



## The being-cyclist: An essay in existential anthropology

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### ABSTRACT

Critical of empirical forms of anthropology which have missed the singularity of beings, this paper defines the conditions for the observation of a human being. It would be then up to existential anthropology to do this work. To observe in detail a human being and to understand its existential grammar, the author considers necessary to return to the lexical field of the contour, the consistency, the stability. In a heuristic way, the paper solicits two unexpected supports: a drawing of Marcel Duchamp representing a cyclist and the notion of ball, proposed by Parmenides, that he associates to the one of volume of being. The paper then becomes a reflection on the movement in cycles to think an existential anthropology of the being human riveted to itself. The result is a move away from the foundations of existentialism, which, in different ways, value a being in the process of wrenching away from itself, in disequilibrium or as a “mystery” that cannot be looked at.

### KEYWORDS

circle; existential anthropology; existentialism; observation; singularity; Marcel Duchamp; Gilles Deleuze; Jean-Paul Sartre; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Jean-Luc Nancy; Parmenides

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## ANTHROPOLOGY, A DRAWING BY DUCHAMP AND THE BALL OF PARMENIDES

Is there any other reality than each being and its continuity through the hours, minutes and seconds? In its disciplinary functioning, in order to constitute and think its focal points, empirical anthropology adds to this being other beings and reduces time to one or another salient event associated with selected situations, all reworked and mixed in such a way that there is almost nothing left of this being in time. The same applies to anthropologies that claim to work on existence, the individual or the ordinary life — including portraits. There is at least one common, if not ongoing, double error — a double error that distances us from the reality of a singular existence. This is the relationalist excess describing beings in relationships or, more generally, relationships or interactions — selecting situations from everyday life to understand events. Of course, it is not easy to avoid this risk and we never fully do. This is the horizon of existential anthropology, the “asymptote” which it should never be far from, compromises being accepted with full awareness.<sup>1</sup>

There are ideas or images that can help the anthropologist keep this objective in front of his mind. The reality of the cyclist and the image of the ball, synthesised in the idea of volume of being, will serve as a guide here. We know that a cyclist pedals. This consists of a movement of the legs, with the feet wedged on pedals, a repetitive movement if ever there was one, the body sitting and thoughts able to wander. This movement is a matter of cycles: the bicycle has several. Bicycle, we say, but we should say “multicycle”. There are the wheels turning on themselves and moving in a straight line. There is the movement of the pedals, combined with the strength of the legs. And it is this movement of the pedals, more precisely the rotation of the crank axle, that drives the rear wheel, thanks also to a roller chain that transmits the power exerted by the cyclist on the pedals. In other words, the crank set transforms the movement of the legs into a rotational movement, which in turn is transformed into a linear movement. And so the bike, with its cyclist, moves.

Among Marcel Duchamp’s works there is a drawing of a cyclist, from 1914, entitled *Avoir l’apprenti dans le soleil*.<sup>2</sup> This drawing indicates one more circle. Not only that of the pedals, the wheels and the legs, but also that of the whole

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for his/her very enlightening suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> The drawing can be accessed via this link: <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/51631> (05.04.2024). I look at this drawing, following my anthropologist’s intuition, independently of the many and extremely varied interpretations of Duchamp’s work and of this drawing in particular. For example, there are these two readings: James, 1991; Troche, 2012. There is also this link: <http://centenaireduchamp.blogspot.com/2020/01/cod-avoir-lapprenti-dans-le-soleil.html> (05.04.2024).

cyclist, folded in on himself and at the same time on the bike.<sup>3</sup> The drawing also shows a double axis in black, from the shoulders to the pedals, via the handlebars (slightly curved), a double accentuated line, indicating the body mechanics adapted to the bicycle's. It is the support of this axis as well as the horizontal seat (the saddle), that allows for the movement of all the cycles, articulating and organising them. The shape of the cyclist thus drawn by Duchamp is almost analogous to the other circles that make the bicycle work. In this respect, the slightly more pronounced rounding of the top of the head and the back seems significant to me. The cyclist is like a meta-circle, uniting these other circles, the legs associating the rider thus "cycled" with the pedals and the rolling of the chain that implies the movement of the wheels.

