable of producing these performances.¹⁰ Latour calls «morphism»¹¹ this traduction that gives "form" to an actual actant from the examination of a set of performances. This operation takes place in the "metamorphic zone"¹² as a place of (re)cognition. The agency of things would therefore be primary (it *performs* first), while their form – the form they take – would only come at a second stage in the form of an inference: it would be the result of the recognition operation. With regard to this hypothesis, not to invalidate it but to complete it and to place it within the uncharted context of cognitive pluralism, I would like to explore the opposite hypothesis, according to which form (and not agency) would come first and the (aesthetic) experience of it would be at the origin of the process of (re)cognition. On the basis of this 'formal' recognition – the perception of morphological analogies between the 'object' to be known and the 'subject' of knowledge – the relationship with the object would be established by means of either its power to act (*agency*) or its power to suffer (*patience*). I will try out this conjecture on a fragment of the *Pastorales*, which relates an episode of conflictual interaction between the breeder and her goats. We shall see that a careful reading of this anecdote leads to a plural definition, a little less *agent-oriented*, of the 'metamorphic zone' as a place where relationships and natures take shape and identify each other on a common ground.

POSTCARD °1. DESCARTES AS A ROLE MODEL.

*"The weather is dreadful. I walk towards the barn in the pouring rain. I take a quick look at the herd still lying down. I'm already imagining what a hell of a day it's going to be, the hours on watch in this downpour. I'd be better off in bed. I wedge pots and filter into a corner, stand up, not a single goat comes. I take a step towards the nearest one, it gets up and moves away. I try another, same circus. Soon they are all standing at the other end of the barn. They stare at me without moving. First, you calm down."*¹³

¹⁰ AA, 12.

¹¹ RA, 22.

¹² "Below the apparently vast distinction between, let's say, *science and literature*, objective statement and narratives, something else that I call, for want of an accepted term, the metamorphic zone out of which all agencies emerge." (RA, 14). An essential notion in Latour's epistemology, the "metamorphic zone" is that metaphorical place where humans register unidentified agencies, describe them and give them *shape in* order to identify them and make them the *dramatis personae* of different discourse regimes (science, fiction, politics, law, religion, etc.). Newton noticed that planets rotate and apples fall. From these different actions or 'performances', he concludes and points at a single 'agent': the force of attraction or gravity, gives it shape and definition and thus adds a new character to the discourse of physical science. Latour defines the metamorphic zone as the place "where we are able to detect *actants* before they become *actors*" (AA, 15) or "where humans and non-humans keep exchanging their properties, that is, their *figurations*" (RA, 22).

¹³ « La météo est détestable. J'avance vers la grange sous la pluie battante. Rapide coup d'œil au troupeau encore couché. J'imagine déjà la putain de journée, les heures de garde dans ce déluge. Je

On this rainy morning, the breeder's barn is a "metamorphic zone". In Latour's lexicon, the term refers to the zone of turbulence through which must pass any discourse (scientific or literary) on the thing to be represented. Provided that the encounters that take place in this zone have not been normalised beforehand, in other words pre-formatted, as encounters between a subject and an object of knowledge, an operation of '*morphism*' or transaction of forms takes place between the self-appointed subject and the so-called object. For this double morphism to take place, it is important, according to Latour, to learn to 'better register the agentivity of things', in other words to identify 'performances' and to deduce from these *actions* the form of an *agent* likely to cause them. When you feel ill, you call a doctor to diagnose what's acting inside you – fatigue, virus, bacteria, etc. When you are afraid of being possessed, you call an exorcist to find the name and genealogy of the demon acting on you and usurping your free will. It is clear that the type of 'agent' recorded (virus or demon) cannot be conceived independently of the type of 'agent' recording (doctor or sorcerer):¹⁴ as many regimes of veridiction, as many modes of existence. The metamorphic zone is a laboratory of forms in which a "quasi-object" and a "quasi-subject" co-produce a certain *mode d'existence* and a certain *régime de discours*.

Conceived by Latour as a means of countering the epistemology of the Moderns and bridging the 'Great Divide' between subjects and objects, the passage through the 'metamorphic zone' is unfortunately very often short-circuited. More blindly Latourian than Latour himself, we spare ourselves the experience of the encounter with the thing – the formative experience that should decide its mode of existence - and we give *a priori* the full status of agent to the totality of beings to which the modern constitution had confiscated this status: plants, animals, landscapes, meteorological phenomena, and so on. Instead of experiencing things by staying in this rich "*place of exchange*"¹⁵ that is the metamorphic zone, instead of putting our objectification reflex to the test by lingering in this zone, instead of testing how and under what conditions this reflex is thwarted or not, we *side with the good* by professing that all gents, including beasts, plants, stones and hats, live in the active voice and are endowed with intelligence, language and volition. However, only experience should decide the system of truth and the status of a thing. It happens very often, without any crime or scandal, that we use people and are used by them as mere means; and it also happens that a hat – depending on the person it covers, on our link with this person, on whether this person is

serais mieux sous ma couette. Je cale dans un coin bidon et filtres, je me redresse, pas une chèvre ne vient. Je fais un pas vers la plus proche, elle se lève, s'éloigne. J'essaie une autre, même cirque. Les voilà bientôt toutes debout à l'autre bout de la grange. Elles me fixent sans bouger. D'abord, tu te calmes. »

¹⁴ If we adopt the nomenclature of the *Enquête sur les modes d'existence*, we are dealing, in the case of the virus, with a "being of reproduction", captured in a regime of scientific knowledge and therapy; and in the case of the demon, with a "being of metamorphosis", captured in a regime of existential crisis and magical rituals of healing.

¹⁵ RA, 15.

dead or not: ill, lost, gone to someone else, etc. –acts violently on us, harbours all kinds of intentions, manifests itself in our eyes as a being far more alive than the table it sits on or the guests seated at that table and (the ultimate test for an agent) *makes* us 'do' all kinds of things. It would be quite absurd, on the pretext that such hat acts powerfully on me, to deduce from this power an agentive substance (*res agentiva*) that would turn it into a 'person' and oblige everyone to greet it as they pass by. Rather than an enthusiast who professes in principle that plants are agentive, but doesn't know what to say when asked for a story or example of a plant that he knows personally and whose subtle radius of action he experiences ; rather than this enthusiast, I prefer René Descartes, who isolates himself in a heated room because he wants to know with certainty the agency at *work* in his thinking, who dares to experience the obscure workings of his certainties, his doubts, his most naïve opinions, right up to the encounter with the 'malin génie', this demon of metamorphoses, this hyperbolic agent invalidating all science and striking everything with illusion. In the "metamorphic zone" of the stove to which he had retreated, Descartes succeeded in *morphing* this evil intelligence into a God of truth who gave him back the world and knowledge. Descartes' 'method', his path to truth, crossed this 'zone' or '*place of exchange*' from which he deduced for us the fundamental distinction between object and subject – on the one hand, the *res extensa*, on the other, the *res cogitans* – which we inherit every day, in the slightest of our gestures, the least of our words, without even realising it. If we want to contradict him and undo the prerogatives with which he capped the *cogito*, we have to follow his method – backwards, but all the way – and not short-circuit the experience in the metamorphic zone. To declare in principle that everything is an agent and to apply to all things the system of veridiction hitherto reserved for subjects corresponds paradoxically to a new form of objectification. What was *reified* as an object is *reified* as a person. I will soon try to show that the reluctance of her goats, by upsetting the breeder, does not suddenly force her to recognise their *agency*, or to see them as persons. What is happening in the barn is undoubtedly an episode of thwarted modernity, but the experiment is turbulent and, if we are to have any chance of it gradually settling down and making sense of itself, there is no other way than to be Latourian to the end: instead of starting from his results, start from his method and experiment.

