

## **Psychology as an Art and as a Science.**

### **A Reflection on the Myth of Prometheus**

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*The article focuses on the radical shift in consciousness that occurs when we move from a workaday, natural scientific sphere of life to the celebrative sphere of religious practice, of the arts and the humanities. The quotidian, workaday world is here understood as the birthplace of science and technology and the festive world of personal encounters makes its appearance here as the birthplace of the arts, the humanities and of religious practices.*

*Hesiod's Prometheus is understood here as the founder of Greek civilization and the builder of an altar that set apart mortals from immortals, heaven from earth and feast days from workdays. The Promethean altar shows itself here as a first entryway into the festive sphere of life and as the prototype of all entryways and thresholds that together transform an uninhabitable, universal chaos into a human and divine cosmos.*

#### ***About a workaday and a festive world.***

There is an ancient Greek proverb that says very simply and directly “*Aner oudeis aner*”, meaning literally: “*One man is no man at all*” or: “*one human being without relationship to another can for that reason not be considered truly human.*” “*Being human*” refers here to a tissue of relationships with self and others, with things and objects that together form a distinct and personal human world.

In what follows, we will explore two different but complimentary and dynamically interacting types of such relationships that as such grant access to a human world. We could have chosen night and day as two such dynamically interacting parts or couples, or studied the differences and complementarities of masculine and feminine modes of being in the world. We choose here, however, to compare and contrast a workaday, secular and universal mode of being in the world with a festive or religious one, so as to come to understand how their dynamic interplay opens to us a truly human world.

We draw attention, first of all, to the fact that the various calendars of our Greek, Roman, Jewish and Christian ancestors all take it as their fundamental task to organize human time by dividing it between feast days and workdays and by pointing out what times might or might not be favorable to the celebration or the performance of certain events or tasks. The main function of these calendars appears to have been to bind heaven and earth together and to connect human or earthly activity to celestial or divine manifestations. It was with the help of these calendars that our cultural ancestors forged together two very different worlds into one coherent, cosmic whole. They thereby created a human world that would be *both* celestial and earthly, *both* workaday and festive, *both* masculine and feminine, *both* human and divine. By consulting these calendars people found access to a human and divine cosmos in which there would be a

distinct place and a time for sowing and harvesting, for working and resting, for attending the flocks and fields and for celebrating religious, communal and ancestral events.

A workaday attitude opens upon *a world of work* in which we seek to transform a resisting or indifferent natural world into one that conforms more closely to human bodily and material needs. Ensnared in this workaday world we transform deserts into gardens and primeval forests into villages and cities. We tame rivers so their overflow may fertilize agricultural fields, we mine for tar and copper, hunt for food, transform wild animals into domesticated ones and build ships to transport us across rivers and oceans. The world of work is therefore by no means a monotonous or uninspiring one in which we do no more than pit our feeble human strength against much greater natural forces. Quite to the contrary, the workaday world offers a constant spur to the development of human intelligence and imagination and in that way contributes greatly to the humanization of humanity. It is important to emphasize that in our Western societies, both technology and the natural sciences developed out of the workaday habit of actively interfering with the natural order so as to make it conform closer to human needs and desires. The central theme of the workaday world, of technology and the natural sciences, is one of material *progress*, understood here as the constant transformation of material reality so as to make it ever more pliant

and subservient to human will and desire.

By contrast, a festive attitude gives us access to *a world of celebration and commemoration*. The chief concern of that world is one of bringing people together to celebrate religious or civic events, to form institutions and alliances and in general to promote cultural instances that foster the mutual revelation of self, world and other. Such revelations should not be understood in the first place as scientific data that facilitate the conquest of a material universe but as personal and festive gestures that help create a coherent social world.

In our Western societies, religious practices, together with the arts and the humanities form a festive world that coheres around the fundamental human desire to stand in a mutually revealing, personal relationship to others and to a surrounding world. Where the chief focus of our daily workaday world is on forcefully bending a natural or pre-human world to our will, a festive world asks of us to bring together into a mutually revealing relationship not only heaven and earth, but also native and stranger, the living and the dead, man and woman, parent and child, friend and friend, neighbor and neighbor.,

The cultural forms elaborated by these two modes of being in the world vary greatly from place to place and from time to time. The world of work of New Guinean Papuans clearly differs from that of the Bantus in South Africa, and the festive world of medieval France

is not the same as that of modern Germany. Yet these differences, no matter how great or small, do not contradict the fundamental given that all societies, in so far as they are viable, recognize and practice a distinction between a time and a place for work, centered on procuring life's necessities, and a time and place devoted to thanksgiving, to celebration and to the festive revelation of heaven and earth, of self and other.

We will later return to this subject for a closer examination of these two fundamental modes or attitudes. For the moment, however, we want to focus our attention on the mysterious *transition* that occurs when we move from a workaday or natural scientific relationship to the world to one that is essentially festive, discursive and revelatory in nature.

To study this transition in some detail, we will make use of a thought experiment in which we follow in the manner of a novelist or story teller the thoughts, feelings and acts of a fictional or imagined person as he moves from a *workaday, technological or scientific attitude*, in which he seeks to understand and mentally appropriate a natural universe, to a *festive attitude*, in which he seeks a personal revelation of heaven and earth and of self and other.

We should realize that each of these fundamental attitudes toward a common world has its own inherent limits so that a festive

attitude is always followed by a workaday one and vice versa. Neither attitude can therefore be understood in isolation from the other.

No human culture can prosper, or indeed survive, without some practical and intellectual understanding of the laws that govern the natural and universal world. But neither can a human society last for long without cultivating the festive dimension and finding ways of bringing together into a mutually revealing union, self and other, man and woman, child and adult, heaven and earth and the living and the dead.

All viable cultures possess an understanding of what it means to work and to transform natural reality into a useful human resource. They all possess also, to one degree or another, an understanding and a practice of *festive disclosure* in which they are able to witness the un-coerced appearance of heaven and earth and of self and other.

### *A Thought experiment*

In seeking to explore the mysterious shift from a workaday to a festive attitude, we will want to know not only what sets these two fundamental attitudes apart or in what respects they differ, but also how these attitudes and the worlds they create stand in relationship

to one another, and come to form a whole. The world of everyday, mundane tasks and the world of the festive each has its own integrity, its own essential conception of what is real and important, its own sense of what is fitting and unfitting, of what it is right to do and of what should be avoided. Moreover, each of these worlds is surrounded by a horizon that announces the imminent arrival of its companion world.

While we participate in a festive gathering, we remain aware that we will have to return to the mundane world of work, and while at work, we comfort ourselves with the prospect of homecoming and festive revelations. Only severe pathology could limit us to merely one perspective and isolate us within a closed world without access to another. We might go so far as to claim that a person is healthy and whole only to the extent that he manages to fruitfully bring together both heaven and earth, mortals and immortals, night and day, work and play, man and woman, child and adult.

Let us now turn to a concrete example in which we can study in some detail the experience of a person at the very moment when he turns away from the world of work, where he had been pursuing his natural scientific interests, and begins to shift to a festive attitude in which it becomes possible to encounter another person.

Let us imagine a geologist on a scientific expedition in a very

remote and uninhabited region of the world. Let us imagine him just after he has climbed the last mountain range to arrive at his planned destination, which is a small plateau overlooking a vast expanse of barren and uninhabited wasteland. We assume that he has come to study an important geological feature discovered on an aerial photograph taken by an overflying satellite.

At the moment when we begin to take an interest in his work, our scientist has made a long journey that began with a flight to the closest airport of this remote country and that was thereafter pursued, first by car, and finally by camel and by foot.

At the point in time when the scientist enters our story he appears physically exhausted, and we see him struggle to hoist himself atop a large boulder from where he can overlook most of the surrounding landscape. What he sees before him is an enormous expanse of barren sand and rocks that nowhere shows a sign of human habitation or of animal or even vegetative life. The only variety offered by the landscape is that of countless boulders of all shapes and sizes that lie strewn over the white sandy soil as far as the eye can see. Our geologist thus finds himself completely alone in a world that appears overtly inhospitable to any form of life.

