The Four Ways to Construct Narratives on Origins

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By

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To those who imagine, to those who calculate...

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INTRODUCTION

At all levels of civilization, from the earliest times,
one of man's fundamental concerns has been the search for his origins.[1]

Topicality of the question of origins

There is no culture that has not raised the question of its origins. Better: this question has always been answered. All the cultures that anthropologists describe to us have developed narratives on origins. Stories tell where things come from, animals and plants, etc.

Our culture today is no exception to this rule. It is even distinguished by the plurality of discourses on origins that circulate there. What power is vested in the question of origin in order to receive meaning beyond the differences of cultures and eras? Why is the question of origin so universal, so shared, so constant behind the infinite variety of its manifestations?

If you scan the horizon on a cool morning along a country lane, distinguishing here a barn, there a few trees standing out against a pale sky, here a path lined with grass, there again a chubby, perky cloud playing with its shadow, the question may arise unexpectedly: how did it all come about? But the answer is immediately multiple: we see not one, but several ways of responding to it. This barn was once the project of a peasant, these few trees are the remnants of a forest and this path was perhaps, long ago, the passage point for animals going to drink from the nearby river.

But what do I know, deep down, about the history that built this landscape? It could be quite different than the one I just imagined. Perhaps the ancient legends that speak of it as a creation due to the benevolent action of a God are not absurd. Or perhaps, conversely, is it the question that should be declared absurd, since it seems impossible to give it an unequivocal answer to it?

In any case, it seems from the outset that the questioning of origin must

[1] André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and speech* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993), *Le Geste et la Parole,* tome 1: *Technique et Langage* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1964).

lead to a story–a *narrative.* To the question of origin, no equation answers, only a narrative can. This can take various forms. But it is always, at least at first glance (this statement will have to be qualified), a narrative that must bring out the origin of its enigmatic obscurity. No one can say that he knows his origins if they have not been told to him.

There are, however, several types of narratives. For example, we can distinguish between scientific and mythical narratives. The word "narrative" thus declines itself according to a variety of epistemological modalities.

What we see emerging in this multiplicity of styles of possible answers to the question of the origin of what is there, in front of us, has its counterpart in culture. This plurality of views on origin is, in fact, one of the characteristics of the question of origin and the counterpart of the fact that this question can never, strictly speaking, find a settled, absolutely definitive answer.

The frequent struggles to force others to subscribe to a certain conception of origins or to forbid them to adopt a certain conception of origins occurs precisely because this question belongs to the realm of undecidable questions. And, conversely, it is not possible to close the question because a varied set of answers can be provided.

That is why the question of origin lends itself to so much controversy. But what is it that encourages these arguments? These interminable struggles are possibly based on the existence of a plurality of answers combined with ignorance of the profound nature of the question posed. For each of them considers itself sure of its own legitimacy, while at the same time unable to reduce that of other ways of answering the question of origin, all of them get lost and end up in sterile quibbling.

Should not these controversies therefore be clarified by an analysis of the concept of origin and the discourses underlying it? This is precisely what this book is about. The issues at stake as well as the limitations of the methods of analysis raised by the notion of origin will be explored.

In doing so, we will examine the "concept" of origin. This concept is mobilized in many contemporary discussions, not only philosophical, but also political. And it's easy to understand why.

Globalization, the phase of universal history in which we are living, often presents itself as a challenge to origins. In its current political meaning, the word "origin" indicates an intention to particularize, distinguish, discriminate, or even control origin. This is why some reject the origin,

while others claim it. Some people berate origin, while others praise origin. Some people want it, while others fear it. This is another dimension of the controversial nature of the issue. And current events show every day that the price to be paid for a lack of understanding of the fundamental nature of this issue could be high.

In any case, what we see emerging in the political debate, on a recurring basis (for there is no shortage of analogies with this or that era in which similar questions were asked), is the most superficial aspect of an extremely profound problem. It is the immersed part of an immense question that crosses all disciplines and all eras. This is the question we want to raise: the question of origins in all its generality. What is an origin? And why is this question so powerfully active epistemologically but also politically, socially, culturally?

And, since there are many ways to talk about origin, let's start by asking: how many exactly are there? To this question, here is what we will answer: there are four ways of talking about origins, four ways of constructing discourses on origins.

