

# SINGULARITY AND DEGREES OF EMBODIMENT

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## Resumen

Este ensayo pretende esbozar un marco general para el análisis de fenómenos semánticos, en términos de la distinción entre contextos de “significados fuertemente encarnados” y “significados débilmente encarnados”. Se elaboran sugerencias sobre esta distinción presentes en los escritos de Wittgenstein, Polanyi, A. Burms y H. De Dijn. Después de explicar el lugar de este marco dentro de las teorías contemporáneas acerca del significado como relevancia, me concentro sobre la singularización como uno de los aspectos del significado fuertemente encarnado. “Pérdidas” de encarnación fuerte reflejan problemas de ‘hypo-singularidad’, o ‘hyper-singularidad’; al mismo tiempo, ejemplos que se relacionan con nombres propios, indexicales y ritualización muestran que la aparición y desaparición de significado expresa una lógica paradójica de reversiones entre lo singular y lo genérico.

## Abstract

This article attempts to outline a framework for an analysis of phenomena of meaning in terms of a distinction between contexts of ‘strongly embodied meanings’ and contexts of ‘weakly embodied meanings’, thus elaborating indications pointing to such a distinction in the writings of Wittgenstein, Polanyi, A. Burms and H. De Dijn. After accounting for the place of this framework within contemporary views concerning meaning-as-relevance, I focus on singularization as one aspect of strong embodiment of meanings. ‘Losses’ of strong embodiment reflect problems of ‘hypo-singularity’ or ‘hyper-singularity’; at the same time, examples relating to proper names, indexicals and ritualization show that appearance and disappearance of meaning express a paradoxical logic of reversals between the singular and the generic.

## 0. A touch of magic

In *Baisers volés*, the third part of his Antoine Doinel cycle, François Truffaut explores the real and imaginary amorous experiences of Antoine Doinel as a young man. At one time, in the margin of his rather unstable attempts at starting a professional career, Antoine gets involved with Fabienne Tabard, the wife of the director of the big shoe shop where he is employed. Or rather, Antoine has fallen in love with her, and as the lady is amused (and flattered) by his highly labored *avances*, he manoeuvres himself into an imagined affair. Of course, his old girl friend Christine (whom he will eventually marry) is troubled by this imaginary, or perhaps not so imaginary relationship; she had always remained more or less present in Antoine’s more real dealings with the world. However, Antoine persuades himself of the dullness of Christine’s personality, now that he is seeing such a sophisticated lady. One night, while shaving, he is standing before the mirror, and, facing his own image, he pronounces the name of his

new love. To Antoine, the name *Fabienne Tabard* sounds much more refined and aristocratic than the 'banal' *Christine Darbon*. He repeats the name of Fabienne, tastes it, smells and touches it, making it resonate with the sound of his own name. As he reiterates and augments the speed of his recitation, the sound of the names reverberates on the mirror of his susceptible mind. In order to make a kind of crucial test about the affinities or repulsive forces that should or should not reign between himself, the woman of the shoe shop, and his ordinary girl friend, he engages in a real derwishes' dance of sounds that should answer his quest and decide about their fates and his own: *Fabienne Tabard / Antoine Doinel / Christine Darbon / Fabienne Tabard / Antoine Doinel / Christine Darbon / Fabienne Tabard / Antoine Doinel / Christine Darbon / ...*

### 1. Paraphrasability

What, in fact, do examples of 'weird' uses of linguistic and other symbolic expressions, such as the foregoing, exemplify in terms of the possibilities of language to convey meanings? In the following, I will attempt to place several kinds of examples within a general framework of types of meaning.

In § 531 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, we read: "We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.) In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.)"<sup>1</sup>

Let us call, for brevity, the first mentioned mode of signifying and understanding the mode of paraphrasable meaning, the second the mode of non-paraphrasable meaning. Nowhere in this section or in the surrounding sections does Wittgenstein give any clarifications or examples of what, in linguistic meaning, constitutes the paraphrasable. But he does explicitly indicate paradigmatic cases of non-paraphrasable meaning: look at art, music and poetry, he says. An overly quick line of criticism would run as follows. Is it not significant that it is typically in the realm of the aesthetic that we have to look for the non-paraphrasable? Here, the suspicion is raised that really only aesthetic *expression* and something like (perlocutionary) *effect* are at stake, with the attached suggestion that we are not faced with a phenomenon of meaning properly speaking: we would not be allowed, then, to put the phenomenon under a common denominator with the 'real', *i.e.*, paraphrasable meanings.

Leaving aside the question what, exactly, Wittgenstein had in mind, the notion of what we could call non-paraphrasable meaning is certainly intended

<sup>1</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976, p. 143f.

by him as a genuine case of meaning: in § 527, he says that "understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think. What I mean is that understanding a sentence lies nearer than one thinks to what is ordinarily called understanding a musical theme". But the musical traits (rythm, tempo, dynamics...) one would point to in the comparison, do not belong to undescribable, unstructured parameters: they reveal themselves in manifest features, subject to highly structural treatment. Indeed, the analogy is about questions such as "why is just *this* the pattern of variation in loudness and tempo?" And the sameness of rythm alluded to, between a linguistic and a musical sentence, indicates that we have something like "the same pattern. (One says, 'Don't you see, this is as if a conclusion were being drawn' or 'This is as it were a parenthesis', etc.)" (*ibid.*). So the center of the comparison is the notion of pattern, or structural form. Thus, if something would account for the inclusion, within the sphere of meaning, of the zone of the non-paraphrasable in music, art and language alike, it is the presence of form. There is no general form of propositions, to be sure, and no general form of expressions within other symbolic genres either, but there is, in general, the presence of pattern or form. What should interest us here, is that via this notion of form, there is a reference to a common notion of meaning or signification in a more than metaphorical sense, and, to that extent, the distinction between two zones or aspects of meaning is really a distinction within one domain.

## 2. Degrees of embodiment: the framework

This paper is not an exegesis of Wittgenstein's thought. In the following attempt, I use the distinction between the paraphrasable and the non-paraphrasable as a *Leitfaden* to a more encompassing feature of meaning, both linguistic and nonlinguistic: the degree of what could be called, with a term coined by the Louvain philosophers Arnold Burms and Herman De Dijn (and inspired by Wittgenstein and Michael Polanyi), 'embodiment of meanings'.<sup>2</sup> By hypothesis, the non-paraphrasable will correspond to strong degrees of embodiment. The degree of embodiment of the meanings produced in a certain context is the crucial notion for a framework within which to discuss the relations between diverse symbolical practices. Religion, art, literary language, and certain

<sup>2</sup> A. Burms, "The Sound of Words: A Neglected Perspective in Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language", in D.A. Boileau & J.A. Dick (eds.) *Tradition and Renewal. Vol. I.* Leuven: University Press, 1992, p. 167-180. See also A. Burms, "Proper Names and Magical Symbols", in *Leuvense Bijdragen* 67(1978), p. 309-317; and A. Burms & H. De Dijn, *De rationaliteit en haar grenzen.* ["Rationality and its Limits."] Leuven/ Assen: Leuven University Press/ van Gorcum, 1986. For Polanyi, see M. Polanyi and H. Prosch, *Meaning.* University of Chicago Press, 1975. Among other philosophers having dealt with phenomena that are related to the topic of embodiment of meaning, one might mention Merleau-Ponty, Joseph Margolis, A. Danto, S.K. Langer, ...

fragments of ordinary language and practice would be typical contexts of strongly embodied meanings; for the latter fragments, one might think of linguistic practices expressing commitments with respect to certain types of values and interests (language of trust, stately language, aesthetic poignancy, ...). Contexts of weak embodiment, in turn, would be paradigmatically exemplified by scientific discourse, especially designed artificial (formal) or pseudo-natural languages (Esperanto, Basic English), fragments of ordinary language such as used in news bulletins and instruction manuals (or more generally: language of communication as notification).

