

Talk of the Center

...the social sciences were born on the day when the 'origin of society' was consigned to a desk draw—to the file labelled 'fantasies.'

— Regis Debray

Where to begin? This is a basic question for any philosophy or discourse in the human sciences: what do you take to be the fundamental "unit" of analysis, or methodological principle, or subject position of the master of the discourse—and why? You can start with something that seems very fundamental, like "Being," or a perplexing question that might come up in discourse (what is the "good"?); in psychology you start with something like the "mind" or "psyche," in sociology "society," or the "group," but these concepts just reiterate those posited by the disciplines themselves. Why are there "groups" Why is there "society"? "Mind"? "Consciousness"? Is "Being" anything more than a grammatical artifact? Etc. If these are not simply transhistorical or eternal concepts, both the concepts and their referents must have come into existence at some point, so, to answer a question like "why 'society'" or "why 'mind'" assumes at one point there was no such thing as "society" or "mind" and at another point there was—or that at one point concepts like "society" and "mind" would not have been intelligible and then at another point they became so—

the referent and the term came into being together.

It's possible to say that there are no starting points or origins: we are always in the middle, always becoming. To say something like this to have already chosen a starting point: the question of Being vs. Becoming. It's a philosophical starting point, which therefore locates us within the discipline of philosophy—a discipline which has always had imperial ambitions, asserting a right to examine the passports of anyone claiming to enter into the discourses of what we could broadly call the "academy." What, then, is the origin of philosophy? Is there a time when humans were not questioning the relationship between Being and Becoming (or the One and the Many, etc.), and then a time when they were—and, therefore, an event, something happening, that involved crossing over that threshold? If so, we can't expect philosophy to be completely aware or forthcoming about what that event entailed. After all, we know for certain that ritual came before philosophy; so, for that matter, did tragedy (with ritual preceding tragedy, which is really a modification of ritual). So, philosophy's "coming out" must have had something to do with opposing, modifying, or rejecting (philosophy itself might say "transcending") ritual. Can philosophy be trusted to tell us what was involved in crossing that threshold?

Any starting point that cannot account for its emergence out

of ritual must therefore be of limited value, and this is the case for philosophy and all its children, which includes all of the human sciences. "Groups," "society," "mind," "consciousness," "Being and Becoming" and all the rest are concepts raised over the graves of ritual. This would mean that a real origin would have to precede ritual. But, of course, even a word like "ritual" is a product of the human sciences and is therefore a way of looking at rituals through the rear-view mirror, so to speak. Still, what we now call "rituals" can share a common point of reference with peoples who engage in rituals, and with peoples who have left us records of the rituals they once engaged in in a way concepts that emerged in philosophy's wake can't. We could ask, for example, what happens when a particular act is performed and those performing the act could give us an answer. We could elicit a language, overlapping across ritual scenes, of interactions between beings performing rituals and beings summoned, or appeased, or vivified, by those rituals. And we can ask about the origins of rituals because any group of people performing rituals will have their own accounts of the origins of those rituals because the origins are part of their efficacy. Are inquiring into, narrating, and performing the origins of the things we do no longer part of the efficacy of those doings? If not, when did they cease to be so?

The remnants of rituals we retain today give us information about what distinguishes a ritually based order from

whatever we are to call what we have now. We can work with the kinds of simple examples J.L Austin used in explaining his concept of linguistic "performativity," like marrying a couple or christening a ship. We could argue about this, but I'm going to say that what appears to be the attenuated nature of these rituals is precisely what provides us with information regarding their origins, and our human origins along with them. We know that a clergyman can't actually provide a married couple with good fortune or prosperity or curse them with the opposite if they fail to fulfill their vows—the ceremony doesn't "do" anything in that sense. What it does is change their condition and initiate them into the community in a new way. This change of condition has all kinds of consequences that are reinforced by other measures taken by the community—a married couple is treated differently in the law, their children have a different status, and so on, than is the case with unmarried couples. This is precisely the kind of "privilege" so resented by those who object to even these minimal elements of ritual culture remaining, and who are the intellectual descendants of those who first of all defined their practices against ritual—philosophers. On what would philosophers form a community, if not on ritual? Surely the search for truth, of which ritual will sooner or later come into philosophy's sights as the primary enemy because while, for the practitioner of a rite, the rite lives within the sphere of radiation of its origin, for the philosopher the ritual has no real origin—it is an