It is beyond the scope of this survey to say what is the best or truest way to talk about origin. But only to underline the epistemological importance of this observation: there are a finite (and relatively limited) number of ways of speaking about origins. In other words, there are a limited number of possible structures for forming discourses on origins. We will make a detailed inventory of these structures within the framework of what we will call an "*originology*" understood in the sense of a discourse on discourses on origins. The recurrent debates between creationism and evolutionism will find in this originology the real reasons for the misunderstanding that condemns them to remain sterile.

But we must first make a detour through the question which, by itself, sums up all the problems of origins. It has the advantage of opening all possible avenues of response without closing any. It looks like this: *Why is there something rather than nothing?*

The Leibniz's question

Why is there something rather than nothing? The question is formulated by Leibniz in 1714 in *The Principles of Nature and Grace Founded in Reason*[2].

[2] Gottfried W. Leibniz, *The Philosophical Works of Leibnitz [sic]: Comprising the Monadology, New System of Nature, Principles of Nature and of Grace*, trans.

This is the most fundamental question of metaphysics. Some have called it, for this reason, the "canonical question".[3]

It can be understood as the question that marks the gateway to metaphysics. It appears above the threshold, on the lintel of the door that anyone venturing into the solemn realm of metaphysics passes through. However, while some have stressed its radical decisiveness, others, on the other hand, have tried to neutralize it by declaring it absurd: is it not necessary, in order for it to be posed, that the one who poses it, at the very least, exists? And in order for the one who poses it to exist, doesn't a world also have to exist? Thus, the question cannot be asked without having already been implicitly resolved: since I am asking the question something exists and not nothing. No doubt (we will come back to these arguments later). Yet that doesn't answer the question of *why* something exists. The absurdity would therefore be to declare that the question is absurd. The question is so far to be absurd that, if it is not formulated, it has been *felt by all known human cultures that have* formed on Earth since, as we recalled at the beginning, all known human cultures have produced discourses on origins.

We make a distinction there between a question that is *only felt* and a question that is *fully formulated*. A question that is only felt manifests its presence only in the negative, i.e. by the formulation of answers, never by the question itself. How could an answer to the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" be only felt? It is felt if such an answer presents itself as an implicit "because" to the Leibniz's question. An answer to the canonical question is implicit in any account of the origins.

In other words, the canonical question is lodged, silently but deeply, in any cosmogony. Leibniz, in shaping this question, therefore, referred to what formed the background of the narratives on origins, whatever their nature can be:

> "The first question we're entitled to ask will be: why is there something rather than nothing? For the nothing is simpler and easier than the something. Moreover, assuming that things must exist, it must be possible

George M. Duncan (Andesite Press, 2015), *Principes de la nature et de la grâce fondés en raison: Principes de la philosophie, ou Monadologie* (Paris: PUF, 2001 [1714]).

[3] Francis Wolff, *Pourquoi y a-t-il quelque chose plutôt que rien ?* [Why is there something rather than nothing?] (Paris: PUF, 2013).

to reason why they must exist in this way and not otherwise.[4]

The common starting point, most often ignored, of any story on origins is a question. The theological, metaphysical and positive narratives which Auguste Comte thought he could distinguish–and to which we shall return a little later–have this in common: they all are attempts, not perhaps always "to answer", but so to speak, "to deal" with the question of Leibniz.

Behind the apparent difference in "treatment" of the issue, there is a common concern: to account for what is, most often by telling what has been. Every cosmogony has this role, this function and this ambition. It pretends to tell us why things are the way they are, even when it apparently confines itself to the question of "how" things became what they are before our eyes–that barn, that grove, that grassy path, that cloud, etc. And then it tells us why they are the way they are. It always carries within itself a "why" which, without necessarily being formulated, is nonetheless *felt*.

Idea of a division between discourses on origins

Hesiod's *Theogony*, for example, is an implicit answer to the canonical question. To the question: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" it answers: "In the beginning there existed Chaos, then the Earth with a wide chest, safe for all the Immortals who inhabit the crest of the snowy Olympus; then the dark Tartarus, placed under the abysses of the immense Earth." Etc.

And the answer goes on without ever explicitly formulating the question of origin. Hesiod's *Theogony* is a theo-cosmogony. It makes gods exist before things happen. Gaia, for example, is the Earth, but it is also, first of all, a God. It's a God turned thing. One thing is, according to this narrative, a remnant, a divine waste. The divine spirit that animated it at the beginning has withdrawn from it. The only *thing* left is the one *thing* we grasp or spot in the distance.