### *Axes of opposition*

Axes of gradual oppositions between the respective kinds of contexts may be described in terms of several (presumably not mutually independent) dimensions. I will distinguish between

- (i) the character and degree of *singularity* of the sign and the object signified, with attached questions concerning the possibility of integrating the sign/object into global conceptual surroundings;
- (ii) a dimension of *articulation*: the degree of dependence of meanings upon the mode of expression chosen, and, connected with that, their 'vulnerability' with respect to material changes in the carrier;
- (iii) degrees of attainability through *internal* or, alternatively, external *points of view*, and, closely related, the way meanings inhabit the *traditions* (or types of connections between old and new meanings) they belong to.

Here, I will examine contexts, mainly, of strongly embodied meanings in terms of the first axe of oppositions mentioned: the character of singularity of the sign and the object mentioned. My main heuristic guide will be the phenomenon of loss of meaning, and the analysis of examples thereof: the ways of loss of meaning may give indications about the ways meanings had been constituted in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

Before turning to the peripetias of singularizing meanings, I want to flesh out the roughly indicated frame of analysis of semantic embodiment a bit. So I begin by considering two alternative views of the way mainsprings of meaning relate to each other; both imply, albeit more implicitly than explicitly, a denial of

<sup>3</sup> One preliminary notice may be in place: In speaking the language of meanings throughout and unscrupulously, one should not *eo ipso* be forced into the scenario of an ontological commitment to special entities called 'meanings'. The question as to whether a translation of the terminology suggesting a stance of 'semantic essentialism' into less committed language may succeed, is left open here. However, it seems plausible that subsequent locutions suggesting an analysis of the form 'x means y' may be spelled out in terms of (circumstantial) locutions possessing a form corresponding to speaker's meaning. (Especially when the latter expression is not only read as 'S means (understands) y by x', but also, in a sense to be specified below, 'S fails to mean (understand) y by x'.

the view that an interesting opposition (even a gradual one, in terms of degrees of embodiment) can be made between contexts of meaningful discourse as ways of producing meaning. More precisely, both involve denying that a peculiar type of meaning, which could be termed 'meaning-as-relevance',<sup>4</sup> could be thought to arise in especially significant ways within contexts of strong embodiment.

### *Two Enlightenments*

What, in these views, are the tacit assumptions about the relations between the diverse spheres (science, everyday practices, art, ritual and religion) as constructions of meaning? What I have to say in this respect is rather schematic: the remarks, needed and sufficient for my purposes, are located on the level of ideal types of these views rather than on the level of detailed and diverging exemplifications of the ideas concerned.

In one view, now rapidly antiquating, the interaction between the sources and paths of meaning is in fact a one-way traffic. What decides about the true meaning (or meaninglessness) of a unit of signification, is pure objectified (scientific or, possibly also, philosophical) analysis. In the case of meaning-as-relevance in the manifest forms of life, only a detached analysis can show us the way from illusory attachments towards existing practices and modes of thinking to their true explanation *and* to their revision. Eventually only those practices or practice-fragments that stand the test will survive and will be sustained. I will call this version and this vision "the Old Enlightenment".

In a more sophisticated view of symbol and symbol formation, linguistic and semiotic meaning are but sediments, into peculiar symbolic systems, of what belongs to more encompassing processes, including meaning-as-relevance in all forms of life. Yet, all kinds of meanings appear to evolve on one scene as quickly shifting metamorphoses of one fluctuating and globalized signfic process. From philosophically correct puns, pictures and poems to airy exchanges on relevance and religion, from social statement to scientific spirituality, from technopia and therapeutic theology to virtual ritual in cyber celebrations, all meaning effects belong to the construction of the signfic world without any *genre* canons or demarcation lines among its several constituent symbolic practices. All semiotic processes are dealt with according to a pluriform/ plural but in the end unitarian model (instantaneous meaning globalized), as if a direct comparison between all of them as productions of content by means of symbols laid at hand. For instance, according to this model, meanings arising in the context of scientific traditions and meanings arising in the context of religious or aesthetic traditions, or in the arena of political thought or everyday life, are simply merged

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<sup>4</sup> Again, I use the term in accordance with the way it is introduced in A. Burms, "The Sound of Words", *a.c.*

in the course of a single line of argument. Or rather, it is not clear in the end whether the denial of privilege for any form of discourse calls for a chorus where each point of view is entitled to an equal voice, or, on the contrary, for protective belts, immunizing perspectives of diverging symbolic practices from even the principled possibility of mutual criticism (presumably because all perspectives are equally arbitrary).

Within such a view, the metaphorical, value-committed and polymorphous nature of all meaning creation is recognized, and metaphor, narrative, polysemy and the like are treated as cognitively fruitful and even indispensable in any domain of symbolic activity. Science, too, is shown to have a human face, and religion, not just theology, appears as an ongoing debate, an argumentative practice. That is to say, however, that such moves still allow religious and artistic meanings to be judged by the same kind of standards of significance as scientific or, say, political discourse. Thus, a *nouvelle alliance* among science and lifeworld might be just another, more sophisticated way of installing the (now enlightened) hegemony of the generalized enlightenment stance with respect to all forms of life. I will call this version "the 'New' or 'Enlightened' Enlightenment". What the two versions of the unitary model of meaning and significance have in common, is the idea that meaningful content is created in a roughly uniform way through all domains.

Several, mutually diverging (and very interesting) varieties of a suchlike view are presented in ways infinitely more subtle than could be suggested here; in this and the next subsection, I will take a quick glance at two examples. The first will be reviewed now; it is found in one quite peculiar tradition within contemporary thought which originated from a cross-fertilization between American pragmatism, Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms (as transferred by Susanne K. Langer), and analytic philosophy of language in the lineage of Nelson Goodman, Israel Scheffler, and Catherine Elgin. There is, in the works of these philosophers, a convincing argument to the effect that we need to achieve "a broad view of the reference of symbol systems as extending beyond language [and science] and encompassing also the arts", we need to recognize "the creative character of symbolism, issuing in those radically plural structures that shape the subject's worlds".<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, just how 'radically plural' the structures referred to here would have to be conceived, has never been made clear, since that theme arose in Cassirer's own work: and indeed, what would be needed for a clarification here, is a thorough reflection on the idea of 'cognitive function' ascribed by these authors to the field of what we call strongly embodied meanings.

### *Meaning globalized, meaning neutralized*

In the unitary model of meaning and interpretation, cognition is the central

<sup>5</sup> I. Scheffler, *Symbolic Worlds. Art, science, language, ritual*. Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.4.

theme. According to the Old Enlightenment, it is to be equated with informative content, which is considered to be the core of whatever carries meaning. The meaning of a (linguistic or nonlinguistic) phenomenon is a communicable idea or message, which is neutral with respect to the material mode or way it is expressed. The expression is identified with the coding of the idea, and message and code are conceived as separate aspects of the informational unit. Accordingly, linguistic meaning is content expressed in such a way that it is apt for paraphrase; relevance, in turn, is intrinsic insight into the cosmic order, or at least prudential application of vitally useful information.

A new variant of the Old Enlightenment view is maintained in cognitive science and (mainly 'internalist') philosophy of mind, and in some varieties of philosophies of language, where cognitive content is the core and the result of information processing in cognitive systems (human and non-human) in all departments of speech and experience, emotions and categories of relevance included. Meaning-as-relevance, in that case, is the fitness of a well-adapted system of collaborating zones in the individual cognizer, eventually supplemented with the well-functioning communication among two or several such systems recognizing each other's propositional attitudes as well as the respective aboutness of the propositions involved. (Sometimes, in more 'externalist' variants, the interpretation and adjustment of statements and meanings are seen to be the object of speakers' and hearers' triangulations).

