

On Subjects, Objects, Transitional Fields, and Icons: The Semiotics of a New Paradigm in Human Studies

Marcello La Matina

Abstract: To save what is human (and humane) about the human sciences, the subject/object dyad must be abandoned in favour of a semiotic and an anthropological point of view. This viewpoint draws on the interaction of several signifiers in dialogue with a salient space similar in nature to the transitional field of psychoanalysis and—via an interpretation of that space—to the iconic function of human culture as seen by patristic wisdom. To attain this viewpoint entails abandoning the idea that the human sciences are supposed to *explain* the human being. Their task is to clarify the plural and ecological character of humans.¹

Keywords: Anthropic zones; Byzantine icons; human sciences; ontology; person; semiotics; subject/object dyad; transitional objects

In all epistemologies, old and new, the subject/object dyad plays a crucial role. It is commonly believed that every genuine act of knowledge is oriented towards an object and, at the same time, explained as the doing of a subject. The same occurs with all human actions, since

Marcello La Matina is Professor of Semiotics and Philosophy of Language at the Department of Human Studies, University of Macerata, Italy. The author expresses his gratitude to the *CPOSAT* referees, whose comments contributed to bringing this article, which has known a long gestation, to the current form. He also acknowledges that he alone must be held responsible for any oversights and errors still to be found in the text.

knowing is the very mode of existence for living human beings. Yet, despite its pervasiveness, the subject/object binary is not that simple to read from an epistemological perspective. A theoretical storm about this topic has been gathering strength for decades, one that hinges on the current and future meaning of the humanities. Recently, the dispute seems to have reached the climax as a final showdown between the human and the natural sciences and, on a deeper level, between the cosmological vision of the human phenomenon and an anthropological vision of the *Umwelt*, or environment.² In a sense, the way is open from a human to a nonhuman ontology, passing through an object-oriented ontology.³

It is my conviction that semiotics, on the one hand, and patristic wisdom, on the other, can make an important contribution to this debate. Here, semiotics denotes the study of sense and signification, while

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- 1 Although the term “human sciences” is widely used and accepted, a unified, reasoned definition that defines the field in a way that is acceptable to all is missing. Sometimes, human sciences are defined in opposition to the natural sciences; at other times, they are associated with the latter and differentiated only in relation to the role of the analysing subject. In this article, I seek to define the field in the sense of the Latin locution *studia humana*, which includes the relationship between human studies and concrete human beings.
 - 2 The attempt to reconcile the anthropic and the cosmic perspectives could benefit from reference to the worldview of the early Christians, perhaps by comparing their sense of the cosmos with the cosmology emerging from quantum physics. Excellent work in this regard has been done by Doru Costache, *Humankind and the Cosmos: Early Christian Representations* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021).
 - 3 According to Greimas’ germinal work *Du sens* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), the task of semiotics lies in putting sense in a condition to signify. In other words, *sense* is the given and as such it is not definable, whilst *signification* is the result of a transposition. In A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Semiotics: A Dictionary (sub voce “Sense”)* it is said that sense can be considered both that which enables the operations of paraphrasing or transcoding, and that which grounds human activity as intentionality. Note that it is precisely the reference to human intentionality that differentiates semiotics from the “hard” human sciences, or from philosophies that theorise an object-oriented ontology. On the latter, see T. Morton and D. Boyer, *Hyposubjects: On Becoming Human* (no place: Open Humanities Press, 2021); T. Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). On the so called “nonhuman turn,” see also R. Grusin (ed.), *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015) and E. Kohn, “Anthropology of Ontologies,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (2015): 311–327.

patristics is the traditional source for considering the limits and the thresholds of meaning. In any form the humanities might take—at least in principle—the object of knowledge somehow overlaps with the subject of knowledge, namely, the human being. The latter is understood at once as actant subject and actant object. But what would become of meaning if the actant subject and the actant object were no longer overlapping entities? And what would happen if the overlapping subject and object of the humanities were to occur *without* the icon of one appearing in the other? Could we still refer to the humanities as humane?

What is at stake for human sciences is the question of whether humanism is still possible. Two or three possible outcomes can be discerned: first, a *semiotic* outcome, by virtue of which the subject/object binary remains the precondition for analysing *sense and signification*, and, second, a *philosophical* outcome, which gives up the subject/object dyad in a couple of ways. In the latter case, two possibilities are foreseeable: the *internalist* approach, where the object is considered a logical and linguistic posit able to combine stimulating aspects similar in behaviour; and the *impersonalist* approach, according to which the subject is not the precondition but the product of social methods of individuation.

Come what may, the subject/object dyad is destined to condition the philosophical debate for a long time. In the following pages, the two terms will be treated insofar as they form the premise of this discussion. More interesting to me is the space where it may be possible to reach some clarity about these terms. Is it a logical space? Or is it an anthropological space? And is that space empty or not? Without presuming to explore the issue exhaustively, I will attempt to outline this “between” or betwixt space. I will show that this space is not empty, but inhabited by strange entities, that is, on the one side, the transitional objects of psychoanalysis and, on the other, the sacred icons of the Christian tradition. My intention is to propose that there is a kind of kinship between these two types of entities. An enquiry of this kind will help us grasp the place that the humanities could occupy in the near future, which many people already depict as post-humanist. Not

being a hard scientist, I am nevertheless aware of the problems the subject/object binary cause beyond the humanities. Perhaps the ensuing discussion will provide answers, albeit indirectly, to issues at stake for broader enquiry, including for the faith and science interactions.

The Disappearance and the Rescue of the Subject

Knowledge requires postulating at least an object. If the theorists of object-oriented ontology were right, it could be assumed that it is not always necessary that a given subject be present. But even without going to such extremes, the presence—or the mere supposition—of an object is the necessary condition for knowledge: knowing always involves knowing *something*. That is one reason why the ancient Greek philosophers did not conceive of subjectivity the way postmodern culture does. For the Greek philosophers, the subject, ὑποκείμενος, was everything that could be spoken of or, better yet, the subject of the proposition. Nevertheless, they also called ὑποκείμενος everything that one could observe behind things; everything one would call part of the world or part of the *kosmos*; in a word, every object.⁴ Whether subject or object, things in the ancient world were considered not inert but rather powerfully pulsating bodies animated by an author, artist, or demiurge.⁵ Things and artefacts were capable of speech: they had a voice and behaved like emanations of their creator.⁶ Echoes of this perception are clearly audible in scriptural psalms (see especially, Psalm 44). There is something poetic and magical about this intersection of animate and inanimate beings, a familiarity that the modern

4 The relationship between the modern concept of subject and the Greek ὑποκείμενος is critical. A correct approach to this topic features in Martin Heidegger's *Logik als die Frage nach dem Wesen der Sprache*, a work recently discovered and published as volume 38A of his *Gesamtausgabe* (2020).

5 See Marcello La Matina, *L'accadere del suono: Musica, significante e forme di vita* (Milano: Mimesis, 2017). See also Marcello La Matina, "As for God so for Sound," in *Polis, Ontology, Ecclesial Event: Engaging with Christos Yannaras' Thought*, ed. Sotiris Mitralaxis (Cambridge: Clarke, 2018), 133–150.

6 Known as "Pygmalion's power." See Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon, 1959).

world has dismissed. Indeed, beginning with Descartes,⁷ the subject, as we moderns are used to thinking of it, takes revenge on things, on what, henceforth, would constitute pure extension (*res extensa*), matter or physical environment. Things, beings, and artefacts are now voiceless. Descartes' subject (*res cogitans*) becomes the *ego cogito*—a thinking subject, pure cognitive function, mind, or other impalpable reality.

The focus on the cogitating *ego* gave rise to a limitless, invisible dimension opposed to the objective external world, that is, the mind, consciousness, the computational faculty that enables the human person to build a world and to accumulate experiences, treasures of the intellect that inhabit the palace of memory. Taking its cue from this modern mindset, the twentieth century has deeply altered the meaning and forms of knowledge. New objects of study were established, more sophisticated methods of examination devised. Although these changes have impacted all branches of learning, their effect on the human and the social sciences proved to be decisive. So much so that, for about seventy years, a new scientific paradigm—one that considers phenomena as structures in a system and treats them as though they can be known as objective facts—has supplemented to the point of supplanting the traditional humanities.

As in the past, the first signs of change were seen in disciplines concerned with language and communication. To give just one example, in the 1940s Louis T. Hjelmslev envisioned a new gnoseological paradigm. In his words, “A linguistic theory which searches for the specific structure of language through an exclusively formal system of premises must seek *constancy*, which is not anchored in some ‘reality’ outside language.”⁸ Constancy, Hjelmslev argued, would have ensured the epistemological autonomy of linguistics, making it a model for other sciences. He predicted that traditional philologists and linguists would resist this new approach to language modelled on *iuxta sua principia*:

7 See René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (Leiden: Maire, 1637), and especially his *Philosophicae Meditationes*.

8 Louis T. Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, trans. Francis J. Whitfield (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1961); orig. ed. *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlæggelse* (Copenhagen: Bianco Lunos Bogtrykkeri, 1943).

The search for such an aggregating and integrating constancy is sure to be opposed by a certain humanistic tradition which, in various dress, has until now predominated in linguistic science. In its typical form this humanistic tradition denies *a priori* the existence of the constancy and the legitimacy of seeking it. *According to this view, human, opposed to natural, phenomena are non-recurrent and for that very reason cannot, like natural phenomena, be subjected to an exact and generalising treatment.*⁹

The rift between the categories of subject and object has thus arrived. For centuries, humanities scholars had employed historical-critical methods of a largely circumstantial nature.¹⁰ In this traditional view, knowing was the standard of every human deed. And it was the human being who, where knowledge was concerned, proved to be the measure—the μέτρον—of all knowledge, and of every other deliberate undertaking. Humanistic knowledge was therefore a form of human praxis (πρᾶξις). With the advent of the new human sciences,¹¹ the subject of conventional *studia humana* had to surrender its role as knowing agent to the objective protocols of a system. In other words, the personal *iudicium* of the philologist, or any other humanities academic, was replaced by the impersonal analysis of the new structuralist disciplines. In my opinion, constancy spelled the breaking point. Built on methodological criteria, constancy introduced the idea of repeatability into the study of human phenomena. By admitting that constancy applies not only to natural phenomena, but to human matters as well, human phenomena were implicitly stripped of uniqueness and unrepeatability.

