

The Eros of Doubting

"But – who then, Diotima," Socrates asked, "are the lovers of wisdom, if they are neither the wise nor the foolish?" "A child may answer that question," she replied; "they are those who are in a mean between the two; Eros is one of them."

(Plato)

"... a sort of flirtation with meaninglessness – [...] trying to plumb abysses which are generally agreed not to exist."

(Marilyn Frye)

One of the biggest problems of our civilization is a misguided idea of the self. Conceptually, as well as in everyday practices, the general expectation is to display a self-certain, determined posture and to act correspondingly. The *phantasm* of the self-certain, autonomous and impermeable ego has been proven to be dangerous and fictitious long ago. And it has been linked to the – likewise fictitious – idea of masculinity, which – proving its alleged autonomy wrong from the beginning – has always been dependent on its complement in the equally fictitious idea of femininity as self-uncertain, heteronomous, and permeable. Notwithstanding its fictitious character, this binary gender model has been very powerful and continues to be so. It seems very difficult to think, to feel, and to act outside of this frame, as on a deeper level, our western philosophy is pervaded by this violent dualist paradigm.

The *Quest for Certainty*, which the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey considered one of the most dangerous attitudes of modernity, has suffused our western everyday thinking and acting. Doubt nowadays is considered mainly an obstacle to avoid (or to be rapidly overcome) for maintaining a strong position in the world, towards oneself and towards others. The position of the doubter is seen as a position of weakness, accompanied by suffering, exclusion of recognition, and the inhibition to act decisively. The mainstream climate in politics and in public debates, as well as in private life is one of a vague, but nevertheless powerful pressure: The pressure to be sure of one's own position, to know what one wants, to come up – at best instantly – with solutions to given problems, to have an opinion on any topic at stake. In short, it is the fantasy to inhabit the god's eye view.

Of course, as we aren't gods, this climate of certainty-pressure does not *resolve* any doubts or make them disappear, it only *suppresses* them. And suppressed doubts suppress judgment-formation as well. As a result, common sense and the public media are marked by an alarming lack of a thoughtful and responsible formation of

judgment, one of the most precious capacities of human beings.¹ With the increasing velocity of digital communication and information flow we are even more in dire need of cultivating our opinion-formation, instead the increase of information is accompanied by a decrease of adequate coping. The consequence is the prevalence of a posture which could be called the *pro-con-whatever-posture*: Either being instantly in favor of or instantly against something, or, if neither one of those options seems fit, not to care at all – which, in the end, amounts to the contra position, except for the fact that the manifested indifference doesn't even bother saying no and saves the effort of taking responsibility. The *pro-con-whatever-posture* seems to suppose that being impermeable and self-satisfied leads to success and happiness. And, at first sight, it in fact does seem to lead to success, as this posture makes people functional within most of the given globalized economic and political systems. But it represents a functionality in the sense of the functional drug-addict or alcoholic who, viewed from the outside, succeeds in behaving as expected, while, viewed from the inside, fights a war against all kinds of desires and doubts which, having been cut off from conscious reflection, become less and less controllable, until one day the system collapses. Repressed doubts and desires turn into aggression and exponentially increase the violence, which originally caused them. This mechanism not only applies to the psychological microstructure of the individual, it applies as well to the macrostructure e.g. of nations. The more impermeable a nation claims to be, the stronger the fictitious “we” is being opposed to the “others” by building a fortress, the more likely a collapse of civilization is to be expected.

Underneath all, this posture is nurtured by a profound fear. Fear that anything else but certainty amounts to nothing and renders one's existence worthless. If you are not determined in your own position, fear seems to ask, isn't everything just random? If there is no absolute evidence, isn't everything just a joke? This either-or-claustrophobia is partly a remnant of Christianity, partly it reflects our deeply ingrained Cartesianism – namely to feel and to think in a binary logic: Body/soul, male/female, nature/culture, good/bad, yes/no, everything/nothing.