In the course of his already long and distinguished career, our scientist has become used to barren landscapes, and he feels buoyed

by the thought of having reached his final destination in spite of so much adversity. He takes a little food and drink from his diminishing supply and then pulls out his notebook to begin to sketch out the physical features of the terrain.

As he surveys his surroundings, the geologist notices ancient traces of what once, perhaps several millennia ago, must have been a forceful stream running down the mountains and crossing in a wide sweep the entire length of the valley below. The river not only carved a still visible path from the mountain down through the valley, but it also left behind a trail of variously sized boulders with rounded and smoothed features that testify to the combined corrosive power of water, steep temperature changes, wind and sand.

The geologist observes other, rougher stones that do not bear the mark of flowing water and that must have reached their present location by other means. He traces the path of their descent from the eroding sides of the mountain, and he reads from their weathered surfaces the corrosive impact of windstorms and desert temperatures.

Here and there, the combined action of these natural forces has shaped stones into truly fantastic forms. Sometimes these appear in clusters, some leaning against each other as if embracing or fighting,

others heaped together in bizarre formations that defy description. If an ordinary citizen were suddenly confronted with this sight, he might think that he had entered an intergalactic sculpture garden.

Our geologist is not given to such reveries and the thought of sculpture is farthest from his mind. He treats the appearance and the precise location of each stone as a kind of material archive, containing the record of all the natural forces that have left their imprint on the landscape since it came into being. When he sees the rounded form of a boulder in the desert, he thinks of the forces that first broke it loose from the mountain and then transported it to its present location where it was exposed to a new array of natural forces. He retraces the path of the stone from the side of the mountain to its present location where it was smoothed and rounded by the combined forces of water, wind, sun and sand. He reads the presence of natural forces by what is now *missing* from the stone, namely its old location on the side of the mountain, its original jagged shape, its original color and appearance etc. The presence of the natural forces is thus entirely identifiable with *what is presently missing* from the stone.

The geologist is not inclined to think of sculpture as he surveys the geological landscape. Sculpture belongs to a very different world and proceeds by what seem to be quite opposite principles.

Like the forces of nature, the sculptor removes parts of a block of stone, and in this respect his actions resembles those of heat and cold, water, sand, and wind in various, naturally occurring combinations. Yet there remains a profound and unbridgeable difference between these two kinds of actions. The sculptor removes material from the surface of a stone not in a completely accidental way, not as determined by an unintended interplay of physical forces, but as a means to *revealing a personal presence*. What is missing from the sculptor's marble stands in the service of a personal appearance. The sculptor's gesture resembles the movement of a curtain that opens upon a stage or that of a veil that drops to reveal an artwork.

It was Michelangelo who suggested that the sculptor, chipping away at his block of marble, aims *to reveal a personal presence* that in retrospect can be thought of as having been imprisoned in the stone. In this way, sculpting reveals itself as essentially different from the simple and mechanical process of erosion that is not guided by such an aim. What is absent from the eroded stones of geology reveals only the forces and natural actions of an uninhabited natural scientific universe.

We might thus understand the act of sculpting as similar to that of a visitor knocking on the door of his neighbor. In both cases the

activity takes place on the threshold before a closed door and is aimed at revealing a personal presence that remains hidden behind the door. Both the sculpting and the knocking addresses that hidden presence and both bid it to come forward and to reveal itself. For the sculptor the stone is *inhabited* and it is his task to bring the inhabitant out into the light of presence.

The physical act of artful carving, understood as revealing a subjective and personal presence, cannot take place within the Euclidean space of the natural sciences; it requires a lived and inhabited, intersubjective space in which it becomes possible to encounter self and other. Artful carving and sculpting thus resembles speaking and conversing closer than it does the natural process of erosion. It is as misguided to understand sculpting as labor, as merely removing pieces of marble or wood, as it is to regard speech as an act of moving lips or of forcing air through a windpipe. Both speaking and sculpting serve ultimately the same purpose of revealing and cultivating a personal presence; their ultimate aim is to create and reveal an inhabited cosmos.

As a natural scientist, our geologist would certainly shrug his shoulders at any suggestion that the weathered boulders he observes should be understood as art objects. This is not because the geologist is hard of heart, or lacks artistic sensibilities or cultural refinement.

It rather is the result of his scientific training that he is able, for the moment, to screens out all aesthetic and subjective experiences and concentrate instead on the scientific task at hand.

It is not that the geologist is incapable of inhabiting any framework other than that of the workaday, scientific world. His very training as a geologist has taught him to sharply distinguish a workaday, natural scientific landscape from a festive or artistic one. By dint of much effort, he has learned to gain access to a purely material universe that can be fully and completely understood in terms of natural forces. To do his work he must, for the moment, understand his world as forming part of a *natural universe* and screen out all other ways of seeing and understanding his surrounding world. This methodic blindness and this particular and temporary avoidance of all other ways of seeing and understanding the landscape constitutes the basis of the geologist's expertise. It is this methodic blindness and this particular *natural scientific way of seeing* that enables him to make a valuable scientific contribution to his discipline and empower his community.

It is important to understand, however, that the geologist practices this methodic exclusion of everything that falls outside the scope of natural science only as long as he is engaged in the practice of his discipline. Upon his return home from his long voyage he will be

able to shift to other perspectives, heartily embrace his family and his friends and respond with gladness and affection to being reunited with them. Moreover, no matter how deeply absorbed he might be in his scientific work, the geologist would immediately step outside his naturalistic and workaday preoccupations were he to catch sight of an awe inspiring sunset, or hear a child cry out in the desert. He has placed himself within the framework of a workaday, naturalistic world, but he remains ever open to a festive perspective of mutual and sincere revelation. His work has transported him to an uninhabited world of material forces, but at the fringe of that world there remains in place a horizon of festive meeting that at all times would enable him to welcome a stranger, to say a prayer, or to vividly respond to a radiant or majestic landscape. Only madness could condemn a person to remain imprisoned in a landscape of geology or in a body of biology. Our essential humanity resides in the fact that we can shift perspectives from the material realities of a workday world to the revealing, interpersonal revelations of a festive world.

For the moment, however, our geologist is obliged to practice the methodic exclusion of subjectivity that forms part of practicing a natural scientific discipline. He thus seeks to reconstruct the natural history of the landscape without in any way making reference to human or divine persons. This methodic exclusion constrains him

from using language that includes personal pronouns. He is thereby barred from using such phrases as "He created" or "She managed" or "They did." He must therefore construe his history of the desert landscape entirely in terms of natural forces or natural incidents and refer to these in terms of "it".

This methodic exclusion places him, grammatically speaking, in an awkward position, since the usual construction of sentences in European languages demands that a verb be linked to the subject performing the action. Our geologist is thus obliged to tell the natural history of the landscape in a new narrative style that avoids all personal pronouns and makes use only of the *impersonal* pronoun "it". His account therefore will make use of such sentences as "*it rained,*" "*it fell,*" "*it formed,*" "*it froze,*" "*it broke off*", "*it cracked*" or "*it melted.*"

We should note here as an aside that the particular perspective of the natural sciences that grants us access to a world in which "it" is the sole source of action, developed thousands of years ago when the first astronomical observers began to take note of the orderly daily, weekly and monthly changes taking place in the nightly sky. That mythical first observer faced a realm that was all at once clearly accessible and observable to him, while yet remaining at the same time forever beyond his reach.

Within a *mythical* frame of mind observers of the nightly sky would have personalized this inaccessible world and continued to use personal pronouns. A mythical framework operates within the festive sphere and seeks a personal revelation. But astronomy was born the moment when a first observer resisted the mythical temptation and began to think and imagine a world devoid of ‘he’ or ‘she’ and inhabited solely by an ‘it’.

Natural science always presents us with a natural world that we learn to observe and get to know in great detail, but from which we remain personally or existentially excluded. We may know the world of physics and chemistry, but we shall never be able to inhabit it or to make it fully our own. Nobody can bathe in H<sub>2</sub>O, nobody can dine on chemical compounds or make love to a biological organism. The world in which a friend is transformed into a biological entity and where a cup of tea becomes a chemical compound is one in which the starry sky of the night becomes transformed into an astronomical world of ‘it’. We can see that world and study it, it may inspire us to make marvelous discoveries that in turn may have extraordinary implications for our life on earth, but we can never intimately touch, understand or *inhabit* that world. We manage to come close to it only by renouncing to inhabit it and by refraining to refer to any part of it as a ‘he’, a ‘she’ or a ‘we’.