On the subject of human judgement—and the humanistic *iudicium*—Hannah Arendt took a stand against those who argued that people had become incapable of establishing original criteria to make judg-

9 Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena*, 8 (italics mine).

10 See the works of Carl Ginzburg, *Spie: Radici del paradigma indiziario*, and *Miti, emblemi, spie: Morfologia e storia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986).

11 In the 1960s, Roland Barthes identified a quadrivium of experimental sciences in the paradigms of linguistics, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

ments, and that the best one could do was apply rules of behaviour.¹² It is worth quoting the following passage, written around the same time as Hjelmslev's *Prolegomena* and Schrödinger's *Shearman Lectures*, a few years before 1950:

[I]f human thinking were of such a nature that it could judge only if it had cut-and-dried standards in hand, then indeed it would be correct to say, as seems to be generally assumed, that in the crisis of the modern world it is not so much the world as it is the human being itself that has become unhinged. This assumption prevails throughout the mills of academia nowadays, and is most clearly evident in the fact that *historical disciplines dealing with the history of the world and of what happens in it were dissolved first into the social sciences and then into psychology*. This is an unmistakable indication that the study of a historically formed world in its assumed chronological layers has been abandoned in favor of the study, first, of societal and, second, of individual modes of behavior. *Modes of behavior can never be the object of systematic research*, or they can be only if one excludes the human being as an active agent, the author of demonstrable events in the world, and demotes it to a creature who merely behaves differently in different situations, on whom one can conduct experiments, and who, one may even hope, can ultimately be brought under control.¹³

In no time, this new paradigm sparked reactions both for and against. And those against did not always come from the camps you would expect. For instance, people who held the structuralist revolution hostage were not just rearguard philologists, as Hjelmselv had predicted

12 On Hannah Arendt's distinction of agency and behaviour and on the philosophical consequences of the prevalence of behaviour in philosophy (with reference to Greek fathers too), see M. La Matina, "Acting and Behaving: The Philosopher in Ancient Greece and Late Modernity," *JolMA: The Journal for the Philosophy of Language, Mind and the Arts* 3:1 (2022): 7–28.

13 Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1993), 104–105 (italics mine). I have compared this quotation with its version in a manuscript source held at the Library of Congress, Digital Collections, marked *Hannah Arendt Papers—Box 79—Speeches and Writings File*, 1923–1975; Essays and lectures; "Die Vorurteile," undated, sheets 022868 (–5) and 022869 (–6).

(in Italy this group was actually enthusiastic about the methods of literary semiology),¹⁴ but rather a large constituency of the philosophical world then engaged in debating postulates introduced by quantum physics and the theory of general relativity. Even some physicists advanced caveats of a philological and philosophical nature that could be traced back to the Greek conception of scientific thought. To take just one example, in several essays, Erwin Schrödinger—one of the fathers of quantum theory—pointed out the Greek foundations of the scientific concept of the world, in particular the postulate that the world is intelligible, and the postulate that the ability to build a scientific image of the world demands to exclude the knowing subject from the representation of the known object.¹⁵

A large number of philosophers also came out vehemently against the method of this new physics. In her essay *Sur la science*, Simone Weil even denounced the disappearance of modern science (*nous avons perdu la science sans nous en apercevoir*). A practice that bore the same name yet presented radically different characteristics was, she argued, surreptitiously introduced in its place (*Ce que nous possédons sous ce nom est autre chose, radicalement autre chose, et nous ne savons pas quoi. Personne peut-être ne sait quoi*).¹⁶ What Weil sensed in the changing paradigm was the weakening of a relationship between the action of the subject and the behaviour of the studied object. She claimed that, far from expanding its cognitive practices, in the twentieth century classical science had lost something essential for doing science: “the analogy between the laws of nature and the conditions of

14 See Marcello La Matina, *Il testo antico: Per una semiotica come filologia integrata* (Palermo: L'Epos, 1994).

15 Cf. Erwin Schrödinger, “Quelques remarques au sujet des bases de la connaissance scientifique,” *Scientia* 57 (1935): 181; idem, “Nature and the Greeks,” held as The Shearman Lectures, University College, London, May 1948; now in id., *Nature and the Greeks* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1948).

16 Simone Weil, *Sur la science* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946); online edition. Translation mine.

work,¹⁷ that is, the principle itself; and it is the hypothesis of *Quantum* that beheaded it” (*l’analogie entre les lois de la nature et les conditions du travail, c’est-à-dire le principe même; c’est l’hypothèse des quanta qui l’a ainsi décapitée*).¹⁸ For a philosopher as steeped in ancient Greek studies as Simone Weil, it must have been intolerable to think of κόσμος being dissociated from all the processes of ποίησις or removed from the political dimension of πρᾶξις. In truth, such a limitation was as intolerable to Weil and to Arendt as the fact that, in a world conceived of as a mechanism with no attachment to personhood, human actions could no longer aspire to be a λειτουργία,¹⁹ a form of agency performed for the community.

The scientific and philosophical vision operative in human studies was tacitly based on an interpretation of the classical definition *homo est animal rationale*. The interpretation in question gave rise to both singularist prejudices and speciesist prejudices. Singularist prejudices favour only statements concerning the individual; to use an anal-

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- 17 As Ludwig Wittgenstein has repeatedly observed—especially in his *Philosophical Investigations*—the logical conception of language dispenses with history and consigns the definition of language to the realm of forms. Following the Austrian philosopher, I too take a stand against the Platonism of the logicians. Furthermore, I note that the topic of the relationship between language and historicity becomes particularly interesting when studying musical language. See, for example, M. La Matina, “I linguaggi e il tempo: Considerazioni filosofiche sulla storicità della Musica,” *Spectrum: Journal of Music Analysis and Pedagogy* 17 (2007): 4–18.
- 18 Simone Weil, *Sur la science*. Translation mine. Similar statements against quantum physics can be found in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 3: “the first boomerang effects of science’s great triumphs have become obvious in the crisis of the natural sciences themselves. The trouble concerns the fact that the ‘truths’ of the modern scientific worldview, though they can be demonstrated in mathematical formulas and proved experimentally, will no longer lend themselves to normal expression in speech and thought.
- 19 I use the word λειτουργία in a very broad sense, one that is not limited to the liturgies of historical religions, although it originates from them, particularly Christian liturgies. By this word I refer to all the devices by means of which a community (or a qualified member of it) controls the conditions of truth of the utterances or actions on which its form of life depends. I have written about this—with reference to the difference between the Christian West and East—in *L’accadere del suono*, 49–63. More recently, I have returned to similar themes in the volume *Archäologie des Signifikanten: Musik und Philosophie im Gespräch* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2020).

ogy, it is as though, having described one flower, human and social sciences could ignore the bunch.²⁰ In turn, speciesist prejudices consider relevant to human sciences only our species, not the diverse community of people. In a compelling passage in her *Denktagebücher*, Arendt condemned both forms of prejudice. In her words:

The error of philosophers has always been that they thought that *Human being* relates to *people* as *Being* relates to existing *beings*; namely, the way Being, as the grounding principle, makes each existing being into a certain being; by the same principle, *human being* (namely, “Human” as an ideal type) makes existing *human beings* into certain *people*.²¹

According to Arendt, the speciesist vs singularist viewpoints would arrest the development of knowledge, impeding us from grasping its authentically plural character, specifically, its political, anthropological, and ecological character:

Because *Human being* has been used as *the Being*, the concept of *Human being* remained stuck in the representation of an animal species; ... This “ideality” derives solely from the fact that we do not yet have a concept of the human being that does not refer to animal life.²²

If Arendt is right, the recent form of human sciences is founded on a concept of the human being that automatically assumes the speciesist concept of living. Human beings are reduced to nature and behaviour, and what they look like or the sound of their voice is no indication that they might be historically significant and redeemed. But we shall return to this human being “with no image or face” (ἀνεικόνιστον καὶ ἀπρόσωπον, as the Greek fathers would have it) towards the end of this

20 See Byeong-uk Yi, “The Logic and Meaning of Plurals Part I,” *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 34 (2005): 459–506.

21 Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch 1950–1973*, vol. 1, ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (München: Piper, 2020), 128. Translation mine.