The translation of Christian's fear of god into our own times is this: If one does not partake in infinite certainty, one ends up living in the hell of insignificance. The own being, seen from this perspective, will then effectively amount to nothing. In a strange way, the *pro-con-whatever-posture* hold itself captive in some kind of purgatory, trying to avoid at any price the role of the doubting lost soul by adopting the position of a god's eye view (instantly knowing what is certain) while simultaneously accomplishing the role of the devoted believer desperately trying to know what god would want without daring to ask. As these two roles are completely irreconcilable, an inner war (of course not admitted) is inevitable and simultaneously unsolvable.

Denying doubts and denying the value of doubts is disastrous, because unchanging and indubitable identity is a fiction, which can only be established and maintained through structural, indirect, or direct violence. Instead, it seems less violent, more realistic and more fruitful to acknowledge that subjects are living organisms, as much as political systems, science, language, and relations are. These living organisms constantly alter. Trying to fix them into a static position is like cutting off every branch

¹ For a discussion of the relation between Kantian reflective judgments and pragmatist doubts, see Heidi Salaverría, “Critical Common Sense, Exemplary Doubts, and Reflective Judgment,” in: *Confines of Democracy. The Social Philosophy of Richard Bernstein: Essays on the Philosophy of Richard Bernstein*, ed. Ramón de Castillo, Ángel M. Faerna, Larry A. Hickman, New York, forthcoming.

a tree grows. If not shaped in a friendly and very skillful manner – as in the bonsai art – the result will be a crippled plant with very low life expectancy. Also the question would remain: Who should be the bonsai artist cutting our tree?

In my paper I am going to outline the significance of what I call the *Eros of doubting*, by following some of its traces in philosophy, thereby proposing a concept of the self beyond stiff impermeability/permeability. Its cultivation is crucial for the (always ongoing) process of creative and responsible positioning of the self.

On a Diving Board

Doubting is like standing on a diving board: A delicate situation, in which it is necessary to sharpen one's own perception and to develop the right amount of momentum in order to dare to jump into the unknown. On a diving board, one easily gets the feeling of losing a grip on the ground, because the board gives way quickly. And in fact, one does not stand on firm ground, but is instead only held by a thin elastic plank in the air, about to move from one element into another, leaving behind one unstable standpoint for an even more unstable one: plunging into the water, hoping – in the moment of *jumping-falling* – that the transition will be smooth and painless. The same holds true of doubts. Suddenly you find yourself on precarious and questionable grounds, vacillating between returning to the old and turning to the new. Something says no to the old but fears the new, something says yes to the new but fears to let go of the old. You are about to change, or, better said, something already has started to change, which led to the doubt altogether (you already stand on the diving-board, and something brought you here).

But what is it that leads to the situation of doubt? A colleague of mine, who discussed this paper with me, raised the question if it weren't more adequate to talk of a "state of doubt" instead of a "situation of doubt." A state of doubt, as she argued, designates an internal or mental process, whereas a "situation" rather designates some external event. But then again, I wondered, isn't the characteristic feature of doubt precisely that the self becomes permeable? Doesn't it happen that in the process of doubting the supposed borders between the self's identity and something yet unknown become porous, dissolving temporarily the separation of the "internal" and the "external," even suspending temporarily the status of a self-contained identity? From the point of view of pragmatism (comparable in that sense to the one of phenomenology and existentialism) the dichotomy of the internal/external appears to be part of the virtual binary logic. Couldn't one describe the moment of doubting instead in terms of "I've got a situation here," thereby questioning the whole setting one finds oneself in?²

It seems to have to do with this transitory blurring between the self and the outer world that one never knows exactly what caused the situation of doubt. Of course, there are harbingers, like a repeatedly felt tension or nervousness in the face of particular occurrences or persons. But these harbingers can go on unnoticed for quite a while. Afterwards, it seems puzzling how long one could endure a political or a personal situation, a situation in a company (or any other constellation), not only without changing or saying anything, but also without even being aware of it. In retrospect, the taken action seems so clear. But this clearness only becomes

² I am grateful to Dr. Laura Odom for fruitful discussions and inspiring suggestions.

Heidi Salaverría, THE EROS OF DOUBTING

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discernible after the undergone “change of elements,” when a new contour between the self and the world becomes tangible after having lived through a new experience. There is an existential dimension about doubts that always remains partly opaque. What becomes clear transitorily (until the next doubt shows up) is the outcome, not the process itself.