In this drawing by Duchamp, the position of the cyclist, pedalling, is quite particular, forming an almost compact unit, a ball we might say. From now on, I think of the cyclist as the one who only moves his legs, the rest of his body almost immobilised, as if it were necessary that parts of it do not move in order to better ensure the movement. I also see him as someone who does not require any capacity other than that of pedalling. He does not need what a footballer does with his feet, or a car driver with his attention when driving and his steering ability. The folding effect is all the more because the cyclist doesn't throw anything, doesn't play with anything — a ball, a disc, a weight for example, as in other sports — because the cyclist hardly interacts with others, even if he talks, looks, advances, has race strategies or sometimes helps his team members. All this makes this body compact. It is even when the cyclist is more "gathered" that he goes faster, turning away from others — and not when he slows down his pace. When he wins, he "gets up" even more, stretching his arms high. To pedal, he has to bend, fold, and fold again.

I associate Duchamp's cyclist, a self-gathered entity, with a ball, apart from what surrounds him. In the foundations of Greek philosophy, Parmenides can be considered the philosopher of the ball. In a sense, he takes us in a similar direction of thought to my reading of Duchamp's cyclist. Mixing poetry and metaphysics, Parmenides presents a being "in the coils of huge bonds" (Coxon, 2009: 72), and he adds that a "strong necessity holds it in the bondage of a limit, which keeps it apart" (Coxon, 2009: 73), "like the volume of a spherical ball, and equally poised in every direction from its centre", without having more or less being here or there (Coxon, 2009: 78). From Parmenides, I retain this line of thought and the fact that there is an entity to grasp and observe, a "being". He does not designate a being in particular, for example a human being, since he indicates that it is neither born nor dies. But characteristics of the being in question are intriguing and even heuristic. Parmenides presents this being as non-divisible, in one piece, all alike; "remaining the same and in the same state,

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<sup>3</sup> On the importance of cyclical movement in Duchamp's work, see Gervais, 1989.

it lies by itself” (Coxon, 2009: 72); “Nor is it divisible, since it is all alike and not any more in degree in some respect, which might keep it from uniting” (Coxon, 2009: 70).

In connection with Duchamp’s drawing, some of these points will reappear later. Above all, I want to learn how to look at a human being in their movement and in the way that movement is structured. Of course, empirically, it is difficult, if not impossible, to follow Parmenides completely. But I think it’s important to know that this full and complete ball is a symbol of what much of contemporary philosophy and social science stigmatises. Gilles Deleuze is extremely clear here, perceiving a dominant feature of Western thought in its search for essences and continuity — of “a substantial, completed and well-constituted subject” (Deleuze, 1994: 118). I believe that this type of critique — which privileges the thought of an individual “with no fixed identity, forever decentred” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983: 20), with “the relative, floating and fluid character of individuality itself” (Deleuze, 1994: 258) — comes at a cost — losing the possibility of looking at and describing a human being. This critique requires somewhere a solid grip, to be able to have before one something that slips, that “knows nothing of substance and form” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 507), that prefers “heterogeneous” and retains only “that which increases the number of connections” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 508).

## THE HUMAN BEING: A VOLUME OF BEING

It call the cycling ball a “volume of being” and this figure will help me to look at a human being and understand its existential functioning (Piette, 2019; Piette, 2023).<sup>4</sup> The Indo-European *kʷél* is the basis of a large lexical field (designating particular cycles, circles, going around in circles) and from which the Latin *volvere* is not far off. From *volvere*, “volume” will emerge.<sup>5</sup> As a folded entity, like a ball, the human being is typically a volume of being. In geometry, volume refers to a three-dimensional figure, with a container and a content. It cannot be dissociated from a form of consistency, block or mass. In the same way, a human entity has a clear edge and a limit that can be perceived by everyone. And it comprises a set of components: actions, gestures, emotions, moods, social or cultural traces, thoughts, memories, cognitive, socio-cognitive or psychological expressions and even one’s own stylistic traits. Thus the volume of being, as a universal reality, whatever the cultural representations it may have, is the volume of *a* being — that of each being with its own structuring.

