

Distance as the most essential form of human thought and subjectivity

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Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Abstract

If the philosophers of distance (Max Scheler, Ernst Cassirer, Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen, and Heidegger), unlike their predecessors, have overcome the forgetfulness of distance in the history of thought since Plato and have recognized it as an essence of thought, they however leave unattended the question of distance as articulating the inner transcendent dynamic of the human subject as an enigma unto himself. I use Marc Richir as an example where this lack has been overcome. To achieve this goal, I will first analyze western philosophical literature to show that distance is not just proper to man/thought but the most essential form of any living body. Secondly, I will justify that abstract and practical thinking of social interaction (e.g., the infant's interactions with caretakers) and a notion of the self are impossible without an inherent distance. Lastly, I conclude that there might be a correlation between distance and the degree of development of thought and subjectivities in different socio-cultural milieus.

Keywords: Distance, difference, self, thinking, living body.

1. Introduction

Society is not natural, but created by humans, the same way a sage like Thales constructed geometrical figures (e.g., triangle) via thoughts, *a priori* representations following concept and the conception he puts into them.¹ In other words, societies are primarily human ideas in germ produced by abstract thought, though concretized in praxis through series of interactions bearing these ideas and sedimenting² into habits. This way we can say, with Einstein, that the society created by man emerged out of human thoughts and mind.

But if interaction can be understood as a practical form of thinking, we need to ask what the nature of thought is. In fairness to philosophical history, this has been thematized, at least since Plato (for whom thought is an inner dialogue of the soul with itself³), Aristotle (for whom the “nous” is the unique human faculty for thinking *theoria*⁴ and which has a divine character), and later Augustine and Descartes (for whom thinking's endpoint is an absolute self-assurance: “cogito ergo sum”) right into the advent of modern philosophy and beyond.

The following observations are evident.

First, the metaphysical notion of the subject, traceable back to Aristotle, has been rediscovered by philosophers since the enlightenment. For Descartes and, later, Kant, the *thinking subject* was made the metaphysical ground of the possibility of the world (*res extensa*), and *a fortiori*, of knowledge. This strategy has even gained momentum in the phenomenological tradition since Husserl in the concept of the subject as *Leib* – the subject and ground of experience⁵ – a zero-point of orientation in the world. The result: an autonomous unchanging ego, prevailing over the world, and standing as the ground of all realities, “independent and isolated from the dynamically changing and contingent world around us.”⁶ There is thus a power relationship between the autonomous *thinking self* and the manipulable, subservient world (e.g., the *creation of societies*, and institutions).

Secondly, while the *thinking subject* was understood as a distancing from the world, distance was neither articulated as the essence of thought nor of the inner transcendent dynamic of the human subject (double defects); consider, e.g., Plato’s understanding of thinking as an inner dialogue of the soul. In our opinion, the first has been overcome by “the philosophers of distance” (Max Scheler, Ernst Cassirer, Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen, Heidegger etc., and eminently, Hans Blumenberg). Limiting our scope to Heidegger, Blumenberg and Husserl, we shall see that, first, it is distance which makes thinkable the inherent connection between a plurality of concepts and concept formations (*beings*) from indeterminate *difference (Being)* (Heidegger). Strategic planning, decision-making, simulation or theorization (Blumenberg) and thinking are also possible through distance. However, these leave unattended the question why the experiencing subject transcends himself, remaining, in *experience*, an enigma unto himself. This is where Marc Richir shows that distance becomes an essential interior dynamic of the incomprehensible in the experiencing subject, of thought/sense surpassing thought/sense, which prevents the subject from adhering to his experience. This paper faces the task of substantiating the overcoming of these two defects. Therefore, the following becomes evident: thinking, which for us captures the tension between a determination and an indetermination, is impossible without reflexivity which requires distance as a constitutive precondition. Thus, distance is the basic requirement for the thinking subject and for thinking itself: both practical and abstract.

I will first analyze western philosophical literature⁷ to show that distance is not just proper to man/thought but the most essential form of any living body (2.1 – 2.4). Western philosophy is nothing other than the performance of distance. Secondly, I will justify that abstract and practical thinking of social interaction (e.g., the infant’s interactions with caretakers) and a notion of the self are impossible without an inherent distance. This *via negativa* outlines two phenomena (a. the earliest phase of ontogeny in child development, and b. the notion of God) where distance is absent; consequently, human thought appears absent (3.1 – 3.2). Lastly, I conclude that there might be a correlation between distance and the degree of development of thoughts and subjectivities in different socio-cultural milieus (4.0).