In all the societies that anthropologists have been able to study so far, they have found such stories, cosmogonic stories. They are mythical tales that involve events that no one has ever observed (gods-things: Chaos, Earth, etc.). These fabulous entities–in the sense that they can only exist in fables–appear in narratives that have a coherence of their own. Another

[4] Gottfried W. Leibniz, *The Philosophical Works, Principles of Nature and Grace*, § 45.

well-known example of this type of narrative in our culture is provided by *Genesis*, the story that opens the Bible and that sets out the conditions for the appearance of what is. *Genesis* is an ontogonic narrative.

It is possible to identify a very large number of such narratives when one travels, as Mircea Eliade did, through human cultures in search of traces of narratives on origins[5]. These stories have often come down to us in multiple versions with, usually, behind a recognizable plot, many variations. However, nothing is revisable or amendable and each story has its own typical regime. This is one of the reasons they are called "myths". These narratives are always presented as closed narratives, and whoever ventures to introduce a revision into them runs the risk of seeing this infidelity considered as ungodliness. Belief, here, is faith and faith is fidelity to a group.

However, these stories may give rise to the suspicion that they are composed arbitrarily, because the narrative that carries them is proven by nothing but itself. It is true that we walk daily on what Hesiod's *Theogony* refers to as Gaia, but what it says about what Gaia was in the past cannot be attested by anything other than the narrative. *Theogony*, like all myths, is its unique and ultimate self-reference.

But let's immediately consider a completely different kind of narrative on origins: the one proposed by contemporary science because science also talks about origins. It offers one story or rather stories on origins. They begin, in their most recent versions, with the *Big Bang* and extend to the story of the origin of contemporary man and the societies in which he lives, of language, writing, philosophy, etc. These narratives successively describe the appearance of atomic nuclei, hydrogen and helium atoms, atoms of higher mass, planetary systems, the solar system and planet Earth, life, multicellular organisms, vertebrates, mammals, primates, humans, language, techniques, societies, art, nations, etc. Taken together, they form a single great narrative that presents itself as a tale of successive *emergences.* These are indeed narratives–a story is told–but the structure of the story and the elements that go into its composition are different from those that went into the composition of mythical stories.

Even if the compositional elements of the story in question are based on calculations, experimental data and theories, the result is a story that has the narrative structure of a sequence of "that's why": this happened, that's *why*

[5] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press, 2009), *Aspects du mythe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

that happened. It is only in narratives with a scientific structure that the sequence articulations have the character of a strict causal determination in the storytelling. But histories in which the chain of the narrative structure has a non-causal (in the physical sense) nature can be produced, as it is the case within any mythical narrative. The latter thus derive their epistemological value from something other than exhibiting a causal structure.

Soon after some ventured to speak of the "end of the great stories" (one of the characteristics of the postmodern era according to Jean-François Lyotard[6]), "new great stories" appeared, made up of the assembly of small stories. These were stories dealing with the history of nature as a whole. Unlike the narratives Mircea Eliade studied, they benefit from the support of contemporary experimental sciences. Unlike the way myths constitute their epistemological foundations, everything here is revisable, and nothing is arbitrarily asserted.

We have therefore identified two types of discourse on origins: mythical narratives and scientific accounts of origins. Both, despite their differences, offer the same kind of overall performance: explaining all that is by characterizing it by its genesis. The two types of narratives, nonetheless, do not have the same structure at all. They answer the same question about the origin of things and beings, but they do so in very different ways. In one case, an intention, that has since possibly withdrawn and which manifested itself according to rules that have themselves disappeared and are therefore only accessible through narratives (a narrative being a reactivation, through speech, of what was), is supposed to be at the origin of what is. In the other case, the postulate of a uniformity of nature's functioning in space and time is established from the outset, and it is therefore accepted that what has been must be understood in the same way and on the basis of the same principles as what is. But in both cases, it is a matter of producing a deployment narrative: how did reality unfold to become what it is before our eyes? The two proposed attempts at a response are contradictory on some sides. Yet both are *similar in the question* they seek to answer.