<sup>4</sup> In the empirical field of existential anthropology, the work of Nigel Rapport is a strong expression of this desire to focus on the individual (Rapport, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> The reader can see this link: <https://indo-european.info/pokorny-etymological-dictionary/> (05.04.2024).

This is also what becomes astonishing and constitutes the whole issue of an anthropology: human existence, as a unity that holds together and a singularity that is immediately recognisable. My question is this: How can a human entity, which is not of course a completely closed system, remain a same volume of being? It is its continuity that needs to be explained and not the movement. No doubt the cyclist would answer that he “holds” on because he is moving. But I prefer to extend the question and ask how a human being, so often presented in relation, in movement, holds on and how he manages to continue like this? A human being is not a flow. I’ll try to show that he has a consistency and he holds on in a certain stability — as Duchamp’s drawing prompts us to consider. He remains this volume or this ball. What are the conditions not biological or organic, but existential — of this stability?

A first answer is in what I call “relateity”, so called to stand in contrast to relation. Whereas the notion of relation thinks of actions with and towards others, relateity tries to think of what it means to “hold” as an entity in its unity, with its components, when it is also “in relation”. The Latin supine *relatum* of the verb *referre* means precisely to withdraw, to carry back, to bring something to the point from which it started, as in a circular movement. Relateity thus designates a kind of attachment of the components to the volume itself, as if returning to themselves without leaving, when they express themselves. No one can observe an action, gesture or emotion circulating or being exchanged for other actions, gestures or emotions, whereas biological and anatomical parts can be removed, exchanged or given. A volume of being is thus different from a biological organism but also from social systems. For unlike their parts (individuals, various objects) which are mobile and separable from the social system, an action, a gesture, an emotion, as components of the volume, have no objective autonomy. The same applies to language: it is not the words that the volume utters that escape. They remain “attached” to the volume. The other receives echoes, traces of them, as is also the case with actions, gestures or moods addressed. A volume of being is therefore a structure that does not allow its, let us say, “existential components” to leave — they are retained there — but only to express themselves.

It reminds us of Parmenides’ ball: “in the bondage of a limit, which keeps it apart” (Coxon, 2009: 73; quoted above).

The cyclist’s relateity in some ways clarifies matters. Nothing comes out of the folded-over cyclist, moving himself by his strength and circular movement, but without moving, or almost without moving. As I said, there is not even a necessary of essential gesture here, one stretched towards another, and there is no object in play. Far from the case of a football player making “passes”, the cyclist is pedalling, unable to pedal for another, with his sensations, emotions and thoughts. These are not exchangeable “fragments” like clothes in a wardrobe. There are empathies or affections, but they are themselves of a particular

volume, allowing for traces, echoes and reverberations, but which are not the actual emotions of another volume. Of course, the cyclist can experience overcoming, liberation, fusion with nature and many other things, but once again these are only experiences of his own. Like any volume of being, when he does something, when he feels or says something, he shows that his actions, feelings or words are (r)attached to himself — as if held by the entity. One can say that relateity is a form of ligature tightening the volume, since as soon as he does, feels or says something, his retained acts do not escape from him, they return to him, as if turning back on themselves in the volume. Is this so far from Duchamp's drawing of the cyclist on his road that goes up and down, following his path, alone in the world, deaf to the musical scores that form the background of the page (James, 1991)?

But this does not imply that there is not a form of permeability between the ball what comes from outside. As we know, the ball is not completely closed. It is here that "lessereity" as a capacity for filtration and detachment brings in a new principle or regulation. It designates a diffuse detachment, not one that is intentional and voluntary. With different levels of intensity, lessereity regulates the impacts of actions, emotions or thoughts, of moments of consciousness or of strong lucidity, that is to say the various traces of human co-presences — including traces of one's own acts. From the particularities of the volume of being, according to variable strengths, the lessereity allows one to filter, to forget, not to think about it (anymore), not to be conscious or lucid, to be present with a certain absence, to get used to it, to be docile, to rest on various supports and thus to cushion, in one way or another, the impact of these traces. In this vein, I could quote Alfred Jarry: "It is well known that each leg of a cyclist rests and even benefits from an automatic massage, as restorative as any embrocation, while the other acts" (Jarry, 2007: 50; author's translation). With the mechanics of the bicycle, this balancing act is also that of the "shock absorbers", of the braking, of the tyres with their solid and supple material — (which, when in contact with the ground, absorb shocks and vibrations) of the suspension as a supple link between the frame and the wheels, and of the saddle that absorbs impacts and also filters vibrations. Is it not also, in Duchamp's drawing, the air holes that appear between the arms, legs and trunk? The cyclist's volumic unit, his ball, is not full, participating as it does in these various figures of the lessereity. In the end, it ensures all the more separation between beings.