Once you took the first step to do something you have been intending to do for a while, you need to overcome the long guarded doubt, and before that, you need to carefully nurse those uncertain impulses in a process of finding out what you want and don't want. Or, put more precisely: It is a process of finding out, again and again, who you are. Practicing this finding-out is indispensable, since it signals how and in which direction to jump. The point is: *We don't really know us*. And as the idea of a defined and self-contained identity is completely fictitious, doubts do not function as an indicator of something distinct and definable, which had been there all along (say, like a stone in the water) and simply needed to be retrieved, but on the contrary: Doubts *generate something new* about us, about our relation to the world and thus, generate something new in the world itself.

Doubting is a deeply ambivalent state, somehow painful and a reminder of our finitude (gods and angels don't doubt), yet simultaneously revealing, and in that sense a reminder of our singularity (stones or robots don't doubt either). In doubts, something new is being experienced which does not fit within our own common sense conglomeration of belief-habits, something makes us question the beforehand taken for granted ground on which we stand. Because doubts reveal something new, they are not completely controllable or foreseeable (as pretty much everything in life, only that doubts remind us of that fact). However, this perceived lack of control often leads to the conclusion that doubts are not only unpleasant, as they are accompanied by feelings of insecurity and uncertainty, but that they also are dangerous, as they seem to weaken the self's position. And indeed, doubting *is* a manifestation of uncertainty, and it is, in that respect, a relative of fear and pain. Yet, at the same time, doubting is exciting, and this is where *Eros* comes into play. Doubts are as much related to fear, as they are to desire: an inner conflict takes place between something wanted and something unwanted, both sides not quite graspable, yet nevertheless pressing. But it is fear of uncertainty, which many times inhibits us from enjoying the doubting, thereby restraining the creative potential of the process.

It is not simply that doubts *unsettle* the self, signaling a problem or an error committed by the self or experienced in the environment (e.g. the structures of society). They also *resettle* the self by signaling an emerging new contour of the own positioning. Some part of the self, allegedly known, is being weakened, and simultaneously some part of the self, yet unknown, is being encouraged through the enjoyment of the uncertain. The *Eros of doubting* enables the self to experience the seeming 'lack' of temporarily being uncertain in an abundant way, inviting a diving into unknown terrains, which might bring up something helpful. Doubting invites the self to (re-)positioning, its singularity being at stake by connecting to something new. It opens up new possibilities.

Therefore, to face doubts does not mean to be overwhelmed by them as if they were a violent force of nature, too strong to counter, leading to paralysis and despair. It means instead to ally with them. If one tries, however, to maintain absolute control over situations and thereby to push aside every hesitation, one will end up repeating stiff routine patterns of behavior, which simply do not match the given circumstances,

and will bring about more stiffening of one's own identity. Being controlled by fear of the unknown will, moreover, result in inflicting aggression upon oneself, upon the situation, and upon everybody involved, by trying to squeeze a new situation into an old inflexible template. It is, as if someone forces her-/himself to wear shoes from which they grew out long ago. In political terms doubting of course appears scary to authorities when expressed by groups of people claiming their rights. And from the point of view of persons or institutions, which prefer to let other people wear their worn out shoes for them, doubts definitely represent a danger that needs to be repressed. However, as history has shown, doubts won't go away through repression. Here again, the solution consists in allying with them, because every other alternative, in the long run, will turn out worse. The longer that doubts are repressed, the more rage accumulates and causes all the more violence, which then is much more difficult to resolve.

The fear of being weakened by doubt is caused essentially by the erroneous premise of a fixed, self-satisfied ego and the objective of strengthening this ego. But the real danger does not lie in the doubting. It lies in this premise of a strong indubitable self (and, for that matter, a strong, indubitable state or corporation) which not only is false, but causes even more fear, not less, and which, in the end, results in nothing but (direct or indirect, passive or active) violence up to and including war.