What do we see right away? On the one hand, we find stories based on never-observed events, and on the other hand, stories based on empirical knowledge and reasoning. Stories of the first kind, which we describe as

[6] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington (Minneapolis, Minn: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010), *La condition post-moderne. Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

mythical, involve phenomena produced, in all probability, by the imagination of their authors (who are, more often than not, unknown). This is why the chains of reasoning they exhibit can be of different kinds and are in no way constrained by physical causality. In Hesiod's *Theogony,* the Earth, Gaia, gives birth to and keeps her offspring within herself, which, from the point of view of strict physical causality, poses some problems*,* if only it can be conceived. The fact that a scientific narrative is not allowed to include in its narrative sequences anything other than sequences compatible with physical causality prevents a narrative such as that found in *Theogony* from being confused with a scientific description of origin.

Stories of the second kind, which we call scientific, are based on phenomena that are actually observed and controlled. The accuracy of the observations they invoke is referred to the credit that can be given to collectively organized critical examination, calculations or theories whose validity has itself been collectively assessed. Mythical stories and scientific stories have in common that they answer the same question while having not only very different structures but also very different compositional elements. The structure of scientific accounts of origin must, as a matter of principle, be at least compatible with an underlying causal chain. This rule amounts to a limitation to which mythical narratives do not bind themselves in any way.

Let us stress again that what we are trying to identify is not the truth value of the story, but only its *structure* and *composition*. The scientific narratives on origins have, in the approach we propose, not a truth that is superior to the others (since they answer the same question) but a different structure and composition: a structure that requires them to possess a certain logic (in accordance with laws that can be observed in nature as it is currently given to us) and a composition that ties them to observed facts (a tie-up that is clearly lacking in mythical narratives). In other words, we suspend the question of the legitimacy of the answers given to the question of origin to focus only on the form these answers may take. This methodological precaution alone can lead us to an appreciation of discourses on origins that is not, at the same time (and often surreptitiously), the promotion of one type of discourse to the detriment of another.

But shouldn't we face *ab initio* the question: couldn't there be other types of narratives on origins? Are there no other ways to answer the canonical question? Are there only two ways–one mythical, the other scientific–to say why there is something rather than nothing? Aren't there ways of talking about origins that are neither mythical nor scientific?

Can an exhaustive inventory be made of all the possible types of discourse on origins? Or again: how many ways of talking about origins do we have? If the question of origin is so constantly caught up in the innumerable controversies that we mentioned above, is it not precisely because there are many different ways of relating to origin, which in turn are reflected in the various types of narratives on origin that can be identified? Exactly how many are there? In trying to answer this question, we will show that the two forms of narrative we have just mentioned are only a part of it. This does not mean, however, that there are an infinite number of ways to talk about origins. We will document four of them and show that no more can be conceived. The question then arises as to why the types of narratives on origins are limited in this way. What does this limitation correspond to?

Starting point for questioning

Let us take up the questioning we have just begun by trying to go into it in greater depth, to specify the issues at stake and to generalize it to all the narratives on origins. As we have said, any discourse on origins can be analysed as an answer to the question: "Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there this instead of something else?" This is what defines a discourse on origins. Why is there something (whatever it is)? Why does the giraffe have four legs and not three, five or six? Why does it bear limbs with the same type of bone system as humans? Why hair? Why teeth? etc. The question can be renewed about any object, any being, any living thing and any structure. This renewal of the question about every being generates the question on origins. And since this question can only be answered by looking to the past, that is to say, to a time that can only be reactivated narratively, the question on origins itself has a close relationship with the possibilities offered by narrations. Any access to the origins seems to presuppose a narrative of the origin and must therefore be moulded into the possibilities offered by the narrative itself. Origin is said, in a privileged way, in narratives, and this is why any question of origin must also, and simultaneously, raise the question of what a narrative is, of what a narration does, both on the one who produces it and on the one who receives it.

At the same time, the question of origin itself, which culminates in the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?", appears to be the most elementary, but also the most profound, formulation of the fundamental concern that generated the discourses on origins. The question of origin, taken in its most general sense, does not favour any particular answer, any

specific type of narrative. It does not favour a mythical answer, nor does it favour a scientific answer, nor does it favour an answer of any other type if it turns out that we have to identify a type that is not any of those we have just listed. It is located near the source of the questions on origins. And, in doing so, it remains neutral of any commitment to a particular type of response. It is simply an expression of an expectation of a response that does not in any way prejudge the form that this response should take.

