Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari and the Rhuthmoi of Culture and Subjectivity - Part 2

- Recherches

- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains

- Philosophie - Nouvel article

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Sommaire

Subjectification in Postsignifying Regime of Signs

According to Deleuze and Guattari, this new semiotic regime deeply changed the form of subjectivity. Instead of being caught in the expanding circles of the traditional paranoid interpretation system, the subject emerged from a single "point of subjectification" and deployed into a dynamic "subject of enunciation," who developed in turn according to a "line of flight" until it was blocked by the dominant "signifying regime of signs" and converted into a mere "subject of statement."

> This is how things are in the passional regime, or the regime of subjectification. There is no longer a center of signifiance connected to expanding circles or an expanding spiral, but a point of subjectification constituting the point of departure of the line. There is no longer a signifier-signified relation, but a subject of enunciation *[sujet d'énonciation]* issuing from the point of subjectification and a subject of the statement *[sujet d'énoncé]* in a determinable relation to the first subject. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 127)

Naturally, this becoming of the subject could follow simultaneously heterogeneous lines of flight and was always limited in time. In other words, the subject was composed of several and successive becomings, it was never unified nor constant.

> In the course of a proceeding, while there is linear movement the plural is often used, whereas there is a return to the Singular as soon as there is a pause or stoppage marking the end of one movement before another begins. Fundamental segmentarity: one proceeding must end (and its termination must be marked) before another begins, to enable another to begin. [...] Several points coexist in a given individual or group, which are always engaged in several distinct and not always compatible linear proceedings. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 128-129)

Once again, Deleuze and Guattari quoted Benveniste but failed to appreciate his contribution, which was nevertheless going into the very same direction. They reduced it to a sheer philosophy of subjectivity restating the unity and constancy of the subject, whereas he was openly critical of philosophers trying like them as a matter of fact to describe language without taking into account the contribution of linguistics, and suggested like them too that the subject was based on a discrete succession of enunciation acts. This is astonishing to see how distorted their view of Benveniste was, making him say that "the subject is the condition of possibility of language or the cause of

the statements," when he claimed exactly the opposite: the language, that is to say the activity of language, is the condition of the subject, provided naturally that this activity can universally rely on the existence of empty signs (or their equivalent in verbal conjugation): the I, and on some other characteristics such as present tense and modalities (See Vol. 4 and Michon, 2010, Chap. 6).

> Linguists like Benveniste adopt a curious linguistic personology that is very close to the Cogito: the *You*, which can doubtless designate the person one is addressing, but more importantly, a point of subjectification on the basis of which each of us is constituted as a subject. The *I* as subject of enunciation, designating the person that utters and reflects its own use in the statement ("the empty nonreferential sign"); this is the I appearing in propositions of the type "I believe, I assume, I think ..." Finally, the I as subject of the statement, indicating a state for which a *She* or *He* could always be substituted ("I suffer, I walk, I breathe, I feel.. ."). This is not, however, a question of a linguistic operation, for a subject is never the condition of possibility of language *[du langage]* or the cause of the statement: there is no subject, only collective assemblages of enunciation. Subjectification is simply one such assemblage and designates a formalization of expression or a regime of signs rather than a condition internal to language *[non pas une condition intérieure du langage]*. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 130)

This failure to appreciate the most advanced theory of language of their time explained why Deleuze and Guattari finally resorted to some sort of psychological perspective describing the subjectivity as "a cogito [that] is always recommenced, a passion or grievance [that] is always recapitulated." Despite their rejection of psychoanalysis, they still used the vocabulary of "consciousness" and "passion."