Not only does this posture produce violence, it also gives away the possibility to cope with problems in a new and potentially better way. It also gives away the opportunity to enjoy experiences in ways previously unknown, which could extend the scope of action. Adhering to control and stiff routine scotches the option of making acquaintance with the new and of experiencing profound joy. Profound joy always has to do with an element of surprise, with an unconstrained modification of our criteria. Warding off doubts means warding off key experiences and paradigm chances of any sort. Put the other way around: The more we cultivate fertile doubts, the more we allow the emergence of new perspectives on oneself, on others, and the world. We seem to have lost sight on the fact that doubts not only broaden the range of problem solving, but also the range of experiences, enabling thereby deeper fulfillment. And the serious seeking of joy and fulfillment is far from being a luxury theme. Taking seriously the uncertain joy of Eros means, on the contrary, finding the courage of seriously listening to the soft inkling of one's own orientation and judgments – and the one of others, which are the base of any responsible posture, and which represent the core of Kant's political philosophy of enlightenment. "*Dare to know!* Have the courage to use your own understanding."³

Metaphysical love affairs

For too long uncertainty, and for that matter doubting, has had a bad reputation in western philosophy. The prevailing thread of Christianity over centuries regarded doubt as a sin, since doubting meant questioning god's will. Therefore, unshaken belief was demanded. The impact of that powerful tradition still resonates in our own times. The dawn of the idea of modern subjectivity is inseparable from this tradition: With Augustine's *Confessions*, synthesizing Christian theology and Platonism, for the

³ Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (1784; repr.), Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983, 41.

first time a subject-position had been articulated by way of a self, which starts to internalize divinity through the desired love of god. Exercising its belief made the finite individual partake in god's infinite realm and, thereby, evolving its own status as a subject, its subjective point of view in the world. By loving god back, the believer established a connection between her- or himself and the divine. The inner life of the believer emerged, became graspable and, by this, started taking shape as the *mind*, a secularized version of the immortal soul. In that way, the internalization of god's love led to the first rising of the idea of freedom of thought or autonomy, an introjection of a spark of eternity, which liberated the human being from its supposed sinful absorption by carnal desires and limited self-interests.

In the famous eleventh book of his *Confessions*, Augustine testifies before god his struggle with the question what time is, particularly with the problem of understanding the difference between finite human time and divine eternity. The only solution he can think of is that there „was no time, therefore, when thou hadst not made anything, because thou hadst made time itself.“⁴ It turns out – as he convincingly analyses in a detailed survey of the impossibility of measuring time – that the concept of time is incomprehensible without *somebody* perceiving it. He concludes, therefore, that there are “neither times future nor times past. Thus it is not properly said that there are three times, past, present, and future. Perhaps it might be said rightly that there are three times: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation“ (C, XX, 26).

But what is perceived when one perceives time? Time does not represent anything distinct, and therefore no object. The point Augustine makes, is that time is not to be found in an object, but in the subject! He puts it in the following way: „From this it appears to me that time is nothing other than extendedness [*distentionem*, spread-out-ness]; but extendedness of what I do not know. This is a marvel to me. The extendedness may be of the mind itself“ (C, XXVI, 33). What does this have to do with doubting? The extendedness of time Augustine speaks of is not something to be known, for if it were known, it would be some kind of epistemological object (and note that Augustine himself seems to be unsure of his conclusion). *Time is the way in which the mind thinks*, and it is a way of relating the presence of the past (memory) with the presence of the present (direct experience) and with the presence of the future (expectation). Now, this relating does never know in advance what is going to occur. It's a process of processing and connecting. This process is never completable, never consummated and therefore, never certain. In other words, the activity of the mind or of the subject is impregnated with doubts. If we knew everything from all times, we weren't subjects, but gods. The core of subjectivity is, as well formally as with regard to any content, uncertainty. Formally, because the effort of connecting memory, experience, and expectation is an effort of holding the ends together, of stretching the “now” of the “I,” which can always be disrupted and therefore never is guaranteed. Kant later transformed this idea into the “I think” that

⁴ Augustine of Hippo, „Confessions,“ in *Confessions and Enchiridion*, transl. and ed. by Albert C. Outler, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955, XIV, 17, hereafter referred to as C and E.

“must be able to accompany all my representations.”⁵ Content-wise, we don’t know indubitably what we are going to think next. If we knew, then we weren’t thinking.