It was the first systematic knowledge of the starry sky that gave us the calendar and that made it possible for mariners to trace their path across the seas. The great scientific revolution of the modern world took place when we learned to view our familiar earth with eyes that had been trained to observe an astronomical sky and with a mind formed by the logic of an impersonal “it”.

With the help of the impersonal “it” we learned to see the earth as though it were itself an uninhabited planet and so we learned to set the course of our daily lives guided by the impersonal logic of “it rains”, “it falls”. “it happened”. We then began to confuse the planet revealed from the perspective of astronomy with the heaven and earth that is our home and that, as such, forms the ultimate standpoint from where it becomes possible to inhabit and understand a human and divine world.

The era of modernity is profoundly marked by this confusion, and we will not be able to escape its confinement until we have reestablished the primacy of the generous, intersubjective world of host and guest which forms the ultimate ground of any personal or human world. It is only in such a human and divine world, created by mutual hospitality and gift exchanges, that we can humanly live, die and feel at home. It is only such a hospital world of host and guest that can construe and found a workaday world and that can

give birth to a prosperous culture of scientific explorations.

It is interesting to note here how Freud introduced the natural scientific world into the innermost recesses of our being with his second theory of his “the psychic apparatus”. He spoke here of *das Es* (the "it") as an unconscious psychic region governed entirely by impersonal material forces. His English translator, perhaps worried that to speak of the unconscious in such simple terms might detract from the scientific and professional image of psychoanalysis, gave the “it” a more learned, Latinized form and translated it as the *Id*. Freud wrote that his use of the term had been inspired by his reading of Georg Groddeck's (1987) book, bearing the German title *Das Buch vom Es*. That book appeared in an English translation as *The Book of the It* (Groddeck, 1961). Freud (1975) continued to use the plain German term *das Es* till the end of his life (p. 292). He defined that term as "an impersonal psychic entity that unavoidably forms part of our psychic make-up" (Freud, 1964, pp. 72-75).

Here is not the place to discuss in detail Freud's understanding of what he referred to as the "psychic apparatus," or that part of it that he understood to be the domain of the "it," except to point out that the fundamental attitude within which he analyzed the human mind and soul had been developed long before his time by Babylonian,

Egyptian, and Greek astronomers. By adopting their attitude and applying it to the study of the "psychic apparatus," Freud transformed their starry heavens into a modern, subterranean and impersonal part of the human soul.

But let us return to our geologist in his lonely desert outpost, where he continues to contemplate the land of "it" of the early astronomers. Let us assume that there comes for him a moment when, wearied from his calculations, he allows his eyes to wander a bit aimlessly over the barren surroundings. Let us suppose that his attention is drawn to some particular feature of the landscape that does not seem to fit in with the rest of the impersonal geological landscape stretched out before him.

The place from where the difference emanates appears to be a geometric, rectangular clearing, bordered on all sides by small round boulders of about equal size. On one side of the rectangle, the geologist notices a five-foot-high, pyramid shaped mound of smaller rocks that appears to form part of the composition.

It is difficult to say what sets this particular site apart from the rest of the impersonal landscape. Is it the regular shape of the small pyramid or the rectangular form of the clearing? Is it perhaps the rhythmic pattern of the border, consisting of nearly equal-sized boulders that appear carefully laid out in straight lines? Does the

regularity and the rhythm of this pattern speak silently of a *different* world that transcends the geological landscape of “it”?

No matter how hard he tries, the geologist cannot find a satisfactory place within the world of geology for this particular configuration. No matter how hard he tries he cannot fit that curious formation within the world of geology and he remains confronted by a stubborn and irresolvable *difference* that sets it apart from its neutral surroundings.

To say that this particular formation *does not fit* within the landscape of the natural sciences and that it *stands apart* from the world of geology is not to say that it does not form part of a natural world or that it would not be subject to the same natural forces that affect the rest of the landscape. The sun shines, and the wind blows on these symmetrically placed stones as it does on the ones that have tumbled down from the side of the mountains, or that have been transported by the river. What sets these stones apart from the surrounding world of "it stands," "it falls," "it rains," and "it shines" is the fact that they insistently evoke a purposeful and expressive world of "he built," "she stood," "we live," and "we die." What the geologist perceives at the outer limit of the neutral, natural scientific landscape is the upsurge of a very differently ordered *inhabited*, specifically *human* world in which it is possible to tell a story, to form a judgment and

to express a judgment.

After losing himself in the uninhabited regions of the world of the natural sciences, the geologist suddenly finds himself called back to an inhabited earth of human artifacts. After trying heroically to see the landscape before him as an uninterrupted natural whole, that is, as a part of the absolute unity of a natural universe, he is forced to admit to the presence of something *other than* a natural universe, to wit, an inhabited human and divine cosmos. The world he had attempted to unify under the rubric of “natural universe” stubbornly refuses this attempt and continues to manifest the un-erasable duality of a cosmos that, as such, points all at once to two distinct worlds separated by a threshold. The natural universe of the sciences splits apart to manifest a symbolically linked inhabited and an uninhabited, natural or universal world. The geological universe is thereby not erased or invalidated but it is understood as something that is incomplete in and by itself. The “it” of the geological landscape cannot stand by itself without the support of the “he”, “she”, and “we” that made its appearance possible.

Where only a moment ago our geologist had been completely absorbed in the rarefied world of “it”, he is now is confronted by a human presence that calls him back to a very different *inhabited* world. This encounter not only alters his thinking but it also changes

his bodily demeanor, his way of standing and walking, and his manner of relating to material objects. It is as if the very body of the geologist understands without further instruction that studying the stones of geology differs in countless ways from questioning the stones that make up a gravesite, a house or a city.

We might say that in discovering a grave the geologist witnesses the miracle of seeing a “he” or a “she” or a “we” emerge out of the neutral natural landscape of “it”. At this moment of *transition* he witnesses, so to say, the miraculous birth of mankind out of the ashes of a natural scientific universe.

We should emphasize that the unitary landscape of “it” is no less real or less “human” than the dual and cosmic landscape of the painter or the poet. Nor is the geologist, while engaged in his fieldwork, any less “human” than a priest or a sculptor.

We might say instead that the geologist’s humanity resides precisely in the fact that *he can shift perspectives* and approach his world both as a geologist observing an uninhabitable natural universe and as a host or guest in a world shared with family, friends and neighbors.

The geologist’s humanity does therefore not reside solely in his ability to observe a natural universe or in his proficiency to advance a scientific or technological project. But neither does it reside wholly

in his ability to forge loving and revealing relationships with others. Rather, his humanity manifests itself most clearly in the fact that he is able to shift from the abstract contemplation of the stones of geology and from the practices of science and technology to the festive and revealing practices of art, religion, myth, and poetry. The geologist's humanity resides in the fact that in the midst of his scientific exploration he is able to completely change the course of his thoughts, feelings and actions. His humanity shows itself most clearly in the fact that he can leave the workaday world of "it" and the stones of geology to enter a festive and personal world and contemplate there the very different stones that form a house, a temple or a human grave.

We might think of madness as a kind of imprisonment within one fixed attitude of mind or as the inability to shift back and forth between a world of work where we struggle with neutral material objects and a world of festive disclosure where we encounter a personal *Other*.

This *odd* appearance of a personal and revealing world within the *even* landscape of geology draws the geologist away from his academic discipline. He closes his notebook, climbs down from his perch, and begins to walk in the direction of the mysterious rock formation that makes up the grave. His entire outlook on the world

is now transformed. Only a moment ago he had been completely preoccupied with a world of resisting natural forces that he hoped to conquer and make transparent to scientific reason and technological exploration. But now he finds himself confronted by *the inhabited domain of another*. This metamorphosis of the landscape takes place at the exact moment when the geologist begins to suspect that the little mound of stones and the small rectangular clearing before him is not a natural but a human formation and that he is standing face to face to a human grave.