22 Arendt, *Denktagebuch 1950–1973*, 1:128. Translation mine.

study. For now, let's just point out that, almost a century ago, these premises generated a debate over the function of human sciences: even if we continue to call our studies humanities, the present epistemic situation is far different from the classical *studia humanitatis*. As often happens with such sweeping subjects, the debate developed along parallel lines—in the sciences and at the level of beliefs and opinions about our social narrative, both in our ordinary lives and in the virtual realm of social media—and, with increasing urgency, it has gripped the religious sphere.²³

Common Sense and Philosophy on the Subject/Object Divide

Cultural movements of the second half of the twentieth century bear traces of both the old and the new paradigm. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, too, human sciences continued to link the two notions inextricably. Moreover, in many cases the original subject/object binary has been overlain with a parallel dyad, one ethically endowed: the person/thing dyad. Thus, in many discussions a kind of scientific shorthand has emerged that equates the subject with the person and the object with the thing. To say that we need to look after people more than things, and that subjects count more than objects,

23 This debate is ongoing. An intriguing collection of essays is *Religious Education in a Mediatized World*, ed. Ilona Nord and Hanna Zipernovszky (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2017).

is commonplace.²⁴ Saying so conceals at least two truths. On the one hand, there is a kind of naïve personalism that is always unaware of its origins and aims.²⁵ On the other, there is an equally unaware curiosity about things, which reveals an unconscious idolatry of the object.²⁶ This morbid fascination with the object is often confused with virtuous λατρεία, worship—about which we shall say more at the end of this paper. The contemporary world overflows with objects, gadgets, and goods, so much so that, in order to be considered important, people

24 The classical reference is to the categorical imperative formulated by Kant: “So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in another, always as an end and never as only a means.” See Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785; *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington, 3rd ed. (London: Hackett, 1993), 36. On the question of being a person, see Simone Weil, *La personne et le sacré* (Paris: Rivages, 2017). The standard logical viewpoint seems to consider irrelevant the ontology of the person/thing divide; in both cases, logicians instead talk about individuals. For more on this topic, see Peter F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen & Co., 1959). In general terms, an object is anything that can be possessed or dismissed by subjects provided with intentionality. On the difference between having and being, the following are two classical works: Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) and Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1937; Germ. ed. 1923). The subject/object dyad can also be seen as a relation among bodies in Foucault’s sense. See Roberto Esposito, *Le persone e le cose* (Torino: Einaudi, 2014). For a consistent attempt to draw a line between objects as things and subjects as persons, see Robert Spaemann, *Personen, Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen “etwas” und “jemand”* (Stuttgart: Klett-Costa, 1996). In the end, the notion of subject/person is a timeless subject in classical and contemporary Greek philosophy, and in Christian theological debates. For example, see Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007).

25 In addition to naïve personalism, there also exists philosophical personalism. It was subjected to profound analyses by French existentialists. On the notion and the movement of personalism, see Emmanuel Mounier, *Écrits sur le personnalisme*, Points Essais (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

26 The idea of a “society of objects” has become widespread of late. A semiotic account of the objective/objectal topic is provided in the monographic issue of *Protée* titled *La société des objets: Problèmes d’interobjectivité* (ed. G. Marrone et E. Landowski) 29:1 (2001). Objects as consumer goods signal the ethos of contemporary society; see Emanuele Coccia, *Le bien dans les choses* (Paris: Rivages, 2013). See also Byung-Chul Han, *Die Austreibung des Anderen* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2016). The transformation of subjects into objects and of persons into things is one of the most debated topics in sociology and philosophy today. See *Tiqqun: Premiers matériaux pour une théorie de la Jeune-fille* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 1999).

themselves frequently take on the appearance of objects.²⁷ Moreover, if people fall ill and die, things seem to remain radically indifferent to death and illness. The world is well-grounded, so goes one argument, because things provide it with a lasting life as well as objective consistency.²⁸ Hence the admonition “love people more than things,” for in popular opinion people are affected by illness and therefore need more care; consequently, a world of individuals is considered not well-grounded.

Anyway, if people are subjects and things objects—and this distinction matters—then the object is what is important, what remains, what is publicly observable.²⁹ The subject, in turn, is consigned to the private sphere, to the transience of experience, or to that which appears to have no scientific relevance.³⁰ Contemporary society, governed by science, demands “objectified” thinking, an image of the world based on durable objects; such an object-oriented ontology seems to leave individual experience and subjectivity on the margins. Objects are du-

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- 27 The world of electronic and digital media is often described as a world of illusions. This claim is not without foundation, especially taking into account the prophetic volume by Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964).
- 28 Hidden behind the notion of object is the Greek heritage, for in the ancient Greek world the artist’s and the artisan’s process of production was considered analogous to the creative process of composing poems (ποιεῖν). Interesting remarks on this subject are made by Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
- 29 The notion of object (lat. *objectum*) is commonly referred to by the Greek word ἀντικείμενος (“what is opposite to something,” “what is before us,” and by extension “what-is-against”). Cf. the German *Gegenstand*.
- 30 According to popular opinion—one shared by most philosophers—the conventional idea of subject and subjectivity should largely depend on the notion of *homo interior*, formulated by Saint Augustine in his dialogue *De magistro*. The Augustinian concept is also associated with Saint Paul’s notion of ὁ ἕσω ἄνθρωπος (2 Corinthians 4:16). For an interesting article on this topic, see Rastislav Nemeč, “Some Views on ‘Homo Interior’ in Selected Writings of Augustine of Hippo,” *Filozofia* 72:3 (2017): 181–191. The article explores the origins of Plato’s ideas about the human nature up to the Alexandrian authors Philo and Origen, as well as the Cappadocian Fathers.

rable things; their birth and death are linked to their use.³¹ Things are thought of as tools and not as sensitive bodies. Their duration—their lifespan, so to speak—is also measured differently. People have a date of birth and a date of death. Ordinary things do not: they “live” for as long as they are used; there is no record of them at the archives. Before cybernetics gave us smartphones and personal computers, objects did not rely much on people—or perhaps we should say that people did not rely much on objects.³² Many believe that these new objects, which have already become an indispensable appendage of the modern subject, will influence the way people of the future, the human beings of the so called *infosphere*,³³ will be thought of and, perhaps, built.

Thus, as a consequence of the recent aforementioned paradigm shifts, the subject and the object have become in modern times the termini of human knowledge. Ever since, knowing has meant giving objectivity to the dimension of things, accounting for their stability as things. For instance, the debate between, on the one hand, Wilfrid Sellars and John McDowell apropos the so-called “myth of the given,” and, on the other, the discussions pitting Donald Davidson against Willard Quine in regards to “inscrutability of reference” and the “third Dogma of Positivism,” take place at this particular juncture.³⁴ If we circle back to the subject of knowledge (the *ego*, the knowing subject), we must ad-

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- 31 The notion of use (χρήσις) was crucial to Greek philosophy, having both a political and a moral significance. The concept refers to the usage of the world as well as to the relationship between bodies or between people and texts. Echoes of the concept can be detected up to modern metaphysics. See, for instance, Martin Heidegger’s discussion of *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit* in paragraphs § 41 and 42 of his germinal work *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1927).
- 32 In a society ruled by systems, users are the *servo-mechanism* of their own media, because these media are extensions of their body or faculties. According to McLuhan, the very appearance of this new medium could cause a sort of “numbness” similar to that of Narcissus in Ovid’s myth. Such notions were introduced by McLuhan, cited above. For a discussion about the “poverty of gaze” generated by this medial numbness, see Byung-Chul Han, *Im Schwarm: Ansichten des Digitalen*, (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2013).
- 33 The notion of *infosphere* was introduced by Kenneth Boulding and developed by the Italian scholar Luciano Floridi in his *The Logic of Information: A Theory of Philosophy as Conceptual Design* (Oxford University Press, 2019).
- 34 John McDowell’s *Mind and World* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1994) is required reading on this topic.

mit that, despite the repeated and alarmed proclamations of religions and philosophies, knowledge is often produced in the same way, reduced to being a thing among other things.

In this sense, contemporary social and human sciences are nothing more than the unfolding of a drama that, from the end of the Middle Ages on, has progressively transformed the knowing subject into a known thing, to consecrate it.³⁵ According to Giorgio Colli, we can observe an inversion of epistemologies in recent decades: while ancient Greek epistemology dealt with the problems of knowledge in terms of objects, many contemporary epistemologies simultaneously destroy the myth of objectivity and the myth of subjectivity.³⁶ However, as we shall henceforward argue, there are still many practices and forms of knowledge in which a more original vision of things and their connections to people appear to be preserved. One of these forms of knowledge—as we will demonstrate later on—is psychoanalysis.

Espace Subtil: From Dichotomy to the Emergence of a Third Space

Were we to borrow an image from geometry, we might say that until now we have treated the subject and the object as the endpoints of a segment, between which we placed the line of knowledge. But let's consider of what the segment—the interval that both separates and connects the endpoints—is made. We will propose three hypotheses:

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- 35 The debate continues. A more comprehensive depiction of the problem was drawn decades ago by Edmund Husserl in *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie: eine Einleitung in die Phänomenologische Philosophie* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2012; ed. orig. 1956). For the recent debate, see Alberto Asor Rosa, Ernesto Galli della Loggia, and Roberto Esposito, “Un appello per le scienze umane,” *Il Mulino* 6 (2013); the online edition of this paper can be found at <https://www.rivistailmulino.it/a/un-appello-per-le-scienze-umane>.
- 36 Assuming that knowing is the act by which a subject constructs the representation of a given thing, Giorgio Colli is right to argue that “the Object is neither a formal nor substantial element by which one can arrive at a representation ... but rather something whose significance or reality can be clarified only if the representation is presumed.” *Filosofia dell'espressione* (Milano: Adelphi, 1969), 7.

one logical-linguistic, one psychoanalytic, and one semiotic-anthropological. The first two preserve the subject/object dyad and will therefore be treated together; the third, however, does not, so we can develop it independently, in a way never before proposed.

Scholars know well the logical-linguistic interpretation, the subject/object couple representing a binary opposition familiar to contemporary linguistics.³⁷ As such, rather than a relationship, it expresses a dichotomy between the two constituent terms, with the result that knowledge is a state of the system and not a gradable process. Furthermore, once the subject and the object are counterposed as a structure in a system, they exhibit a different set of traits, more than a relationship (subject/object). We are left to decide whether it is a privative opposition, where one of the terms—bearing the distinctive mark—is called the “marked term” (marked/–marked). Certain semiotic positions recommend such a reading. According to some schools of thought, the subject is the term that bears the mark */intentionality/*, while the other term does not. Similarly, if we consider the object the marked term, we see it as the bearer of the mark */value/*: the object is the site invested with values in a given culture.