This raises a new question: how are the components of the volume of related within it? Several points should be noted. Let us say that a moment of presence is, according to the activation of this or that component, made up of actions, gestures, emotions, thoughts, the emergence and realisation of which are marked by lasting stylistic features that characterise them. This is another binding of the volume of being: allowing these actions, gestures or emotions to be impregnated by them. This indeed tightens the ball, holds it, as

Parmenides said, evoking “the coils of huge bonds” (Coxon, 2009: 72; quoted above). These are modalities specific to an individual — non-voluntary, more or less easily identifiable, concerning different registers, bodily or psychological. They are perceptible at the first moments of the baby and accumulated with experience: gestural, linguistic or cognitive modalities, facial features, bodily expressions and psychological traits (the “character”, the “temperament”, of which desires, wills and above all their specific expressions can be part), habits that are specific to a volume (such as doing something at such and such a time) and the ways in which they are accomplished, ways of feeling, of being moved. To this list I can add memory and recollections which, even if they are also associated with experiences shared with others, are immediately selective, specific to each person, accumulating from moment to moment. The style may include a particular gestural movement — but also and in addition — a particular way of performing a gesture, or using the voice, an accent or certain facial movements which are stylistic traits particularly present in the continuity. It is indeed this diversified whole that constitutes the “style” of a volume of being. By its durability and recurrence under partial expressions, let us say that it forms a block of singularity. Some of its elements have a very localised effect, such as the way we smile or make a particular gesture. Others are more transversal, such as temperament or character. They overlap with several components of the volume — actions, thoughts, moods, emotions, etc. — with the specific way temperament or character are.

Thus a cyclist shows at every moment that it is she herself, a singular entity, who moves, who pedals, from her own expressions and attitudes — of course, not all of which can be actualised at the same time — from her mode of being, her tendencies, her style, her recognisable temperament, by which she is determined or in any case limited, and which is found from one situation to another, in different roles and acts. There is nothing clearer in cycle races than this: the specific temperament of each cyclist, the strength, the will, the opportunism, the intelligence of each — is different from that of the others. The results of the competitions reveal and validate the determined and limited singularity of each volume unit. Generally social sciences and philosophy are not clear enough on this point, which is not often said radically. They prefer thoughts of overcoming and conquering emancipation. My point of view is far from these ideas, since this possibility of overcoming or emancipation is a part of a personal style, and therefore also of determinism for the individual. Without doubt, the cyclist also needs a good dose of lessereity to accept the rankings that he is confronted with almost every day: not to think about it, to put it off until the next day, to delegate to others, for example to his teammates, the possibilities that he does not have. This absolute limitation of humans and, moreover, its bracketing or veiling are definite realities of everyday life.

The bicycle advances in a linear movement to keep its balance, but it does so, as I said, with cyclic movements, those of the wheels, the pedals, the chain, the legs. In a volume of being, also in that of a rider, there is therefore also, by analogy, the movement of these stylistic components that can be said to be impregnating. Coming from the block of singularity, these components reappear very regularly, cyclically — indicating and reminding us that they are from such and such a volume of being, infiltrating as if to mark and thus better hold the gestures, the words and the affects of this one. These acts can only be expressed with such and such stylistic features. With and through its acts, the ball moves, retained by the relateity and held by these impregnating components.