Now, if the model of all meaning as neutral and paraphrasable were correct, the material constitution or embodiment of meanings would matter little. Actually, witting or unwitting proponents of the model could concede that material variations in expression affect the psychological or aesthetic effect and efficacy of the message, but the core (the idea itself) remains virtually untouched. The expression is not (part of) the meaning itself, after all; it belongs to pragmatics (the perlocutionary force), or to psychology. At most one could concede that (some form of) embodiment is a necessary condition for constituting, and, foremost, for communicating meaning. In that version, it may be an aspect of meaning, but it remains a separable one. The *particular* embodiment is not constitutive for what is being said. Borrowing a metaphor from mathematics, meaning is an invariant which is conserved under varying embodiments. The model claims that the core of all meaning is production and transfer of paraphrasable content: it is the model of *weakly embodied meanings*. This is a charitable interpretation and designation of a view which, often, comes dangerously close to a model of merely *disembodied* meaning.

In contrast, according to the New Enlightenment, not only is all meaning thoroughly embodied, and necessarily so; also, the variegated ways of this embodiment are shown. Moreover, there is no hard core of purely cognitive content; metaphor, evaluation and emotion are inevitably omnipresent, softening

up the allegedly brutest of facts. We are never in the space of mere literality and paraphrasability. There is no such thing as a detached stance, no external point of view, no cosmic exile. Every handling of symbols bears the marks of the handler; everything is permeated with traces of the human originator of meaning. Accordingly, no subjective/objective dichotomy, no fact/ value gap, no distinction between hard sciences and soft humanities (or even arts) are recognized.

This brings me to a second recent example of the Enlightened Enlightenment view; here, interestingly enough, pragmatism has been fused with the very wittgensteinian philosophy of forms of life, aptly interpreted as a defense of the 'manifest image' against (the claims of) the 'scientific image'. In this version,<sup>6</sup> all meaning is rooted in the manifest image (or images), so the scope and bearing of all claims and criteria are to be measured against the manifest values of the lifeworld.

The problem in this version is, in fact, solely, to see whether it is still possible to say anything at all about what renders some forms of meaning and discourse less embodied (or more embodied) than other ones. Perhaps the New Enlightener's paradigm of meaning should be called something like 'the model of *even tempered embodiment*' (to borrow a musicological expression). We are left with no significantly distinct degrees of embodiment, but, at best, one continuous spectrum, with metaphor, narrative and value on one end, and perhaps something like described (or constructed?) physical facts on the other. The question (which should be raised by this picture) of degrees of literality, of paraphrasability is not addressed. The problem, then, is that the operation of softening-up seems to discharge into a sea of significations where any distinctions one would be tempted to propose are drowned. Whereas in the Old Enlightenment view the contamination of degrees of embodiment was conjured by recognizing only a zone of objective meanings, here virtually no plurality of types or degrees of embodied meanings subsists as a serious object for a philosophical analysis (which is paradoxical, at least in the versions propounding a pluralism rooted in the priority of the manifest forms of life).

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<sup>6</sup> As it is developed in the pragmatico-'wittgensteinian' writings of Putnam and, subsequently, in articles by, *a.o.*, J. van Brakel. There is an hesitation about the road to be chosen along this path: shall the plurality of forms of life be defended in combination with a thesis of the 'priority of the manifest image', or will there merely be a granting of equal rights? Of course, the thesis just mentioned had been developed earlier, mainly in the late Husserl's writings. A general priority of meaning-as-relevance was claimed in the philosophy of the *Lebenswelt*, but, already there, this priority was mixed with a thesis about the *cognitive* priority of the manifest form(s?) of life. Unfortunately, it has never been convincingly made clear, as far as I can see, what the latter, *cognitive* priority of the manifest over the scientific image exactly consists in (except for the reliance of the evaluation of scientific claims, and of 'aims' set for science, and of epistemic and pragmatic values or 'virtues', possessing already some vague sense in 'the' manifest image). In particular, the concept of 'the' manifest has been extended and moulded to such an extent in the process of establishing the thesis, that the latter is virtually emptied of content.

What our two models -corresponding to two stages of the Enlightened views of meaning and embodiment- have in common, is the denial of (or at least indifference towards) the existence of especially strong degrees of embodiment. Both versions claim, furthermore, that there is no important difference between degrees of embodiment of meanings to be drawn: the two models taken together are variants of a broader model of *neutral embodiment of meanings*. Rather than dwelling on these views, however, I want to propose and develop the preliminaries, instead, to an alternative view, restricting my focus, for now, on one aspect: singularity in strongly embodied meanings.

### 3. Singularization and loss of meaning

Within each mode and context of meaning, as meanings are produced and circulated, the phenomena of momentary or ultimate, partial or total loss of meaning are part of the game. We are utterly familiar with descriptions, theories, ways of talking, icons, symbols and conventions being relinquished or superseded by other, rival congeners: old 'forms' pave the way for new ones. But especially in the field of strongly embodied meanings, it seems essential that, moreover, forms which seemed replete with relevance may appear empty in certain circumstances, even if the forms and the circumstances seemed to be of the appropriate kind. What is more, without this permanent possibility of meanings falling to pieces, "as in a dream in a slumber",<sup>7</sup> the very repletion of meanings may be inaccessible as well. Without the possible and actual disappearance of the seemingly replete meaning in unpredictable situations, the strongly embodied meaning might never have been able to appear as such in the first place: its strength and ability may be dependent upon the unexpected appearance of its disappearance, its ability of being disabled.

#### 3.1. Focusing on the singular 'points of condensation'

Another characteristic of contexts of strongly embodied meanings is the fact that meaning is much more dependent, here, on concrete or intuitive modes of realization than in the case of weak embodiment. A sample of scientific discourse may require illustration and other types of intuitive models (such as applications, graphs, etc.) to be sure; moreover, imagination and intuition are essential in the context of discovery. But these requirements are not, or at least not to the same extent, as intrinsic as in contexts where the strongly embodied meanings are tooled for their own sake. Strongly embodied meanings have to seize us in order to have any point at all. So they can live and survive only if they can find a point of application in our own sensibility; and in order to be able

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<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Parmenides*, 164d.

to do so, the signifying unit they belong to, itself needs singular points of 'anchoring' or embedding. In their material presentation, certain points, contingently determined, should become carriers of our attempts to grasp, seize and be seized. We must be seized, not by something like the general or abstract meaning of the work of art, but by its unique appearance, unique in the way it presents itself to us; contingent in its immediate appearance yet convincing us that it could not have been made otherwise. The best way to be persuaded of, and impressed by, this character of irreplaceability, this singular and detached identity of the work of art (or of any other complex of strongly embodied meanings), is actualized in the ability to find details or points of direct impact (such as metaphors or peculiar rhythm patterns) in the work, which allow us to see the whole singular work and its meaning as if it were projected and condensed into these even more singular points.

In a letter of March 24, 1863, Flaubert congratulates Ivan Turgenev on the occasion of the appearance in French of *Pervaya Lyubov'* (*First Love* (1860)), the miniature novel which had just been published in a Turgenev volume entitled *Nouvelles scènes de la vie russe*.<sup>8</sup> In this frame tale, the first-person narrator recounts a youthful passion. Flaubert writes: <sup>9</sup>"As for your *First Love*, I have understood it all the better as it properly recounts the story of one of my most intimate friends. [The friend Flaubert refers to is probably no-one else than Turgenev, P.C.] All the old romantics (and I, who have slept with the head on a dagger so often, am among them) must be grateful to you for this tale which recalls so much of their youth [...] One of your talents is in the invention of women ... But, dominating the whole story, no, the whole volume, there are these two lines: 'I had no ill feelings whatsoever towards my father. On the contrary, to me, he looked magnified, as it were'." (This is the comment the first-person narrator makes when recalling his own reaction (as the seventeen year-old hero of the story) at the discovery that his father had become the lover of the young woman he himself desperately loved.) Flaubert goes on to say: "To me, this is of a frightening profundity. Shall it be noticed? I cannot say. But for me, it just belongs to the sublime." To Flaubert, the sentence singled out by him surely represents both the key to the novel, and an embodiment of the perfect sentence, *la phrase inchangeable*.