> Subjectification assigns the line of flight a positive sign, it carries deterritorialization to the absolute, intensity to the highest degree, redundancy to a reflexive form, etc. But it has its own way of repudiating the positivity it frees, or of relativizing the absoluteness it attains, without, however, falling back to the preceding regime. In this redundancy of resonance, the absolute of consciousness is the absolute of impotence and the intensity of passion, the heat of the void. This is because subjectification essentially constitutes finite linear proceedings, one of which ends before the next begins: thus the cogito is always recommenced, a passion or grievance is always recapitulated. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 133)

The denied reliance on psychology or psychoanalysis also explained why they identified "lines of flight" with "passions" which could only last for a moment, like burning fires of desire, necessarily blocked after a while by the stratifications of the world.

> Every consciousness pursues its own death, every love-passion its own end, attracted by a black hole, and all the black holes resonate together. Thus subjectification imposes on the line of flight a segmentarity that is forever repudiating that line, and upon absolute deterritorialization a point of abolition that is forever blocking that deterritorialization or diverting it. The reason for this is simple: forms of expression and regimes of signs are still *strata* (even considered in themselves, after abstracting forms of content); subjectification is no less a stratum than signifiance. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 133-134)

This was a beautiful romantic image but it did not explain why such "passion" could last for more than 2500 years,

whether in the case of the Jews or in that of the practice of philosophy, which were much too swiftly amalgamated with 19th century psychiatric cases (see, p. 128), neither why the so-called "stratification of the world" could not actually be of some help, at least sometimes, for the expression of desire. This lack of dialectic spirit resulted in a definition of subjectivity that oscillated between pure "passion" and pure annihilation of the self in a way that recalled the most traditional mysticism.

> The subjective regime proceeds entirely differently [from the signifying regime]: precisely because the sign breaks its relation of signifiance with other signs and sets off racing down a positive line of flight, it attains an *absolute* deterritorialization expressed in the black hole of consciousness and passion. The absolute deterritorialization of the cogito. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 133)

The subject was finally and inconsistently compared to what had been explained before deemed a part of the rigid strata that immobilized the pure movement of the "plane of consistency" or the "abstract machine."

> The principal strata binding human beings are the organism, signifiance and interpretation, and subjectification and subjection. These strata together are what separates us from the plane of consistency and the abstract machine, where there is no longer any regime of signs, where the line of flight effectuates its own potential positivity and deterritorialization its absolute power. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 134)

Therefore the subject had to be "abolished" in order to reach the fundamental and pure mobile condition of the being, the "absolute power of deterritorialization," just as, for Saint John of the Cross or Teresa of Ávila, the earthly condition of man must be overcome to be able to reach God. And the condition for that was similar to that experienced by those mystics: to overcome the organic body by making oneself a "body without organ," which was to be described thoroughly in the next chapter.

> The problem, from this standpoint, is to tip the most favorable assemblage from its side facing the strata to its side facing the plane of consistency or the body without organs. Subjectification carries desire to such a point of excess and unloosening that it must either annihilate itself in a black hole or change planes. [...] Make the body without organs of consciousness and love. Use love and consciousness to abolish subjectification. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 134)

Naturally, the principle to be reached was not for Deleuze and Guattari the monotheistic God of the Bible, it was Nature itself in which one had to participate as closely as possible by experiencing pure "intensities" and emitting in human culture "particles-signs" analog to physical particles emitted in the cosmos.

> Make consciousness an experimentation in life, and passion a field of continuous intensities, an emission of particles-signs. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 134)

From Transsemiotics to General Pragmatics

Unsurprisingly, the passage beyond the limit of the "signifying regime" was rather difficult. The various types of "semiotics" or "regimes of signs" coexisted in the historical world. One always had to deal with a semiotic mixture: "Every semiotic is mixed and only functions as such; each one necessarily captures fragments of one or more other semiotics" (p. 136). Contrary to a stereotype common in the 1970s based on the exaggerate extension of the sole signifying semiotics, there was "no general semiology" (p. 136) that could provide us with a general criterion and help us to choose and act.