In other words, if the question *why is there something rather than nothing?* is implicitly set in motion in all discourses on origins, it carries by itself none of the tonalities by which it can be undertaken to engage in an answer to the question. Rather, it gives meaning to the narrative on origins by justifying the question it raises in advance. So, let us return to this question, which could pave the way for the identification of a new type of discourse on origins. For if the question, on its own, is located at the heart of the questioning of origins, it cannot itself fit into one of the categories we have just defined (mythical and scientific). The canonical question is situated upstream of the types of narratives that attempt to answer it. It thus defines the territory of a type of approach to origin that does not correspond to any of those that have been identified so far, even if, in a sense, it precedes and determines these narratives (since it formulates the question that these narratives answer). Perhaps it deserves, as such, the status of the most eminent metaphysical question that Heidegger accorded to it:

> Why is there being and not rather nothing? That is the question. And there is reason to believe that this is not an arbitrary question. Why is there being and not rather nothing? That is obviously the first of all the questions. The first, it is not, of course, in the order of the temporal sequence of questions. In the course of their historical development through time individuals, as well as peoples, ask many questions. They search, they stir, they examine many things, before coming up against the question: Why is there being and not rather nothing?[7]

Yet not all philosophers in Western culture–far from it–have given it this pre-eminent place. Others, such as Bergson, on the contrary, see in this allegedly primary and radical question a mere appearance of a question, a misleading question, a "pseudo-problem":

> I say that there are pseudo-problems, and that these are the anguishing problems of metaphysics. I'll make it two. One gave rise to the theories of

[7] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), *Introduction à la métaphysique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 13 [retranslated].

> being, the other to the theories of knowledge. The first is to ask why there is being, why something or someone exists. It does not matter the nature of what is: say that it is matter, or spirit, or both, or that matter and spirit are not sufficient and manifest a transcendental *Cause*: in any case, when one has considered existences, and causes, and the causes of those causes, one feels dragged into a race to the infinite. If we stop, it's to escape the vertigo. We still see, we think we see, that the difficulty remains, that the problem still exists and will never be solved. It never will be, indeed, but it should not be put down. It only arises if one imagines a nothingness that precedes being. One thinks to oneself, 'there might not be anything', and then one is surprised that there is something–or Someone. But analyse this sentence: 'there might not be anything'. You will see that you are dealing with words, not ideas, and that 'nothing' has no meaning here.[8]

Like any question, the canonical question is therefore itself under debate within Western culture. And the debate is about the importance that should be attached to it. For some, this importance is obvious, eminent and primary. For others, the eminence itself is false and misleading. Bergson's devaluation of the canonical question is, as we can see, rooted in the possible nonsense of "nothing" in the question *Why is there something rather than nothing?* The "nothing" cannot be when a being has to be to figure it out. This refers to the argument presented above as a possible challenge to the canonical question: in order to ask the question of origin, something must necessarily exist and not nothing, since the question cannot be asked without a human being able to ask it. But can't this recusal in turn be recused as we did above? Does this challenge not confuse the questioner with the question itself? For how is it illegitimate, let alone impossible, for a question to be asked about what preceded any possibility of question formation? Why would it be absurd for a question to be addressed to what preceded any possible questioning, or even any possible being?

When man wonders about what may have preceded him on Earth, about what the Earth was like before he was there himself (both as an individual and as a species), he is obviously not asking an absurd question. The question is, moreover, so far to be insignificant that it is now receiving precise answers, some of them scientifically argued, and that it has, as we have seen, long been the subject of treatments that tried to provide answers which, however mythical they may have been, nevertheless had a cultural and civilizational role that is difficult to contest.

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[8] Henri Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant* [Thinking and moving] (Paris: PUF, 2013 [1935]), chapter "Le possible et le réel [The possible and the real]".

While asking the question of origin is not in itself absurd, absurdity can always arise in the judgment on this question, in the sense that what is at stake can only be answered in the apparent nothingness of a narrative. A narrative, indeed, does not have the same consistency as an object. However, a narrative is not nothing. In order for it to be conceived as nothing, the unique ontological criterion chosen must be the ontology of the object of material or spiritual kind. A narrative is neither one nor the other.