An example of this is seen with persons who suffer from severe Alzheimer’s dementia and lose their short-term memory. Therefore they are unable to connect the recently experienced past with the present, and because they do not remember what they just said or thought they are unable to anticipate what could come next. Philosophically speaking, they lose the company of their “I think.” The experience of an interruption in the mental spreading-out between past and future is very common, only that these momentary slips usually are being overcome quickly. However, the extent of the mental stretching or spreading varies very much, depending e.g. on how relaxed, tired, or nervous we are. But it is not the interruption of the mental flow doubting consists in. *Doubting consists, in contrast, in experiencing the tentative movement of the mental stretching itself.* It is the conscious art of extending and relating time. In that sense, thinking always means mildly doubting, as we can never be sure of what comes to mind next. The experienced time of the subject always continues and the continuation of that time is beyond our control. An image to describe this process could be the movement of a flying plane. There is the momentary stance of the subject (that would be the plane), there is the presence of the past (that would be the vapor trail) and there is the presence of the future (the course the plane takes).

A musician or someone who has developed a sense for music will be able, by playing or listening to music, to stretch her memory and anticipation of a musical piece very far. While playing or listening she will constantly connect the just heard with the notes just about to arrive. The metaphorical vapor trail of the plane will then be very long. The Alzheimer’s patient, at worst, does not have a vapor trail of memory at all. It seems that music is particularly suitable to bind memory and anticipation. Studies have shown that listening to music, particularly to familiar pieces of music, can help dementia patients who already had lost contact to the world (and to themselves) to reconnect.⁶ By remembering the course of a song, they remember its progression and thereby the stretching and binding of subjectivity. Through the song their “I think” temporarily awakens, they are, so to say, able to take a short trip and fly their plane again.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 131-32.

⁶ There is an abundance of publications on that topic to be found. See e.g. Sharon Smith “The Unique Power of Music Therapy Benefits Alzheimer’s Patients”. *Activities, Adaptation & Aging* 14 (4) 1990: 59–64.



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Yet, this capacity to reconnect through music is not cognitively reducible. The transitory awakening of the patients also has to do with another factor: Music awakens their Eros, and so do doubts. By listening to music not only the formal capacity to bind memory and anticipation comes into play, but also the content of their beloved memories is being revived. One might recall a sunny spring afternoon when he fell in love with his wife, another one might remember turning on the new radio-receiver she had bought for the living room, the delight of hearing music at her home with friends for the first time. And doubts awaken things, too: A new wish, a new possibility.

It is no coincidence that Augustine himself talks about music and verses in his reflections on time (he also wrote a whole book on rhythm). The rhythmical and/or melodic structuring of music and poetry (and, for that matter, of any other art) itself already displays an aesthetic type of time binding. The aesthetic form, the aesthetic “*how*” of the distribution and modulation of the elements (e.g. notes, words) in time, coins the “*what*” of the artistic result. It presents a form of time binding experienceable to us, while at the same time going beyond our clear understanding. And there is an important aesthetic element in doubts, too: They appeal to something, which we do not yet completely understand and thereby broaden and modify our understanding.⁷ For Augustine, aesthetic and religious experiences are inseparable. Indeed, beauty and the love to god seem to be the same. The Augustinian version of the subject is not a formalized structure (as Kant conceived of it much later, particularly in his *Critique of Pure Reason*), but it is the whole bodily self being tormented and simultaneously enchanted by the realm of possibilities opened up through god, and an experience that

⁷ For a first draft of an “Aesthetics of Doubts,” see: Heidi Salaverría, “Enjoying the Doubtful. On Transformative Suspensions in Pragmatist Aesthetics,” in: *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, Volume 4, Number 1, 2012. <http://lnx.journalofpragmatism.eu/?p=571>.

reminds him time and again of his uncertainty. Thinking for Augustine is longing, and longing always is doubtful. „My soul burns ardently to understand this most intricate enigma. O Lord my God, O good Father, [...] do not close off these things, both the familiar and the obscure, from my desire. Do not bar it from entering into them [...]. Of whom shall I inquire about these things? And to whom shall I confess my ignorance of them with greater profit than to thee, to whom these studies of mine (ardently longing to understand thy Scriptures) are not a bore? Give me what I love, for I do love it; and this thou hast given me“ (XXII, 28).