From this fateful moment on, the geologist begins to assume a very different emotional and intellectual stance toward his surrounding world. His thinking of even just a moment ago had been formed by notions of physical causality and by an exclusive logic of natural forces and material interchanges. Just a moment ago, he still sojourned in the impersonal world of "it." But now that he has come face-to-face with a *monument*, his thinking and feeling enters a very different world in which a heaven stands apart from the earth and a "self" encounters an "other." He now enters an ethical realm of "right" and "wrong," a sexual domain of "he" and "she," and a generational domain of "father" and "son", of "ancestors" and "contemporaries", of "younger," and "older", of the "living," and "the dead." He rediscovers motive and desire in a relationship between "self" and "other", he enters an aesthetic world of beauty

and ugliness, a hospitable, ethical and religious world that sets limits to what he is permitted and not permitted to do.

In more concrete terms, his thoughts now turn to the possible identity of the person buried beneath these carefully arranged stones. Was he perhaps an explorer like the geologist himself? Did he meet up with an accident or perhaps fall ill? (The geologist's imagination follows here the path of *literature and history*). Or was he perhaps an aboriginal hunter confused by a sandstorm? (His imagination now turns to *cultural anthropology* and to questions about early human life on the planet. Or, again, the buried person had perhaps been the ruler of an ancient city that once prospered on the banks of a now extinct river? (He remembers here having once read a fascinating book about lost civilizations). He fleetingly entertains melancholy thoughts about the fate of civilizations and recalls what he has read in *archeology and history*. He then remembers a haunting painting by Caspar Friedrich of a lone man wearing a dark 19th-century overcoat while standing atop a mountain and overlooking an empty landscape of rocks and clouds. (Here he is summoning his experiences of *art and poetry*.) He asks himself if it really could be true that at one time children played along the fertile banks of a river that today is transformed into a gully filled with sand and stone. (His sensibilities now draw nearer to questions concerning the meaning of life and evoke his explorations in the

fields of *philosophy* and *religion*.)

We see thus how standing before the grave the geologist turns away from scientific observations and calculations that earlier had kept him preoccupied with an uninhabited universe. Moving away from the stones of geology he now approaches the inhabited world of religion, the arts and the humanities. This is not to say that the world of geology and the land of "it" has completely disappeared from his consciousness; it still forms a horizon around the festive world he now inhabits and in which it is possible to encounter a self, and another. His perspective has shifted from a unitary, natural and physical universe, of which he imagined himself to be but a part, to a very differently constituted world that demands to be understood as a meeting place for self, world and other. He now sees the gravesite and the landscape surrounding it, not with the eyes and ears of astronomy, but with the sight, sound and touch cultivated by religion, by the arts and the humanities.

This *different way* of seeing and of "being in the world" does not alienate him from concrete worldly or even scientific reality, but it makes him experience these in a different way. He now has entered the intersubjective and festive world of host and guest. He no longer plays the role of the lone astronomer studying the nightly sky with all the world around him is sunk in sleep. He now is a host who

opens his house and his heart to a new guest, or he impersonates the guest who overcomes numerous obstacles on his way to the home of his host. But in either case, host and guest have temporarily left in abeyance a workaday, natural scientific, impersonal and technological struggle with the forces of a natural universe. Both host and guest are eager to enter the world of festive encounters, which includes the domain of the arts, the humanities and that of religious and social celebrations. Science is but the extension of the world of work and the struggle for existence, while religion, the arts and the humanities all draw us closer towards to our neighbors, whether they be human or divine, living or dead, native or stranger. The sciences provide us with information about a natural universe while the humanities provide us with the means to build a coherent, human and divine world. The building block of that coherent world is the host and guest relationship and the fundamental order of that world is not achieved by objective measurements but by conversation. All the humanities, the arts and religious practices are built on the fundamental relationship between a host and a guest and take the ultimate and irreducible form of conversation. By contrast, to enter the world of natural science and technology, we must assume the role and the mask of an anonymous and faceless intruder.

The geologist' reflections on the fate of the unknown person buried in the deserted valley inevitably provoke in him thoughts about his

own precarious situation. He thinks about his dwindling food supplies, about his physical exhaustion, and about the dangers he still faces on his way home. Within the inhabited world of art, religion and the humanities a person is *always in the presence of a neighbor*, near or far. The scientific observer removes himself as much as that is possible from the scene; he uses the Cartesian motto of “Masked I advance” (*Larvatus prodeo*). But within the realm of the arts and the humanities our constant desire is that of drawing nearer to another who is all at once a neighbor, a host and a guest.

While he cautiously approaches the site of the grave and the unknown person who lies buried there, the geologist comes into the presence of *another world and another person*. This would be true even if later he would come to the conclusion that the rock formation was not a grave at all but merely a curious geological artifact. It would still be this *other* who opened his eyes and his heart to the intersubjective world of the humanities, of the arts and of religion. It would still be this imagined *other* who opened to him a world of hospitality and conversation and made him think about the meaning of human life and the fate of civilizations.

It was thus the evocation of a *personal presence* incarnate in a human artifact that intruded on the geologist's ongoing natural scientific preoccupation. It was the awareness of this presence that

transported him from the neutral geological world of "it rains," "it falls," and "it happens", to another world that made him aware of mortality, of truth and beauty, of good and evil, of motivation, of life and death, of love and friendship, of order and chaos. It was this personal presence of the buried stranger that gave the geologist access to philosophy, theology, art, history, architecture, literature, and music.

If instead of discovering a grave, our geologist had suddenly heard a child cry out, or had been surprised by the song of angels, the result would not have been different. He would have been called away from his geological and universal preoccupations and made to return to the inhabited world of host and guest, of heaven and earth, of self and other, of the living and the dead.

We note here again the difference between a scientific observation and a contemplative pursuit made possible by the arts and the humanities. A scientific investigation introduces us to a generic, a-historic time of "it," while the contemplation of a monument, calls us into the presence of a personal other and invites us to enter into a relationship of mutual revelation. The monument opens to us an inhabited space and time and assigns to us the role of host or guest. We are thus *present* to a tombstone in ways that we can never be present to the rocks of geology, to the forces of physics,

or to the substances of chemistry.

To conclude we briefly return to the question of human consciousness. We have maintained that that consciousness remains at all times aware of a dual reality of heaven and earth, of self and other, of day and night, of man and woman, of what is festive and what is mundane, of work and play. Human consciousness can only develop within a cultural world that enables us to shift from one way of being, acting and perceiving to a radically different one.

The historical division between the natural sciences and technologies, on the one hand, and religious practices, the arts and the humanities on the other, reflects the human need to inhabit the human world in radically different ways. Any attempt to radically unify and standardize these human ways of seeing and understanding, or to impose on it a strict hierarchy, does not make our world more coherent or transparent but leads us to an ever greater impoverishment and dehumanization of our cultural world.

Let us once more return to the geologist's experience. When we first met him he was involved in a natural scientific explorations of a landscape that in all respects appeared lifeless and barren. Yet in the midst of this desert he became aware of a mysterious trace of another world that resisted the universal embrace of his natural scientific thinking. For a moment he was tempted to ignore that trace in order

to preserve the perfect unity of the natural geological landscape. Yet in the end he permitted that absolute unity to be destroyed so it could make place for the appearance of an *Other*. We might say that at that moment the heavens began to break through the arid monotony of a merely geological earth and to form together with it an inhabitable human and divine world. It is at that moment that the geologist shifted away from a workaday, natural scientific and technological stance to embrace the arts and the humanities as his means to understanding his world.

We observe that in the world of natural scientific explorations the observer himself forms part of the all-inclusive natural unity he observes and seeks to understand. As we have seen, in that world there is here no place for an “I”, a “he” or a “she” or a “we”. It is only with the discovery of the disturbing trace of *another world* that the geologist manages to shift perspectives and rediscovers an inhabited, cosmic world in which there is place for self and other, heaven and earth, divinity and humanity. We discover here anew that it is *the other* who constitutes the ultimate source and principle of ontological change. Without a fundamental link to *another world* we are condemned to psychic immobility and infinite, sterile repetition.