2.1.

In breaking away from traditional metaphysics, Heidegger conceptualized distance (*difference*) in his *Identität und*

Differenz within his criticism of Hegel and Aristotle. According to Heidegger, thinking for Hegel (*Wissenschaft der Logik*) is all about thought as an “absolute idea”, which, in itself, is captured by the concept “Being”. The “indefinite immediacy” of “Being” gives off its self-sufficiency as that thought that thinks itself absolutely.⁸ Being thinking itself (for Heidegger, to have a thoughtful discussion with Hegel, one must speak the same thing with him and in the same way) was termed by Heidegger as the same (*das Gleiche*).

“The same” could serve as a key to unlocking the whole Hegelian system as a locked-in system of circles where all forms of difference and contrariety are absorbed into identity: “The difference disappears in the same”.⁹ *The same* (identity) abrogates all contrarieties, all oppositions. Though Being, as a totality, is related to itself and penetrates all moments “of being”, which it captures in itself as that which is immediate to itself, it however, also contains its differences and determinations in it: “it is therefore directly one with its other, non-being.”¹⁰ In other words, there is no distance in Hegelian *Being*. Thought as *Being* that thinks itself could therefore be summed up as a closed circular circuit or, following Marc Richir, a symbolic institution,¹¹ which makes things unthinkable (*impensables*), since therein to think is to think *Being* as *this* or *that* (*Seiende*). While commenting on Hegel’s *Wissenschaft der Logik* where Hegel asks: “with what should the beginning of science be made?”,¹² Heidegger responds that Hegel’s *science* (*Wissenschaft*) begins with the result (the end). If the beginning of science is God, then in Him science has the *beginning* coinciding with *the end*. Heidegger terms such a science “Theology” (*Theo-Logik*) which with Ontology (*Onto-Logik*) constitute the discipline of Metaphysics.

In contrast to Hegel’s closed circular circuit of thought,¹³ Heidegger proposes another way: “thinking, tentatively named, is difference as difference”.¹⁴ He identifies the *disputing* moment in *Being* as the thing of thought: difference. Thus, we may speak of the *Being of entities* (“*Sein des Seiendes*”) in the *genitive object* and of the *entities of Being* (*Seiende des Seins*) in the *genitive subject*.

Before Heidegger’s difference, Aristotle’s thought of difference must be understood in respect to the same: “But that which differs is different from something else in some respect, so that there must be something which is the same with respect to which there is a difference. And that which is the same is the genus or the species”.¹⁵ For example, we might ask what philosophers in Germany share (*same*). This *sameness* is for Aristotle, the “primary substance”¹⁶ on which their differences are based. But there may be differences between genera. According to Aristotle, these things “are far removed and noncomparable”¹⁷ – since there is no common ground for comparison between genera, (*no sameness*), e.g., we cannot compare the primary substance of philosophers with that of water, difference is unthinkable. To reconcile them, Aristotle posits the idea of the unmoved mover: the *one thing* which makes things thinkable and communicable.¹⁸ “For not to signify one thing is to signify nothing, and if names have no meanings, then discussion with one another, and indeed even with oneself, is eliminated; for it is not possible for anyone to conceive of anything if he does not conceive of one thing and if it is possible, he could then posit one name for this one thing.”¹⁹ Thus, to think difference, in Aristotle, amounts to thinking the identical – being then has to be understood as one, though in different ways.

Heidegger argues against Aristotle’s understanding of beings from the point of view of primary substance *εἶδος* – “as that which can be named and thought in terms of the logic of identity”²⁰). Such a move did not allow Aristotle to think of Being from the point of view of the “presencing of Being” (i.e., Being), but rather from the *point of* “presence of being”²¹ or

presence (as *eidos*). This *eidos* is that which guarantees the logic of identity, each time always in possession of a corresponding terminology (*logos*) which shows *such and such* that can be *named*. This subordination of *eidos* to *logos* is the very thing that made Aristotle incapable of thinking Being as the ground of being. Aristotle was incapable of thinking difference, since Being is that which gathers by way of difference and since it is the ground in view of which the differences of *beings* can be thought without being subordinated to *logos*. Thus, Heidegger's novelty in the Aristotelian enterprise of *thinking being qua being* lies in the ontological difference.