These components of the block of singularity not only impregnate the act of the moment and its accomplishment. They also absorb, infiltrate, appropriate — with or without tension — what happens, in the volume of being itself, especially according to the specificity of temperament and character traits. Most often — not always, of course — the trace is buried in the content of this or that component, which will hardly be modified. Some components, such as knowledge or memories, are more variable than others. Their stock increases or decreases, modifies itself on the surface, I would say, but in a set specific to each person, more or less buried, ready to be partially revived. In fact, from moment to moment, from situation to situation, there are not so many modifications in relation to everything that the volume of being and its block of singularity are confronted with. According to its own style, this is the whole work of the lessereity and the specific appropriation in the volume of being. Does the volume give the impression of moving by turning on itself? It is not a strict copy of itself, but neither is it a “vortex” indicating a rapidity of change — anthropologists who solicit this lexicon do not necessarily refer to a form maintaining movement (Ingold, 2018). The temporality of change, with barely perceptible changes, is in any case a slow temporality. It also evokes the rubber of tyres returning to their initial shape after deformations with each turn of the wheel... Slow temporality does not mean stagnation and fixation. There is a certain movement that also makes the bicycle wear out very gradually...

It is the mechanism of the bicycle that sheds light on the functioning of the volume of being as a ball. The bicycle is like an “excrecence” of the latter, to better express its functioning and structuring. The pedalling volume is the articulator and also the condensation of the bicycle. Every act of the volume of being is like a rotation that creates a movement, like a pedal push, with a steering handlebar, on a saddle and shock-absorbing tyres, all marked by the repetitive, cyclical presence of stylistic impregnations. These, the change-damping elements and its volumic structure in relateity ensure that what an individual does and says does not escape him and is held within him: it is such forces that



regulate the ball. They ensure a homeostatis, I should say an existential homeostasis — in a way reminiscent of Parmenides. It is a kind of circular movement, such that the advance, while being made, is retained on itself. This movement is not only what causes the advance as in the system of pedals and wheels. It is also what maintains, contains or holds the volume of advancing being.

This “being-to-self” is not the mode of being of a moment, of a situation, alongside other modes turned towards others. Whatever it does, like Duchamp’s cyclist, a volume of being remains towards itself — standing, sitting, running, walking, speaking, writing, making, participating in a collective life. It is structurally so. There is no necessarily central self or ego in a volume being animated by the structured diversity of its components; but it is not merely a physiological unity, for there is indeed an existential “gathering”, with ligatures, with the relateity and its impregnation mechanism, through its regulated advance, at any moment, whether it is selfish or generous, whether it accelerates, climbs, descends, escapes from the peloton or elaborates strategies with its teammates.

The volume of being does not have the perfection that Parmenides lends to its “being”, its ball. Let us recall his words quoted above: “equally poised in every direction from its centre”; “it is all alike and not any more in degree in some respect” (Coxon, 2009 : 70). In the mass of the volume of being, there is a part of emptiness that allows for “play” and different intensities thanks to the effect of the lessereity on the components of the volume of being. In this way, a volume of being does not have the homogeneity, coherence and perfect symmetry of components as found in Parmenides’ conception. An imperfect or irregular ball, but a ball nonetheless... This identity in the variations is marginalised as a commonplace, often evaded or presented as banal and obsolete, the interest in the variations and the heterogeneous clearly prevailing in social sciences. But it is precisely this constancy in the variations that seems to me to be essential to describe, as long as one takes the time to look at a human being, to grasp him in the succession of moments, and to understand how he stands through it. In any case, the cyclist ball reminds us that there is a human being there and also that it is possible to look at him and not at others, at each one and not with the others. This would be a key issue for an existential anthropology elaborated on a fine scale.

## EXISTENTISM AS NEO-EXISTENTIALISM

Like a ball, slowly changing in a way that is restrained by what it contains and what structures it, the movement of the volume of being distances itself from existentialism in its basic and most typical expression, with its lexicon of the “outside-beyond-ahead-of-itself”. In fact, this lexicon is an obstacle to