However, Deleuze and Guattari envisaged the possibility of "transforming one abstract or pure semiotic into another, by virtue of the translatability ensuing from overcoding as the special characteristic of language" (p. 136). Although they had previously criticized Benveniste for having emphasized the specificity of language compared to all other semiotic systems and its unique power to "semiotize" them, they now reintroduced his view, without mentioning him though.

> The second aspect, complementary but very different, consists in the possibility of transforming one abstract or pure semiotic into another, by virtue of the translatability ensuing from overcoding as the special characteristic of language. This time, it is no longer a question of concrete mixed semiotics but of transformations of one abstract semiotic into another. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 136)

In other words, the language their own essay was itself a proof of that allowed to navigate between semiotics and to envisage substituting the dominating *signifying* regime by some other regimes, like the *countersignifying* or *postsignifying* ones, which were ethically, politically and artistically more suitable. We were not stuck in the former and, thanks to language which ensured a kind of "transsemiotic," we could always form "new pure regimes of signs."

> Transformations are not limited to the ones we just listed. It is always through transformation that a new semiotic is created in its own right. Translations can be creative. New pure regimes of signs are formed through transformation and translation. Again, there is no general semiology but rather a transsemiotic. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 136)
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> Doubtless, every regime of signs effectuates the condition of possibility of language and utilizes language elements. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 140)

However, consistently with their purely pragmatic perspective which considered language as secondary, Deleuze and Guattari insisted that regimes of signs were actually experienced through "assemblages" that mobilized signs or statements but also bodies and various elements of context. In that sense, those regimes were also "more than language."

> The reasons why a regime of signs is less than language also become the reasons why it is more than language. Only one side of the assemblage has to do with enunciation or formalizes expression; on its other side, inseparable from the first, it formalizes contents, it is a machinic assemblage or an assemblage of bodies. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 140)

"Semiotic systems" and "physical systems" were "in reciprocal presupposition," and could be "abstracted from each other only in a very relative way because they [were] two sides of a single assemblage." Actually, in both cases, their becoming resulted from a deeper *"abstract machine"* that accounted in the end for the fundamental dynamic aspect of the world.

> We must therefore arrive at something in the assemblage itself that is still more profound than these sides and can account for both of the forms in presupposition, forms of expression or regimes of signs (semiotic systems) and forms of content or regimes of bodies (physical systems). This is what we call the *abstract machine,* which constitutes and conjugates all of the assemblage's cutting edges of deterritorialization. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 140-141)

As an example of "abstract machine," Deleuze and Guattari referred first to Foucault's description, in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), of "two kinds of 'multiplicities,' of content and of expression" in "reciprocal presupposition," then to his introduction, in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), of "assemblages of power, or micropowers" to account for both the "statements" and the "bodies." They suggested, however, that, in their view, the assemblages were not based on "power" but on "desire" and therefore, that lines of flight were "primary" and did not result solely from "phenomena of resistance." This seemingly moderate criticism, in fact underlined a significant divergence between their own bright and optimistic Spinozist naturalism and that of Foucault, built on more obscure and pessimistic Nietzschean foundations.

> (1) To us the assemblages seem fundamentally to be assemblages not of power but of desire (desire is always assembled), and power seems to be a stratified dimension of the assemblage; (2) the diagram and abstract machine have lines of flight that are primary, which are not phenomena of resistance or counterattack in an assemblage, but cutting edges of creation and deterritorialization. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, n. 39, p. 531)

This remark allowed Deleuze and Guattari to resume with their ontological reflection. "Prior to" any assemblage of statements and bodies, "prior to" any "form of expression or content," there were "abstract machines," which were not physical nor semiotic but *"diagrammatic,"* that is, operating exclusively by *"matter"* and *"function,"* not by "substance" nor "form."

> An abstract machine in itself is not physical or corporeal, any more than it is semiotic; it is *diagrammatic.* [...] It operates by *matter*, not by substance; by *function*, not by form. [...] Functions are not yet "semiotically" formed, and matters are not yet "physically" formed. The abstract machine is pure Matter-Function a diagram independent of the forms and substances, expressions and contents it will distribute. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 141)

The concepts of "matter" and "function" respectively opposed the traditional concepts of "substance" and "form," or "content" and "expression," and shed light on the virtual side of the being, "before" the essentially dynamic "Matter-Function" became physicalized and formalized.