This ontological difference, introduced in *Sein und Zeit*, enables thinking *Being* in difference with an *entity* (being) and conversely. The difference therein is a "revealing-concealing discharge" ("*entbergend-bergende Austrag*"²²) – articulating a tension between a determination and indetermination in thought. In both the *Introduction to Metaphysics* and *Identity as Difference*, Heidegger showed that Being was the most indeterminate generality; it is emptiness and indefiniteness which *overwhelms or overcomes* (*Überkommenis*). But in *being*, the arrival of *Being* is signaled. Perhaps this explains the "obvious contradiction" with regard to *Being*: it is both "definite and completely indefinite."²³ Following Kant's thesis, "Being is not a real predicate",²⁴ the ontological difference, which thinks the difference between Being and being, is not in view of thinking Being in terms of identity as Hegel and Aristotle did, but in view of understanding the reciprocity between the one and the other:

*Being shows itself in the unconcealing overwhelming as that which allows whatever arrives to lie before us, as the grounding in the manifold ways in which beings are brought about before us. Beings as such, the arrival that keeps itself concealed in unconcealedness, is what is grounded; so grounded and so generated, it in turn grounds in its own way, that is, it effects, it causes. The perdurance of that which grounds and that which is grounded, as such, not only holds the two apart, it holds them facing each other. What is held apart is held in the tension of perdurance in such a way that not only does Being ground beings as their ground, but beings in their turn ground, cause Being in their way.*²⁵

In other words, whereas Being grounds being, being for its part causes Being. To think is not to return to the *identical* but to move between the *indeterminate* and the *determinate*, that which grounds (Being) and that which is grounded (being). To think is to realize this distance between an abyss and a conceptual ground of language.

The problem of thought in Heidegger is essentially the fact that Heidegger's *Dasein*, despite the *Mitsein*, is incapable of thought and interaction because it is incapable of distance. After *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger articulated *Dasein* as follows: "And so the human being, as existing transcendence overflowing in possibilities, is a being of the distance".²⁶ Yet, if he succeeded in outlining the ontological difference between *Being* (as *Sein* or *esse*) and *being* (*Seiende* as *ens*, *Dasein* or *existentia*) as an inherent of thought, this should have been realized in *Dasein* (understood as *being* or *existentia*) itself. Is *Dasein* determinate, indeterminate, or between the two? And does it correspond to itself? These questions are beyond what Heidegger set out to answer. We shall see how a phenomenological tradition articulates the distance (of *determination* and *indetermination*) in *Dasein*.

But it is precisely this lack of distance in Heidegger's *Dasein* that makes the matter of thinking unclarifiable in *Being and*

Time. Consider this description of *Dasein*: “[T]he subject of affectivity, *Dasein*, is not a phenomenological but an ontological category, full of existence and empty of interiority and experience.”²⁷ The lack of distance in *Dasein* is expressed in the lack of interiority, the lack of thought, as one given mode of human experience.

For us, thinking articulates this difference (distance) in which an absolute indeterminate subject (Husserl’s zero-point: *Leib*) and a determinate object enter experiential interaction. Thus, there lies a tension between a determination and indetermination in thought/self. Let us name this movement “in between” the thinking self “distance” and let us note that only such an “in-between” (the ontological difference) could ground Aristotle’s difference between primary substance (which is identifiable if we recall the example of the philosophers) as *eidōs* and *beings* (as composite substance if we recall the example in the footnote above, of Descartes, Kant, Hume, Butler, etc.).

2.2.

If thought implies a zigzag from an *indetermination* to a *determination*, and if the essence of *Dasein* lies in this “in between” (distance) of thought, then the question must be posed how such an aspect that is essential in the understanding of *Dasein* could be genetically and phenomenologically reconstructable. How could we overcome the abstract form of distance and move to a more plastic and plausible understanding of the same as given in experience?

Hans Blumenberg’s *Beschreibung des Menschen* demonstrates how, in the “diversity of human performances” and capacities, distance not only plays a central role but also articulates a systematic “functional unit” of the human person.²⁸ He reconstructs a genetic point of departure in the narrative of the stone throw (*Steinwurf*): “Man came into being with a blow, or more precisely: with a throw.”²⁹ According to Blumenberg, this ability is evidence of a *decisive developmental leap*.