From the analysis conducted so far, which has shown that there are at least two ways of answering the question of origin, it already appears that the question of origin is answered by a narrative. But a narrative can lead to a dead end if it is aimed at something it cannot answer. The canonical question seeks precisely to escape the impasses that threaten any narrative as soon as its legitimacy, understood as the possibility of answering it, is questioned. If the canonical question defines a position of the question on origins that does not correspond to any of the narrative forms identified so far, it is because it does not refer by itself to any narrativity while opening up to all conceivable narratives. The canonical question thus obliges us to go beyond the realm of narrativity as a possible treatment of the question of origin. The question of origin can indeed be answered in ways other than narrative, even if it is the narrative that is offered at first glance as an answer to the question of origin and seems to be the most straightforward when answering a question about the provenance of something. What characterizes the canonical question, therefore, is not only the fact that it is situated upstream of any narrative, but also the fact that it identifies a new position of the question of origins that culminates in the question itself. By deepening the meaning of Leibniz's question, we can thus apprehend a new type of discourse on origins by taking up step by step the argument that has just been presented.

The question of origin in western metaphysics

One of the peculiarities of Western metaphysics is that it does not propose a univocal ontological dogma, but rather a plurality of them; each thinker has excellent arguments to defend the ontological dogma to which he or she adheres. Precisely because fundamental dogmas are not defined in other ways than by a series of assertions made by individual thinkers in the cultural field of metaphysics, it is always possible to see in these assertions a singularity and to present the thinker who made them as representative of a particular current. One can therefore relate his statement to a particular interpretative tendency and produce "comparative" effects by bringing

together statements by thinkers from different cultures, as we have just done with Bergson and Heidegger.

The whole problem of such a comparison then comes from the fact that it is established on the basis of a few works presented as exemplary in the currents or cultures to be compared. It is thus implied, if not explicitly stated, that Western culture as a whole would be in unison with these examples (which have been taken from among others and endowed with the virtue of exemplarity) and would possess certain generic traits that we are therefore keen to identify. On the contrary, we see this culture constantly divided against itself (as illustrated by the positions of Bergson and Heidegger on the Leibniz's question). We see it constantly questioning and self-referring. It refutes itself through the interplay of interpretations that it engages with its own foundations. Of course, it can always be said that "according to such and such a thinker", Western culture has such and such a foundation. But we then evolve in the register of the interpretation of a particular author or a particular school. According to one philosopher (Heidegger, for example) the question "why is there something rather than nothing? "is fundamental. But according to another (Bergson, for example), the same question is only nonsense.

Here, using the example of the canonical question, we seize the Western culture in its work of self-rejection of its own foundations (which does not, however, prevent narratives that attempt to answer the question of origin from being proposed). What characterizes our culture is not one particular foundation or another. It is the fact that it has no assignable basis other than the interpretations proposed by one author or another.

Kant had a premonition of these complexities when he made the question of the origin of the world the first of the four antinomies of pure reason.[9] This question (and not, as we will show at his place, the all too famous "awakening from dogmatic sleep") was the seminal element of the whole *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant shows that, on the question of the origin of the world, the thesis that the world has an origin in time and a limit in space can be supported with just as many reasons as the opposite thesis that the world has neither an origin in time nor a limit in space. Kant's perplexity stems from the equivalent rationality of the opposing theses which was also illustrated, as we have seen, in the antagonistic positions of Heidegger and Bergson.

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[9] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1781-1787]), "Antinomy of Pure Reason, First Conflict of Transcendental Ideas" (A, 426/B 454).

The expression "Western culture" is the name given to positions that are as multiple as they are in antinomy with each other. We can only refer to "Western culture" by referring to the "point of view" of this or that thinker, an operation necessarily tinged with a certain arbitrariness as long as we do not specify why we have elected the point of view of this particular thinker as a decisive point of view.

But it is obvious that having taken as its theme "origins", a question such as "Why is there something rather than nothing?", given its open structure and the fact that it is entirely directed towards the origin of things, could not but present itself as the hidden questioning source from which the multitude of answers emerge, and not simply as the point of view of a particular author. It cannot be concluded, therefore, from the mere fact that there are rigorously defended, though rigorously opposed, positions in Western culture that everything would only be relevant from a personal point of view.

The question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" can, as we have seen, be placed in front of any discourse on origins and present itself as the question it answers. And this property of the canonical question owes nothing to the one who first formulated it. As a hidden source of the discourses on origins, it constitutes in itself a form of discourse on origins. Asking the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" is adopting a certain attitude towards origin. The question thus appears to be part of a *type of discourse on origins* that turns out to correspond to neither of the two types we have identified so far. Of the question *Why is there something rather than nothing?* we can neither say that it opens a scientific narrative nor that it opens a mythical narrative. It's a different kind of question, opening to a different kind of discourse.