 We define the abstract machine as the aspect or moment at which nothing but functions and matters remain. A diagram has neither substance nor form, neither content nor expression. Substance is a formed matter, and matter is a substance that is unformed either physically or semiotically. Whereas expression and content have distinct forms, are really distinct from each other, function has only "traits," of content and of expression, between which it establishes a connection: it is no longer even possible to tell whether it is a particle or a sign. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 141)

The virtual side of the being was characterized both by its "degrees of intensity, resistance, conductivity, heating, stretching, speed, or tardiness," and by the "tensors" it contained.

> A matter-content having only degrees of intensity, resistance, conductivity, heating, stretching, speed, or tardiness; and a function-expression having only "tensors," as in a system of mathematical, or musical, writing. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 141)

The passage from the virtual to the actual was not driven by any existing "infrastructure" nor aimed at any "transcendental Idea." Just as in Morin's cosmo-ontology, it constructed "a real that was yet to come, a new type of reality."

> An abstract machine is neither an infrastructure that is determining in the last instance nor a transcendental Idea that is determining in the supreme instance. Rather, it plays a piloting role. The diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality. Thus when it constitutes points of creation or potentiality it does not stand outside history but is instead always "prior to" history. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 141)

Naturally, Deleuze and Guattari, faithful to their antidualistic strategy, emphasized that virtual and actual, plane of consistency and strata, abstract machines and concrete assemblages, diagrams and programs, were always tangled up in each other.

> We cannot, however, content ourselves with a dualism between the plane of consistency and its diagrams and abstract machines on the one hand, and the strata and their programs and concrete assemblages on the other. Abstract machines do not exist only on the plane of consistency, upon which they develop diagrams; they are already present enveloped or "encasted" in the strata in general, or even erected on particular strata upon which they simultaneously organize a form of expression and a form of content. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 144)

Becoming consisted as much in decomposition of the strata as in the "capture" of abstract machines and their "stratification".

> Thus there are two complementary movements, one by which abstract machines work the strata and are constantly setting things loose, another by which they are effectively stratified, effectively captured by the strata. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 144)

"Pragmatics or schizoanalysis" they now equated both thus implied four components: the global study of mixed semiotics; the study of the various types of pure semiotics, included the new ones; the diagrammatic study of the virtual plane and its abstract machines; the machinic study of assemblages that resulted from the action of the

abstract machines. This conclusion was meant to show that a full description of cultures necessitated to take into account various levels and various perspectives through a regressive-progressive process. First, one had to observe, like sociologists or anthropologists, the cultures as they actually existed. Second, as semioticians of a new type, one must look into the general semiotic types which supported them. However, third part of the process, the *rhuthmic* philosophers' part, it was finally necessary to look deeper again into the virtual bases of those cultures or fragment of cultures, the "abstract machines" which accounted for them, then to follow reversely the upwards production of the assemblages by these machines.

> Thus pragmatics (or schizoanalysis) can be represented by four circular components that bud and form rhizomes. (1) The generative component: the study of concrete mixed semiotics; their mixtures and variations. (2) The transformational component: the study of pure semiotics; their transformations-translations and the creation of new semiotics. (3) The diagrammatic component: the study of abstract machines, from the standpoint of semiotically unformed matters in relation to physically unformed matters. (4) The machinic component: the study of the assemblages that effectuate abstract machines, simultaneously semiotizing matters of expression and physicalizing matters of content. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 146)

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Deleuze and Guattari's conception of culture was both illuminating and marred with strong limitations. Unlike Serres who limited himself to the physical world, and unlike Morin who relied on a questionable association of a reformed "information theory" and a mysterious "noology," they opened up an entirely new path from the physical *rhuthmic* paradigm to the poetic *rhuthmic* paradigm. But, because of their hyperpragmatism and their rejection of language theory, this push could not bring all the results one could have hoped for.