POSTCARD °2. THE SUBJECT IN DISGUISE. Defining a thing *a priori* as an agent, without taking the time to deduce from a set of performances the form of a singular being likely to cause them and likely to answer for them, has two unfortunate consequences. In the first place, since we have no direct experience of the performance of the thing, we will represent it in the image of the most familiar agent, and the closest to us. Therefore, from animals to hats, everything will take the form of a person, a subject who speaks and thinks. This anthropomorphic projection, caused by the short-circuiting of the metamorphic zone (and of the experience of the thing), is what Russell defines as an error in logical type. On the pretext of restoring to things the agentivity confiscated by modern constitution, they are transformed into persons, in other words into a concept born of the confiscation and of the separation it instituted between mind and matter, thinking subjects and mere things. In short, by representing the hat that

obsesses me in the form of a subject (anthropomorphism), by making a river speak (prosopopoeia), by personifying a place or a non-human being (personification), we do not decolonise the subjugated world of things: on the contrary, we generalise the product and the construction of the regime we claim to dissolve. If the "subject" is produced by an operation of confiscation of the object's agentivity, we understand why a reparation that believes it is doing the right thing by instituting the object as a subject would not be reparative but doubly and irremediably confiscatory: it amounts, not to recognising anew what has been repressed, but to adding to the spoliation the denial of the spoliation. The error in logical type can be described in two stages. Firstly, the specific agentivity of 'things' is denied, and only thinking persons or subjects are recognised as agentic. Secondly, on the pretext of restoring their native agentivity, 'things' are granted a place in the realm of 'persons'. A false exit from Modernity, this general *subjectification* of the field heralds the ultimate stage of integrated Modernity: the subject in the modern sense now reigns everywhere.

In the ontology of the Moderns, the *nec plus ultra* is to be a subject who speaks and thinks. Well-meaning Moderns, eager to undermine the foundations of their own domination, seize upon this privilege and concede it to everyone. And now, by dint of anthropomorphism and personification, anything can only be an agent if it is disguised as a subject. We forget the sacrifice that becoming a subject implies: no longer being a body, but having a body; living as a misalliance of matter and will in endless divorce proceedings, and so on. In literary fiction, such an error of logical type is immediately sanctioned by unlikelihood and a pervading sense of falsity. You cannot believe in talking viruses, monologuing trees or babbling rivers. You only have to sit down by a river, in the metamorphic zone of daily frequentation, to know that speaking the language of men is not one of its performances. It speaks continuously, but through its own forms. Its speech is both per-formed and per-forming. So we have the wrong agent when we disguise it as something that thinks and speaks *like us*. The sanction comes quick. What we cannot believe in does not provoke any emotion, and is therefore literally deprived of any aesthetic efficiency or literary 'performance'.

POSTCARD °3. THE PREDATION PARADIGM. The second consequence of the decision to represent everything *a priori* as an agent is the antagonistic drift that consists in correcting a cumulative relationship of "complementarity" (subject *versus* object) by a relationship of "symmetry" (agent *versus* agent) that reverses its course, but causes the same effect of reciprocal deformation of the two terms of the relation.¹⁶ Just as the cumulative effect of

¹⁶ In the various articles collected in *Towards an Ecology of Mind* (1974), Bateson sets out a general theory of social relations that studies the characteristics of the various social groups as the by-product of the two possible types of relationship established between these groups: relationships of 'symmetry' and relationships of 'complementarity'. In a symmetrical relationship, any behaviour by group A elicits similar behaviour from group B. In a complementary relationship, any behaviour by group A elicits dissimilar behaviour from group B, adapted as a response (authority/obedience, assistance/dependence, domination/submission). These two types of relationship give rise to a "schismogenesis" effect -

complementarity ended up hindering the relationship between two terms that have become so different that they have nothing more in common (the subject, increasingly active, became a pure non-object; the object, increasingly passive, became a pure non-subject), so the cumulative effect of symmetry – competition and one-upmanship of the same type of skills – always ends up leading to the total elimination of one of the terms of the relation. The way in which 'complementary' relations between subjects and objects are reconfigured as symmetrical relations between 'agents' bears witness to such a drift in the tendency to represent them as deadly encounters.¹⁷ In Val Plumwood's work, for example, nature speaks "in the active voice" in the embrace of a crocodile that regards the philosopher as a mere piece of meat.¹⁸ From the eye of the crocodile to the eye of the cyclone, it is the encounter with a tornado that teaches Amitav Ghosh the true measure of man on the scale of natural forces.¹⁹ Nastassja Martin and Baptiste Morizot need two legendary predators to represent the end of the "naturalism" of the Moderns and to try to replace man's domination of all living things with diplomatic relations or mirror relationships.²⁰ A crocodile, a hurricane and two wild beasts, the wolf and the bear... It seems that non-humans need to be represented by super-predators if they are to be taken seriously and recognised as agents. Why should the 'redistribution of agentivities' take the form, not of an end to agentive hierarchies, but of a reversal of roles – the hunters being hunted – and a simple inversion? The agentive strategy employs the same strategy as '*rewilding*' techniques in the rehabilitation of de-naturalised territories.²¹ In order to give agency back to the disaster-stricken realm of things, it reintroduces a few large

cumulative differentiation of the two terms of the relationship - which ultimately threatens the very existence of the relationship. Rivalry (symmetry) has an escalating effect that leads to a fight to the death. Interdependence (complementarity) has a consolidating effect that ends up making the two terms totally different (one too wise and the other too foolish; one too spiritual and the other too material, etc.) and incapable of getting along. As schismogenetic, the two types of social relationship end up causing the relationship to collapse, unless they are corrected by a dual logic of reciprocity and alternation.

¹⁷ I owe to « La tornade et le crocodile. Complicités, empêchements et pouvoirs du récit à l'ère du grand dérangement », Marie Cazabon-Mazerolles' thrilling conference at the Cerisy colloquium "Que peut la littérature pour les vivants?" (Summer 2023), the idea of bringing together the three episodes of reverse predation reported by Val Plumwood, Amitav Ghosh and Nastassja Martin.