By delving deeper into the nature of the canonical question, we thus see that it leads us to discover a new type of discourse on origins which is no longer of a narrative nature (since it can be expressed in a question). Moreover, this type of discourse on origins welcomes both the fundamental question itself (as in Heidegger's work) and the reasoning that denies its validity (as in Bergson's work). It is indeed a third type of discourse on origins, irreducible to the two previous ones. We will call it the *rational* type because it is always based exclusively on reasoning (unlike the scientific discourse on origins, for example, which mixes facts and reasoning).

This category of discourse therefore includes discourses that paradoxically reject the theme of origin. For to dismiss questions about origin by invoking

the impossibility of finding a solution to them is still to hold a discourse on origin since the reason invoked (the impossibility of finding an answer to the question) is mobilized with the aim of defusing a question that happens to be precisely the question of origin.

The reasoned rejection of the question of origin finds its source, as we shall see, in the work of Aristotle. But many people, in his footsteps or seeking to supplant him on his own ground, made it a rule that allowed the question of origin to be set aside by declaring it either dead-end, uninteresting, or, with an even more subtle argument, by detecting in it an alleged obstacle to prevent the asking of other questions that were supposed to be broader, more interesting, more profound.

The "middle" of things

Gilles Deleuze's thought, for example, stands explicitly at the antipodes of an interrogation on origins and intends to draw all the consequences of an assumed impossibility to answer the question of origin. Consistent with this principle, he tries to take everything, so to speak, "by its midle".[10] But within the flow of thoughts, whose living multiplicity he tries to restore, how does he account for the persistent interest in origins? How does he see this recurring curiosity as the ghost of a metaphysics that he himself regards as "outdated"?

Pursuing this line of thought soon leads to an even more fundamental question. For if, as we have seen, we cannot attribute to Western culture a representative thesis, can we not assume, however, that the fact of asking the question of origin–whether to agree with it or to refute it–is, in itself, a distinctive characteristic of that same culture or, at least, of a certain moment, of a certain epoch, of that culture? François Jullien believes, for example, that Chinese culture, contrary to Western culture, does not need to question its origins.

He too, like Deleuze, asserts that it is possible to take things by their middle, without questioning their origin but rather by taking an interest in the processes of transformation of things, and that this is precisely what Chinese culture does, or at least what some of its most remarkable thinkers do:

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[10] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), *Capitalisme et schizophrénie* : tome 2, *Mille plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980).

> The [question] is explicitly asked by Wang Fuzhi himself, according to his own problematic: how can one think of the origin from such an idea of alternation? Or even more: does the question of 'origin' still even make sense?[11]

From this metaphysical position, certain questions such as those, exemplarily, of the origin, are thus supposed to sink into pure nonsense, thus freeing a whole space for renewed questioning, as unexpected as it is richly varied, opening up to problems that Western philosophy, until then, had not even considered but that Chinese philosophy would have been able to see.

Should we conclude, as Jullien does, that the question of origin is, in itself, one of the most characteristic markers of Western culture that would be absent in at least some other cultural spaces? In Eastern philosophies, one would find:

> It is not 'genesis' or 'filiation', but development or deployment, as the development of duality from the unity that this duality totally constitutes. In the sense that one could say that duality 'comes out' of unity (at the same time as unity is only the sum of this duality), For yin and yang, which are the totality of the real, have no possible beginning, and the supreme limit does not therefore stand alone above yin and yang.[12]

And we should therefore ask ourselves not only whether questions of origin are really asked in all cultures, but also who is the "one" who is asking them. Because that indefinite personal pronoun could well be misleading. It suggests that the identity of the questioner is not problematic, that it can be detached from the question itself. But is that so? The "one" that asks the question is, in fact, anything but indefinite. When I ask the question of origin, regardless of the entity to which I apply it, I, as an individual living in Europe at the beginning of the 21st century, am not at all indefinite. On the contrary, I am even strongly defined: by my culture, already. And, within my culture itself, by the place I occupy in it: my social situation, that of my ancestors, my age, my gender, etc., and by my history, and, more broadly, by the history of those who have determined me, who have been able to influence me in one way or another.