A common feature of this type is the negative formulation. In an oppositionist couple—just as Saussure teaches—the feature that distinguishes is also the feature that individuates. In other words, in systems of this kind, it is impossible to distinguish differentiation from individuation. The system is one of pure differences, pure negativity. If we were then to apply this structural vision to the subject/object dyad, the logical space around the dyad would be (non)gradable (there would be no intermediary trait between the subject and the object) and therefore we would have no observable phenomenon to place between the constituent terms, which are mere fictions of binary logic. At most, the opposition in any context could be neutralised; this would result in the disappearance of difference between subject and object, determin-

37 See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique générale*, 5th edn, ed. Ch. Bally, A. Sechehaye, and A. Riedlinger (Paris: Payot, 1915). For a critical consideration of binaries, see Roland Barthes, *Éléments de sémiologie* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), III.3.

ing a state of exception. This may be the most compelling hypothesis, since it calls to mind the political utopias aimed at installing regimes of knowledge completely devoid of differentiation—and therefore of individual actants. Thus, the logical-linguistic interpretation does not help us understand the role of the subject/object couple in the field of human science that we intend to examine and reformulate.

Psychoanalytical research into intermediary entities between the subject and the object appears to be more promising. In fact, it demonstrates that something lies between the subject and the object that is neither an object nor a subject. In order to talk about this third element, we have to introduce a new concept, the so-called transitional object. What is a transitional object? Before we proceed, we must first identify a few psychoanalytical terms. Let's begin by pointing out that scholars agree that there is a difference between ontogeny and phylogeny; that difference matters here. It is often said that an individual relives the history of all humanity in its own development. But, of course, that statement is not always true. In fact, it is more proper to talk about history in connection to individuals and their existence. Species have no history, properly speaking. If we accept this distinction, then talking about a "history of objects" is not the same in human individuals as it is in the human species. Taking this distinction as a given, let's turn our attention to the ontogenetic side of the subject/object couple.

What specifically happens during human development? On its ontogenetic path, a human individual—every human subject—is born without objects. As modern psychology states, a child is born as a rational subject only within the "subtle space" (*espace subtil*) where the dominant presence of the mother nullifies the need to seek objects. If anything, objects are occasionally convoked as forms of offsetting. Said differently, a child enters a space of objects only in cases where it experiences a lack of personal presence. Later on in an individual's life, the object becomes an intermediary zone between the subjectivity of the person and the objectivity of the thing. In 1972, Jacques Lacan introduced the so-called "Objet (*a*)" into psychoanalytic theory, a distant echo of Freud's drive object and Melanie Klein's partial Object. Something be-

comes an “Objet (*a*)” only when it is in a seeking relationship (*quête*), for it expresses the *objet-cause* of desire.³⁸ This, Lacan explains, displays traits that we shall call semiotic, because they can be traced back to the moment of enunciation: “Insofar as it is selected in the appendages of the body as an index of desire, it [namely, the ‘Objet (*a*)’] is already the exponent of a function, of the index pointing to an absence.”³⁹

Lacan’s contribution aside, the history of transitional objects stems from other scholars.⁴⁰ The name and concept first appeared in Donald Woods Winnicott, but the version of the transitional object as we will be referring to it hereafter belongs to Françoise Dolto. Winnicott’s transitional objects pose a challenge to the traditional ontology that separates people from things and gives beings a different status. Its discovery, and the innumerable ways in which this notion can be applied, persuade us that within the transitional object lurks a portion of history that we might call a “wordless mythology”: a universe where, instead of words, the tale is formed of images; a tale whose heroes are things, or objects, and in which subjectivity is absorbed by the thing and, in a sense, objectified without being transformed into an object. On the other hand, the transitional objects that Dolto and then Denis Vasse have in mind are not actual objects; they can embody an object, but they remain floating signifiers. They are neither denoted objects nor denoting signs; they are signifiers, tasked with conjuring up the

38 Jacques Lacan, *Autres Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 379. Lacan discusses this topic in *Séminaire XV* (1967–1968, unpublished). I have consulted a summary of this seminar.

39 Jacques Lacan, “Remarque sur le rapport de Daniel Lagache,” in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 647–684, esp. 682. I would like to add one comment about “Objet (*a*).” Because it is a purely linguistic creation, this unrepresentable object seems similar to ξ , the character used by Gottlob Frege: ξ is not exactly part of symbolic language, but instead the index of the temporal staging in the analytical step-by-step construction of a sentence. In short, a kind of transitional object. Michael Dummett describes the symbol ξ as “merely a device for indicating where the argument-place of a predicate occurs.” See his *Frege: The Philosophy of Language* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 16.

40 The bibliography of transitional objects is endless. See Denys Ribas, “L’œuvre,” in *Donald Woods Winnicott*, ed. D. Ribas (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003), 35–109; Victor Smirnoff, “La relation d’objet et le vécu infantile,” *La psychanalyse de l’enfant*, ed. V. Smirnoff (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), 183–292.

presence of a person (and not the presence of an object—be it a *Bedeutung* or meaningful babble).

How can we represent the developmental condition of floating signifiers? Infants, even absent their mothers, are never alone. Infants live in relation, σχέσις,⁴¹ as the Greek fathers would call it. Let us define σχέσις as the relation that precedes and forms the phylogenetic foundation of every successive appearance of the subject and object. To support this interpretation, suffice it to quote Dolto's assertion that infants "invent this relation" and "conjure the presence of their mother by babbling, convinced that they are repeating the phonemes that they had heard their mother utter and, thus persuaded by this trick, feel not alone but rather for and with her (*pour et avec elle*)."⁴²

An interesting feature of σχέσις is the condition of indiscernibility between mother and infant, a condition Dolto calls *mémeté d'être* (ontological memory, memory of being, or even sameness of being). In this condition, the child tries to stay in contact with the primary object—mother—by producing expressive (hence not objectual) simulacra. The child babbles, gesticulates, expresses itself in several ways. The child appears within, *not in*, a relation with the object. The proof is that its utterances neither refer to a *Bedeutung* nor can they be interpreted as acts of reference. Rather, they are signifiers in relation with other signifiers. They are signifiers that we would like to call *echo-like*, reformulations (transpositions, recreations) of enunciation acts that can be assigned to a different space every time. They are not just evocations—they are affirmations of the (imagined) presence of the mother.

41 When I refer to the ancient Greek word σχέσις, rather than the classical Aristotelian notion, I have in mind the idea of "relation" in the Greek patristics of late antiquity, for ex. the Cappadocian Fathers. For more on this subject, see Ilaria Vigorelli, *La relazione: Dio e l'uomo: Schesis e antropologia trinitaria in Gregorio di Nissa* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2020). See also Marcello La Matina, "God Is Not the Name of God: Some Remarks on Language and Philosophy in Gregory's *Opera Dogmatica Minora*," in *Gregory of Nyssa: The Minor Treatises on Trinitarian Theology and Apollinarism*, ed. Volker H. Drecoll and Margitta Berghaus (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 315–336.

42 Dolto, *L'image*, 35. It is the mother who, with her words, mediates the absence of an object for the benefit of her infant; in technical terms, as Lacan would have concurred, the partial object is evoked by the total object (Dolto, *L'image*, 64).

If this interpretation is correct, it is easy to think that the transitional objects discovered by Winnicott introduce what I shall call a proximal zone. Infants choose these non-objects from their immediate surroundings and therefore the non-objects are enabled to establish a transition between the original relationship with the maternal breast and the constitution of real objects in the external world.⁴³ A similar view is taken in Dolto's discovery of transitional objects. These objects can suggest something interesting about the human subject/object divide, so that many popular, deeply ingrained beliefs must be rewritten. In particular, thanks to psychoanalysis, before appearing as tools or products, objects function as what I call "floating signifiers";⁴⁴ they are not rooted in conceptual grammar nor do they refer to semantics structured by conventions. Rather, they have their basis in the child's bodily image; they are firmly grounded in its personal history. Notice that, in spite of its name, the image is less a visual formation than a *tensive-muscular habit*. Moreover, the transitional objects are witnesses and places where the category of mediation is applicable. In this sense, they are also the place where the desire for a relationship appears in the form of desire for the Other (*désir d'Autrui*). In this sense, it is always a relation with the Distal Other.

Transitional Field and Anthropic Zones

The third interpretation of the space between subject and object is semiotic-anthropological. This consists in rewriting some previously discussed theories of transitional objects. It is expedient to stress that transitional objects should be considered neither objects nor pseudo-objects. To me, they seem more like signifiers that have yet to be caught in the net of grammar and are therefore drifting in the *espace subtil* inhabited by mother and infant. The following is an important

43 See the innovative article by D. W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: A Study of the First Not-Me Possession," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 34:2 (1953): 89–97.

44 For more on this subject, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Introduction à l'oeuvre de M. Mauss," in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).

observation: if we connect Winnicott's analyses to Dolto's, it turns out that transitional objects reside in the region between subject and object, but do not belong to merely one zone situated between subject and object. Therefore, hereafter we can do without the labels "subject" and "object," and call this region *transitional field*.⁴⁵

First, we must say what the transitional field is. The signifiers that operate in the transitional field do not settle into fixed patterns: sometimes they refer to proximal signifiers, sometimes to superimposable signifiers, and still other times they evoke signifiers that cannot be placed in either the superimposable sphere nor in the adjacent sphere. When this happens, they evoke a distal (an ancestor, a mythic time or space, a Freudian thing, etc.). Moreover, sometimes the reference is spatial in nature, and other times it is not. Which is why it is important to articulate the transitional field semiotically. Therefore, the transitional field is the semiotic *miniverse* that expresses proximal space and connects it to the distal space evoked.⁴⁶ It is about understanding the nature of the transitional field is and about distinguishing the phenomena associated with it.