¹⁸ Val Plumwood, « Meeting the predator », in *The Eye of the crocodile*, ed. Lorraine Shannon, (Canberra: ANU E Press, ACT, 2012).

¹⁹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

²⁰ Nastassja Martin, *Croire aux fauves* (Paris: Verticales, 2019). Baptiste Morizot, *Les Diplomates, Cohabiter avec les loups sur une nouvelle carte du vivant* (Marseille: Wildproject, 2016).

²¹ In these "renatured" areas, walkers may enjoy "contemplative walks". Philosophy often contrasts action and contemplation. In neo-wild forests, nature alone has the right to act, while a *de-activated* man contemplates its actions. The redistribution of agentivities does not so much call into question the confiscation of agentivities as reverse it by way of compensation. The model remains the same: a complementary relationship between agent and non-agent. It just happens to be upside down.

predators awakening old ancestral terrors and expected to restaure the balance, not of the trophic chain, but of "régimes de discours."

POSTCARD °4. AGENCY AND PATIENCY. Rethinking agency reveals something important: our relationship to the world, the unthought of that relationship, conceals a pattern of predation. If we are to escape this pattern, we must not turn it on its head by setting super-predators against man, thereby undermining his power and reintroducing into his life the primitive terror of the world, but rather balance or temper it by means of another pattern. All farmed animals were once prey hunted by man. The breeder is therefore a hunter, a predator who protects the life of the prey rather than killing it. He or she is not a hunted hunter (an inversion that maintains the structure of the relationship), but a thwarted hunter, a persecutor converted into a protector. Whereas the *inversion of roles* maintained the pattern of the relationship, the functional *conversion* introduces a new relationship. Big game hunting is a battle of agents. Breeding is more complex: the animal that is bred, insofar as it is the object of care, is neither entirely an agent nor a thing. It is a kind of 'patient' that the breeder is responsible for keeping healthy and in good condition. Because they idolise the status of agent, the epitome of the values they place above all others: freedom, autonomy, control and independence, our societies find it hard to *recognise* people who are not active (the unemployed, the old) or whose activity is reduced (the sick, the elderly, the disabled, children, etc.) and therefore *a fortiori* all the living beings they exploit and keep dependent on them. As healthcare professionals deal with patients, the form of recognition, vigilance and attention they have to develop is undoubtedly very different from the attention we develop in a relationship between agents. What might a metamorphic zone look like, in which we manage to record both 'agency' and 'patiency', both the power to act (*potentia agendi*) and the power to suffer (*potentia patiendi*) of the beings we encounter in it?

POSTCARD °5. A TICK IN A HOPELESS PLACE. When Descartes enters his stove and the breeder enters her barn, they both venture into a metamorphic zone and encounter a number of performances. Whether or not they are able to record these various performances (and therefore whether or not they even exist) depends, of course, on who they are and what equipment they have. According to Uexküll, a tick is only sensitive to three *stimuli*²². This means that the world it inhabits is reduced to the perception of this trio of performances. Since the tick's problem is not one of ontology, but of subsistence, it doesn't bother concluding from these "performances" to "competent" agents (light, hence "sun"; butyric odour, hence "dog"; heat, hence "hot blood"), but is content to react to each of these *stimuli* with the corresponding action (light, hence "climb"; butyric odour, hence "drop"; heat, hence "pierce"). This four-character bloody huis-clos offers a still too rich picture of the tick's "*weltarm*" existence. Her world is a world of appetites and perceptive qualities (*qualia*), not a world of characters betrayed by their performances.

²² Jakob von Uexküll, *Milieu animal et milieu humain* (Paris: Rivages, 2010).

POSTCARD °6. THE COGITO'S SHADOW. Imagine for a moment that the invisible man is sticking his tongue out at you. As you do not have the ability to record his performance, you will have no way of deducing from it a certain kind of character endowed with a certain kind of skills and quirks (« *compétences* »). The transparent lout will have to choose another form of vexation (verbal insult, slap on the cheek) if he wants to be recognised and have access to existence. The same applies to Descartes thinking in his stove. To recognise who is *at* the heart of his knowledge, to discover its active principle, he has to record a whole series of 'performances' – representations, memories, thoughts, conjectures, doubts – and find their agents: which ideas come from his erudition and the *auctoritates* from which he derives his knowledge; which ideas come from his senses; which ideas come from his body or, worse still, from an evil genius bent on deceiving him. He needs to identify the agents at work in his representations if he is to have any chance of really knowing what he knows and thinking in the first person. What happens in the stove transforms Descartes' world at the same time as it changes him. The world and the person *a quo* are: a tangled universe of influences, of more or less occult powers, and a *homo studiosus*, nourished by the multiple and terribly discordant bulk of knowledge of classical humanities. The world and the person *ad quem* are: a *res extensa*, an expanse of inert matter entirely reduced to the status of an object (of knowledge), and a *res cogitans*, a pure subject (of knowledge), not comprehended in the material expanse grappled by his comprehension. If Descartes' *cogito* serves as the founding myth of modern 'naturalism', it is because it is the philosopher's answer to the Sphinx of evil genius and its frightening enigma. The '*cogito, sum*' kills two birds with one stone: the evil spirit of doubt and the ancient figure of the world. For Descartes and the Moderns, the sojourn in the stove is a rite of coming of age and a rite of emancipation. It guarantees the distinction between the sphere of subjects and the sphere of objects. Or rather, as Latour puts it, it guarantees this distinction as a regime of discourse only to call it into question in the regime of existence. The episode of the *cogito* perfectly illustrates the thesis that Latour defends in *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* on the dual functioning of the « modern constitution »: theorising the difference between 'subject' and 'object' and multiplying the hybrids that pass under the radar of this « *Grand Partage* ». Descartes emerges from the stove with a firm portrait of himself as a "*res cogitans*", or pure subject. He has overcome the ordeal, but we immediately realise that this cathartic self-definition also produces the first hybrid. This is the magnificent passage in the « Sixth Meditation » on the profound astonishment – a mixture of anguish and wonder – experienced by the *res cogitans* when it suddenly realises that it is indissolubly one with a body, i.e. a part of the *res estensa*:

“I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but [...] I am besides so intimately conjoined and as it were intermixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity. For if this were not the case, I should not feel pain when my body is hurt, seeing I am merely a thinking thing, but should perceive the wound by

the understanding alone, just as a pilot perceives by sight when any part of his vessel is damaged."²³

All the feelings of pleasure and pain, which Descartes confesses are not mere representations, prove that he who maintains that he is "only a thinking thing" acknowledges at the same time that he is an astonishing hybrid, an unstable product "of the union and, as it were, the mixing of soul and body (*ab unione et quasi permixtione mentis cum corpore*)". Paradoxically, the *res cogitans* turns out to be the first hybrid of the Modern world.