Unlike the unitary and universal world of the natural sciences, the world of the humanities, the arts and religion *remains irreducibly*

*dual* and conforms to the fundamental relationship of host and guest. Where natural science adopts a specific logic and a particular method to reach its conclusions, the arts, the humanities and religious practices all follow a very different, irreducible principle of *conversation* in which a self and another become mutually engaged. Within this latter cultural realm there can be no revelation of a shared world that is not at the same time a revelation of self and of other. Moreover, the conversational structure of the arts, the humanities and religious practices is all too evident. There can be no author without readers, no actor or painter without a public, no divinity without humanity, no music without avid and appreciative listeners. Writing and painting are inherently conversational practices, as are prayer and hermeneutical or liturgical practices.

We notice also that the shift of focus from the material unity of the natural universe to the dual unity of the cosmos at the same time marks a shift from a literal and substantive to a symbolic whole. The natural universe announces itself as a natural whole, in the sense that it demands no cultural effort to keep it together. But the unity of a host and a guest, or of conversational partners can be maintained only by a never ceasing cultural effort to bring and to hold it together. The unity of the universe is maintained by something we can name only by the impersonal pronoun “it”. The unity of an inhabited cosmos must be created and thereafter maintained by an unending dialogue

between heaven and earth, man and woman, native and stranger, self and other. The humanities, the arts and the practices of religion all form part of this unending conversation that builds and holds together a human world.

*About experiencing barriers and thresholds.*

We have seen thus far how the awareness of the presence of another subject takes the geologist from the neutral and indifferent world of natural scientific pursuits and transports him to a differently structured world of hospitality and dialogue where he becomes aware of his own and another's subjectivity. His situation differs in no essential respect from that of someone who in the midst of his daily labors is surprised by a telephone call or by a knock on the door. In responding that person interrupts his absorption in the workaday world and enters instead a very differently structured world that leads him not to a physical obstacle, but to a threshold where he might encounter another person. For the moment he suspends his struggle with a resisting natural world so as to encounter and draw nearer to another person.

As we observe the geologist walking toward the grave, we notice that he no longer moves and acts in the forthright and businesslike

manner of the experienced field geologist. He no longer surveys a geological terrain but finds himself on his way to meet a stranger. This shift in perspective introduces a certain note of reticence in his approach; he appears less sure of himself and slows down when he approaches the grave. His entire body now moves in a way that testifies to his mental and physical awareness of the fact that he is approaching a *threshold* that leads to the mysterious domain of *another*. He now is conscious of the fact that he is no longer alone and that he needs the permission of another to draw closer and pursue his inquiry.

When he reaches the gravesite, he kneels down beside the monument to inspect it at close range. His demeanor is now respectful, his movements and expressions more tentative and ready to respond to the presence of another.

As he begins to examine the conical headstone, he is very careful not to place his foot upon the rectangular clearing that forms part of the grave. And as he bends down to inspect the individual stones that form part of the monument, he no longer studies them in the manner of a geologist who is primarily interested in their physical and chemical composition; rather, he studies them as an anthropologist might study a mask or a historian an ancient manuscript. Within this new world of festive encounters he now approaches these stones as

markers or as letters that spell out and symbolize facets of a *personal existence* embedded in a *social* history.

He now finds himself in the position of someone who has come to call upon a stranger. In that situation we expect the caller to be alert and eager to gather as much information as possible about the host or guest he hopes to meet. We might think here of an insurance salesman who has come to call upon a new client. We see him first as he is making his way through the garden gate, past the lawn and the flowerbeds to the front entrance of the house. We assume that this is his first call, and we imagine him to be looking around for any clues that might help him better understand his prospective client and frame his approach to him.

He certainly will take note of the size, the age and the state of upkeep of the house and the surrounding gardens. He may be glad to discover a prosperous bed of roses. He himself cultivates roses, and this common interest might serve to establish a friendly relationship with his client. If he notices a child's bike on the lawn and is greeted by a cocker spaniel wagging its' tail, he will gauge his sales pitch differently than if he were to come upon an abandoned yard and find a pit bull growling at him. He notices these and similar details not out of idle curiosity but against the background of a need to frame a fitting approach to his prospective customer.

Within this context the salesman is not likely to inspect the flowerbeds in the manner of a biologist or a professional landscaper. He does not examine the house in the way an architect or as a real estate agent might. His real interest is not in flowerbeds as such, nor in cocker spaniels or in real estate, but in the people who inhabit this house, who tend the flowerbeds, play with the dog or ride the bike.

This search for a face, for an identity and a state of mind has little in common with the strategies and methods of the practitioner of the natural sciences. The work of the insurance salesman is here much closer allied with the activities of the humanist historian, the literary scholar, the religionist, or the psychotherapist.

It is also the approach used by our geologist as he sets out to study the grave he has discovered in the midst of the desert. As we see him cautiously approach the burial site it is as if all the material objects that compose it suddenly awaken from their slumber within the neutral, material world of geology and transform themselves into a kind of material *adjectives* that describe and tell the story of the unknown person who lies buried there.

As he approaches the grave the geologist discovers a *threshold* beyond which he hesitates to tread. All what lies beyond that threshold he now experiences as *belonging to another*. The objects he finds there no longer refer to a geological terrain or to a natural

and material universe but now point to the buried stranger and begin to reveal *that other subject's world*.

The geologist has stepped from one attitude into another, and the world around him stands now revealed in a very different light. It is as though the objects that he now encounters have undergone a sudden and miraculous transformation: they no longer speak of a natural world that forms part of a physical universe. They now attempt to tell a story about a coherent historical world and about a person who once inhabited that world and participated in its cultural life. This transformation and transubstantiation takes place at the very moment when the geologist steps outside the uninhabited world of geology and enters the inhabited world of the arts, the humanities and of religious practices. This moment also marks a shift from a naturalistic psychology that dissolves the human presence into the world of "it" to a humanistic and descriptive psychology that explores the inhabited world of "he", "she", "we" and "they".

The progressive world of the natural sciences is one of relentless advances that leads us from discovery to discovery in an unending search for intellectual and material mastery of a natural universe. Entering that world is like beginning a long march on a road where every step on the way demands the removal of a physical or mental *barrier* and where each new breakthrough, as soon as it is achieved,

brings into view a new series of obstacles and roadblocks. Each barrier incarnates a facet of the natural world's resistance to human dwelling, each manifests its essential indifference to human needs and desires, and the removal of each barrier represents a weakening of this resistance and a further step on the road to the conquest of a material universe.

Both the world of work and the world of the festive offer us the prospect of a future paradise where all our needs and desires are forever put to rest. The ultimate dream of the workaday world is that of an absolute appropriation of nature such that it would become entirely subordinate to our will. The ultimate dream of the realm of the festive is that of an absolute revelation of self, world and other such that it would forever still our quest to better understand and be nearer to self and other. Our desires unrestrained would thus lead us in the direction of either a total appropriation of the natural world or to a total and unattainable revelation of self, world and other. In the end, we would be forced to make the impossible choice between *being* and *having*.

Clearly, our desire to gain mastery over nature must be tempered with the desire for festive manifestation, and our desire to gain material possession of a natural universe must be tempered by our desire for a festive revelation of a human and divine world. Equally,

our desire to control and dominate the other and to use him as an instrument in our conquest of the world must be counterbalanced by a festive desire to witness his free and spontaneous self-manifestation of self and other.

The world revealed to us within the attitude of mental or physical appropriation is a world revealed through violence. A world revealed to us in a festive celebration is one that is interrupted by a threshold and structured by an *accepted difference* between what belongs to the self and what belongs to the other. Neither world can maintain itself in the absence of the other; a world without violence remains a pious dream and a world unrestrained by hospitable thresholds cannot endure. The world of work, that is, of science and technology, and the world of festive revelation present us with two different but complimentary ways of understanding the difference between what belongs to the self and what belongs to the *other*.

Within the world of everyday work, of technology and natural science, each task and each problem presents itself as an obstacle to progress, measured in terms of an absolute conquest of what is other than the self. Science and technology dream of the creation of a paradise that, unlike a human and divine world, no longer offers any resistance to what human beings will or desire. Science and technology offer us a world where *distance* is experienced as a

barrier and where we pit the strength of our bodies and the agility of our minds against it so as to diminish and remove it. But the festive world of revealing encounters is structured, not by natural *barriers* that we are called upon to oppose and remove, but by *thresholds* that we are enjoined to respect so that we may encounter human and divine persons. Thresholds form the underpinnings of an ethical world in which we seek alliances with others. Barriers form part of a solitary, physical world that we must learn to master in defense of a viable human world. The festive world thus places us before an absolute *ethical limit* in the form of a threshold that a guest may not cross without the active consent of the host. It is this absolute, ethical limit that makes human habitation possible. Before this limit we abstain from dissimulation and force and we bring to a halt all progress of a workaday, scientific and technological world. Before this limit we present ourselves in the hope of coming into the presence of the host. It is this limit that makes possible hospitality and conversation and in this way it forms the absolute foundation of a human world.