François Rastier notes that in every culture there exist significant disruptions to the contiguity of *Umwelt*. For example, he has

45 The view proposed here is not a variant of the well-known logical Platonism. Firstly, I speak of transitional objects as signifiers—bodies—sensible things linked to the corporeity of the human person. Secondly, as I have written in my *Archäologie des Signifikanten*, these signifiers are assimilated here with Christian icons, with which they share a perspective directed not to the past but to the future. It is worth referring here to a passage by Ps.-Maximus the Confessor (*Scholia in librum De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, PG 4, 137A–D), where he writes that “truth is the state of things to come” (ἀλήθεια δὲ ἡ τῶν μελλόντων κατάστασις). John Zizioulas notes: “In this passage, Saint Maximus interprets in his own way the concept of Eucharist as image and symbol in relation of the concept of causality ... The divine Eucharist is for him an image of the true Eucharist which is nothing other than ‘the state of things to come.’ The truth of ‘what is now accomplished in the *synaxis*’ is to be found not in a Platonic type of ideal reality, but in a reality of the future.” J. Zizioulas, *The Eucharist and the Kingdom of God*, trans. Elizabeth Theokritoff (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2022), 21–22.

46 For a discussion about the proximal and distal emissary, Marcello La Matina, *Cronosensitività: Una teoria filosofica per lo studio dei linguaggi* (Roma: Carocci, 2004).

shown homologous positions along the four axes (person, time, place, and mode). Different languages may have different names for these axes, yet there can only be three zones traced, which in his most recent work he describes thus: the *identity zone*, where the subject establishes coincident rules with self-image; the *proximal zone*, where the subject is adjacent to empirically accessible entities (what I call signifiers); and finally the *distal zone*, situated in another time and space that by their mode transcend the first two zones.⁴⁷ Thus, in every language, we have a first, second, and third person, just as we have past, present, and future, and other aspects to which, though they vary, speakers constantly refer. Table 1 breaks down these gaps and homologies between Rastier's three zones:

	Identity Zone	Proximal Zone	Distal Zone
1. Person	I – We	Thou – You	He/She – It – One
2. Time	Now	Once – Soon	Past – Future
3. Space	Here	There	Over there – Somewhere else
4. Mode	Certainty	Eventual	Possible – Unreal

Table 1

This theory makes an important point about the connections between zones. Rastier identifies two: the empirical *couplage* (or linkage between the identity and the proximal zones); and the transcendent *couplage* (between the first two and the distal zone). Note the terminology and subdivisions in Figure 1 (by Rastier): *couplage empirique* (empirical nexus), *couplage transcendant* (transcendental nexus), *zone identitaire* (identity zone), *zone proximale* (proximal zone), *zone distale* (distal

47 I am primarily referring to François Rastier, “Représentation ou interprétation? Une perspective herméneutique sur la médiation sémiotique,” in *Penser l'esprit: Des sciences de la cognition à une philosophie de l'esprit*, ed. V. Rialle and D. Fissette (Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1996), 219–253. The figure is at 246.

zone), *frontière empirique* (the empirical border), *frontière transcendante* (the transcendental border), *fétiches* (fetiches), and *idoles* (idols).

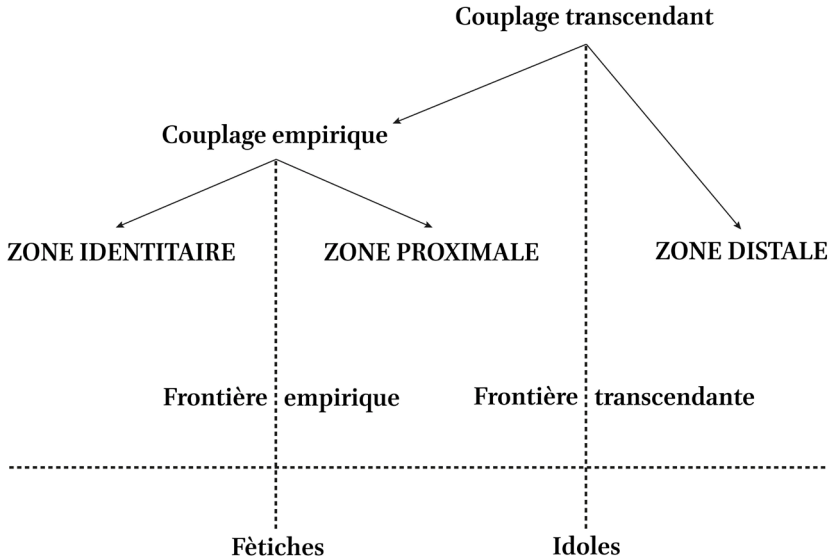


Figure 1

Rastier believes the distinction between the first two zones and the third is significant. The objects present in empirical space are called fetiches (charms) and those in transcendent space idols. If we attempt to apply this new terminology to the matter at hand, we might ask ourselves what category the Byzantine icons or their counterparts, *ὁμοιώματα*, fall into, based on their mode of being. The icons cannot be charms, since no “magical” power is attributed to them. Nor are they idols, since they are not worshipped like divine effigies. The icons seem to conjure a mode of being that is not included in Rastier’s diagram (or, if it is, it is so incongruously). Strictly speaking, not even transitional objects seem to fit neatly into these categories. In fact,

they shuttle between the empirical and the transcendent, without being able to connect these *signifiants flottants* to any regularity provided by a code or connected to some standard significance.⁴⁸ We shall soon turn to this question.

Renunciation of the Object and the Proto-Sacrifice of the Child

There are no objects in the transitional field; hence there is no space for the semantic reference (which always requires a referent or *Bedeutung*). Here, on the contrary, as Jacques Lacan beautifully puts it, every signifier “represents a subject for another signifier.” Everything happens in the space of air, in the space of breath that binds mother to child, or the child and the maternal ghost, by means of speech sounds and rhythms that evoke the physiology of feeding, hunger, expulsion, and crying. Above all, everything happens by means of the first clumsy attempts to reproduce those sounds that make the mother present when she is absent, when she is far away. The space between subjects and objects is now an all-embracing, bodily space: “This way, we understand that language is not an immaterial abstraction, but rather the body of the infant perceived in the network of signifiers, its subtle body, truer than the opaque materiality of a meaningless organism. In this sense, the word of the mother (and of others) gives body to the child.”⁴⁹

In the transitional field signifiers come in all sizes. They are comparable to images (εἰκόνας); how so will be explained later on. I have set

48 One could also word the question differently: “On what basis can we decide when a Transitional Object falls into the identity space of the subject or into a proximal or distal space? Studies show that this introduces a zone adjacent to the subject, but sometimes it slips into a distal space/time. Clinical data about this have not resolved the matter. What counts for the birth of a Transitional Object is its *aspectuality* (that is, whether it has a continuity of repeated and recognised perceptions that the child can organise its bodily *imago* around). In the subtle space of signifiers, the bond between mother and child, severed together with the umbilical cord, can be reconstructed thanks to the presence of these *motherised* objects (*objets mamaïés*), i.e., things capable of conjuring for the infant a memory of the mother’s reassuring presence.” Dolto, *L’image*, 70. Translation mine.

49 Denis Vasse, *L’ombilic et la voix* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), 67–68. Translation mine.

aside the problem of establishing what kind of images give form to the transitional field. Images that function as unconscious images of the body are, in any case, preponderant. Unlike the claims of some schools of psychoanalysis, it appears to me that the bodily image should not be considered a mere projection of the child: if that were true, it would be an ontic phenomenon lacking ontological depth. Instead, I believe that the bodily image (εικῶν connected to the “reticular” story of signifying bodies) should be seen as a relational—and more importantly historical—phenomenon, for which what counts is the uniqueness and unrepeatability of every *couplage* between actant and *Umwelt*.

In simpler terms, I believe that the infant is never alone, but always caught in the web of signifiers that turn the infant’s originating Other into an *allelon*.⁵⁰ What I am saying appears to confirm Dolto’s intuition that “the image of the body is always a potential image of communication with the phantom. Human solitude is never unaccompanied by a mnemonic trace of a past contact with either an anthropomorphised other (*autrui anthropomorphisé*) or a real one.”⁵¹ If my questions are plausible, what kind of relation is the transitional field that every transitional object opens between proximal and/or distal *allelons*? And what does this new vision teach us about how to understand the epistemic and anthropological divide based on the contrast between subject and object?

All this also tells us, however, something more interesting concerning the topic: in the infant’s experience, language is similar to *hirotopy*, which includes the signifier, both bodily and symbolic. No actual objects are given; only corporeal signifiers that enact a genuinely liturgical action, a sacrifice of sorts. How is such a sacrifice possible? If Vasse is right, I could be so bold as to say—and this is my thesis—that the infant’s surrender of the object functions as the child’s “sacrificial gesture.” It is an offering made in order to compensate for the unbear-

50 The word *allelon* (not to be confused with “allele”) is my own term. It comes from the ancient Greek reciprocal pronoun ἀλλήλων, which appears in various phrases. For a detailed explanation of the theory, see my forthcoming article, appropriately titled, “Alleli e allelouchia: Semiotica e forme di vita.”