POSTCARD 7. THWARTED MODERNITY. Having overcome the ordeal of the "Great Divide", having banished from his mind the doubts that agitated him and the demons that acted upon him, having disentangled his destiny from all equivocal influences, and finally the sole agent of his knowledge, Descartes emerged from the stove paradoxically changed into an impure hybrid of pure mind and pure body. He would never be modern, or would only be half modern, in the clarity of the mirror in which his mind contemplated its purity. And then, one rainy morning, four centuries later, a cranky breeder enters the barn where her flock is waiting. How do we recognise her as the descendant of the man whom a stove turned into a "thinking thing" caught in the *res extensa* like a thrush in a glue trap? No doubt because of the strange way she treats her own body. She gets it up and forces it like a convict to do its work. It is not a body, but a clunky machine that her will manoeuvres like a pilot manoeuvres a boat. Her real body is only a ghost left behind in the cooling bed. The conditional mode ("I'd be better off in bed") conveys the spectral regret of a former complicity.

When the breeder enters the barn, she enters without a body of her own. We will see that this is important. When she turns to face the goats, they form a block at the end of the barn. They are not machines to be emptied of milk and filled with brambles. They do not intend to be mistreated in the same way as the farmer mistreats her own body. One must handle them properly, one must try and get their consent. As soon as the breeder sees them standing motionless, something inside her snaps and it is like a spell being broken all at once.

The anecdote is an episode of thwarted modernity. Reified by the breeder, the goats object to her carelessness. They are not a resource from which to extract the maximum in the minimum of time. But what kind of 'performance' did the farmer perceive that suddenly gave her back a sense of her job and made her pay attention to the situation? Latour's anthropology invites us to speak of *agency*: the goats, in their objection, impose themselves *in the active voice*, claim their status as *agents*. This well-learned catechism invites us to redistribute agentivities. But perhaps it is a betrayal of Latour's pragmatism to follow him *a priori*, sparing ourselves experience, and to be Latourian too literally.

²³ René Descartes, "Meditation VI », in *Meditations on First Philosophy,*" in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911).

POSTCARD °8. A CLASH OF AGENCIES. To see the difference, let us take a look at what a battle of agentivities between breeder and herd looks like.

"I'm pig-headed and they're headstrong. Mid-October, we're slowly making our way back to the barn. All of a sudden, the animals stop. I know what they want and I don't agree. In previous years, at this time of year, I would send them up the mountain, but now there are other goats roaming freely there, and I don't want them to mix. I fight their will for a long time, Arsou fights with me, she runs around, barks, runs, gasps, looks at me. There are always a few that get away from her and. I'm all sweaty, mad with rage, so mad that I break down, I sit down on the grass and cry. The goats, all grouped together, are waiting, still in the same spot. They watch me calmly, not one of them tries to flee without my permission, they're patient, they don't give up. I say to them softly: "Go on, get up there, I don't care". Obediently, in single file, they set off towards the mountain."²⁴

A clash of agentivities establishes a relationship of symmetrical competition that implies, on both sides, an ever-increasing effort, an escalation of power. The symmetry is expressed in the opening line of the piece: "I'm pig-headed (*entêtée*) and they're headstrong (*têtue*)" – and the escalation is illustrated by the breeder's ever greater efforts, until she gives up to the law of numbers. The tears of rage and powerlessness convey the pain of surrender, the anger of an agency defeated – defeated, but not transformed – by an agency stronger than itself.

The ending of the barn episode is entirely different. The farmer does not burst into tears, she does not grit her teeth, she does not give in wearily and unwillingly: she is transformed by the herd's objection, she realises something. There is no surrender, there is "recognition" (Bateson) or *anagnorisis* (Aristotle). The breeder comes to her senses. This very different ending is due to the type of performance she is acknowledging. The goats have not acted: they have vetoed an action. They put themselves in a safe place and kept their distance. They were not to be touched. Forming one single body at the back of the barn, they put themselves under the protection of their *habeas corpus*. Their *noli me tangere* does not show their power to act (*potentia agendi*), but the silent objection of their power to suffer (*potentia patiendi*). Their whole bodies recoil at the use of force.

²⁴ "Je suis entêtée et elles sont têtes. Mi-octobre, nous retournons tranquillement vers la grange. Tout d'un coup les bêtes bloquent. Je sais ce qu'elles veulent et je ne suis pas d'accord. Les années précédentes, à cette saison, je les envoyais dans la montagne, mais il y a maintenant d'autres chèvres en liberté à cet endroit, et je ne veux pas qu'elles se mélangent. Je lutte longtemps contre leur volonté, Arsou lutte avec moi, elle contourne, aboie, court, halète, me regarde. Il en reste toujours quelques-unes qui lui échappent et se replacent. Je suis en nage, folle de rage, tellement folle de rage que je craque, je m'assieds dans l'herbe, je pleure. Les chèvres, toutes regroupées, attendent, toujours au même point. Elles m'observent, tranquilles, pas une n'essaie de fuir sans ma permission, elles sont patientes, ne lâchent rien. Je leur dis tout bas: 'allez-y, montez, je m'en fous.' Obéissantes, à la queue-leu-leu, elles s'en vont vers la montagne."

POSTCARD °9. BATESON'S CRAB. The singular performance of this refusal to suffer (*patior*) explains why the breeder finds herself, not discomfited, but transformed by the outcome of the episode. What is happening at this moment is not the conflicting embrace of two active wills, pitted against each other. It is the recognition that one incarnate being feels for another incarnate being. It would be wrong to maintain that, stopped by their veto, the breeder recognises her flock as *agents*. It would be even more erroneous to maintain that she recognises the goats as *persons*. This is a mistranslation of a certain type of "performance" (the *noli me tangere*) into a type of character whose "skills" (agentivity, personality) are not *accountable* for these performances.²⁵ Between herself and her goats, the breeder recognises an analogy of form, a "pattern which connects"²⁶ and this "recognition" triggers her "em-pathy" (i.e. power to suffer *in* someone else). The example of connective pattern given by Bateson in *Mind and Nature*²⁷ is the freshly boiled crab he brings to his students for observation. They recognise in the creature their own bilateral structure, the symmetry of their body around a median axis; they recognise the claws as an equivalent of the arms as prehensil appendices, etc. They do not change into crabs, but a series of analogies enables them to recognise themselves and their morphology as one variant among others in the morphogenesis of living bodies. They are a mind that observes (paradigm of distinction) and they are also a body that experiences its common belonging – beyond the leaps of species and genus – to the long history of life (paradigm of incarnation).

For Bateson, only those who experience the *pattern* linking their own structure to all the structures deployed by living beings are capable of "meet[ing] them with empathy and recognition."²⁸ Latour defines the "metamorphic zone" as "*a place of exchange*" where the two characters in a cognitive drama that has not yet separated a subject and an object exchange their qualities and *morph* each other in a fitting session of forms likely to work together. The metamorphic zone is a zone of reciprocal morphogenesis. An empathic response in no way presupposes the equivocal operation of an anthropomorphic projection. Bateson's students do not anthropomorphise the crab. The morphism likely to trigger empathy presupposes a return upstream beyond the series of specific and generic differences that impede the recognition of an old kinship. At this stage, it does not presuppose any *anthropomorphism* that makes the crab a person, a subject worthy of empathy, nor any

²⁵ Latour uses the notion of *accountability* to define the adequacy (*adaequatio*) between the 'performances' recorded in the metamorphic zone and the 'skills' (*compétences*) of the actor (chromosome, virus, angel, atom, etc.) whose profile the committed observer sketches out to explain these performances.