The triumphant path of scientific inquiry of the natural world is that of Columbus sailing uncharted waters to the unknown corners of the earth. To make progress following that path means to do battle with an endless succession of obstacles, each of which represents a measure of our ignorance and inexperience with the physical and

natural world. Within that workaday world, we can rely only on the resources of body and mind, and on the acquired virtues of courage and steadfastness to help us persist in the face of innumerable obstacles.

But where the workaday, natural scientific world leads forever to obstacles that must be faced and resolved, the world of festive encounters places us before thresholds in the form of altars, portals, doorways, and monuments. Our inquiry begins here with accepting the first law of the threshold, which forbids us to make forced entrees into the domain of the other. To violate the threshold means to subvert the only means we have to truly encounter self, world and other.

Seen from within this perspective, the activities of the workaday world are essentially those of bringing a particular site in readiness for festive encounters. The Genesis myth of creation tells of a divine Creator who during six days forcibly transformed the space and time of an uninhabitable Chaos into the measured and hospitable time and space of a welcoming earth. On the last day of creation God is said to have “blessed” humanity and assumed the role of a host who opened the doors of the world to his guests. The Sabbath thereby came to symbolize a pause or a hiatus; it assumed the form of a threshold that cannot be mastered by human force or will alone and

that can be crossed only with the help of a consenting Host.

We think here also about the Socrates of Plato's *Banquet*, who on his way to Agathon's party is said to have come to a sudden halt and fallen into a profound meditation on the porch of Agathon's neighbor. The myth tells us that Socrates philosophical meditations are not merely the product of a methodic pursuit of reason but rather should be understood as festive dialogues before a sacred threshold symbolized by a neighbor porch. From Socrates' and Plato's perspective, wisdom-loving thought takes place before thresholds and doorways that are not even visible from the standpoint of the workaday world. Wisdom-loving thought comes to us always as an answer to our prayers.

### ***Hesiod's Prometheus and the birth of a human world***

Hesiod's (1959) *Theogony* tells the story of Prometheus and details for us the important role he played in the birth and emancipation of humanity. That emancipation led mankind away from an original state of confusion about their own identity and led them to accept their own mortality and their subordinate position within a human and divine cosmos.

The myth recalls how in a distant past, human beings had lived

without distinction among the gods and had done so without recognizing the mortal difference that set them apart from the immortal gods.

According to Hesiod, the first step in the creation of the human race was not so much a question of shaping individual human bodies but rather of permitting a pre-human race to recognize its mortality and thereafter to find its own proper place in respect to that of the immortal gods.

The specific creative act whereby humanity came into being was therefore one of recognizing its own mortal nature and of acknowledging its proper place within the larger scheme of the cosmos. It was thus this acknowledgement of difference that opened the prospect of a distinctive human world that would be apart from, but not indifferent to, the divine world of Olympus.

This human acknowledgement of human mortality came about under the tutelage of Prometheus, the “forward looking” benefactor of the human race.

Hesiod’s “Theogony” (1959, verses 535 and 536, p. 155) tells the story of the discovery of the fateful difference in a very succinct manner:

*It was when gods and mortal men took their  
separate positions at Mekone.*

The story gives us no specific details about what it was that caused the separation or how the discovery of man's mortal nature came about. All it tells us is that the discovery was made by Prometheus, and that it was he who guided the human spirit and taught it to dwell on earth.

What set in motion the story of mankind's emancipation was here not a quarrel, not a fatal flaw or a mortal sin but simply the intellectual and spiritual discovery of an ontological difference between heaven and earth and between immortal gods and mortal men.

When Prometheus told Zeus about mankind's decision to set up their separate household at some distance from the gods, the initial reaction seemed to have been favorable. Zeus ordered that a great feast be prepared to mark and celebrate the occasion and to give both mortals and immortals a chance to enjoy one last supper together before each going their separate ways. He ordered Prometheus to slaughter a magnificent bull and to prepare two equal portions, one to be consumed by the gods and the other by the departing human race.

Zeus' choice of Prometheus for this task acknowledges the central role he played in the drama of human emancipation. His name derives from the Greek *prometheia*, meaning "forethought,"

"foresight," and "caution", indicating qualities that would make him exceptionally gifted in making appropriate distinctions. We also should note that Prometheus, being a Titan and therefore a member of a defeated previous generation of gods, might have felt a particular sympathy for the human race as it was at the point of discovering their own inferior status from the victorious Olympian gods.

After killing and butchering the bull, Prometheus proceeded to divide the sacrificial animal in such a way that mankind would receive the meaty portions and that the gods would obtain the bones and the fat. No matter how we might otherwise interpret the division of the portions, it seems clear that it was made at least in part to reflect the different natures of mortals and immortal beings.

After the separation at Mekone, it was still possible for gods and men to eat together, but it no longer was suitable for them to eat the very same food.

Prometheus took the massive bones of the slaughtered animal and craftily covered these with layers of fat. He then hid the tasty meat inside the unsightly stomach of the beast, covered it with the entrails, and placed it next to the other portion. Zeus chose the bones hidden beneath the fat and left the meaty parts to Prometheus and his mortal subjects.

If we read the story with the understanding that a quarrel had

led to the fateful separation of mortals and immortals, then we might assume that Zeus was being duped by Prometheus and remained unaware that a trick was being played on him. But if we approach the story as a myth concerning human emancipation, then we see Zeus' apparent gullibility in a very different light. The deception practiced by Prometheus would then represent a first step in the emancipation of mankind, and Zeus' apparent failure to notice it should then be read as his quiet, unstated approval of the growing independence of the human spirit. The deception could then be seen as marking the end point of a long period during which mortals had remained morally and intellectually transparent to the gods.

We see something very similar occurring in the ongoing relationship between young children and their parents. There always comes a time when the child begins to outgrow a relationship of complete transparency to the parents and begins to move in the direction of greater autonomy. It then becomes possible and legitimate for the child to hide something from the parents and to accept a first fruitful distance from them. This first moral *di-stance* or this “*standing apart*” from the parents, if it is properly respected, becomes the moral foundation upon which all further stages of the child's emancipation will be built.

Yet, this first *di-stance* and these first fateful steps in the direction of independence evoke conflicting feelings in parents and children

alike. Like the pain of birth itself, these hurt feelings must be borne with patience if the developing child is to become a flourishing adult.

Few parents would fail to recognize themselves in this portrait of a half- irritated and half-pleased Zeus playing his role as the father who pretends being tricked by his children. It is only when we place Zeus' silent suffering of Prometheus' tricks within the larger context of human emancipation that the whole story begins to make sense.

There is another good reason to read the myth in this way. All the events mentioned here are said to occur at a place called Mekone. Some have tried to link this name to that of an ancient town in Corinth, but such a realistic interpretation fail to advance our understanding of the myth. (Lamberton, 1988, p. 98). A more promising approach would be to read the place name as pointing to a central aspect of the myth. The Greek noun *mekoon* translates as "poppy" or "head of the poppy," or, in botanical terms, *Papaver somniferum* (Liddell & Scott, 1966 [see under *Meekoon*]). As such, it refers to the realm of sleep and dreams and to a preconscious realm that we might think of as preceding conscious human existence. To escape from that realm can be seen as a first determinate step on the way to humanization.

It is curious to realize that Aristotle (1967, p. 587) used the word *meconium* almost in the same way we still do today, that is, to refer

either to the juice of the poppy or to the fecal discharge of a newborn child. If we read these ancient meanings back into the place name, we begin to understand that the very site of the last banquet with the gods was also the birthplace of the human spirit and the moment it awakened from its sleep.