invented origin, by someone interested in suppressing the search for the truth. And the philosopher has a point here, even if we can note that a violent act of instituting a mythical account of the origin of a ritual so as to suppress its real origin would itself be a kind of origin, pointing more reliably to the more obscure one than does the philosophical critique.

The philosopher has no interest in seeking out the true origin of ritual (even though that should be exactly what he's interested in) because that origin lies in something that precedes and makes possible the search for truth: the foundation of the community itself in a shared act or event. If marriage changes the condition of the couple by conferring upon them a new (for them) status honored in a particular way by the community, then it might very well be that the origin of ritual lies in changing the "status" of the entire community, which can only mean creating that community as this community. This claim gets us into paradoxes which not too many philosophers have taken seriously—Rousseau, to his credit, was an exception, as he found himself puzzled by the relation between the community as constituting and the community as constituted. To found the community you must have already been a community so as to carry out the founding. It's no coincidence that we find a similar paradox when it comes to the origin of language which, unless you want to embark upon the arduous and disingenuous practice

of denying all differences between human language and the communications of even the most intelligent animals, must also have not existed at one point, and therefore come into existence at another. And we have the same problem here as with ritual: how could members of a community know what the newly created words or signs mean without already having a linguistic system and community which would confer meaning upon those words or signs?

I think we've wandered off of philosophy's reservation here. Do we even have any right to continue? I, and you, if you're still with me, have found myself in the same kind of paradoxical situation as those originating language and ritual: I have to confer a kind of legitimacy on my discourse without having the kind of legitimacy that comes from subordinating myself to an acknowledged "master" within philosophy or the human sciences that would enable me to do so. Not to be too dramatic, but this is the kind of "pharmakonian" situation that Derrida drew our attention to without, at least in my view, being willing enough to set aside his own institutional and disciplinary legitimacy to occupy. Whether other practitioners of what has come to be known as "generative anthropology" (you knew that's what I've been talking about), including its founder, have efficaciously occupied such a position; whether it's necessary to do so, and if so, how, in order to inscribe in history the hypothesis we must leap into in order to resolve while preserving these

paradoxes, are all very interesting questions. Think of the kind of overwhelming authority those historically located at the "vortex" of such paradoxes have had to invoke in order to imperatively impose their ritual enactment of the paradox. Obviously, I don't have anything approaching such revelational or scriptural authority, or even anything resembling it. One can just elicit signs of the origin of the sign one is issuing in all the other signs and acts it is deferring and differing and in the conditions of deferral (or differance) across the infrastructures enabling its articulation.

Why it is difficult to do so will lead us to the, not resolution, but presentation of this "stack" of paradoxes. I think that Rene Girard was never more correct or insightful when we asserted that dwelling too much upon our fundamentally mimetic nature is simply unbearable. Literature professors, he said, in his book on Shakespeare, would rather admit they want to have sex with their mothers and kill their fathers than admit that they feel envy. Who could bear to see an unflinching inventory of the successive bouts of imitation, emulation, envy, resentment, installation of gestures and attitudes, dwelling upon and forgetting of slights and, even more, those brief glimpses of the shameful (why so shameful?) pretense that the acquiescence to the desire of others was nothing more than our own self-creation? Imagine what speaking to each other would be like if we just

took for granted that every word and movement of the other was borrowed and translated from another on the condition that that borrowing and translation be denied to the point of forgetting. Much better to argue about whether to be a materialist or idealist. Like with ritual, we retain some sense of our mimetic nature—we speak of good and bad models and examples, and most arguments about "culture" take that mimetic nature for granted. And yet there's not much appetite for looking into how the sausage is made, with "positive" and "negative" role models rather anodyne euphemisms for what's involved in the chaotic construction of a "self," especially under conditions bereft of any carefully plotted out initiatory path for doing so—which suggests that the suppression of mimesis has something to do with the burial of ritual under philosophy. The belief that your mother-in-law is torturing you through the "evil eye" in its way demonstrates greater knowledge of social interaction than most of our psychology. Even, or especially, if your mother-in-law happens to be dead.