a thought of the existent as an entity and also to a description of it. It is the refusal of the entity as such and its withdrawal into itself that characterise the philosophies of existence. For example, confronted with the problems of analysing the relationship between the body and the mind, out of step with the sciences that would fix and with the valorisation of founding consciousness, Maurice Merleau-Ponty presents the human as a problem that obliges specialists in the human sciences toward prudence. I can agree with this prudence but he writes: “So there cannot in all good conscience be any question of solving the human problem; there can only be a question of describing man as problematic” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 202). This type of reflection, which may seem to increase epistemological difficulties, does not necessarily commit an observer to observation... Using Merleau-Ponty’s characteristic language, the individual is not thought of as a “real unity” but always “indivisibly demolished and remade by the course of time” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 255). They are one whose body “is not where it is, nor what it is” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 229), and even when it allows existence to evade the world, “the body never quite falls back on to itself” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 191). Here, the observer is no longer able to follow this untenable human... Is Merleau-Ponty talking about style? “I [...] have received, with existence, a manner of existing, a style”, he writes, associating it with a structure and specifying: “All my actions and thoughts stand in a relationship to this structure” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 529). But from the outset the philosopher slips, dilutes, evaporates, like a cyclist who can no longer hold his own, skidding, not wanting to be looked at — as is so often the case with philosophies of existence when, here and there, one might think that they come close to a possible observation of a being in its structuring. Thus Merleau-Ponty does take the matter to the end, or does not encourage one to go to the end of the intrinsic reality of the style associated with a particular entity. He ends up considering it as a means of communicating with the world that does not prevent freedom: “I am from the start outside myself and open to the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 530). It is indeed, he specifies, the “intentional threads which attach us to the world”, which should be brought to “our notice” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: XV), as well as the “reciprocal insertion” or the “intertwining” of “this visible body, and all the visibles with it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 138). In this case, the being is diluted with the others that are added before the observer’s focus.

A similar point can be made about much of Sartre’s discourse. Speaking of the human being, he does not mean “a stable substance which rests in itself”, but “a perpetual disequilibrium, a wrenching away from itself with all its body” (Sartre, 1963: 151). He invokes the notion of “transcendence” characterising man as one who “passes beyond himself”, in the sense that he is not “an island unto himself”: it is “not by turning inward, but by constantly seeking a goal outside of himself in the form of liberation, or of some special achievement,

that man will realize himself as truly human” (Sartre, 2007: 53). Again, does such a perspective not deprive one of the possibility of looking at an entity in its structuring? The various characteristics of this man “always outside of himself [...] in projecting and losing himself beyond himself” (Sartre, 2007: 52) make him the exact opposite of our cyclist. The human being is thus the one who takes off from himself, an ex-istence coming out of its possibility, introducing play and the negative, “as being what it is not and not being what it is” (Sartre, 1956: LXV). In reality, the focus is less on the human being outside of himself — escaping without possible holds — than on his acts and his realisation, on the “work, action, or gesture” by which he “transcends” his condition (Sartre, 1963: 150). Style is itself a matter of “surpassing”, not “an instantaneous movement” but “a long work” (Sartre, 1963: 106). And Sartre adds that each person, starting from his or her subjectivity, also “discovers all the others” — “as the condition of his or her own existence” (Sartre, 2007: 41). He writes: “we are thus immediately thrust into a world that we call ‘inter-subjectivity’. It is in this world the man decides what he is and what others are” (Sartre, 2007: 42). In this case, it is also a matter of looking at others, situations and contexts, as Sartre recommends with his progressive-regressive method, that of “a continuous cross-reference” which would allow for “progressively determining a biography (for example) by examining the period, and the period by studying the biography” (Sartre, 1963: 135). And once again, the entity, taken with and in its contexts, loses the singular force of the volume of being that it constitutes.

In short, outside of oneself, wrenching oneself away, disequilibrium, overcoming oneself and other beings: the existent in himself would not be relevant. The being-cyclist which I have presented as a ball or volume of being, is thus a questioning of the philosophies of existence. By insisting on the characteristics of the cyclic ball, of the volume of being with its capacity of retention, I feel the difficulty in accepting the definition of existence that is in line with etymology, which Jean-Luc Nancy recalls: “Ex-istence, that is, the being-outside, the being-out-of-itself” (Nancy, 2018: 99). He insists on the “moveable play of reflections and angles, an essential instability that is always effacing or transforming itself. This ‘essential’ instability is equivalent to the absence of an essence, to the absence or incessant stripping away of a substance that is stable, permanent, and self-contained. This stripping away of the essence is called existence” (Nancy, 2018: 99). Conversely, the lesson of the cyclist reminds us that the human being is not ahead or out of himself. It is a volume, by definition — stable, despite its variations, in its continuity and restraint. And the observer now has a grip, a support. He can look.