51 Dolto, *L’image*, 35. Translation mine.

able absence of the mother's body. Would it be correct to speak of a *proto-liturgy*? Vasse and Dolto would explain the behaviour of the infant by way of *mémeté d'être*. In simpler terms, the infant blurs the absence of and desire for the maternal body. For this reason, the child literally becomes other; to compensate for the maternal absence, it would put itself, totally unconsciously, in a state of exception. Unable to cope with the mother's absence, it would seek the *mémeté d'être*, the sameness of being with the mother, transitionally recreating the web of maternal signifiers: *Il tente d'être autre pour demeurer même* (it attempts to be another in order to remain the same).⁵²

While embracing this subtle analysis, I prefer to think in semi-otic terms. In the situation just described, no actual actant appears; we might second Greimas and say that we are in the presence of the *en deçà*, under the true signifier. The transitional field is the space where performing a symbolic sacrifice enables the participants to claim a form of proto-actantiality. Also indicative of this is what emerges from the studies of Vasse, a psychoanalyst who picked up where Dolto left off. Vasse considers central to this process of the mother's presence/absence what he calls the "deferred reconnection" (*rétablissement différé*) of the missing object.⁵³ The infant calls on the imagination, conjuring up a past experience that is felt, however, as an experience capable of launching a new future. Equally, argues Vasse, during this imaginative phase, the possibility of deferring the moment of satisfaction is introduced. This phase he calls the renunciation of the object: "At the same time that the possibility of deferring the moment of restorative satisfaction, of renouncing the object, is introduced, the subject's desire for something other than the thing, the encounter, arises, supported by the memory traces of previous experiences."⁵⁴

52 Vasse, *L'ombilic et la voix*, 77. Under attack is the concept of the individual, squeezed between the personal and the intersubjective realms. The topic has been the subject of many astute analyses. See the essays by P. Veyne, J. Vernant, L. Dumont, P. Ricœur, F. Dolto, F. Varela, and G. Percheron in *Sur l'individu: Contributions au colloque de Royaumont* (Paris: Seuil, 1985).

53 Vasse, *L'ombilic et la voix*, 77. Translation mine.

54 Vasse, *L'ombilic et la voix*, 77. Translation mine.

If my argument is plausible, then Vasse's renunciation of the object can be seen as a proto-liturgy or a proto-sacrifice—indeed it takes the shape of a symbolic evocation (i.e., via signifiers) that introduces the primary signifier into the proximal space: the mother (who, however, lies in the distal space). Let us delve a little longer on the renunciation of the object;⁵⁵ it raises questions about the nature and function of the transitional field. What type of space is it? Is it a logical space, as we learned from the theory of proposition? Or is it an anthropological space, tasked with mediating between identity and proximity? Or are we encountering a utopian space where we ought to place the operations that make the conjured distal signifier accessible (the mother, the lost object, the Freudian thing, etc., as well as the first signifier that goes back to God for other signifiers)? Surely—and now I can say so—it is not merely a psychic space, it is not just the fiction on which imagination and reality hinge. The renunciation of the object performed by the infant makes clear that the transitional field is homologous to the symbolic field and to the relationship between the *allelons*, which I have called *allelouchia*; all this demands a more in-depth theoretical study, which—surprisingly—could come from semiotics more than from psychology.⁵⁶

Before moving on to the next topic, it is worth underscoring once more the paradoxical feature that up to this point we have been making. Psychoanalysis (Lacan, Dolto, Winnicott) discovered transitional objects and shone a light on their communicative and expressive function. Nevertheless, it is in semiotic terms (and not psychoanalytical terms, as Vasse rightly observed) that one can explain the birth of the object as such, linking this emergence to the formation of a network of signifiers that occupy the subtle space (*espace subtil*). Our subject is

55 Vasse, *L'ombilic et la voix*, 77.

56 My observations are not contradicted by François Rastier's consideration of the transitional object as the first model of the cultural object. In fact, the objectivity of the transitional object obeys subjective laws (*obéit à des lois subjectives*). See his "Prédication, Actance et Zones Anthropiques," in *Prédication, Assertion, Information*, ed. F. Rastier, M. Forsgren, K. Jonasson, and H. Kronning, Acta Universitatis Uppsaliensis, coll. Studia Romanica Uppsaliensia 56 (Stockholm: Almqvist et Wiksell International, 1998), 443–461.

now the transitional field, the site where signifiers of the body and language appear, the site of transformations and ritual practices and, in all frankness, liturgical practices. The transitional field is above all the space of the proto-sacrifice, the space of the signifier, where the infant renounces the object, having been forced by the absence of the mother to remake herself and experience “being alone while someone else is present.” As Winnicott observed:

Although many types of experience go to the establishment of the capacity to be alone, there is one that is basic, and without a sufficiency of it the capacity to be alone does not come about; this experience is that of being alone, as an infant and small child, in the presence of mother. Thus, the basis of the capacity to be alone is a paradox; it is the experience of *being alone while someone else is present*.⁵⁷

Anthropic Zones and Byzantine Icons

The question of icons might not appear important to a discussion of the ways of knowledge and the redefinition of human studies, yet in fact it is.

In the philosophical vision of the Greek fathers, the subject/object dyad does not have a real theoretical purpose, whereas questions of knowledge, especially about God, are often treated by applying the idea of πρόσωπον, or, in modern terms, person. When the term πρόσωπον was first introduced, it did not have a clear semantic definition. Around its lexical, textual, and theoretical history, much literature has sprung up, literature that we cannot give a full account of here.⁵⁸ In the texts of the Cappadocian fathers or Maximus the Confessor—those I think I know best—the term πρόσωπον comes up frequently, including as a

57 D. Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London and New York: Routledge, 1958), 29.

58 For a bibliography of the idea of πρόσωπον, see Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Lucian Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

synonym of ὑπόστασις. As I attempted to show in an earlier essay,⁵⁹ there are contexts in which it appears as a meta-indexical sign used in reference both to the context and to the co-text. In all of these cases, πρόσωπον fulfils its role when it refers to what one finds when *faced-with-a-face* and, for that reason, offers a “face” to the “face” that is looking or being looked at. In Greek patristics, the term was given a specific meaning, so that “what one is faced with” (which we might call ἀντίον) is not referred to as πρόσωπον in its ontological dimension (οὐσία) but is referred to as present-in-the-face-of-us (παρουσία). This what-is-before-us can arise either from absence, as something that did not exist before, or from ignorance, as something that emerges from oblivion or comes out of hiding. The moment ἀντίον is present, then the mode of existence (τρόπος τῆς υπάρξεως) of πρόσωπον is realised. To paraphrase Christos Yannaras, the πρόσωπον is nothing if not the way of ecstatic existence itself: an *existence-before-that-which-is-Other*.

Therefore, what πρόσωπον realises is a mode of existence within an anthropic zone and not within a logical-linguistic space. Whether we are talking about an icon of the Pantocrator or the icon of the Mother of God or of a saint, the mode of existence of πρόσωπον is completely different from an object trapped in the subject/object dyad. Again, Yannaras puts it well when he writes that “the person [i.e., the πρόσωπον] in its ecstatic reference—that is, in its otherness—transcends the objective properties and common signs of recognition of the form, and consequently is not defined by its nature.”⁶⁰ The πρόσωπον is an ecstatic reality open to the surrounding space, the *Umwelt*. According to Byzantine anthropology, the πρόσωπον is distinct from its nature. This double order—person and nature—is native to Greek and Oriental patristic philosophy.

In theoretical writings about icons—from Gregory of Nyssa to Maximus the Confessor and from Dionysus the Areopagite to Theodore the Studite—we often encounter the word πρόσωπον. It means, quite specifically, a relationship between the ὁμοίωμα (likeness), called εἰκὼν (icon,

59 La Matina, “God is not the Name of God,” 315–335.

60 Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, 25–26.

image), and the πρωτότυπος (prototype).⁶¹ Such a relationship is placed in the space of prayer, and therefore a *hierotopic* space. The veneration of icons is not, as we know, an act of adoration, so that the icon is neither a charm nor an idol, to borrow Rastier's terms. Προσκύνησις (veneration) is, instead, a semiotic act that—to use Lacan's beautiful phrase—articulates meaning by convoking a signifier capable of signifying a subject for another signifier. In that sense, we can say that προσκύνησις validates the presence-of-person recognised as signifier via personal devotion. No wonder the second Council of Nicaea accurately drew a distinction between προσκύνησις and λατρεία (adoration, worship).⁶²

In the Byzantine world, the perception of the icon is extremely close to the realm of the person, with which it often coincides. Theodore the Studite says that “icons are sometimes referred to as ‘icon of such-and-such’ and sometimes they are referred to as if they were the person itself, that is, the archetype.”⁶³ The Byzantine icon is thought of neither as an aesthetic object nor a material object, but rather ὁμοίωσις (likeness), the presence of the absent one. This ὁμοίωσις renders the relationship with the archetype effective for bringing about προσκύνησις, creating a kind of *objet manaisé* in the *espace subtil* of liturgical devotion. One last observation: all the sources emphasise that σχέσις (relation) happens without the involvement of the object in its materiality (ἔξω τῆς ὕλης, outside of matter).

Much can be said on this subject, but my ambitions are more modest. In fact, I shall merely suggest a possible typological kinship between the transitional field (as signifying space that ties the proximal to the distal) and the hierotopic space of the icon. Because it evokes the dimensions of time past and time future, the transitional image represented by εἰκόν introduces a break in the continuity of the psychic present that encroaches on a dimension that we might call

61 See Theodore the Studite, Ep. 57, in *Theodori Studitae Epistulae*, ed. Georgios Fatouros, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae – Series Berlinensis 31 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992), 164.

62 See Theodore the Studite, Ep. 57, at 167.

63 Cf. Theodore the Studite, Ep. 301, at 442. A contemporary philosophical correspondent of this idea can be found in Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976).

analogical or modal. This indicates that in human cultures there is a distal zone that is constructed differently from those that preceded it. Technically speaking, we should talk about the relationship (σχέσις) between a likeness (εικών or ὁμοίωμα) and its prototype (ἀρχέτυπον or πρωτότυπον) as a relationship between signifiers, none of which is a charm or idol. Thus reformulated, the three anthropic zones form the transitional field, which is not supported by dichotomous logic, but rather functions iconologically.