The self immerses into the divine realm like the plane immerses into the infinite sky. To this, one could object in a bureaucratic voice that a pilot needs to be sure of his course: “If he is filled with doubts, perhaps he should better be reading Augustine instead of navigating an aircraft, risking its security through his own insecurity.” But that depends on the interpretation of doubt. Doubting doesn’t mean insecurity in the sense of stressful anxiety. Stressful anxiety is mainly caused by pressure to complete a task from which one has become alienated, for example if one fears not being good enough. It is a symptom of an authoritarian thinking, which today still predominates, being fueled by very real fears – fear of the superior, fear to lose one’s job. As a result, one loses the connection to the given situation, loses the confidence in being entitled to deal with the circumstances.

Doubting in Augustine’s sense instead would mean to maintain the connection with the situation, to extend into the uncertain and to take charge of it. The secularized translation of Eros as metaphysical longing would then mean expectation and anticipation (with the resource of memories), a somehow paradoxical doubtful trust. The pilot flying the plane needs to accompany his actions by a mild form of doubt in that he remains partly skeptical yet still confident about the expected course and the measures he is taking, without turning into anxiety or desperation. He needs to draw his attention to possible changes in the atmosphere and in the plane, as well as in his own mental state. But the best way to do so is by *loving what he does*. Should he become too tired or unsettled by some turbulence, he would be ill advised not to consult with his co-pilot or to change seats, because his main interest would not be to fit into an inflexible image of the infallible pilot, but to make the best out of the situation. The misleading idea of the instrumental or “identarian” thinking, which Adorno so vehemently criticized, assumes that the subject could control the objects by identifying them. But the “more relentlessly our identarian thinking besets its object, the farther will it take us from the identity of the object.”⁸ The view Augustine develops questions instead its own “identarian position” and *thereby positions itself as a self*. He even claims, anticipating Descartes, that if “I am mistaken, I am.”⁹ But Augustine was not a skeptic. On the contrary, he criticizes the antique skeptics for trying to immunize themselves against “the appearance of error in themselves [...] by not positively affirming that they are alive” (E, 7, 20). The strategy of stoic indifference denies its own permeability at the price of denying being alive, and thereby denying their Eros. It seems, to summarize, that the *Eros of doubting* for Augustine consists in the irresolvable tension between being alive and loving life (as a gift of god), while at the same time admitting the self’s own fallibility as the necessary core of the own exis-

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, transl. E.B. Ashton, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1990, 149.

⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of Gods*, transl. Marcus Dods, Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody Massachusetts 2009, XI, 26.

tence. The certainty of human existence is felt *through uncertainty*, and this uncertainty is not static, but a relentless extending of the self's own finitude into the infinite. 1140 years later, still closely intertwined with religion, Descartes crystallized the core of the modern subject in his *Meditations* as the famous *ego cogito, ergo sum*: "I think, therefore I am," a conclusion he developed with his method of doubt: Everything, Descartes assumed, can be doubted, but "we cannot doubt of our existence while we doubt."¹⁰ Doubting represents a necessary means to achieve certainty of the irreducible principle of the thinking subject. But it was certainty and not doubts that became the focus of philosophical developments from Descartes on – a notion that in a way translates the faith in god's infallibility into the human world and its quest for epistemological and moral truth. However, whereas Augustine confides in being loved by god of all things for his faithful uncertainty, Descartes changes the perspective. Somehow, he seems to have fallen out of love with god. Their relation transforms rather into some kind of marriage of convenience. Trying to find an unshakable principle of certainty to base knowledge on, Descartes in his *Meditations* carries out the mentioned thought experiment by doubting everything that is possible: The existence of the outer world, of his own body, of other minds, and of his own beliefs. And he feels compelled to do so by supposing the possibility of an *evil demon*, "as clever and deceitful as he is powerful, who has directed his entire effort to misleading me" (Med. 1).