Falling back on Herder³⁰ (referring to Arnold Gehlen) Blumenberg defined the human as: “the animal that walks erect.”³¹ The change into the two-legged *homo erectus* corresponds phylogenetically with the transition from the rainforest (a place to hide but also containing close range threats) to the savannah³² where hands were free, and eyes were able to survey the terrain.³³ Thus, the anthropological status of *homo erectus* was constitutive of man in view of distance.

In essence,³⁴ “the answer to the question how a human is possible, could therefore be *through distance*.”³⁵ Integrating distance into his field of action, he becomes that subject of *actio per distans*³⁶ “as a specific radical of the human performance complex.”³⁷ Advantageous possibilities open: risks arising from the terrain could be circumvented, predators detected, and prey hunted.³⁸ Rivals are only capable of action from direct contact. The real enemy is thus the one who can anticipate from a distance.³⁹

Distance enables the development of plans in advance of enemies (e.g., traps, and recently, drones, and chemical and nuclear weapons). Consistent with Paul Alsberg, for Blumenberg, “stone-throwing” is an event which reconstructs the human crypto-genesis.⁴⁰ With this, *thought-charged* strategies are developed, time and energy consuming efforts avoided, and risks reduced. Success comes through coordination, planning, and decision. Requiring communication, language thus emerged among hunters and nomads.⁴¹ Thus, language and thought enjoy a correlation they have in

Wittgenstein's theory of language.⁴²

If the subject of *actio per distans* is thoughtful it is also because, with a wider horizon of the distance before her as the source of anticipation (the localization of personal action in the horizon of possibility⁴³), this implies the weighing of options, hesitation (*Verzögerung*), evaluation, and repeated review (*wiederholte Überprüfung*) of situations rather than being swiftly swayed by the stimulus of perception⁴⁴ and helps avoid premature misinterpretation (*voreilige Fehldeutungen*).⁴⁵ This breeds the capacity for deliberation and decision-making.⁴⁶

As the grasping and throwing of stones emerged as a result from *actio per distans*, we could say that it mediates thoughts and rationality by putting *abstract* thoughts into action (*praxis*). In same way, the use of language mediates reality to grasp (understand) the world. According to Blumenberg, a concept is "the residue of manual intervention in reality".⁴⁷ It follows that the human is that which can abstain from immediacy (*Unmittelbarkeit*⁴⁸), i.e., raw reality. Accordingly, a concept does not need to have the thing, physically (grasped: *zugreifen*), to grasp (comprehend: *begreifen*) it. While abstaining and distancing themselves from things, concepts simulate reality. In *simulation*, *actio per distans* attains its purest form: absence of the thing becomes absolute, its dispensability positive.⁴⁹ We could name this the beginning of theoretical science; the non-present becomes thinkable while the present is negated. In rhetoric (for Blumenberg, a form of simulation), situations and actions are imaginatively anticipated, and emotions stabilized.⁵⁰ Yet, metaphor (a "substructure of thought"⁵¹) is another aspect of language – a not so precise nor determinate aspect, akin to myths. Thus, we might distinguish, in Blumenberg, two ways by which language distances itself from and simulates reality to understand it: the determinate (use of concepts) and the indeterminate (metaphors, non-conceptual). *To think therefore is to move between the metaphorical or non-conceptual (indeterminate) and the conceptual (determinate).*

In sum, a new form of experience of the self and the other appeared simultaneously with the evolutionary leap of *actio per distans*. Yet while thinking distance *phylogenetically*, Blumenberg was unable to think it *phenomenologically*, in experience. Besides, distance is not articulated from the point of view of an interior dynamic borne in an experiencing subject. Consequently, the self-transcendence of the human person in the experience of thought, lacking in Heidegger, has not been attended to.

2.3.

The thesis that distance sums up the human can be confirmed using Husserl's phenomenology in the idea of self-constitution through empathy (*Einfühlung*). Later we shall see that the double movement generated by empathy in an intersubjective encounter (where distance plays an essential role) could help us understand the nature of thought as reflexive.