My diagram below (Figure 2) honours the work of Rastier, but revises it in part. The upper half shows the threefold division according to the arrangement of Rastier’s three zones. The lower half, in turn, shows the arrangement of the transitional field as I see it. The two models are not mutually exclusive; they can be employed to describe different ontological commitments. For example, the lower half shows how the relationship between the identity zone and the proximal zone is characterised by an openness to the other and is, therefore, an ecstatic *couplage* (ἐκστατικὸν συνδυασμὸν). This interpretation places the person, πρόσωπον, at the centre of the relationship with the other.

There is no subject/object relationship where “otherness refers not only to objective beings and other persons, but is also actualised principally with regard to the natural individuality of personal existence.”⁶⁴ My interpretation of the relationship between the proximal and the distal zones is also considerably different. It takes the form of an analogical *couplage*, based on iconic semiosis (εικών recalls its prototype, πρωτότυπον). The signifiers that appear in this *couplage* are not—as I just said—idols, but icons (εικόνες), signifiers placed in relation with the Face, with πρόσωπον. I call this *couplage* (ἀναλογικὸν συνδυασμὸν) analogical because its function reveals an aspect of reference from signifier to signifier, according to the modes of the analogy. Yannaras perfectly captures the sense of an anthropology based not on a subject/object antinomy, but on a solidarity between the person and the icon as signifiers. In his words, “if we accept the human person as the ‘horizon’ of the disclosure of beings ... knowledge becomes the

64 Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, 27.

experience of the disclosure within the context of the person’s relation to objective things”; and again: “The Icon is the signifier of personal relation.”⁶⁵ These two propositions encapsulate the search for a model of human studies that respects the personological and the iconological dimensions.

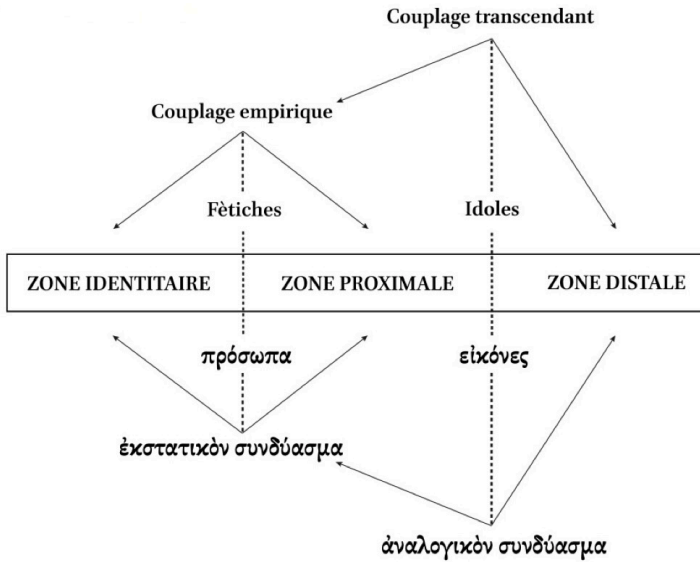


Figure 2

I would observe that all human and social sciences would greatly benefit from the application of these semiotic-anthropological categories. For example, Winnicott’s point about the reassuring power of the transitional object—which constitutes “a vehicular unit,” corresponding to “Linus’ blanket”⁶⁶—makes one realise that the transitional object overlaps with the newborn and is therefore an element of the anthropic identity zone. In turn, Dolto emphasises the forms of communication

65 Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, 184.

66 The expression belongs to Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New York: Routledge, 1971).

that take place in the *espace subtil*, characterising this space as an adjacent zone between the mother and the child. Hence the transitional object springs from the proximal zone. Dolto defines this as “an object that joins the infant to the tactile images of the foundational zone”; that is, something closely linked to the heterogenous zones and the space of communication between mother and newborn.⁶⁷ Still, in other cases the transitional object appears to be the *atmosphere* where fragments of the sensory life of child and mother float. Dolto writes: “You could say that, beyond the bodily distance between newborn and mother/wet nurse, the subtle perception of scent and voice is what continues to act, for the newborn, as the place—the surrounding space—where it observes the mother’s return.”⁶⁸

At this point of the analysis, it is clear that the initial *σχέσις* is the *instance of enunciation*, first manifested with the cutting of the newborn’s umbilical cord. With the removal of the umbilical cord, the infant body is reborn into a new economy, going from “liquid contiguity and proximity with the mother’s body” to an impulsive autonomy made up of rhythmic events: inhalation and exhalation, nutrition and excretion, presence and absence (of the mother).⁶⁹ There is something paradoxical about this story of scientific discovery. Proceeding from psychoanalytical observations, I have arrived at the semiotic dimension and introduced the idea of the transitional field. Within that field, the rhythmic alternation of signifiers takes place (presence/absence

67 One clear example of the transitional object is the case of little Agnes, recounted by Dolto early in her career. In 1944, after being separated from her mother just five days after her birth, Agnes refused to eat. Fearing the child would die, the paediatrician consulted a famous psychoanalyst, Françoise Dolto, who told the father, “Go to the hospital and bring with you a shirt that your wife usually wears, but make sure the shirt still bears her scent. Wrap it around the child’s neck and give her a feeding bottle.” Although it seemed strange at the time, Dolto’s advice turned out to be sound, because the “thing” was not simply a thing, but an object capable of mediating between mother and baby. For this case, see Sophie Marinopoulos, “De l’objet « mamaisé » de Françoise Dolto à l’« objet transitionnel » de Donald W. Winnicott,” *L’école des parents* 621:6 (2016): 41–52. Cf. Dolto, *L’image*, 66–67.

68 Françoise Dolto, *L’image inconsciente du corps* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 69. Translation mine.

69 Cf. Vasse, *L’ombilic et la voix*, 67.

of the mother, nutrition/excretion, satiety/hunger, etc.) and the signifying space⁷⁰ is created, where later on the subject/object dichotomy is established. At this stage of development, before the appearance of things, objects, and the *denotations* of words, all that is found in the transitional field are signifiers. It is to the web of signifiers that the newborn entrusts the work of reconstructing “the feeling of bodily fullness that necessarily connotes presence.”⁷¹ The transitional field is a web of floating signifiers and not a field of things or referents, or what linguists normally call the “signified” or the meaning. The field has the typical character of associations between signifiers. Moreover, the pre-eminence of the signifier points to a rejection of the object, or at least the deferral of “the moment of restorative satisfaction,” on the part of the infant.

Icons at an Exhibition

I would now like to comment on the relationship between transitional objects and artistic language, focusing on several images from the catalogue for “Transitional Object Project Zero,” the first Italian art exhibit created with the intention of collecting images of transitional objects as reproduced by artists and other creators.⁷² In short, a select group of artists were asked to draw their own transitional object, as remembered by the interviewees; the resulting drawings and photos have become the exhibition.

I would also like to describe a connection between how transitional objects function in therapy and how icons function in prayer and veneration. What can the artists’ drawings tell us about transitional objects? We know that infant psychoanalysis commonly revolves around interpreting the drawings and clay models of young patients. But in

70 Vasse, *L'ombilic et la voix*, 69.

71 Vasse, *L'ombilic et la voix*, 76.

72 “Project Zero” was launched by Elena Cesaretti and Alessia Porfiri, designers, visual artists, and art therapists. The catalogue was edited by the artists themselves and included a preface by Marcello La Matina (Macerata: Trob, 2022). The objects mentioned in this section can be found at <https://en.trob.space/gallery> (accessed 12 August 2022).

this case, we are dealing with adults whose products are not transitional objects; they are visual or sculptural sketches of them. They are not *objets mameisés* but personal transcriptions of a music that only the listener or the performer can know. How can they serve this discussion? Well, I am convinced that the drawings and photo collages, though not applicable to clinical study, can provide a seed for philosophical reflection. Here is my argument.

We have seen above that transitional objects are not actual objects, but signifiers floating around a transitional field, that they do not acquire specific material shape, and that their formal properties may not be defined. By virtue of their “signifying nature,” it is difficult to represent transitional objects as beings, since they cannot be exhibited as normal, average-sized objects. Nor can we represent them pictorially as objects, strictly speaking. And yet, as a philosopher would say, if you can’t show Being itself, you can at least attempt to show the spirit of being. We therefore find ourselves in a position similar to that of someone looking at Van Gogh’s famous shoes: there is no object-shoe in the painting, yet the painting unveils the world behind it, the life of the farmer who wore them, the hard dirt where the scuff marks come from. For this to happen, the shoes do not need to exist as objects. In the same vein, painting transitional objects (which are potentially visible, *qua* objects, only to their “owners”) can generate an entire web of signifiers that stand for the transitional field within which the relationship with the transitional objects had developed. We neither see nor experience the object (which never exists as object); in place of the absent being, we have—as Heidegger would say⁷³—its truth. And the truth of the transitional object (not the object itself, which never appears) that resides in the work of art and is produced for artist and spectator alike—via its *signifiants flottants*—is nothing if not the revelation of the transitional field in which the *couplage* between signifying bodies occurs, between beings that—it bears repeating—are neither objects nor subjects, but *σχέσεις*, relations.

73 I am referring to the first *Holzwege* by Martin Heidegger, entitled *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1950), 36–42.

But let's return for a moment to the exhibition. The transitional objects created for this exhibition are responsible for "photographing" the birth of a transitional object. And even though these products are just representations of the original creation, made in hindsight, they display certain formal and semiotic characteristics that appear to be keeping with the thesis of this article: the transitional object is not merely an imaginative phenomenon, but a semiotic phenomenon (creating and conveying meaning). It is not an object or an epiphenomenon of the subject, but a relationship, σχέση. As such, the transitional object has a semiotic function similar to a Byzantine icon, as we argue at the end of this article. Let us now say something about these images. In most cases, the transitional object resembles an "emotional trunk," the mythical ancestor of every adolescent diary; an object incapable of telling a story "if it is not allied with other objects." Even when recreated for artistic purposes or for art therapy, the transitional object does not lose its aura of historical authenticity. It can appear as a fragment of past life (a pillow, a blanket, a small album) or as an original construction—as long as there are relationships and atmospheres capable of "physically establishing" that presence which recalls the body image in its historicisation.