But it is a strange argument Descartes puts forward: He claims to *only theoretically* assume its possible existence, just in case his assumption of an *evil demon* might turn out to be true. His assumption serves, in other words, as some kind of insurance, like a pre-nuptial agreement. And as we know, that is not the best start for a marriage, because it is like saying: "I think I love you, but I don't trust you, because you might use and deceive me. So let's, just in case, make a divorce-contract before we get married." In contrast to Augustine's passionate stretching of doubts, Descartes' argument seems like a slightly paranoid power game, led by mistrust to, then, surprisingly, culminate in an alleged proof of god's existence. The *Eros of doubting* is being abandoned in favor of an instrumental doubt used to gain absolute certainty, guaranteed by god. The argument winds up finally in the somehow possessive twist of capturing the idea of god inside of him.

And although Descartes admits that god remains ungraspable, his train of thought is rather colonizing and much different from Augustine's. While Augustine finds himself in a relation of permanent metaphysical heartache with god, Descartes secretly seems to wish to become god himself. "I recognize that it would be impossible for me to exist with the kind of nature I have — that is, having within me the idea of God — were it not the case that God really existed. By 'God' I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me, that is, the possessor of all the perfections which I cannot grasp, but can somehow reach in my thought, who is subject to no defects whatsoever" (Med. 3). The dream of unassailable autonomy has its roots in this line of thinking Descartes initiates. But it remains a dream, because, paradoxically, autonomy only works as long as the other remains intact *as other from the self*, no matter if it is god or another person. As soon as one seeks to appropriate the other, the relation is dead, and, for that matter, Eros too.

¹⁰ Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. and transl. by John Cottingham, Cambridge University Press 1986.

Recognizing Doubts

This appropriative posture towards the other not only dominated western philosophy and – particularly violent – politics of colonization, slavery, and suppression over centuries, but it also became part of our common sense and still continues to do so. One aspect of this development was that, with the growing secularization of modernity, the love for god progressively became replaced by the love for another person – which then, weirdly enough, was deified and disenchanted at once: At the latest with the appearance of the bourgeoisie, the romantic fantasy of the two complementing sexes and their respective roles was invented. From that point on, women were considered “the other” of men. Women began being transformed into some kind of allegory (which was practical, because allegories don’t talk) for whatever seemed fit – e.g. of purity, beauty, life. At the same time, much like with Descartes, this process was accompanied by the invention of some kind of *female evil demon*, serving as a corrective threat and simultaneous insurance to the male phantasm: Femininity now also represented impurity, ugliness, death, etc. As Simone de Beauvoir once said: The function of representing the “Other” had become “so necessary to man’s happiness and to his triumph that it can be said that if she did not exist, men would have invented her. They did invent her. But she exists also apart from their inventiveness. And hence she is not only the incarnation of their dream, but also its frustration.”¹¹

It is a strategy, which tries to escape uncertainty by forcing every person into a binary template with predetermined features, and although male persons generally have been and are being privileged by this construction, the structural violence is imposed on both sides. The structural violence of patriarchy consists in that it objectifies Eros, ascribing it to one sex (female), thereby also ascribing powers to it, which then simultaneously are being desired and hated, because they cause doubts, as a result of which they lead to an irreconcilable split between a *good* and an *evil demon*. Pornography is the parody-like exaggeration of this construction – trying to maximize Eros by minimizing doubts, punishing and depreciating women for being the incarnation of male sexual desires. For Socrates it was a different story: Eros is the child of Plenty and Poverty, neither god nor human. He is an *imperfect demon*, neither good nor bad, whose creativity is being kept alive by his unstable position between given identities and by his continuous striving towards “the other,” namely the idea of the beautiful itself.

Objectifying the other as “other” makes recognition and love as impossible as the idea of the other as a “self-identical” mirror of one’s self. The problem with the mirror metaphor is that basically the same would have to be confirmed by the same, reflecting one’s self-identical ego in the other, thereby gaining self-affirmation. In fact, this metaphor is exemplified in the myth of Narcissus, which, as we know, didn’t turn out very well. He drowned in the attempt to unite with his mirror image, in which he had tragically fallen in love by looking into the pond. However, it isn’t self-identical affirmation we yearn for, but the other of our self *in its otherness*. Otherwise, it would be sufficient to activate the camera screen on the computer and listen to oneself while speaking. This narcissistic dream can turn out quite nightmarish, as was shown for

¹¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books: New York 2009, 203.