I will call such particulars, singular points where the meanings are densely presentified or intensified, the 'points of condensation' (points of accumulation, of attachment) of the meaning embodied in the totality.<sup>10</sup> Often the whole of

<sup>8</sup> Paris, Dentu, 1863; traduction H. Delaveau. Besides the novella, the volume comprised the novel *Nakanune* (1860) (*On the Eve*; French title: *Elena*).

<sup>9</sup> Flaubert, *Correspondance*. Vol. II, p. 313.

<sup>10</sup> H. De Dijn and A. Burms use the notion of 'point of incarnation' or 'point of embedding' (*verankeringspunt*) in this connection.

the (non-paraphrasable) meaning, or crucial aspects of a signifying totality of the kind we are discussing, are 'assumed' or resumed in its condensation points; and the way the content expressed in these points represents the work as a whole is eminently non-paraphrasable.

In 1817, one among the many *Lieder* Schubert composed on poems by Goethe was the very simple strophic song *Liebhaber in allen Gestalten* (D.558) (on Goethe's *Ich wollt', ich wär ein Fisch*). What is Goethe's text about? The paraphrasable aspect of the content can be easily summarized: The *I* of the poem imagines himself metamorphosed, in quick succession, in a fish, a horse, a cart, an ape, a sheep, etc., all of course the better to offer his good offices to his (capricious) beloved. And in the end, he tells her just to take him as he is, or leave him. It would be difficult to find a poem more deliberately naive in respect of poetic 'content'. But listen to the rhythm of the simple German words of the first strophe: *Ich wollt', ich wär ein Fisch/ So hurtig und frisch;/ Und kämst du zu angeln;/ Ich würde nicht mangeln./ Ich wollt', ich wär ein Fisch/ So hurtig und frisch*. One could say that Goethe was performing an exercise in sound and rhythm and tempo, and enjoying it.

Now, listen to Schubert's song: it is immediately obvious that it adds yet another dimension (or rather, a world) to Goethe's poem. But it would be very hard to explain what the song does to change the character of the poem. What is especially striking in *Liebhaber in allen Gestalten*, however, is the way the idea of freshness of rhythm and tempo is illuminated and embodied, not merely in the transposition of paraphrasable content (the quick concatenation of the lover's metamorphoses) and literary form into a singular musical form conceived as a whole, but in one striking sound repetition and variation such as *frisch/fisch*: thanks to a combination of melody and rhythm (including the piano line in an essential way) and phonetics, it strikes the listener in a way (s)he could never be struck by a mere declamation of the poem.

As it happens to be the case, singularization may gravitate around distinguishable and localizable condensation points of the work; but the latter may also be scattered throughout the work or context, so as to produce a "shattering effect by the accumulation of seemingly unimportant details".<sup>11</sup>

Other examples of singularization by focusing on condensation points are based on the role of names (proper names) in the condensation of a certain kind of meanings. It is no coincidence that the fragments of literary and ordinary language which are apt for the constitution of contexts of strong embodiment, are coextensive with contexts where strong effects of indexicality (in an extended sense) play a major role. Those are the places in ordinary as well as in literary discourse where indexicals are ineliminable; in the first place, I would point

<sup>11</sup> As D. Magarshack commented on Gontcharev's *Oblomov* (1859) (the work and the character); see *Encyclopedia Britannica* ed. 1967, vol.19:809.

here to the indexical aspect of proper names. Some philosophically interesting aspects indexicals and proper names (considered as generalized indexicals) display within ordinary linguistic practices are not simply (derived from) logical properties, but are epistemological aspects intertwined with realities of an 'anthropological' nature. In particular, the behaviour of proper names (especially names of persons) within human practices, may oscillate between a neutral (historical, scientific) usage, weakly embodied, where proper names function as mere designators, and the strongly embodied (or 'ritualized') occurrence in contexts which highlight evocative force. Indexical elements such as proper names are interesting because of this oscillation between the weakly and the strongly embodied. In the argument of a historian, as a rule, proper names and dates function within a kind of *quasi*-coordinate language.<sup>12</sup> This neutral usage of proper names is also the current practice in ordinary life. However, on top of this 'coordinate usage', the case of strongly embodied proper naming is also essential in a human form of life, thus accounting for a double role proper names play in a variety of cases. Using personal names exclusively in the designative mode, especially in the case of personal contacts (as shorthand for something like: 'I am now referring to the person named *X*., and the person named *X*. happens to be you'; or even: '... happens to be the person I am speaking to right now'), would no doubt be a symptom of a serious pathology. The 'secondary' meaning is essential, in that it must take precedence in at least certain circumstances in the life of persons or of groups of people who happen to be collectively committed to some person or group or institution. Especially in the case of personal names, "a name becomes attached to its object to some extent and comes to form a part of it", as Michael Polanyi remarked.<sup>13</sup>

In our 'cover story' Antoine Doinel felt how the rhythm and intensity of his perception got raised by letting his cultivated affections fuse with the image of his beloved and his self-image, and with the names that are their material carriers. More generally, it is fair to say that in less fanciful examples, people are in general sensible to the category of meaning we have called 'meaning-as-relevance'. Without pretending to analyze the notion here, one could notice that in a number of cases at least, there is not only a discrepancy between meaning-as-relevance and informative content (the latter being the crucial notion in the opposite case of weak embodiment); often there is also an inverse proportion among both. The experiment carried out by Antoine Doinel, as well as more

<sup>12</sup> No historian, however, will seriously consider the possibility that proper names and other indexicals (in the generalized sense) such as dates, or descriptions containing indexicals, be substituted by space-time coordinates in a coordinate language of the physical geometry type (such as in Carnapian utopia's in the style of the *Logical Syntax of Language*).

<sup>13</sup> "From Perception to Metaphor", in M. Polanyi and H. Prosch, *Meaning*. University of Chicago Press, 1975, p.72.

sensible exercises performed by monks and by more common people of diverse obediences, consists in sometimes letting go of all informative content. The informative content which remains present in the proper name of a person is reduced to its bare reference to that person (and even that becomes more and more doubtful in the experiment considered here). In this sense, maximizing relevance could require, in a number of cases at least, minimizing the attention for (or the distraction by) certain sorts of information.

Let us now discuss in what ways the play of appearance and disappearance of strongly embodied meanings may mortgage such meanings, that is, either turn strongly into weakly embodied meanings, or merely make units functioning within contexts of strong embodiment pointless (in a redeemable or in an unredeemable sense). What are the mechanisms involving that kind of loss of strongly embodied meaning, that has to do with the characteristic of singularity under discussion? I will point to two opposite and complementary ways failures of singularization may obtain.

### 3.2. *Hypo-singularization*

This conglomerate of modes of losing track of strongly embodied meanings relates to the ways the latter cease to function as such through a failure to properly focus on the concrete material points of condensation. With apologies for the barbarisms, one could call the mechanism 'desingularization' or 'hypo-singularization' of contexts of singularized meanings. I see two distinct subtypes of this mechanism, and I shall call them respectively '*Fehlleistung*' regarding singularization points, and 'contamination among degrees of embodiment'.