²⁶ Bateson, *Mind and Nature*, 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-13.

²⁸ "Rather, they would meet the primrose with recognition and empathy. By aesthetic, I mean the pattern which connects" (*Ibid.*, 8).

carcinomorphism that transforms man into a crustacean in order to knock down his complacency and teach him humility in the face of the wonders of living things.

POSTCARD °10. RES MAMMALIA. What stops the breeder and makes her calm down is therefore a moment of "morphism" enveloping a movement of "recognition" and "empathy". The goats' *Noli me tangere* reminds her of the experience of incarnation in a body susceptible to suffering (*patior*). Just as her goats are equipped with udders (*pectus*), which she was about to manipulate without consideration or thoughtfulness, she herself is equipped with breasts (**pectorina*) which she knows can hurt whenever they are either groped rashly or fumbled at clumsily. The sensitive mammals of mammalian animals provide the "pattern which connects" and triggers empathy. The experience of this connection does not imply any redistribution of agency, or any anthropomorphic projection. It saves us from having to resort to some reminiscence of animist ontology or to some "Indian horizon of modernity."²⁹ It is not the breeder who lends a "soul" to the goats, it is the goats who lead the breeder back to her "body". If we really want to translate this experience into Descolian ontological terms, we have to resort to Analogism rather than Animism: the breeder is reincorporated – both in her own body and in the situation – through the perception of an analogy between these mammalian bodies (with their sensitive udders) and her own neglected body, left behind in the cooling bed. This analogy of form or morphological kinship produces the *recognition* that triggers *empathy* and stops the aggression dead in its tracks.

The Greek word for "recognition" is *anagnorisis*. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, *anagnorisis* is the final twist in the tragic story, and it takes the singular form of a revelation of *philia* - 'kinship' or 'affinity' - that had not been recognised until then (Oedipus recognises that he has killed his father, Agave recognises that she has torn the flesh of her son Pentheus, etc.). In the tragic context, this revelation triggers an explosion of terror and pity: "terror" at the power of fate as a kind of *super-agent* that acts upon us and ridicules our freedom; and "pity" at the weakness of all human lives and their sad illusion of living in the active voice. The episode in the barn offers a different version of *anagnorisis*: it is the final turn, not of a tragic narrative, but of a pastoral narrative or idyllic piece. Instead of the agentive crisis – the violent redistribution of agentivities (the hero concedes to fate the status of sole agent) – which provokes feelings of terror and pity, we have the recognition of a shared suffering – the *potentia patienti* of bodies – which provokes a double emotion of surprise without terror and empathy without mournful pity. Whereas in tragedy, the lesson of *anagnorisis* concerns the distinction, the incommensurable distance between gods and men (the ones act, the others are acted upon), the lesson of pastoral care is the strong kinship that the history of life has created between living forms. It is not a question of agency, it's a question of morphology. It is not about wilful 'persons', it is about sensitive 'bodies'.

²⁹ Camille de Toledo, *Le Fleuve qui voulait écrire. Les auditions du parlement de Loire* (Paris: Les Liens qui Libèrent, 2021), 17.

POSTCARD °11. EGOMORPHISMS. The term *egomorphism*, which commonly refers to the mechanism by which humans project their feelings onto non-human entities, has a whole different meaning in zoology. It means that an animal has a "goat-like form", from the Greek αἴξ, αἰγός meaning 'goat'³⁰. What happens in the barn between the goats and their breeder is an example of egomorphism much less in the first sense of the term than in its second: in the moment of confusion when the pain inflicted on "mammal-bearing" bodies is experienced in her flesh by a human mammal as power to suffer (*potentia patiendi*), the latter sees herself reincorporated into the body she was bullying and manhandling instead of caring for. That morning, the barn is indeed "*a place of exchange*": in a kind of "*Zugleichsein*" (Schiller) or profound identity that recalls the equivalence between the order of freedom and the order of necessity in the denouement of tragedy, the two meanings of "egomorphism" suddenly become one: there are more similitudes than differences between being a human and being a goat, since the human species and the goat species are both members of the mammalian class, and a long series of morphological analogies (formal interconnections) produces multiple opportunities for recognition and empathy between two very different individuals of the class.

Nota bene. Let us imagine that the breeder was never a body. Let us imagine that she really is a pure *res cogitans*, acting and governing the backward world of things by will alone. When she saw the goats retreat and keep their distance, she would not have felt any sense of 'empathy', because her lack of a body would have prevented her from 'recognising' the power to suffer at the origin of this retreat. She would have seen it only as a *caprice*³¹ (whim), as the natural reluctance of one agent to bend to the will of another. She would have turned the episode into a struggle of agentivities. Her triumphant will would have been given free rein. By the willpower alone, she would have caught a goat, milked its udder without mercy, reduced it to rubble if the goat had struggled under the pain, and obtained milk even at the cost of bloodshed. With no morphology, and therefore no way of experiencing the suffering of another body by analogy, nothing would have triggered compassion for the goat's suffering. Yet in this episode, the goats are not "stubborn" and retreat to the back of the barn, not as strong heads but as weak bodies. Their *noli me tangere* is the expression, not of *res agens*, but of *res patens*, i.e. things subject to suffering.

POSTCARD °12. THREE ROOMS, THREE ATMOSPHERES. If Bateson brings a crab into the anatomy classroom, it is because a crab has no face. A face attracts and fascinates. When an animal has a face, we look it in the eye – as we look at each other – and this focus humanises it by blurring its anatomy. The resulting empathy is falsely interspecific. Bateson's experiment requires the students not to recognise themselves in the trompe-l'oeil of a human face, but in the body of an animal of a completely different nature, with no obvious kinship. The important thing is that the crab's shape suddenly jumps out at them and they see themselves reflected in it. The shock

³⁰ See, for example, *Clavipes aegomorphus*, the long-horned beetle that eats the bark of poplars.

³¹ Word derived from the Latin *capra*, "goat", as a hard-headed animal.

of this anagnorisis – I am related to this crab spread out before my eyes – is equivalent to the stupor experienced by the *res cogitans* when pain entangles it in the ailing body that it had forgotten. Bateson's experience is an 'aesthetic' experience³² – a perceptive event – which uses the forms of the living to break down the (mis)knowledge that his students have of themselves, cloistered in their species like Narcissus bent on his captive face, and invites them to recognise themselves in the intimate otherness of the bizarre morphologies of all creatures. In this strange contemplation, in its moment of vertigo and loss of self, there is undoubtedly a shiver akin to the old sacred terrors. The crab, at that moment, is what Latour calls a "being of metamorphosis", in other words a psychogenic force, an archaic archetype that shakes the defence formations behind which the ego has retreated, and promises, on the horizon of this crisis, a cure in the form of a less cramped, less starved ego.