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example in the movie *Being John Malkovich*. Malkovich therein climbs into his own head to find himself in a psychotic scenario where everyone is a duplication of him, shouting out nothing but "Malkovich, Malkovich." And he is not very happy about it. The first philosopher to show why narcissism doesn't work was Hegel. He outlined convincingly that the identity of the self needs the recognition of the other to become self. The self *needs to become other than itself to become self!* The dynamic he describes could be named the *Hegel-Hollywood-Model*:



Let's call our protagonists *Left* and *Right*. When *Left* falls in love with *Right*, it starts longing for *Right*, so much so, that it turns kind of porous. It loses its self-certain position, in Hegel's terminology: "Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come *out of itself*."¹² *Left* has lost its heart to *Right* (Panel 2). This is the *Eros of doubting par excellence*. The entire history of literature (especially romantic literature) depends on that moment, and no Hollywood industry would exist without it either. It is a painful, yet profoundly joyful experience, as long as there is hope that *Right* will love *Left* back. And we are lucky: *Right* falls in love with *Left*, too. So it loses its heart to *Left* as well and also becomes porous, still without knowing, if the love is mutual (Panel 3). Each one of them now is *out of itself*, until finally, they confess their love to one another, or, in Hegel's Words, they "*recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another*" (Panel 4).¹³ The whole point of it is, however, that there is no shortcut to the process. It is necessary for the self to transitorily lose itself in the other *in order to become a recognized self*.

This applies not only to inter-subjective dynamics. It applies to every relation between the self and the world. William James once described the situation of doubting as an "inward trouble," which could be compared to the trouble of being *out of oneself* – in Hegel's sense. One "meets a new experience," which doesn't fit within one's own belief-system, be it a contradiction, a new desire, something confusing or else.¹⁴

¹² Georg W. G. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977 [1807], 111.

¹³ Ibid, 112.

¹⁴ William James, *Pragmatism. A New Name For Some Old Ways of Thinking*, ed., with an introduction by Bruce

What then happens is a tension between old belief-habits and the uncertain new. This tension is not being resolved by eliminating violently either the old or the new, but by bringing them together in the best possible way. This bringing-together in the best possible way is what James's famous definition of truth consists of: "New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. [...] The reason why we call things true is the reason why they *are* true, for 'to be true' *means* only to perform this marriage function."¹⁵

Now, this idea is applicable to Hegel's description of recognition: Doubting consists in an erotic entanglement of 'old' and 'new'. Accordingly, *Old* falls in love with *New*, hoping that *New* will love it back, and hoping that they will fit together well and that their relationship will last. But their relationship will only last, if *Old* and *New* always continue to start over, thus establishing a lasting positive tension over time, which implies doubts with respect to the uncertain future and the question over how the matter will play out. For the problem with the *Hegel-Hollywood-Model* consists in that it focuses too much on the Happy-End, or in Hegel's words: on the *reconciliation* of self and other. Once *Left* and *Right* finally found each other, the Hollywood story is over – "after they married, they lived happily ever after." But when Hollywood ends, real life starts. Overcoming fixed images and ideas only is possible when *Old* and *New* fall in love with each other again and again. And this means, never stopping to fall in love with the uncertain, but instead a stretching-out and extending from *Old* and *New* in Augustine's sense.

As I have shown, it is only through doubts we learn who we are. They mobilize our judgment and sharpen our perception, raising the awareness for our habitual patterns of judgment and action, which without doubt would go on unnoticed and automatically. Through doubting habitual patterns and judgments become negotiable and changeable. In other words: Every reflectively undergone (re-)positioning and criticism is based on doubts, otherwise it is only thoughtless adoption of the position of others. And this applies not only to individual development. Every social, economic, scientific and artistic invention or discovery is based on doubt. Doubt is the foundation of creativity; it brings the new into the world. Admitting the dubitability of our own positioning at first sight seems to be a dangerous path. But, in the long run, it proves not only to enhance stability, because elastic systems are more resilient than static ones, but also to prevent and oppose violence – against oneself and against others. And, besides, it simply is less boring.

Kuklick, Hackett: Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1981, 31, 33.

¹⁵ Ibid.