#### 3.2.1. '*Fehlleistung*'

A first 'method' to lose singularity by hypo-singularization consists in a failure to utter or take into account the material element of singularization (the sound, the orthography or typeface of words, and especially of names) in the appropriate way. As we noted, linguistic contexts ruled by singularity are often contexts where indexicals play a major role. A failure to produce or reproduce the proper name, especially the personal name, appropriately, is experienced as interfering with the conditions for creating or maintaining the desired degree of embodiment.

It is obvious (particularly with proper names) that lapses of memory, of the pen, and foremost, of the tongue, may become memorable sins against singularity. From a certain point on, the slur is put upon the misnaming speaker (or writer) rather than on the person misnamed. Of those present at the event, who could ever forget the *acte manqué* of the speaker who, at one conference, introduced 'the famous philosopher *Davy Donaldson*'? Losses and misfits of singularity are not confined

to the role of proper names, though. They may be manifest in the range of other indexical elements in languages pertaining to segments of ordinary life and of science, such as dates. The symbolic nature of the forgotten anniversary will require some 'recovering' gesture or other, if the act of forgetting is to be, in turn, forgotten.

Neither is the phenomenon of loss and misfit confined to indexical elements and their role. The singularity may be concentrated in the sound of words or sound/idea combinations which are the supports of the (non-paraphrasable) meaning of the work of art. In the course of an argument, developed in a book by a famous (English-speaking) humanities scholar, we find the author 'quoting' from the *Auguries of Innocence*, in what may be supposed to be an ornamental reference, thus: "see[...] heaven in a grain of sand"... To quote from lines such as these in such a way becomes a significant thing in itself, albeit not in the way intended by the author who was quoting. Indeed, as the author goes on, this kind of "seeing [...]" is not a trick only poets can accomplish"!

In *Liebhaber in allen Gestalten*, there is the inimitable play with the German *-isch* sounds, already associated with everything that is *frisch* in the life of the spoken language: you can only say, either you hear it, or you don't. Thus, compare the interpretation of the song by an Anglophone singer with one by a 'native singer' of German: to the sensitive ear, an interpretation which would, in all other respects, be admirable, may be heavily diminished by the inadequate rendering of the required *-(i)sch* sound, because the association of ideas stands or falls by the associations carried by this sound.

Within religion, many examples pertain to the sphere of liturgical language. The reciting of the wrong liturgical text, or the accurate rendering of a liturgical formula in the wrong place, are not mere mistakes; in case the liturgy is still strictly and strongly invested with dignity, such failings demand some new ritual act or formula in order to rectify the harm and restore proportions in the symbolic order of words and things. The ritual fault is restored by superimposing a higher-level ritual act of purification. Moreover, letdowns may occur, not so much in clearcut violations of text and gesture, as in the proper sphere of the interpretation (or aesthetics of performance) of the gesture: the execution of a rite may suffer of poor inspiration or lack in serenity and grace, or other imponderable quasi-aesthetic or quasi-moral qualities bound to the singularity either of the detail or of the whole act as a unique 'work'. In much the same way as in the performing arts, a distinction can be made between, first, the identity and quality of the score, second, the correctness in the 'playing' of the score, and, third, within the area of the performance, the quality ('musicality') in the interpretation given to the (correctly played) score. In ritual, analogous questions connected with respecting or not respecting the singular aspects of meaning arise in all these areas, and the violations or mediocrities just mentioned emphasized difficulties with (non-scoreable or non-scored) aspects of performing a score.

### 3.2.2. Contamination among degrees of embodiment

To sum up, one subtype of desingularization or hypo-singularization of the strongly embodied consists in missing the point where well-determined singular meanings are breaking through, urging to be seized. This may happen either by failing to focus on the right singular term (and leaving the intention towards that term empty, so to say), or by focusing on the 'wrong' singular, in which case a contamination among singularized meanings occurs.

Another mode of hypo-singularization is not caused by a lack of focus or a wrongheaded focus on this or that 'singular' (the singularly singular, so to say), but by a lack of focus on the singular as such ('in general'). More precisely, it is due to the failure to tune one's expression and intentionality to the appropriate degree of embodiment. In that case, another type of contamination comes to the fore. If a symbolic expression which, on the basis of its typical characteristics of singularization, clearly belongs to the sphere of strongly embodied meaning, is, for one reason or another, delivered in one of the languages (or perhaps just the tone) of weaker embodiment, the singularity is also well lost. What happens here, is a kind of neutralization (rather than a violation), due to a contamination of the strongly embodied by the weakly embodied. (Of course, conversely, it may also happen that the weakly embodied meaning is delivered in a strongly embodied mode; but I will not be concerned with the effects of that kind of contamination here.)

Here too, indexicals and names provide ample exemplification. If instead of forgetting personal names, we substitute them by PIN-codes, we are in the 'wrong' realm of embodiment. A father of nine daughters may have trouble with lack of memory space for all their names (at least as they are to be applied to the right items), and he may find himself saddled with a problem of permanent *Fehlleistung*. Suppose, however, he chooses to settle his problem by the introduction of numbers (presumably a domain he masters better) in place of their names. Now he is saddled with contamination of degrees of embodiment (and a contamination of a rather high degree, I guess), at least when supposing the language of numbers to be weakly embodied (in itself, or perhaps only in its application to given zones of experience). It would be a case of drowning by numbers, *i.e.*, by the very entities that saved the man from drowning in his initial practical problem. Were he to replace the names by uniquely defining descriptions, a similar problem would arise, to be sure (unless, perhaps, they were poetic descriptions).

More importantly, when taking a paraphrase for a poetic phrase as an equivalent for the original, success is guaranteed - if the aim was semantic destruction. Here, no confusion or replacement with another phrase of the same kind arises, but a replacement with an attempted explanation; and the latter must *eo ipso* belong to a different symbolic register, even in case the explanation

deals with the same 'objects' as the original phrase.<sup>14</sup> The teacher 'explaining the meaning' of a novel to his class, and checking the pupils' ready knowledge as with a physics problem; the dating service starting the instruction of its clients by means of a textbook course on relations among the sexes; the priests who came with the proposal to ratify the sacrament of penance as practiced through the channel of the Internet (typically a medium of weak embodiment): they are all in the same predicament in this respect. The point is not to moralize but rather to see that contaminations, arising inevitably in mingling contexts, may quickly turn in the challenging character of a displacement of contexts for that of banalizing techniques and strategies of disposable meaning.

Furthermore, not only replacements of strongly embodied ways of talking by theoretical or empirical-theoretical insights invite misgivings; also the more popular attempts at *integrating* domains so disparate as the scientific, the religious and the aesthetic into 'world views' invite a closer look. In the Religion Debates of the nineties, a thirst for global unity, global holism can be felt, which cannot be allayed, so it seems, by the more modest local holisms pleading for a diversity of meaningful attitudes each operating primarily within their own spheres. But while ingredients (insights) of all those domains may interact with each other in quite vivid (and unpredictable) ways (compare section 3.3.2. below), might it not be the case that such attempted syntheses would end in nothing but mere shadows of former science, and parodies of poetry? And again, couldn't it be the case that the essential vulnerability of strongly embodied meanings is not recognized in systems that tend to even out the role of these meanings to that of rational or epistemic values? On this point, it makes little difference whether the adherent of global holism takes a Replacement view of the relation between religion and science (in accordance with the Old Enlightenment) or a Convergence view, leaving room for a cognitive contribution of the religious component of a world view.