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[11] François Jullien, *Procès ou création : Une introduction à la pensée des lettrés chinois–Essai de problématique interculturelle* [Process or Creation: An Introduction to the Thought of Chinese erudites–Essay on Intercultural Issues] (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

[12] François Jullien, *Procès ou Création.*

So it's not quite like if "one" was asking the question. Even if I try to have the point of view of the "one", a point of view that tends not to be dependent on the determinations in which it is taken, I cannot totally free myself from these determinations. For even if I were to succeed in detaching myself from what determines my social situation, there would still be the influence of my cultural situation: the language I speak, the influences of thought I have inherited, etc.

All of this means that I would certainly pose the problem in a different way if I were in another culture. If, for example, instead of being born in Europe, I had been born and raised in the Amazon, among the Achuar, it is likely that I would not pose the problem of origin in the way I am posing it now. It is likely that I would not have distinguished between different ways of asking the question of origin. Perhaps the emphasis of the question even belongs to this cultural heritage. Indeed, it cannot be excluded that the tendency to ask the question of origin may itself have a cultural origin. It is only the cumulative knowledge of anthropologists that leads to the conclusion that this questioning is shared by every human being and that it possesses a kind of intrinsic anthropological legitimacy. It is on the basis of empirical evidence that we have concluded that the question of origin is universal.

But is it so certain that this is only an empirical fact? Should we not, on the contrary, remain attentive to the universality that the traces of this questioning leave behind? Shouldn't this universality be seen as the mark of a particular essence of this particular question? From one culture to another, there may be variations in the intensity of questioning about origins or a different orientation of the generally preferred answers, but not a complete absence of questioning about origins. The empirical observation thus tends to hide a deeper observation. For how could a culture that is always the product of innumerable questions and attempts at answers omit the question of where things come from? How could such a question "not be born" in a culture? And since it only needs to be born in one brain to awaken it in all the others, how could it not spread to populations sharing a given culture? The fact that a culture emphasizes processes, for example, rather than starting points, as it is the case, according to Jullien, in Chinese culture (at least among some of its representatives), would lead to a difference in the extent to which the question of origin is addressed there. That, in itself, is an interesting observation. But pretending that this is equivalent to a complete absence of the question of origin in Chinese culture would be exaggerating an observation initially correct to make it something spectacular. In other words, the judgment that some cultures could do

without discourse on origins result from an excessive amplification of what is only a difference in emphasis.

Staying out of Western culture certainly brings out differences in the place that a given issue can take in one culture compared to another. But it would be riskier to assert that there are also differences in fundamental questions. This was the basis of the attack addressed to François Jullien by one of his eminent sinologist colleagues, Jean-François Billeter. The second criticized the first for making Chinese culture appear more exotic than it actually is.[13] It can undoubtedly be convincingly shown that in Chinese culture there is less emphasis on the question of origins than elsewhere. But if one means that the question of origins is absent from Chinese culture, that it is absolutely ignored, one ventures to assert something without bringing the slightest proof of it, worse, one exposes oneself to an obvious refutation since Chinese culture offers accounts of origins in the sense that we have defined them above.

Conversely, other thinkers had a sense of the universality of the question of origin very early on, even before the knowledge of anthropology provided it with the consistency it may have today. Thus, for example, at the beginning of the text he devotes to cosmogonic hypotheses, *Leçons sur les hypothèses cosmogoniques (Lessons on Cosmogonic Hypotheses),* which takes up the elements of the last course he taught at the Collège de France in 1911, Henri Poincaré expresses his conviction of the existence of an anthropological invariant of this type:

> The problem of the origin of the World has always preoccupied all thinking men; it is impossible to contemplate the spectacle of the starry universe without wondering how it was formed; perhaps we should wait to seek a solution until we have patiently gathered the elements and thereby acquired some serious hope of finding it; but if we were so reasonable, if we were curious without impatience, it is probable that we would never have created Science and would always have been content to live our little lives. So our spirit urgently demanded this solution, long before it was ripe, and when it possessed only vague glimmers, allowing it to guess it rather than to reach it. And that is why cosmogonic hypotheses are so numerous and varied that every day there are new ones, just as uncertain but just as plausible as the older theories, in the midst of which they take their place without managing

[13] Jean-François Billeter, *Contre François Jullien* [Against François Jullien] (Paris: Allia, 2006).