It was thus at Mekone that the human spirit, guided and symbolized by Prometheus, came to recognize its essential difference from the gods. Thereafter mankind would adopt for itself the name of *mortals* and refer to the gods as the *immortals*. It seems that with this new recognition of their difference much of humanity's earlier confusion disappeared. Sensible action became possible the moment human beings began to recognize their own nature as being fragile, mortal, and limited. This also implied that the condition of confusion and lack of sound sense would return the moment when human hubris would begin to again blur the lines of distinction that sets mortal beings apart from their divine and immortal gods.

A corollary of this proposition would be that the soundness and the clarity of the human mind would depend on its ability to distinguish between humanity and divinity and on the recognition of humanity's role in a cosmic dialogue with the gods. Beyond the point of no return of Mekone the soundness of human rationality would depend on the recognition of an indelible difference and

distance between heaven and earth and between mortals and immortals. That crucial distinction would henceforth be marked by a Prometheus threshold in the form of a sacrificial altar, that thereafter would be understood as a symbolic bridge or doorway between two separate realms marked respectively by death and by eternal life.

A fully developed human rationality, developed beyond the stage symbolized by Mekone, would thus rest on the recognition of the Prometheus' altar, understood here as a portal that both joined and separated two neighboring households. A sacrifice made on that altar would thus implicitly recognize the inevitable separation between the two households. The sacrifice itself suggested that that separation could be overcome only symbolically by means of a commemorative meal celebrated in the spirit of hospitality and attended by an exchange of gifts.

But let us return to the founding scene of the farewell dinner at Mekone. During and after the ceremonial dinner the two groups no doubt exchanged complimentary gestures and speeches, they sang and drank together and then embraced to wish each other well.

Soon thereafter the mortals gathered together under the leadership of Prometheus and began their long journey to their new homeland. The gods remained on Mount Olympus, and perhaps

they shed a tear as they watched the departing mortals disappear into the distance.

The sadness that must have surrounded the departure no doubt stemmed from the realization that humanity's journey to the Promised Land was in fact a one-way journey that would not permit the travelers to reverse their steps. We are reminded here of Thomas Wolfe's (1940) great novel "*You Can't Go Home Again*". Only Prometheus would be able to stealthily return now and then to the abode of the gods.

It is important to note that the absolute nature of their separation from the immortal gods did not make mortals forget or scorn their immortal origins. To become human, the followers of Prometheus were willing to forego immediate and material access to the gods and replace it with a symbolic or sacrificial access that would commemorate their last supper with the gods. The very first thing they did to celebrate their arrival on earth would be to fashion an altar and establish a new relationship with the gods. In building that altar, mortal human beings laid down a border stone or threshold that would thereafter separate and interconnect the two distinct realms of mortal and immortal beings.

Hesiod celebrates the creation of the altar in the following terse line:

*Ever since that time the race of mortal  
men on earth have burned  
The white bones to the immortals  
On the smoking altars.*  
(Hesiod, 1959, Theogony, verses 556  
and 557, p. 156)

Greek ritual sacrifice required that a victim be killed and slaughtered in a carefully prescribed manner. The priest officiating at the sacrifice would burn on the altar the divine portion of the bones and the fat of the victim and offer the celebrants the human portion of roasted meat. In all this he would carefully recreate the original gestures of Prometheus during the last supper shared by mortals and immortals on Mount Olympus.

The Greek sacrificial ritual would thus be, first of all, a commemorative event in which mortals would remember the time *in illo tempore* when they lived without distinction among the immortal gods. At the same time, they would remember the painful event of their separation from the gods at Mekone, together with the proud day when they built their first altar to delimit and celebrate the coming into being of a distinct human domain.

The sacrifice thus evoked not only painful and nostalgic feelings about the human loss of boundless intimacy with the gods; it also

gave rise to pride and confidence in the establishment of a distinct human domain within the whole of the cosmos. In final instance, it was the establishment of that distinctly human domain that would thereafter enable mortal human beings to assume the role of host and guest and consecrate a festive realm in which the self, the other and the cosmos could stand revealed. The ritual of Greek sacrifice thereby laid the foundation on which human consciousness and human and divine revelations could be built.

In Aeschylus' (1976) *Prometheus Bound*, verses 444-458, we find a passage in which Prometheus describes the condition of humanity prior to their exodus from Mekone, and his portrayal is hardly flattering:

*In those days they had eyes, but sight was  
meaningless;*

*Heard sounds, but could not listen; all their  
length of life.*

*They passed like shapes of dreams, confused  
and purposeless.*

*Of brick-built, sun-warmed houses, or of  
carpentry,*

*They had no notion; lived in holes, like  
caverns.*

*They knew no certain way to mark off the winter from the flowery spring, or from the fruitful summer.*

*Their every act was without knowledge, till I came.*

*I taught them the difficult art of determining when stars would rise or set.*

*Number, the primary science, I invented for them, and how to set down words in writing.*

The Greek ritual of sacrifice should therefore be understood as an occasion to reflect back on the creative act of Prometheus at the time when he separated human beings from their divine neighbors and thereby permitted them to develop their own separate and distinct estate.

The birth of mankind, understood from the perspective of the Promethean sacrifice, takes thus the form of an exodus from a prior, primitive chaos based on the fusion of self and other. This separation marks the birth of a human and divine cosmos that is ordered and made whole by a threshold in the form of an altar.

The ritual of sacrifice therefore can be seen as forming part of a larger cultural effort that aims to order and bring together into one whole both heaven and earth and both mortal and immortal beings.

Put differently, we might say that Prometheus established the altar to distinguish an earlier and unproductive way of being together with the gods from a later, cultural and symbolic way that could form the basis of a human civilization. That first way of being together had sought to overcome all difference and distance between heaven and earth by removing all barriers and destroying all thresholds that held them apart. Psychoanalysis would later refer to these same tendencies in terms of incestuous desires and drives in the service of death.

This first failed effort at *overcoming* all difference and distance between heaven and earth was then followed by a new Promethean effort to *cultivate distance and difference* in the form of religious rites, of art and scholarship. This effort would include the development of new forms of governance and refinements in the ways of friendship, love and neighborliness. The old literal and barbaric way of absorbing the other, of comingling and forming an undivided material whole with him, was thereby replaced by a new, culturally elaborated and symbolic way of forming a whole and of creating an inhabitable cosmos together.

Prometheus placed an altar between mankind and the gods and he thereby laid the foundation of Greek civilization. The Promethean altar, and the rituals and myths that came to surround and support it, never closed the sabbatical gap between mankind

and the gods. But instead of materially filling that gap Prometheus transformed it into an infinite source from which mankind would draw the inspiration for building a thriving civilization.

We are faced here with the strange phenomenon of a break in continuity, of a void and a hiatus that, as such, forms the ultimate foundation of a viable human civilization. The Promethean sacrificial meal therefore commemorates the birth of a fruitful separation of heaven and earth and the miraculous transformation of chaos into cosmos.

The altar created, as it were, a new border between heaven and earth and thereby introduced a new and fruitful cultural distance, not only between gods and men, but also between human beings themselves and between mankind and the natural world.

The ritual sacrifice took the essential form of a meal shared by human and divine neighbors and in which all the participants accepted the roles of host and guest. The event itself thereby assumed the meaning of *a separation and a distance overcome by means of hospitality*.

Where the first, chaotic and ultimately unfruitful relationship between gods and men had ended in a confusion of identities and a desperate clinging to each other, the new “sacrificial” form of gathering around the altar would bring order to the human community and endow it with a place and an identity of its own.

Moreover, this new way of honoring a threshold and of accepting distance and difference gave rise to new forms of conversation in which each of the participants would alternatively play the role of host and guest. These conversational exchanges would take the form of presenting and attending a religious ritual, of practicing and admiring the arts, of writing and of reading a philosophical treatise, of composing and of listening to poetry, of building, visiting and inhabiting a magnificent building, of carving and admiring a piece of sculpture or of painting and honoring a sublime piece of art

By contrast, the natural sciences cannot recognize an altar as a threshold, since the ultimate object of their research is not an inhabited cosmos but a natural scientific and material universe. A natural universe has no neighbors and it offers no place or time in which to receive or offer hospitality. Within the field of vision opened by a natural scientific perspective there is no place for a heaven, considered separate from the earth, or for a personal being separate and distinct from a biological organism. To enter that field of vision means to be temporarily barred from the worlds of religion, art and the humanities. As we have said before, this does not mean that scientists considered as persons would be so deprived since it remains always possible for them to interrupt their journey of discovery of a natural universe, to change course and to come home to a human and divine cosmos.