It may be suspected that also gadgets like Penance on the Internet, and, more generally, the call for new rituals, are most aptly interpreted in light of contamination between degrees of embodiment. No doubt, serious problems do arise often enough with respect to the future of old ritual forms; nevertheless, the attitude of experimental variation, the search for ritual novelty for its own

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<sup>14</sup> Even if the next line of the poem contained an internal comment on the original phrase, such an internal comment, the style of which may be deliberately prozaic, would differ from an external comment. Indeed, in such a case the nonpoetic style would be a poetic artifice in the service of a special literary effect within the poem. And a work of art is separated from the world inhabited by other, ordinary as well as extraordinary meanings, by the fact that, next to something like a 'content' or 'story', it contains what M. Polanyi called a 'frame', functioning, precisely, as a detachment from the world. Indeed, this separation or detachment is an essential ingredient of the singularity of this kind of meanings. See M. Polanyi, "Acceptance of Religion", in M. Polanyi and H. Prosch, *Meaning*. University of Chicago Press, 1975, p.149f.

sake, are repudiations of ritual logic altogether. What is being disowned, is the insight that ritual calls for a relation to its own acknowledged origins (whether real or imaginary), origins which are seen as given, even if subject to ever renewed creation (in and through ritual performance) in accordance with a specific structuring of a time, that is experienced as 'sacred'. This relation cannot be replaced by the invention of new forms: such a concocted *ritus ex machina* mistakes the attitude of the designer -the design stance-, the ingenuity and excitement of the Rational Artist, for the anchoring of the ritually embodied: whenever new forms do arise in ritual contexts,<sup>15</sup> the attendant transgression of the existing code is typically designated as a revitalizing return from the degraded state of the present to the original intention. In this respect, ritual and art diverge; more precisely, ritual diverges rather considerably from many artistic traditions known to us.

### 3.3. *Hyper-singularization*

The second (and opposite) way of losing track of strong embodiment as embodiment in singular meanings is slightly paradoxical. Indeed, one more way of failing to *properly* focus on concrete material points of condensation is by focusing too strongly on these singularities. The latter may attract all attention on themselves as singularities, and thus fail to function as evocative indicators of the singularity of the greater aggregate of embodied meanings (such as the work of art) they should be participating in. This has to do with the possibility of losing the fluency meanings always need to keep, also and especially in the realm of the strongly embodied, where the risk of too strong a fixation and rigidity is more real than in other areas of symbolic activity. Attached shifts and losses of religious meanings have to do with the dangers of aestheticism, formalism and 'isolationism' (for instance, in the epistemology of religion). I will call this mode of disqualifying singularly embodied meanings *hyper-singularization*; I will briefly deal with some aspects of this phenomenon, as well as with some of its paradoxical traits and consequences.

#### 3.3.1. '*Fehlleistung*' reversed

Hyper-singularization by *Fehlleistung* can be most clearly exemplified by returning, once again, to the story of *Antoine Doinel*. We pick up our hero at the very point where we had left him. In the course of his declamation (or declaration) in front of the mirror, Antoine gets very dizzy and exhausted, and, finally, he stops his experiment in disgust, as moreover, there are, in terms of his 'crucial test', no answers coming up.

<sup>15</sup> I. Scheffler, taking a somewhat more detached point of view, has recently raised the question as to when change *in* a rite becomes itself changed into change *of* a rite. Cf. "Ritual Change", in Scheffler, *o.c.*, p.151-160.

Contrary to a suggestion that might seem to be contained in what has been said above on the inverse proportion between relevance and informative content, letting go of all cognitive content is clearly not a sufficient condition for reaching a maximization of relevance. Surely, a sensibility for strongly embodied meanings at the expense of paraphrasable content may be the only way of giving the appropriate kind of relevance a place in people's lives. In the case of Antoine Doinel, however, the play of fulfillment and loss was not only uncontrollable, the moment of loss was almost predictable: the indefinite repetition of the names not only acted as a removal of content, it was also bound to destroy the relevance-meaning that had shortly appeared in and through the recitation. The names had to lose their significance in the end, if only because they lost their proper tone in the sound mix they were drowned in. So, it might be said that there exist also cases of drowning by names. The 'fetishistic' or magical frequentation with proper names may become an extreme case of singularization which corresponds, in an alternative description, to a ritualization of meanings ordinarily functioning on the verge between neutral or weak embodiment and strong embodiment. If the strongly embodied use is not properly embedded, it may become an element of a type of separation from the world, which, in the usual case, is reserved for ritual occasions properly speaking. In such a situation, all the risks of repleteness turning to loss are looming large.<sup>16</sup>

As a matter of fact, what ought to be inserted into the course of (personal, interpersonal) life, may become a final object of interest and fascination, revolving around itself, instead of directing the attention from the name to the living person (at least as much as from the person to the living name). Nevertheless, this tendency of meanings, and of signs in general, to revolve around in closed circuits (think of Husserl's notion of *Sinnentleerung*, and, related to it, his criticism of mere *Formelspiele*), reveals an intrinsic possibility of the symbolic which can never be prevented from turning into actuality: the temptation issuing from an absorption in the sound of names as an illustration of hyper-singularization might be considered as nothing but a case of a more general temptation, the absorption of meanings in separated circuits becoming aims-in-themselves. But, more importantly, in the end, this temptation might turn out not merely to pose a threat, but to be a condition of possibility for the appearance of (strongly) embodied meaning at all. That is to say, the border between hyper-singularization and a proper way of focusing on the condensation point is beyond the power of criteria, beyond the decidable.

<sup>16</sup> Notice, besides, that the loss suffered by Antoine is, at the same time, the gain that we obtain as spectators of his behaviour: the pointlessness into which his originally strongly embodied sound/meanings are falling, is the vehicle for the inimitable spectacle of strongly embodied meanings displayed before our eyes (and in our minds, so to say); no weakly embodied meaning constellation such as a philosophical commentary could ever equal this single scene from the film.

In the realm of the strongly embodied, the tendency towards hyper-singularization has its modes of appearance in the use of proper names, in various forms of sterile formalism in art, and in aestheticist ritualism in religion.

In the practice of ascribing proper names (especially in the case of personal names), there is a natural tendency to single out the unique individual named by attempting to attach a uniquely referring name to it. But proper names fail, in general, to be unique in two ways: by the analogue, in the domain of names, of synonymy, and by homonymy. Especially in the field of the strongly embodied, the attraction exercised by the uniqueness ideal is spontaneously counterbalanced by a tendency to use more than one name, *i.e.*, to replace or modify the ('official') name by means of one or several ('poetic') names or surnames<sup>17</sup> for the person referred to (or addressed). This phenomenon of (referential) 'synonymy' does not seem to pose a serious threat for the uniqueness claim as we normally conceive of it; it is interesting to note, though, that the irreplaceability of the strongly embodied name is qualified, as it were, by the practice of surrounding it by all kinds of surnames.

What about homonymy? The strain it puts on the singularizing ability of names could in general be tackled in two ways. The first solution consists in recurring to a name chain (linking the person to his ancestors, for example). This may be practised in a ritual context, or in a context which *acquires* a quasi-ritual character by the very recitation of such a litany. I think that the possibility of (theoretically) recurring to a suchlike solution, thus saving the singularity of the name (and the named), explains part of the attractiveness of a causal theory of reference for names. Yet, the fact remains that all constituents of the chain are made up by elements -'partial' names- which are multiply referring ('multiply instantiated', if you like).

The alternative solution would consist in inventing names which have no actual or even possible referents (at least not in the past and the present) besides the individual one thus intends to uniquely name. Even supposing the approach could exclude application of the name to future individuals, the attempt to implement it puts the finger on the real problem of hyper-singularization. The insertion of human individuals in a chain, itself singular in character, of transmitted symbolic goods, from the dead through the living to the unborn, is one of the fundamental roles the play of names has to fulfill. So, the invention of a completely singular name<sup>18</sup> is the excision of the individual out of the social links, making the name apt for the ridicule of disfiguring acts practised to expropriate it (or to submerge the individual into the nameless community it was illusorily raised above).

<sup>17</sup> Such names may verge on the borderline between proper names and descriptions.

<sup>18</sup> Put in extreme terms, a uniquely determining and determined coding such as Gödel numbering might do.