In a social order that takes the individual as the foundational social "unit" any admission that you are not wholly yourself just paints a target on your back—you're laying out your vulnerabilities before those who might very well be enemies and, in fact, might be more likely to become your enemies precisely because they see those vulnerabilities. Consider how much of the discourse and practices you and others are

engaged in can plausibly be seen as ensuring the boundaries around an intact, self-originating self remain intact. That thing I did—it was the real me who did it. All our institutions, most basically our legal ones, would fall without everyone being willing to say that. I do wonder whether so much of what seems to me ineffectual in the presentation and promotion of "generative anthropology" can be attributed to the sense that there is something impossible about being a bearer and constant reminder of the mimetic nature of the human and what is involved in not simply falling sway to it. The terms of acquiring a "warrant" to boldly proclaim "generative anthropology" the rightful successor of, say, cybernetics, are far more difficult than those required to proclaim, say, the latest new form of co-existence between man and machine.

Ritual must, then, be "about" all this mimetic fervor, but ritual can't speak about it as such (it can only reconcile it on the spot), and the fact that we can speak about ritual in these terms also means we can't return to it in any strong sense. We have to get "behind" ritual so as to get beyond it in the "right" (non-philosophical, non-mimetic denying) way. I just present your own brief inspection of human interactions you're familiar with as evidence that our mimetic nature is regarded as shameful (who comes out and says, "that's not my idea, I'm just repeating what that guy said," other than to quickly, cleanly and shamefacedly disavow what has been

said. But we can all see that others do "repeat what the other guy said" all the time.) Any serious inquirer into things human will keep pressing on this point, then. And I remind you that we are without warrant here, we're liable to be rounded up and ticketed for unlicensed inquiry at any time. Now, the very thing that makes mimesis unavoidably evident and therefore shameful is what also what would seem to neutralize it: everyone just repeating what everyone else says. Conflict would be impossible in that case. Except that what counts as "repeating" is not so simple. Now, this is the kind of question philosophy loves to get its hands on—"identity and difference"! But if we're talking about a situation in which the condition and maybe the existence of the community depends upon some kind of "agreement" here, how the impending disaster is to be avoided must at least some extent be improvised and assessed on the spot. (In thinking through mimesis, then, we are always thinking about ways of landing in and preventing humanly made catastrophes.)

This thought experiment (it could be tried out in actuality—surely some enterprising therapist could give it a go) of avoiding conflict by having each person repeat what the other said, however fruitful, does not get us out of the paradoxes I'm insisting we refuse to lose sight of. You could always notice some difference between what each person and then the next says, some difference in tone, posture,

gesture, or context (since part of the context is what the other couldn't have included because it's what he said). So, you can always try to repeat more precisely and unmistakably, but at the same time this means everyone involved would become more expert in noticing ever smaller differences and making ever larger issues of them. But we might at least arrive at a kind of steady or meta-stable state of the paradoxes here. The more this ritual of repetition goes on, and even the more "narcissisms of small differences" it generates, the more each participant can only represent to himself what he is doing by locating other reference points within the other ways those in the community have said the same thing as everyone is saying. The fact that we're all trying to repeat the same thing, and woe to us if we don't, is installed at and as the basis of the community. No one could ever say anything that couldn't be treated as a more or less competent, ingenious, desperate, defiant attempt to repeat what everyone else is saying—perhaps with an ever greater awareness of how, after all, impossible it really is.