1. On the one hand, they broke away from the generalized semiotics that had become dominant in the 1960s and 1970s.

1.1 They showed that it was not possible to reduce discourses and cultural artifacts to mere networks of signs. In cultural studies, sheer formalism was as useless and deceptive as in linguistics. Instead, they suggested to distinguish between different practices with signs. What mattered first was the way the latter were used by bodies and powers in order to organize life in various assemblages. Signifying could not be severed from interpreting and implementing power and social relations. Semiotics had to be supplemented by pragmatics, which in turn implied history, sociology and anthropology.

1.2 Each kind of semiotic use was thus correlated with a particular relation to State power. The *presignifying* semiotic regime pertained to "primitive" societies that fought against the emergence of centralized power. The *signifying* regime was related with the constitution and development of states in the Middle-East and Mediterranean area in Antiquity and after. The *countersignifying* regime was common in nomadic people who fought against the State from outside. And the *postsignifying* regime emerged through the action of prophets who opposed the State power, whether of the Hebrew or Jewish kings or of the Assyrian or Babylonian invaders.

2. Deleuze and Guattari also reintroduced subjectivity into the analysis against the formalist semiotics that had dominated the cultural studies from the 1960s, for which subjectivity was a sheer effect of the play of signs.

2.1 In hard-line formalism as in Levi-Strauss', the subject was merely insignificant, a sheer passive effect of the cultural structures. In more subtle formalism, as Lacan's, it was both produced and hindered by the chain of

signifiers. For Lacan who was quoted without being named "a signifier is what represents a subject for another signifier" (p. 125), in other words, the subject is woven in the chain of signifiers in which it emerges and by which it is, at the same time, blocked or "foreclosed."

 2.2 In Deleuze and Guattari's opinion, these definitions of subjectivity only resulted from the exaggerate significance granted to the signifying regime of signs. They were mere reflections of a particular conception of sign and language, related to a particular period of time. By contrast with these "passivizations" of subjectivity, they proposed to consider it as essentially dynamic, even if this dynamism was not invincible. Subjectivity was based on "passion" and "action," it was first agency. After the subject emerged from a "point of subjectification," it developed into a dynamic "subject of enunciation" according to various "lines of flight," until it was caught and finally re-subjected by the dominant signifying regime of signs and the power of the State.

 2.3 This kind of emancipating but fragile subjectivity firstly concerned people or social groups using signs whether in *countersignifying* or *postsignifying* ways, that is, people who had to fight from outside or from within against the State. In the West, they endorsed Weber's analysis: this struggle was initiated by the Jewish prophets who introduced the concept of a radical dualism between the world and the principles of salvation, which resulted in a separation from the social group and an attempt at systematizing one's subjective experience. In short, subjectivity rose through a new way to use the signs developed in the struggle against Power. Naturally, this becoming-subject always reached some limits, whether by turning after a while to State power and *signifying* regime, or by exhausting itself in its own performance.

 3. Another interesting contribution of this chapter concerned the ontological foundations of cultural studies.

 3.1 The most common idea of the time was that, due to the principle of arbitrariness of the sign, language and culture were totally independent from the world. Instead, they insisted, like Morin, that "semiotic systems" and "physical systems" were "in reciprocal presupposition," and, moreover, that their joint becoming resulted from deeper *"abstract machines"* which were *"diagrammatic,"* that is, operating exclusively by *"matter"* and *"function"* instead of "substance" and "form." This was the virtual side of the being which was characterized both by modalities of becoming as "degrees of intensity, resistance, conductivity, heating, stretching, speed, or tardiness," and by "tensors" which would modify these modalities.