Again, with respect to ritual, overflows of singularity arise quite naturally. In certain circumstances, an absolutely formalistic (or rather, legalistic) attitude, sticking to the perfection of the score and/or execution of the rite, or stressing its inchangeability, may be fatal for the survival of the ritual itself. Relative as these matters are with respect to the cultural site of the rite, the fact remains that ritual traditions have generally built in limitations on the (necessary) degree of rigidity which is otherwise so characteristic for most of them. Most of the time, there are, within the rite, blank spaces for improvisation (elucidation, exemplification, preaching) or variation (free formulas). Again, considering a formal ritual error unredeemable, because of its impropriety as a sin against formal requirements, may itself be improper (if, for example, the cohesive and conciliatory force of ritual is valued). With respect to this question, as with the example of a 'fault' in the imponderable area of interpretation of (the correct) ritual gesture, one may be reminded of Chesterton's word: "if a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing poorly". Here too, perfectionism is a dead end.

Our concern for the proper writing and pronunciation of our proper name; our fear of a *flatus vocis* or of a fault against the ceremonial *étiquette*: all such phenomena may induce us not only into forgetting or into doing precisely what we were afraid of, but, foremost, into pettiness. The phenomenology and pathology of pettiness belong to the problem of the capacity to recognize proportions between parts (moments, details) as carriers of meanings, and surrounding wholes or frameworks of relevance. Such a phenomenology and epistemology of pettiness, however, would require, and deserve, a separate study.

### 3.3.2. *Isolationism among degrees of embodiment*

Hyper-singularization threatens singularization in a way which is symmetrical to the effects of hypo-singularization; just as a phobia of *Fehlleistungen* may compromise the flow of meanings in a way that mirrors the loss caused by neglect of condensation points, just so contamination of degrees of embodiment has a mirror image. This counteracting force is a form of *hosophobia*, the fear of contamination. The fear, particularly, that differing degrees of embodiment may contaminate each other is translated into artificial attempts at keeping all contexts of strongly embodied meanings strictly separated from all contexts of weakly embodied meanings, and *vice versa*. Such purgation strategies can take several forms. In one of them, the stress is on forbidding weakly embodied meanings, say scientific contents, to mingle with the Other: they might be infected by the effects of being exposed to the subvertive seductions of aesthetic, metaphysical and/or religious 'nonsense'. Given our topic, we will concentrate on fears in the opposite direction: the protection and isolation of the strongly embodied from the horrors of objectivity. There are desperate attempts to install or maintain taboos on contacts that might infect and weaken the strongly

embodied by sleeping with (or even glancing at) the enemy. Either science is intrinsically destined to perverting mankind, or else it must be presented as completely indifferent to the world of strongly embodied meanings. In the latter case, a most interesting variant of isolationism (rather than protectionism) may arise, which has no need to forbid or fear transgressions of the borders. Indeed, in this version,<sup>19</sup> all contacts are allowed since they are unreal, and not even the question of a potential conflict or tension between the corresponding symbolic practices and images (the scientific and the manifest image) is thought to ever arise: where no convergence between mutually disparate domains exists, divergence has no clearly defined sense either. Whereas the normatively protective view is based on a threat-view about the weakly embodied, the 'descriptive' no-contact-view is, basically, a no-threat-view.

The problem for this version is, that a revisionary interpretation of all the actual conflicts and tensions that have existed, exist, and will exist, imposes itself. The description is a radical redescription. All these (seeming) divergences (as between science and religion) can only appear as the sophistic conclusions or confusions resulting from wrong-headed interpretations of the real bearing of the respective practices. Science, then, for example, is neutral in itself; only wrong ideas in the heads (or linguistic behaviour) of people may render it dangerous to other forms of life. This, however, is a bridge (or a blowing of a bridge) too far. The practices of science, and religion, and art, cannot but impress themselves, cognitively or otherwise, as particular (clusters of) viewpoints on the larger viewpoints, or forms of life, that the people living within these practices, and *inevitably* contaminated by them, are habitating. So, there cannot but arise interesting contacts, conflicts, and questions of consistency among science, art, and religion.

What is right about no-threat-views, is that any comparison that could be made between symbolic practices, could at most be indirect. There can be no direct comparison of contents across the proper frameworks, because something stronger than the nowadays rationally bounded, decontaminated versions<sup>20</sup> of incommensurability stands in the way of such a comparison: the very notion of *content* cannot, in the case of the strongly embodied, mean what it means in the case of the weakly embodied. Even if the difference between degrees of embodiment is a matter only of degree, the fact remains that, since paraphrasability was taken as an index of degree of embodiment, the highly non-paraphrasable cannot be dealt with according to a notion of content which

<sup>19</sup> Here, one could think of some versions of neo-wittgensteinianism, in general as well as specifically in the field of religious epistemology (B.R. Tilghman, D.Z. Phillips, ...), convincing as they may be in other respects.

<sup>20</sup> Such as T.S. Kuhn's late taxonomic definition of (pragmatically rational) incommensurability.

is parasitic on the paraphrasable (high degree of translatability, etc.). Thus, the confrontation is necessarily indirect. Nevertheless, it is real: as the ingredients of symbolic practices inevitably shift in meaning while paving their way to the more encompassing images and life forms people live by, they also inevitably mix up in formations where it is virtually impossible to disentangle authentically represented meanings from misrepresentations. No doubt, scientific (for instance, evolutionary) explanations are to be distinguished from elements of a manifest understanding of life; nevertheless, as scientific explanations of a certain type become more and more influential, they cannot be withheld from themselves becoming a way of understanding and interpreting (life, for instance), and thus the relations with other ways of understanding inevitably get tense.

For example, the view a religious person, or a nonreligious person, may have of love as a peculiar possibility to be, at least partially, realized or approximated in human life, is not by itself incompatible with whatever kind of scientific statement to the effect that there is a hormonal, an evolutionary, etc. basis for the phenomenon called love. (In order to be clear about what the view of this person means, we may of course require that he or she is able to evidence such a view, and such a possibility, in more detailed ways.) Now suppose that someone else says that the phenomenon we used to call love is nothing but an epiphenomenon of all those determinants possessing characteristics that differ profoundly from typical characteristics we formerly agreed to ascribe to love. The first interlocutor will protest, and rightly so. Perhaps one may defend the view of love as an aesthetically sound and thus self-justifying illusion, backed by evolution. But there will arise a conflict, not open to redescription, as soon as one is confronted with a situation where the evolutionary explanation and interpretation is unambiguously pushing in the direction forbidden by the requirements of love (as we understood it before). It is not the idea of love which acts as a final cause, to be sure, but the experienced requirement (and conflict) which induces some kind of an idea of love. In this and related ways, threats will also inevitably arise; but *the fact that* they do arise should not be seen as a threat, or as an alibi for isolationism. In fact, all that is required to maintain the coexistence along with the *sui generis* character of the strongly and the weakly embodied, is the recognition that problems of indirect inconsistency may arise, and that some ways out are excuses. If there were simply no links (*e.g.*, of opposition) between the understanding of strongly embodied meanings and knowledge, the average eliminative materialist<sup>21</sup> would

<sup>21</sup> The example of the eliminative materialist is an extreme example, it might be objected. The above example, however, shows that a very closely related kind of conflict would arise with more commonplace reductionist accounts of different sorts. (I leave open the question what would happen when confronted with various other positions on the relations between scientific and manifest images).

completely misunderstand his own position when he claimed to undermine the manifest self-image of man. In this case, we would never be obliged to take the position of our adversary (or rather, the person who misdescribes himself as our adversary) seriously, because it would always be open to our non-confused, antiseptic redescriptions he himself was not aware of in his confusion.