Three characteristics seems to be shared by the transitional objects that I have chanced to look at in this collection of works, of which some were by artists and some by ordinary people. These are: miniaturisation, parataxis, and lack of perspective. I do not claim to have exhausted such important issues in a couple of sentences, but I would like to offer here a few notes by way of commentary and also propose a brief conclusion to my analysis.

First, the transitional object is often presented as a small world, a miniature version of a larger world. This does not mean that it reproduces the entire external world; it represents a fragment of the world in which the subjects can find some general truth that concerns them, an (un)objective truth. Because it is a reduction, the subjects can appear disproportionately large compared to things. The transitional object is often similar to drawings in which the child depicts himself with

a very large head or hands. The miniature is like a synecdoche, only in reverse: it is not the part that stands for the whole, but the whole that seeks to become a part, the subject (always left out of the representation) that lodges itself in the object and makes it concur with itself.

The second characteristic I noted is parataxis. This work on the object becomes work on the subject. What the transitional object constructs is the subject. Like an intransitive verb, it describes an action that takes place within the subject, giving life to the subject itself. In addition, this construction of the subject is unhistorical, set in a time that is always removed from the present experience. Everything happens as if the subject were making his or her transitional object an expressive field devoid of functional parts. There are fragments of things, likenesses, pictures, objects; in other words, a single object, but jagged, partially disjointed, and worn by time. These parts, or this “partial whole,” as I call it, is held together without the use of connectives; it is devoid of syntax. The absence of syntax is a characteristic of primitive, oral thought. And in each transitional object it is as if this residual orality is released and takes shape. Partial transitional objects are like Greek epic formulas: they return again and again, and form ritual contexts.

Finally, there is the third feature: perspective. As in folk art, perspective is nowhere to be found. However, whereas in folk art the lack of perspective is a product of improvisation, what we are dealing with in the transitional objects exhibited in Macerata is a poetic choice. Perspective presents us with a centred view of space and time. In these works, in turn, what should be—and is—represented can never be centred, since it coincides with the *space* in which the subject was formed. In short, I am convinced that any artistic transitional object intends speaks to us about the process of world-making; this process is relevant even if the space has not existed forever, but has only begun to exist at a point that remains outside the possibility of representing the subject. The uncentred, unfocused space of the artistic transitional object belies an attempt to give the constitution of the subject the consistency of an object.

If that is true, then transitional objects teach that the subject is made of objects. It is the place and history of the encounter between subjective demands and objective goals—which are different but not irreconcilable. Subject and object, reconsidered in light of the concepts of *objet managé* and transitional objects, should perhaps be transfigured into a new and perspicuous dimension, where art is no longer an action that produces works, but a model for every construction of the self in the world. In quite similar terms, Yannaras writes that, in studying a painting, it is not the thing that approaches truth, but “the space of personal relation, the immediacy of personal uniqueness and dissimilarity which is experienced vividly in spite of the dimensional non-presence of the person.”⁷⁴

Towards a New Paradigm for Human Studies

The time has come to sketch a conclusion. We began with the relationship between subject and object, which we identified as the *locus deperditus* (to borrow an expression from philology) of the present epistemological crisis troubling the human sciences. Because the distinction between subject and object is not evident in nature, nor is it passed down through sensory perception, we focused our attention on semiotic forms. In inevitably summary fashion, we have identified the essential points of the new scientific paradigm, which has replaced traditional humanism and which conditions the understanding of subject and object. The two terms appear stripped of meaning, since the philosophical reasoning that heralded their birth and long life has fallen into disuse. Everywhere, in philosophy especially, people speak of the death of the subject and the disappearance of the object.⁷⁵ Rather than take a side, I have focused on the intermediary entity, the transitional object, which psychoanalysis introduced in order to clarify ambiguities about the construction of subjectivity and its psychoses. We found the transitional object interesting for several reasons: it is not a real object;

74 Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, 116.

75 See the papers collected in the monographic issue *Au-delà du sujet: L'impersonnel?* of *Archives de Philosophie* 76:3 (2013).

it is not a mere extension of subjectivity; it is not a figment of the imagination; it has something of the symbolic and semiotic in it; moreover, it is a web of signifiers (called *objets mamaïisés*) that always permits us to re-create the mother/child relationship (σχέσις) starting with the dyad's sameness of being.

As Simone Weil saw clearly, the new physical and human sciences do not enable us to understand the human as a correlation between the subject and the object of a cognitive representation based on the categories of πράξις or human ποίσις. The expropriation of subjectivity performed by this method affects the metaphysical foundations that until now have upheld or accepted the analytical paradigm. If the familiar subject can no longer be placed at the intersection of the objects onto which it projects its own anthropic image, then there is no point in continuing to call human sciences those protocols of examination based on the subject/object dyad and the cognitive form from which it arises, i.e., Aristotelian logic.

How can the present discussion be of use to the debate about human studies? Two important points have been identified above. First, I have shown that the transitional field upsets the view of subject/object as a dichotomy, on which the common understanding of knowledge is based. By declining to present the humanities as the relationship between an actant subject and an actant object, we can discover relationships previously overlooked—like the adjacency to proximal signifiers that enable us to “recognise ourselves without being ourselves.”⁷⁶ Second, the transitional object seems to function like an icon: instead of a *Bedeutung*, it requires a web of signifiers. The icon/prototype model of Byzantine iconological semiosis seems to be a valid substitute for the traditional model of conceptual signification, widespread in the West.

The form of signification that we would like to put to the test, in order to build a new model of human and humanities knowledge, is not that of Hjelmslev and his school. It much more closely resembles the

76 I would express my concept by way of the ancient Greek, as follows: ἀλλήλων γνωσθέντων, οὐκ ἀτὰρ ἀλλήλων ὄντων (knowing each other, but not sharing each other's being). That is the very idea of being one another's *alleloi*.

generative semiotics of Greimas and Rastier, from which it borrows essential anthropological aspects. But there is one important difference: it explicitly draws on the theory of knowledge developed by Byzantine theologians and on the kind of signification that emerges from the relationship between icon and prototype. The icon, that signifier from the distant past, can help us reimagine our relationship to the human without reducing the human to an object and thereby alienating it and stripping it of historical poignancy. We must go back to the Greek fathers, whose language “functions iconologically.”⁷⁷ And we must also test the hypothesis of a semiotics that functions iconologically, translating into images those meanings that emerge from anthropic zones. Images are crucial to the new humanism, not only because society at present is ruled by images: that would merely be an ontic fact. Images are *ontologically* crucial, because “the language of images conceals the truth like a dynamic leaven in the mystagogic space of personal relation.”⁷⁸

Bidding goodbye to the subject/object dyad need not spell defeat for scholars; on the contrary, it could pave the way toward a different, richer vision of the act of knowledge. The cold, logical space of the oppositional subject/object relationship is replaced with an anthropological space made up of zones of anthropic interaction. The crucial elements are contained in the human ability to establish relationships between the identity and distal zones, to conjure up a transcendent dimension, compared to the basic empiricism of proximal linkages—which is also present in creatures that are not human. The theory of anthropic zones—as modified in what I have proposed here—can offer a useful model for rethinking the general form of knowledge, substituting subject/object categories with categories of proximal and distal linkages that bring the cognitive act closer to a relationship between a proximal signifier and a distal signifier with a hierotopic and liturgical space.

My proposal stands on the shoulders of a few giants; among those, I would like to single out Rastier, who has been a constant source of inspiration. The idea of anthropic zones, which I consider a serious

77 Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, 194.

78 Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, 196.

alternative to the traditional concessions of subject/object and subject/predicate logic, is his. Now, if we extend the theory of anthropic zones to the field of the humanities, we can detect a new objective in our investigation. The above analysis has unearthed two new pieces of information. First, we discovered that the dominant epistemology in human sciences aims to represent scientifically a connection between the human subject and the human object. For various reasons, mentioned earlier, the laws governing the new human sciences no longer correspond to the humanistic vision handed down to us from philology; they turn out to be much more similar, in their objectives and methods, to the laws governing the physical sciences. Second, the critical point of this vision was located in the subject/object model, which, applied liberally, produces a vision of the human characterised by the predictability of studied phenomena. The anthropic zones permit us to shed the cumbersome subject/object dyad and its cold logic, and instead adopt an anthropological vision of the space of signification and the signifiers that dwell there. I am proposing a paradigm shift. I am also proposing to rewrite the cognitive model by bidding farewell to the logical subject/object dyad and switching over to an anthropological arrangement of the human zones. In such a design, what is important is understanding how the anthropic zones enable us to conceive of the human not in terms of a contrast between a knowing subject and a known object, but rather as a *couplage* of subjects interacting in a complex space. This means suggesting the shift from a logical vision of the cognitive process to a semiotic-anthropological vision of the human and the social sciences.

To save what is humane in the human sciences, we must abandon the subject/object dichotomy and adopt a semiotic-anthropological view based on the interaction of subjects in constant dialogue with a signifying space that resembles, in its nature, the transitional field in psychoanalysis and—via a specific interpretation of that field—the function of icons in human culture. It also means abandoning the idea that the responsibility of the human sciences is to explain the human being. Instead, their objective should be to clarify humanity's plural

and ecological character: not the generic human being, but humans—in all their plurality—inhabit the anthropic zone and, by being in constant dialogue with their *Umwelt*, can render it a shared space capable of evoking distal spaces. Just maybe, it is through merely such a small opening that one day, in the peaceful unconsciousness of time, the Messiah will enter contemporary human and social sciences. Hopefully, the same revolution will also become possible in the hard sciences.

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