Arne Naess reformulates the Batesonian notion of the '*pattern which connects*' in his theory of the '*interconnectedness*' of all living things. He replaces the aesthetic regime of the perception of forms by an ontological reflection on the need to think of each living thing within the totality of ecosystemic interconnections that make its existence possible and without which it would wither away. As a living being, man is bound to realise himself (*self-realization*) by abandoning an overly narrow conception of the ego in favour of a much broader and deeper one that Naess calls the « ecological self », and which encompasses the entirety of the earth – plants, animals, soil, oceans, atmosphere, etc. – on which he is dependent for his survival.³³

In the episode in the barn, the perception of the interconnection of forms unfolds neither in the realm of aesthetics (Bateson) nor in the realm of ontology (Naess), but immediately gives rise to an experience of an ethical nature. The empathy felt by the breeder, instead of deducing from its first stroke of violin bow a whole symphony of perceptual implications, is immediately translated into action or, more precisely, into an hindrance of action. Like Bateson's students, and like the egotistical ego in Naess's text, the breeder has what we call a 'moment of revelation' that unlocks her perspective and releases her from the hold she had arrogated over herself and the situation. Her sudden introduction to the ethical regime paradoxically functions as a liberation. "First you calm down", says the end of the text. It also means: "Breathe". Ethical life breaks into the narrow life of the ego, manoeuvring and stuck in its world of mere means, like the beautiful Leonora in Florestan's prison: "*O welche Lust, in freier Luft den Atem leicht zu heben!*"

³² Bateson was pleased that the students they confronted with the crustacean, all beatniks, had no scientific training: "*Their bias was aesthetic*," he wrote. [*By aesthetic, I mean responsive to the pattern which connects. (Mind and Nature, 8).* Bateson's emphasis.

³³ On the notions of interconnectedness, self-realization and the ecological self, see Arne Naess, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," in *The Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess*, Alan Drengson, Bill Devall (eds.) (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011), 81-97.

POSTCARD °13. LIBERA NOS A MALO. The herd's reaction to the brusque gestures of the farmer, and the consequences of this reaction, make the goats what Latour calls, in his *Enquête sur les modes d'existence*, "beings of morality" (*êtres de la moralité*), that is to say a class of beings whose mode of existence presupposes a shift towards the moral problem and places the relationship we have with them on ethical ground. It is customary to confuse these "beings of morality" with persons: unlike an object or a thing, a person is an end in itself and cannot be considered "merely as a means". It is argued that there is an urgent need to represent all non-human entities as persons in their own right if we are to put an end to their exploitation and destruction. Polar bears are people, glaciers are people, oceans are people. We sincerely believe that this personification and anthropomorphism are the only way to turn these entities to be defended into "beings of morality". *Now observe* (in the rhetorical manner of Ruskin) the cunning of modern reason: on the pretext of tolerance, by jumping headlong into a multinaturalistic ontology, we profess a peculiar kind of animistic Cartesianism. The whole *res extensa* is metamorphosed into *res cogitans*. All living beings are invited to sit at the banquet of subjects and take their share of the feast, on the express condition that they leave behind their accoutrements of scales, hair, feathers and bark and poses as disembodied humans, abstractions that speaks and thinks. And now the rivers are writing, the glaciers are ranting, the forests are raving and summoning men to judgement.

To speak of 'persons' in relation to goats – and *a fortiori* forests and rivers – is to short-circuit the experience of the metamorphic zone. What kind of performance registers the presence of a person? What the breeder encounters in the barn, what suddenly wakes her from her dreary somnambulism, are beings endowed like herself with a faculty of suffering or *potentia patiendi*, in other words, living and breathing bodies. The *noli me tangere* expressed by their attitude is a *noli me laedere*: they shy away from being hurt. In the "Sixth Meditation", Descartes gives proof of the union of soul and body through the experience of suffering: "For if it were not so, when my body is wounded, I, who am only a thinking thing, would not feel pain for that reason, but I would perceive this wound by understanding alone, as a pilot perceives by sight whether something is breaking in his ship". Subjects cannot suffer, they can only study, reflect upon and define suffering. Persons cannot suffer; they can only sue anybody who wrongs them and assert against him or her the "rights of their person". The *potentia patiendi* is an impersonal power that falls short of the modern distinction between things and persons. Descartes said "*quasi permixtio*". The goats' recoil is neither an act of will nor a physiological reflex (for example, the reaction of the nerves to a sting). It is a mixture (*permixtio*) of the physical and the psychic, the "performance" of an incarnation.

POSTCARD °14. PERSONA NON GRATA. In her powerful *La Personne et le sacré*, Simone Weil sets out to demonstrate that, despite common opinion, there is nothing sacred in the notion of "person" or "human person" (*la personne humaine*). The "sacred" character of a being emanates from something more immediate and profound than a legal abstraction, from

"something which, despite all the experience of crimes committed, suffered and observed, invincibly expects good to be done to it and not evil."³⁴ What is sacred and makes somebody a "being of morality" is his instinctive reluctance to be harmed. Now, "the cry of painful surprise that the infliction of evil arouses in the depths of the soul is not something personal."³⁵ What is there "in the depths of the soul", if not that crepuscular zone where the soul merges into the flesh and its power to suffer? This is what is sacred: the soul crying out for *its* flesh. There is no need to turn a goat into a "person", no need for anthropomorphism to be sensitive to that "something that [...] invincibly expects us to do it good" instead of hurting it. Every fibre of the goat's being rejects as scandalous anything that would harm it instead of benefiting it. "Good, writes Simone Weil, is the only source of the sacred." All living beings want to be treated well and cannot understand being made to suffer. Any hindrance to the good it wants for itself, any pain inflicted on it, is perceived as sacrilege, and this sacrilege exceeds and precludes any qualification of a legal nature. It is a more essential crime, a crime against "naked life", even if Weil never uses this terminology. Referring to a passer-by crossing the street, she writes: "It is neither his person nor the human person in him that is sacred to me. It is him. All of him. His arms, his eyes, his thoughts, everything. I would never harm any of that, but my scruples are infinite."³⁶ In other words, she could not bring herself to harm or hurt even a hair on this passer-by's head. What frightens her in him and fills her with infinite scruples is what must be called his *potentia patiendi*, the fact that he could be inflicted with the most minute suffering, whereas palpites in him "that deep, childlike part of the heart that always expects the good."³⁷ The notion of person comes much later than this deep-seated indestructible urge: it is a form of defence, a legal construct used to vindicate one's rights in a conflict of interests. The judicial notion of "offence against the human person" (*atteinte à la personne*) makes it possible to penalise and charge one's adversary. Obligations towards 'persons' are a matter for the courts. The sacred has nothing to do with those complex and lengthy procedures. It has the obviousness of love that fills us with attention, shackles our hands with "infinite scruples" and whose injunction we cannot shun.