Prometheus taught humans beings not to mask, repress or otherwise disavow their differences from each other and from the Olympian gods but rather to acknowledge and manifest these in an artful and festive manner. The acknowledgement of these differences finds artful expression, not merely in verbal or ritual form but also manifests itself in the building and inhabiting of one's house. To inhabit the earth means to situate oneself in respect to a threshold that not only binds us to our neighbors but also distinguishes and separates us from them.

Prometheus taught explicitly that the festive recognition and acceptance of *difference*, to wit the difference between heaven and earth and between mortals and immortals, laid the foundation for all arts and sciences. Mankind found access to these only after it had accepted to stand apart from the gods and from the heavens.

*All arts that mortals have  
come from Prometheus.  
(Verse 506)*

As we have seen, the Promethean altar placed the world of mortals at a proper and fruitful *di-stance* from that of the immortals. The essential Promethean gift therefore did not take the form of a

particular thing, quality or capacity. It was not something added to the bill of particulars of human life, but it rather took the form of a fundamental reorientation of human existence so that it found access to a festive and hospitable revelation of self, other and world. Prometheus did not so much endow human beings with a new quality named “intelligence”, “inventiveness” “consciousness” or “artistic sensibility”. He rather placed humanity in a new *inhabited* relationship to the surroundings world so that these particular qualities could be developed, exercised and made to bear fruit.

What can be said about human intelligence applies equally to the human senses, that is, to the worlds of sight and sound. The senses of sight, sound, taste and smell were never absent from the human condition. But these could make their rich contributions to a human civilization only after they were made to form part of an inhabited world, marked by thresholds and unified by divine and human hospitality.

We encounter here the seemingly contradictory truth that intimate and revealing ways of being in the world can come to fruition only within the framework of an inhabited world that is culturally divided into distinct domains. Intimacy can come to fruition only within a *decorous* world that observes thresholds, that practices good manners and respects boundaries.

Hospitality is therefore never merely a *natural* occurrence; the

gifts of Prometheus do not form part of a natural universe but constitute the core of a human and divine, inhabited cosmos.

It is interesting to discover how contemporary psychological notions of the weaning of a child repeat the major themes of the Promethean myth. We encounter in both instances a humanity that confuses itself with an other, that seems to suck and bites and grasps in a vain effort to return to the womb and to submerge itself in the life of another. In both instances there is question of a painful physical separation that ends with the discovery of symbols and the beginning of a new cultural and symbolic life based on conversation. In both accounts the emancipation of humanity passes by a primitive stage of sucking, biting and grasping that cannot let go of the other that is followed by the acceptance of a cultural and symbolic way of life that is ordered by symbols, delimited by thresholds and supported throughout by conversation.

We use the word "symbol" here in the literal and original Greek meaning of a token that, like the Promethean altar, acknowledges a physical and literal separation between host and guest, all the while offering new ways to overcoming that separation by creating a coherent cultural world.

The word *symbolon* referred originally to an ancient Greek ritual of

hospitality. (Liddell & Scott, 1966 see under Συμβολον). If two strangers befriended each other while on a journey, they might at the moment of their parting conclude a treaty of friendship. To that effect they would break a piece of pottery, a coin or a dice in two pieces so that each of the two friends would thereafter carry half of the divided token as a permanent reminder of their friendship. The Greeks referred to that token as a *symbolon*, that is, a physical reminder of a relationship that has been materially sundered in the past but that offers hope of a cultural or “symbolic” reunion in the future. As such, the symbol of friendship carries the physical mark of a breach or a scar that points to a traumatic, material separation, and beyond that to a missing part with which it remains symbolically connected. The broken dice or pottery shard refers thus all at once to the memory of a traumatic separation and to the hope of a future reunion of the two parts.

But note that the promise of the Greek *symbolon* does not refer to the time prior to the founding of Prometheus’ altar or prior to the Promethean separation of gods and men and of heaven and earth. The future to which the symbol refers does not lead back to a time before religion; it marks as its proper foundation the cosmic world created by the altar and ordered by the sacrificial religious ritual.

The symbol of friendship, like all other symbols, *accepts and includes the altar and confirms the separation* of heaven and earth

and of self and others. As such it remains itself within the sphere of the symbolic and takes its distance from the primitive comingling and the confusion of identities that marked the time before the symbol and prior to the institution of hospitality and of religion.

Neither does the symbol point in the direction of a disembodied utopia or to a totalitarian state of affairs, both of which seek to return humanity to the time prior to the establishment of the Promethean altar and prior to the separation of heaven and earth. The *symbolon* can operate only within a culturally ordered world of host and guest, heaven and earth, self and other.

We want therefore to stress the fact that the symbol can operate only within a time and space that is founded in hospitality. Hospitality refers here to a festive, freely consented *coming together* that has been made possible by a threshold. In the Prometheus myth that threshold takes the form of the altar.

As guests, we renounce all right to further progress when we stand before the threshold of the domain of our host. It is before that threshold that we announce our presence and await the reply of our host. In response to our presence, the host comes to the door to welcome us and to lead us into the intimacy of his home. We repeat this ceremony of host and guest whenever we perform religious rites, practice the arts or the humanities or enter into a mutually

revealing conversation.

By guiding mankind to take its proper distance from the gods and by inviting it to inhabit its' own domain, Prometheus established a rite of hospitality. By inserting a hospitable threshold between neighboring domains he made possible the exchange of gifts and the cultivation of personal exchanges. The first ritual sacrifice was thus all at once, a first guest meal and a first *true encounter* between mortals and immortals, and by extension, between man and woman, friend and friend, child and adult, mankind and nature.

This first festive and hospitable threshold in the form of an altar thus gave neighbors closer and truer access to each other than could ever have been obtained by the indiscriminate and desperate comingling that marked the earliest phase of human becoming. True encounter of self and other can be achieved only in rule-bound meetings of heaven and earth, of self and other. It escapes us the moment we seek unlimited and indiscriminate possession of each other. Greek religion was thus based in final instance on the divine miracle of a threshold that held gods and men far enough apart so they could engage in significant personal exchanges. The Promethean altar set apart heaven and earth, gods and men, self and other, and then bound these together into a new symbolic unity that formed the basis of an original and prosperous civilization.

The conquest of obstacles by science and technology cannot by itself create a comprehensible, hospitable or accessible human world. Nor can it secure for us truly loving or fruitful relationships. A world solely structured by barriers and devoid of thresholds cannot ever be transformed into a truly human world. Only carefully observed and fully respected thresholds can build a human world and thereafter hold it together.

Our workaday world may offer us tantalizing glimpses of a realm beyond, but the distance that separates us from what we desire remains here forever barred by yet another barrier to be overcome, by yet another task to be accomplished, or another instrument or method to be forged or invented. Only the realm of the festive and the practice of hospitality can give us truly access to a self and another and to a human and divine world.

The threshold appears here as our entryway to a place of festive disclosure where host and guests assemble for no other reason than to be present to one another.

Where the world of work, of science and technology may help us penetrate the mysteries of a natural universe, only the practices of the arts, of religion and the humanities, understood here as practices that explicitly honor the threshold, can teach us how to dwell on earth in a human way.

We thus learn from the tale of Prometheus that we find entry into the lived world of religious practices, of the arts and the humanities only after we have first invoked and obeyed a hospitable threshold. To come to understand the world of the humanities as distinct from that of the natural sciences we need to invoke a hospitable threshold, to announce our presence and to wait to be admitted by our host. It is only within the embrace of hospitality that the world of the humanities, the arts and of religious practices becomes fully visible, tangible, audible and understandable to us. In the absence of a hospitable threshold all aspects of that world lose their contours and become drained of sense and purpose. It is only within a pact of friendship and mutual hospitality that self and other can come fully into each other's presence and gain insight into their respective worlds

It is only within the protection of a pact of hospitality that a human world can be properly queried and invited to show itself..

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