In this way we find the "transcendence" of mimesis within mimesis itself. Criteria for more and less highly valued cultural products suggest themselves. The cultural products we would want to repeat the most carefully and elaborately (eddies of repetition within the broader arena of repeating) would be those that find likenesses among practices that seem to be different (failed attempts to repeat, and therefore

dangerous), without minimizing the perception of failure that attended to the reception of those practices—the scope of what can count as repeating what everyone else is saying is expanded, while also creating the expectation that the newly perceived scope be brought into future efforts to repeat what everyone else is saying. Landmarks, ceremonies, holidays, and monuments are all created to commemorate events where likely failure was retrieved as a new way of repeating what everyone else is saying. Those commemorations in turn provide more ways of repeating what everyone else is saying, because they are themselves what everyone else is saying. (I hope you will all notice the way I have repeated without exactly repeating what I always say, and in that way maybe repeating it all the more faithfully.)

I can now propose that what I have described in this thought experiment is exactly what happens all the time, in every human community. There is not a human interaction that can't productively and exhaustively be studied as an attempt on the part of all involved to repeat as exactly as possible what everyone is really saying. You're trying to repeat what your enemy is not quite succeeding to say by identifying his inimical sayings and doings, you're repeating what those who don't "get it" really would be saying if they had arrived at a higher level of circulation of repeating what everyone is saying, you're trying to create a history for yourself as a

continuous attempt to meet ever more exacting standards of saying what everyone else is saying. I would challenge you to identify some human interaction that couldn't productively and exhaustively be described in this way, so as to integrate any human word or deed into the full expanse of history and the spread of institutions. I challenge you to find a more productive and exhaustive way of doing so, even if you want to bring into play the full philosophical and sociological apparatus of "society," "mind," "becoming" and so on.

What this means is that "generative anthropology" is ultimately a kind of "linguaging," entering any discourse and making it more of what it already is, saying the same thing everyone else is saying and, therefore, finding ways to say that you are saying the same thing everyone else is saying. This involves remembering when the crisis of imitation was resolved by first one and then two and eventually everyone reversing the cataclysmic trajectory by repeating what the others say by, first of all, treating it as something said rather than an appropriation of something. You can remember this collective extrication from the crisis because language is nothing more than a field of monuments to such extrications, with reciprocal references that can be made to saturate the space by selecting the way of saying what everyone else is saying that draws into its orbit as many other ways of saying what everyone else is saying as possible. If all utterances carried along with them reminders of their origin in the first

humans' materialized imagining of the dead end created by their own mimetic desires then "generative anthropology" would no longer be necessary. And this means that the proper practice of "generative anthropology" is to locate oneself as close as possible to that vanishing point where language use itself would be nothing more than "tagging" all utterances with such reminders and thereby maximally leveraging the inexhaustibility of saying the same thing everyone else is saying.

The paradoxes of founding are not thereby eliminated and we will always remain mimetic creatures—indeed, our shared project of saying the same thing everyone else is saying cements our mimetic nature and closes off all exits (not that there were any, or that we still can't fantasize about any). And as long as we are mimetic beings the space of mimesis can be saturated, which means it is always possible to imagine that the other has always already tracked all of your future moves and gotten there before you so you can never again say or do anything that is "yours." This possibility of being utterly silenced, and therefore being taken with the paradoxical necessity of joining the race to silence the other first, will always remain the background, threatening to become the foreground of everybody saying what everyone else is saying. To say what everyone else is saying therefore entails including by gesturing toward this possibility, which always takes on a different form. Everybody wanting the

same thing must endlessly be converted into everyone saying the same thing, without a firm line ever being drawn once and for all. Doing so must involve saying the wanting, which is to say making explicit what might be and usually is left implicit—we can't say everything we want all the time, just those things and times we want that make the pursuit of wants unredeemed by sayings more likely. All the wants converging together create necessity, and necessarily converge on those who make the interplay of wanting and saying explicit and insistent. Repeating that we're all repeating and must continue repeating what everyone else is saying enacts that interplay of "absolute" mimesis and its ongoing dispersal. And you could repeat what everyone else is saying in the only way that you can right here and now by making it a bit more the same this time.