POSTCARD °15. FORMS AND THE SACRED. Weil's critique of the notion of the person and the inadequate protection it affords living beings against the various assaults, from the most trivial to the most criminal, that one might wish to inflict on them, this critique helps us to get rid of the illusion that anthropomorphising non-human beings is the best or even the only way of obliging human beings towards them and thus protecting them. Take this mountain I'm looking at. Do I really need to go through the fiction that it is a person, an agent or a subject in order to take an interest in it and feel concerned by its well-being and conservation, that is to say, to

³⁴ Simone Weil, *La Personne et le sacré*, pref. by Giorgio Agamben (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2017), 28.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p28.

perceive the categorical imperative – full of prohibitions, scruples and *noli me laedere*³⁸ – that makes it stand up in front of me, vertiginous and massive, in the very specific mode of "beings of morality". All I have to do is be sensitive to its morphological aspects and a series of interconnections and formal analogies immediately informs me about its good or its bad condition and arouse in me either delighted or distressed feelings of empathy. I find myself in a metamorphic zone and my aesthetic experience turns into an ethical event.

Every being wants its own good. Let us call this power to persevere in one's being and to will that by which it profits: the *potentia fruendi*. The real opposite of *potentia patiendi* or "power to suffer" is not, as we might think, *potentia agendi*, but *potentia fruendi* or "power to profit by", just as we say of a lettuce plant that it suffers from frost (*patitur*) or that it enjoys or profits by rain (*fruitur*). Anything that grows can atrophy; anything whose survival depends on its ability to profit is liable to deteriorate when profitable conditions are not met. Without any anthropomorphism, a mountain, a pasture, an animal or a glacier immediately impose themselves as "beings of morality", bearers of ethical imperatives, in the eyes of anyone who is sensitive enough or attentive enough to register their performances (lustre, colour, humidity, size, thickness, density, liveliness, elasticity, tone, etc.) and to deduce from a series of morphological analogies with her or his own condition their state of plenitude or their state of depletion, respectively experienced, the one, as an expression of their *potentia fruendi* and, the other, as a reversal of this power into a *potentia patiendi*. A minimum of habit enables us to recognise whether or not a being's vital needs – that is, the conditions of its *potentia fruendi* – are being met, and therefore to rejoice or suffer for it. "*Sunt lacrymae rerum*,"³⁹ Virgil's beautiful verse, is all the more beautiful and all the more true if we fully respect its metaphorical dimension without personifying stones by giving them cheeks, tears and a soul to weep.

In what Latour calls the *nouveau régime climatique*, human ways of life and modes of production are the direct cause of the critical state of health of the earth's life forms. The *potentia fruendi* of most of these forms is being reversed into a *potentia patiendi*, and their altered or damaged morphologies are opposing man's exactions with a growing force of ethical constraint. The subdued performance of their *Noli me tangere* is undoubtedly less spectacular than super-predators as crocodiles and hurricanes, but the warning produced by these hypertrophied *agencies* is a bully's argument, not an ethical lesson. Playing force against force is not the best way to put an end to violence. It is often a pretext for escalation. Opposing our negligence with the categorical imperative of the power to suffer inscribed in the very forms of "moral beings" is perhaps a better way of achieving the same goal.

Nota bene. In the metamorphic zone, we study the 'performances' of the thing to be identified. Latour is looking for an "agent" behind these performances, and is thus equating the notion of performance with the notion of action. But what about landscapes, air quality, animal

³⁸ *Laedere* means "to wound", "to damage" or "to injure" (see "lesion").

³⁹ "There are tears of things" (Virgil, *Aeneid*, I, v. 461)

morphologies strangely modified by toxic substances⁴⁰? What we need to be aware of is not so much their actions as what sports medicine calls their *état de forme* (state of health). We need to be attentive to the fact that they are *en forme* (in shape) or not, in other words to the more or less free or thwarted deployment of their *potentia fruendi*. To exist is to perform, i.e. to persevere in one's own form. The form is the "soul" of the body or, as Aristotle would say, its entelechy, its "principle of evolution" (*archè metabolès*). In the meta(*morphic*) zone, we identify 'per(*form*)ances' and deal in "*morphisms*". It's all about 'forms', to the point where it seems superfluous to interfere with this coherence by introducing the notion of agent. It is the performance of its morphology that informs us whether a being is in shape (*fruitur*) or suffering (*patitur*). Because of the interconnections and morphological analogies between ourselves and all living forms, we recognise its *état de forme* and respond to it in an empathic way, either with anguish or with joy. As Bateson's posthumous work *Angels Fear. Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred*⁴¹ suggests, there is a feeling of the sacred as soon as there is recognition of a formal interconnection and therefore a feeling of unity between the different forms deployed by living things. For our purposes, this means that form is the "mode of existence" – and the mode of performance – of "beings of morality".

POSTCARD °16. YOU TALKING TO ME? Bateson speaks of "empathy and recognition", but reports no sign of compassion from any of his students bent over their freshly boiled crustacean relative. The interconnection of all living things, which they are invited to experience, remains a matter of knowledge and representation. The lab bench is a "metamorphic zone" reserved for the study of a certain mode of existence, that of « beings of reference", i.e. the "quasi-objects" of scientific knowledge. A barn with animals is a completely different 'zone' and a completely different "place of exchange". It is a place of complicity and a zone of conflict devoted to the negotiations of that *vita laborans* that Hesiod so aptly refers to as "Works and Days". Between the breeder and her animals, the interplay of means and ends is of the utmost importance. In a striking example of Kantian categorical imperative, the ending of our fragment crowns the goats as "beings of morality":

Soon they are all standing at the other end of the barn. They stare at me without moving. First, you calm down.

Who is speaking in this excerpt? Who is uttering this injunction, formulating this imperative? Too quick a reading would lead us to conclude that this is a sentence in free indirect speech, whose translation into indirect speech would be: "They stare at me without moving and tell me to calm down first." The incongruity of this reading is quite obvious. The breeder is not

⁴⁰ For example, for Cornelia Hesse-Honegger's radioactive bugs, see Hugh Raffles, *Insectopedia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010).

⁴¹ Gregory Bateson, Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear. Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred* (New York: Bantam, 1988).

Marinette and her goats do not talk to her like the farm animals in Aymé's *Les Contes du Chat-perché*. A second reading maintains the hypothesis of free indirect speech, but changes the speaker. It is the farmer who speaks. Translation in indirect speech: "They stare at me without moving. I tell myself to calm down first." The awkwardness of such an alternative is quite obvious. Neither reading seems able to explain the economy of the excipit. Ann Banfield argues that Flaubert's sentences in free indirect speech could never have been said in a communicative situation.⁴² It is impossible to trace them back to the direct speech they are supposed to translate. She shrewdly calls these propositions "unspeakable sentences." The problem with our clause, which has all the naturalness of a spoken sentence, is not that it is impossible to "say" – direct speech suits it just fine: "First you calm down!" – but that there is nobody to say it. It is not an unspeakable sentence, it is – and this is just as uncanny – a sentence without a speaker.