 3.2 This description supplemented that already presented in Chapter 3 and outlined a view in which the world, whether under its physical or its cultural forms, was constantly flowing according to various manners and agents capable of modifying these manners. In short, this ontology, which was close on some points to Serres' and Morin's, was a spectacular homage to the *rhuthmic* tradition although, contrary to most proponents of this tradition whom we have studied hitherto, Deleuze and Guattari tried to hold together both its physical and cultural aspects, the becoming of matter but also that of signs and statements.

 4. On the other hand, Deleuze and Guattari remained partly caught in some of the very conceptions they wanted to criticize.

 4.1 Concerning semiology, they surprisingly maintained the concepts of "sign" and "semiotic" which were at the very basis of the formalist conception of culture. Thus, by not getting rid of them, they remained subjected to the inescapable dualism that was implied by these very concepts and could not but miss the newest research on language, literature and culture that aimed at really overcoming dualism.

 4.2 Concerning the concept of sign itself, they erased the technical meaning of the term "signifier," the Saussurean "acoustic image" associated with the concept, and transformed it into a vague term denoting simply "a sign" or

anything that "signifies." This conceptual confusion possibly accounted for their lack of interest for Jousse's intuition concerning the role of the "manducation of speech" in prophetic discourse, as well as for Meschonnic's work, partly based on a reflection drawn from his experience as translator of the Jewish Bible, which emphasized the historical and anthropological power of the signifiers in discourses and texts.

 4.3 Concerning now subjectivity, since they once again reduced language to a secondary part of assemblages of bodies, statements and powers, they sustained at the same time and quite inconsistently in my opinion two opposite views. First, the subject was agency, it was "passion and action," it was essentially dynamic, and naturally could exhaust itself or be reintegrated by the dominant powers of the day. Second, the subject was itself a stratum, it was a form among others of the rigidification of the deeper movements of the cosmos, its passions were only psychological feelings, it was itself a "cogito," a "grievance." This second bizarre description resulted in the most unfortunate idea: the subject itself had to be "abolished" in order to be able to reach the deepest part of the world, the virtual plane where "bodies without organs" and "abstract machines" could deploy freely their energies. But, this movement towards the unreachable basis of the world just repeated, in a naturalistic context, the movement of most mystics who also wanted to annihilate their self in order to open themselves to the possible coming of God Himself.

 4.4 Finally, concerning ontology, since they rejected the contribution of the theory of language on the ontological issue, Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion was very fragile. In their conclusion, they were forced to cite the language's decisive role in the constitution of the human perspective on the world and therefore on the being "all of this culminates in a language stratum" but they immediately tried to get around this fact by calling it "imperialist" and "pretending" by itself to "a general semiology." Instead, they resorted to a vague and ready-to-use allusion to Peirce's theory. Signs suddenly and mysteriously emerged from a pre-linguistic plane of "expression" as "indexes, icons, or symbols." In the end, it was unclear how language finally developed from this very first semiotic emergence and one wondered if the being, in its "actual" as well as its "virtual" aspects, could not reversely be accounted for by the language itself.

> It is on the strata that the double articulation appears that formalizes traits of expression and traits of content, each in its own right, turning matters into physically or semiotically formed substances and functions into forms of expression or content. Expression then constitutes indexes, icons, or symbols that enter regimes or semiotic systems. Content then constitutes bodies, things, or objects that enter physical systems, organisms, and organizations. [...] All of this culminates in a language stratum that installs an abstract machine on the level of expression and takes the abstraction of content even further, tending to strip it of any form of its own (the imperialism of language, the pretensions to a general semiology). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 142-143)

Deleuze and Guattari's insistence on the "virtual side" of being, in which they found the most profound reasons for what happens in the world, was as powerfully imaginative as it was difficult to follow if one continued to be following Foucault among others faithful to Kant's observation that any concept which does not correspond to any empirical content belongs to metaphysics and therefore escapes any possible rational discussion. Weren't being and becoming more human than philosophers were prepared to accept?