Will we find in Emmanuel Levinas a thought concerning the movement of contraction of the human being, contrary to the “exism” of existentialists? Does he resemble the cyclist ball? In some of his writings, Levinas indeed presents

an existent as a being “riveted to himself” (Levinas, 1987: 43), thus far from the ecstatic movement of existence. He had furthermore used a very specific lexicon, describing a form of enclosing of the existent, which “gathers itself together”, “with a base” (Levinas, 1978: 71), which “cannot detach itself from itself”, in “an enchainment to itself” (Levinas, 1987: 55), no matter what it does. On such a basis it would be even more solidly constituted than the cyclist keeping balance. Levinas proposes the notion of “materiality” to mean “this manner of being occupied with itself” (Levinas, 1987: 55), which is not that of reflection, serene or philosophical, he explains, but that of enclosure in one’s identity. And he adds: “My being doubles with a having; I am encumbered by myself” (Levinas, 1987: 56). Even if “substantiality” is above all “substantivity”, that of “beings capable of bearing names” (Levinas, 1978: 98), it is indeed “a departure from self and a return to self” (Levinas, 1987: 52). Is this not the existing as a unity that I seek? I might indeed think that here we are finding the cyclist and the volume of being. But this movement of the human being is deeply insufficient and unsatisfactory for Levinas, because it has as a corollary suffocation under the weight of identity, subjectivity and egoism. The Levinasian demand is then that of escape, of de-cluttering, of disenchantment, which he will not cease to think about in various ways through the relationship with the other. In short, how to escape, disencumber or disenchant: Levinas will never stop asking himself this. Exposed to others, the subject is thus stopped in his or her enterprise of gathering, henceforth caught by his limited responsibility towards others. It can only be tempting for Levinas-inspired social sciences to see “responses” and ethical issues as an essential focus of their research, rather than the existent with its consistent materiality mentioned a moment ago. The being-cyclist is then again exploded, without our having the possibility to observe it. Levinas does not want this: Seeing “a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin” is reductive for Levinas and “the best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the colour of his eyes” (Levinas, 1982: 85).

What is the answer? Whether such an existent considers another to fill a gap or looks at him as infinite desire not subordinated to needs, aware that each one is an irreducible that cannot be totalized, the way of doing and looking at another is indeed that of a particular volume, with its ways of doing and being which are its own. If it feels a lightening of pleasure or a de-cluttering by another, it will be according to its own way, intrinsic to its volume, of feeling lightened or questioned by another. And when faced with the emergence of the irreducible other, whoever experiences it in this way will experience it and act according to his own modalities. In all cases, the volume of being does not emerge from itself and the anthropologist’s job is to observe and note.

There is a kind of existentialist “intenable” that does not invite the work of empirical observation of the human entity and may even exclude it. The thought of the philosophies of existence constitutes a difficulty that the being-cyclist as a ball with its folding effect allows us to avoid. In order to look at a human being, an existent, to continue to look at it without letting it slip, to constitute an epistemology of such looking, the anthropologist needs precisely “revelations”. I have tried to show that being a cyclist is one of them, among many others. The cyclist’s race — let’s think of the time trial exercise — would be like a condensation of existence in-itself. Should we then say “in-sistance”, rather than existence? The cyclist in-sists. To cycle is to insist, to live folded up. To unfold is to stop. The cyclist-being is not ahead of himself, he is not primarily with others, he is towards himself. His posture reminds us that there is a human being, an existent, constituting an entity, the ball. Existential anthropology becomes an “existentism”, empirical neo-existentialism. This would be the final lesson of the cyclist, in a debate between anthropology and philosophy. “I am learning to see, wrote Rilke. [...]. Yes, I am making a start. I have not made much progress yet, but I mean to make the most time of my time” (Rilke, 2009: 4–5).

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