Prudence suggests that we start with the performance that this strange imperative without a specific speaker brings to mind. It sounds like a sample of what is usually called the "voice of the conscience". This inner voice, although not 'spoken' – scrupulous people do not hear voices – can nevertheless be 'registered'. Both aspects can be found in the imperative of our clause. It offers a valuable insight into the exact composition of this silent voice, which only exists as a report. It does not fall from the sky; it is neither formal nor *a priori*. On the contrary, it is tightly situated and always *a posteriori*. Like taste, which is found neither in the apple nor in the mouth, but in the meeting of the two, the injunction to calm down comes from an interaction in the metamorphic zone. The best way to describe this utterance is to compare it to the children phrase: « *Je te ferais dire que...* » (I'll have you know that...). It's not the goats that "say", it's not the farmer who "says": it's the goats that "make her say" (*lui fait dire*). The notion of '*making somebody say something*' perfectly describes the elocution in question and the montage of agencies its performance implies. Rousseau's "voice of the conscience" and Kant's "categorical imperative" presuppose a situation in which something like a 'subject' is capable of perceiving the performance of an unspoken sentence that only exists when perceived and translated by the receiver into an imperative form. Rather than a race of competing *agents* – who, the goats or the breeder, is *at the origin* of the injunction? –, we should talk about an *agencement*: opportunity makes the thief and «*agencement*» makes the ethical subject. In the ending of our fragment, the particular *diction* of the imperative is therefore an *inter-diction*, in other words the utterance whose enunciation is inter-active. The breeder says nothing that her goats do not *make her say*, but she has to *say* something for this *making* to take place.

POSTCARD °17. ETHICAL REGIME AND INTER-DICTION. This *faire dire* (making say), seen as the manifestation of the ethical mode of existence, resembles the "*faire faire*" (making do) whose operation Latour sets up, in order to free himself from the dead-end embrace of

⁴² Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1982).

deconstruction and constructivism.⁴³ Imagine Michelangelo in front of a block of pure Carrara marble. The idea of the future statue is no more in the block of stone than it is in the artist's mind. It is the artist who *makes* the statue, but it is a host of conditions and determinations – of material, historical time, style, religion – that *make* him *do* what he does. He caresses the block of marble, lives in its intimacy, his memory is overpopulated with ancient statuary, he lives in the time of Julius II, surrounded by a crowd of artists who produce around him, caught up in a series of conflicts about styles, orthodoxy, the history of the church, and so on. All this led him *to create* a statue that neither the Pope, nor the Greco-Latin marbles, nor the Counter-Reformation, nor any of his rivals would ever have *created* without him. Genius makes the age that makes genius. The same retroactive loop, which avoids the pitfall of two errors of logical type (history is made by great men; history would arrive at the same result without great men), operates in the *inter-diction* that results in the establishment of an ethical mode of existence. The expressions "moral instinct", "voice of the conscience" and "categorical imperative" are imperfect periphrases for this complex *interdiction*, because they are too anthropocentric (morality stems from the "moral subject") and too aprioristic (the moral law pre-exists all ethical interaction).⁴⁴ It is a long series of situated encounters, a long experience in the metamorphic zone that enables the establishment of an ethical mode of existence and the concomitant emergence of humans capable of infinite scruples and a motley crew of "beings of morality" (goats, mountains, oceans, landscapes, endangered cultures, etc.).

The concept of *inter-diction* as a performance internal to the metamorphic zone seems to describe the emergence of an ethical mode of existence much better than the notion of 'person', which has the triple disadvantage of existing only *a priori* as a defence formation and as an anthropomorphic abstraction. If you watch a river flowing or a glacier melting, what kind of performances allow you to conclude that you are looking at a 'person'? In truth: absolutely none. A 'person' is an argument, legally necessary in a conflict of interests, that does not originate in experience and that experience invalidates. If we personify rivers and forests and make them talk, if we find these ridiculous abstractions quite natural, it is because rivers and forests have become abstract to us by dint of no longer frequenting them and having broken the bonds of friendship that used to bind us to them. Despite the condescension and aesthetic nullity of the process, dressing up these estranged neighbours in 'person' seems the

⁴³ Latour, *Enquête sur les modes d'existence*, 167.

⁴⁴ Such a phenomenon of inter-diction may help to rethink the "moral subject" apart from any postulate of autonomy and inner legislation (moral law). Contrary to the law of "Great Divide" between subjects and objects, there can be no "moral subject" without "beings of morality" and no moral life without their actual encounter in the realm of experience. Rousseau's voice of conscience still depended a great deal on "pity" as the first passion of mankind. The Kantian categorical imperative isolated and disembodied this voice into a moral law of universal value that applied to all rational beings (whether or not they had a body). By rethinking moral life in terms of relationships and care, inter-diction moves away from the Kantian model and follows in the footsteps of Carol Gilligan's seminal book *In a different voice. Psychological, Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

only way to make them respectable and deserving our protection. But for those who share its existence and know its habits, a landscape is not abstract, and the fabric of the life they share with it is woven of *inter-dictions* that are its existential atmosphere. For these *inter-dictions* to thrive, the riverside dweller only needs a handful of morphological analogies to inform her or him about the state of the river, about the fragile equilibrium of its *potentia fruendi*, about the risks of it reversing into *potentia patiendi*. This recognition immediately triggers her or his capacity to respond with empathy. This empathic response immediately establishes the river as a "being of morality" and introduces the ethical mode of existence.

CLOSURE. One last comment before closing the barn door. On that rainy morning, the goats introduced themselves to their breeder as "beings of morality". They are not agents (as they are in the episode about the path to be taken), they are not persons (as they might become if they had to be made "legal subjects" in a courtroom dispute over mistreatment, abuse or acts of cruelty). Their performance lies entirely in their ability to make one say things, in other words to produce a phenomenon of *inter-diction* between them and their breeder, which manifests itself in the form of a kind of dictated voice, never formulated and yet reported. The existence of a 'being of morality' depends on this moment of discontinuity, which is a risky passage. Depending on who receives the injunction, the phenomenon of inter-diction may never take place. We can remain insensitive to a suffering landscape. According to Latour, each mode of existence has its own regime of veridiction. In the case of "beings of morality", rather than a regime of veridiction, we should probably speak of a test of inter-diction. No metadiscourse of verification can rule *a priori* on the conditions under which the existence of such beings is or is not proven. There are no proofs of their existence. The only way to know them is to test them. They come into existence if and only if inter-diction takes place. If what we are used to calling *la voix de la conscience* begins to speak to us, check our action and overpower us with scruples, then we know we are in the presence of a "being of morality."