On the other hand, when the eliminativist has told his story, our religious person in the above example will be *convinced* that, if that is the picture, something must have been left out of the picture. This, then, is the truth of the no-threat-view: if 'something' has been left out of the picture, it will, as a rule, be something else than an extra-element. It will, in general, belong to a different order than the order of theories. So, the true no-threat-view must be second-order: there is no threat issuing from the view that science can pose threats to the strongly embodied. Speaking in slogans: the 'global meaning holist' (in the model of 'neutral embodiment' discussed in sec. 2) can see no reason why the comment one picture issues upon another would differ from either a direct criticism or a confirmation, and thus cannot recognize the proper validity of the different pictures; the 'local holist', on the other hand, stressing the primordial contribution of meanings to the symbolic practice they belong to, could avoid the pitfalls of isolationism, provided that (s)he allows links between the pictures or practices, and that these links are thought of as something less (and, at the same time, something more) than logical links.

#### 4. Concluding paradoxes

The net result of isolationism and protectionism would be paradoxical, if it succeeded. If there were no real relations between the strongly embodied and the other spheres of symbolic activity (or if these relations were proscribed), a dilemma would result. Either there would be no proper interest in the contexts of strongly embodied meanings beyond the islands of activity they develop in the ocean of symbolic activities in life. There are indeed conceptions of religion, for instance, and of religious ritual, where it is stressed that the sacred and the profane are strictly separated. There are analogous conceptions of art. (For moral practice, it may become very difficult to maintain conceptions of the sort.) Or else, there are conceptions, on the other end of the spectrum, which stress that the whole of life should become ritualized or sacralized, or again, aestheticized. In this case, either the profane is denied a sphere and radius of its own right, or else, it has to be completely penetrated by the other pole of the meaning generating practices.

The first branch of the dilemma seems to fit the strategies of isolationism, while the second seems rather to embrace protectionism. The point is that, in the same way that both opposite practical attitudes issued from related starting

points, they both converge in the end as well, as far as the suppression of singularity is concerned (the protection of which they were so concerned about). Indeed, when strongly embodied meanings become thoroughly esoteric, they tend to degenerate into aesthetic relics, or end with the status of specialisms, the very sort of thing they could not aspire to be. When, on the other hand, strongly embodied meanings pervade the whole of life, at the same time degrading the whole cogno-technological surroundings we live by to a handy apparatus to be relied on blindly, their whole point of *marking*, of *signposting* the rhythms of life gets lost. The totalitarian character the singularly strongly embodied acquires, paradoxically kills its singularity, lacking as it does the challenge of the Other.<sup>22</sup> (It should be noticed that, in this respect, the artist and the priest are not in the same position as the ordinary participant in artistic or religious practices.)

In the same way, in hyper-singularization of the *Fehlleistung* variety, the net result is the end of singularized meanings. Moreover, in these paradoxical results, hyper-singularization converges with its opposite, hypo-singularization: both antagonistic forces may collaborate to disqualify strongly embodied meanings as such. To see this, let us take a look at a phenomenon in the field of philosophical psychology; it is a common phenomenon in certain types of intimate personal relationships, relations with the concrete other, given in his concretely embodied meaning (to use the right word in the right place). P. Moyaert has called this phenomenon "the paradox of individualization": "Bodily details, individualizing the other and lending him a face of his own, are always at the same time the mark of the anonymous shade of the other. The closer the contact strives to be, the closer one gets to the point where the other is no longer distinguishable from the others."<sup>23</sup>

This kind of absorption of the utterly singular into the general or the generic, neutralizing the strongly embodied, was what singularization was destined to flee. What if the hypertrophy of the fixed condensation point and the fear of contaminated embodiment result in the same dissolution of the meaning-carrying element, a dissolution, noticed equally in hypo-singularization, into the environment of congeneric elements?

The beauty spot, the slight asymmetry, may save a face from perfection, - from submersion into 'general beauty'. But the stain preserves its healing force

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<sup>22</sup> Don Cupitt unwittingly provides a contemporary example: "to be religious means that one's whole life is as it were subject to a constant scrutiny and under assessment from an absolute point of view that silently records everything and misses nothing. The religious requirement extends to one's whole life and to every detail of one's life. It does not allow one to keep any secret compartment or locked doors. It searches the heart." "The Meaning of God", in id., *Taking Leave of God*, London, S.C.M. Press, 1980, p.85.

<sup>23</sup> P. Moyaert, "Mysticism and Love", in J. Walgrave & P. Moyaert, *Mysticism and Love*, Leuven, Universitaire Pers, 1988, p.200.

to the extent only that it is not studied under a mental microscope, being stared at without surcease. Only as it is obliquely perceived, the object of a passing look, does it manage to conjure the danger of, itself, relapsing in the status of an exemplar of a natural kind (in this case, the beauty spot, as one of a kind).

There is more to it than mere annihilation and loss, however. On the undecidable borderline between the hypo-singular and the hyper-singular, this paradox arises in such a way, as Moyaert suggests, that the most singular and the most anonymous pass into each other in a play without which meaning would no more appear than disappear.

The paradox has been cinematographically studied for the case of the erotic relationship in Eric Rohmer's *Le genou de Claire* (1970), the fifth of the *Six contes moraux*. In this modern, yet less cynical variation on the theme of the *liaisons dangereuses*, Jérôme (*Jérôme/Rohmer?*) is on holiday, for the last time, at the former parental home bordering the lake of Annecy. He is being offered a major part in a slightly Mephistophelean plot. A friend, a female writer, Aurora, is laboriously devising a scheme for her new novel. After a display of faint resistance, Jérôme is easily convinced by her tempting request to try out his appeal on the young Laura (while, at the same time, Aurora is taxing his proclaimed impassibility). But, determined to reinvent the plot as well as to surprise his accomplice and 'director' Aurora (and himself), Jérôme finally turns to Laura's sister, Claire, as the object of his interest. He is disturbed by certain details in Claire's appearance. But at the same time, there is no escaping the conclusion that the completely singular condensation point he is after, is at the same time a replaceable correlate of a generic desire incapable of reaching out for the irreplaceable. "*Je me disais que dans toute femme, il y a un point le plus vulnérable ... Pour les unes, c'est la naissance du cou, ... la taille, les mains, ... pour Claire, -dans cette position, dans cet éclairage- c'était le genou. C'était le pôle magnétique de mon désir, le point précis où, s'il m'était permis de suivre ce désir et de ne suivre que lui, j'aurais d'abord placé ma main.*" The supreme task, the conquest and exorcism will simply consist, henceforth, in this gesture, to be performed by him, but not without her consent: touching Claire's knee. In fact, what is constantly touched and explored are undecidable borderlines: borders where the morally impermissible touches the morally imperative; borders between the arousal and the excision of desire; the very borders between the themselves unclearly bordered zones of real and feigned desire. The opportunity for the final conquest will present itself, Jérôme having been an unwitting and silent witness to a secret and dubious meeting Claire's boyfriend had with another girl. Indeed, as he reports his vicissitudes on the border of the borders to Aurora, in view of her *dossier*, Jérôme recounts how he has exploited his privileged knowledge of the situation to 'make certain

things clear' to Claire (*"il a fallu que je lui ouvre les yeux"*): after bringing Claire to the borders of the lake, he had told her everything he had seen; she had been sitting there, gently crying, *"en face de moi, une jambe allongée, l'autre pliée, le genou aigu, étroit, lisse, fragile, à ma portée, à la portée de ma main... Mon bras était placé de telle façon que je n'avais qu'à l'étendre pour toucher son genou. Or, toucher son genou était la chose la plus extravagante, la seule à ne pas faire, et en même temps la plus facile... C'est la seule fois que j'ai jamais accompli un acte de volonté pure... La précision de mon geste a prévenu sa riposte... Le geste que j'avais pris pour un geste de désir, elle l'a pris, elle, pour un geste de consolation."*