In *Ideen*, from §18 onwards, Husserl dealt with the possibility of being able to reach "'objective' nature" for both the "solipsistic" and "intersubjective level of experience". He writes: "The solipsistic subject could not conceive of itself as a member of nature, could not apperceive itself as a psychophysical subject, as an animal, as happens at the intersubjective level of experience."⁵² Lacking the distance that leads to a reflexive movement, neither the solipsistic self,

nor the "primordial body" is able to arrive at the "objective nature" of the "I-human"⁵³ (*Ich-Mensch*), a unity of the mental and the physical (*Leib-Körper*). According to Husserl, this is only given to an intersubjective subject of experience, because only there can the psychic I (the spirit) "be the animation of an objective body"⁵⁴ — one's own I-act linked to one's own body (*Leib*).

In an intersubjective encounter, the perceptual objects of all subjects are given in an identically primordial presence (*urpräsenz*) — i.e., in "original presence", "in the original", so that I experience "bodies facing me [...]" like other things in primordial presence". But different from the primal presence,⁵⁵ I experience the interiority of the soul — and not the subjects as objects of perception — in *a-presence* or *Appräsenz*⁵⁶ (psychic self). Thus, there is a distance between the two main ways of encountering a person.

If Husserl thinks that the attitude of self-experience (i.e., solipsism) cannot bring about the linking of the psychic (the ego acts, one's own appearances and the associated sensation data) with one's body (*Leib*), then it is precisely because empathy (introjection) — arising from distance — is missing. In empathy, the other is apperceived as a mode of appearance of "*being there*": "I don't simply apperceive the other as a duplicate of myself, i.e., with my or an identical original sphere, including with the spatial modes of appearance that are peculiar to me from my here, *but, on closer inspection, with such as I would have myself in the same way if I went there and were there.*"⁵⁷ Empathy therefore occurs in the mode of *difference* or *distance* between where I am (determination) and where I could be (indetermination). Psychoanalysis claims that the infant cannot yet differentiate between itself and the world (e.g., the mother's breast; here and there). So, for many psychoanalysts (Freud, Winnicott, etc.) the self has not yet been constituted. Thus, distance is required for the self (e.g., the infant) to apperceive the other.

Distance is at the heart of empathy (introjection), through which I not only apperceive the other, but also through which my mental life (experiences) can be linked with my body. Empathy is not to be confused with self-apperception. Distance applies not only to one's own inner and outer body, but also to the self (here) and the other (there). With Husserl, however, empathy has no genetic priority in one's own body. First and foremost, it concerns the distance to the other:

*But in the attitude of "self-experience" [sic: solipsism] it would never occur to me to seriously "introject" all my psyche, my ego, my acts, including my appearances with their sensory data, etc. into my body. Nor is there any talk of the fact that in solipsistic self-experience I find all my subject matter [Subjektives] with my perceptually (sic) given body as one reality, namely in the form of a perception, although my body has such a diverse unity with the subjective. Only with the empathy and with the constant direction of the observation of experience on the soul life made present with the foreign body (mit dem fremden Leib) and constantly taken objectively together with the body (sic: Leib) does the closed unity human being constitute itself, and I transfer this further to myself.*⁵⁸

Empathy (introjection), which first affects the soul life of the other, is made present (*appresented*) with her body and thus, empathy connects the apperceived experiences of the other (interiority) with the foreign body — his living body with his

physical body.⁵⁹ Thus, for Husserl the human person – an interweaving of psychic experiences and the physical body, i.e., intimacy and exteriority – cannot be constituted outside an intersubjective encounter via empathy penetrated with distance (see Donald Winnicott's sufficiently good mother) yet he understands the *human person as a unity*.

2.4.

Despite the unity thesis, Husserl speaks elsewhere of the interlocking between *Aussenleib* und *Innenleib*. We, however, follow Richir; *there is no complete unity* – neither from *the other* nor from *the self* – because there is an unavoidable distance between interiority and exteriority in subjectivity: “incarnation plays just as much as the necessary distance - gap or originary spatialization - of myself, between my *Innenleiblichkeit* and my *Aussenleiblichkeit*”.⁶⁰ Or rather, there is an unavoidable gap in the unity between the psychic body (*Leib*) and the physical body (*Körper*) of the alien subject. Thus, there is a distance between one's own inner body (*Innenleiblichkeit*) and one's own outer body (*Außenleiblichkeit*).⁶¹

The apparent unity of human life is the coherence we create with stories we tell ourselves, true or not. To say that there is an absolute unity in between is to say that each self can be mastered as a unit – *the other* given to us as a whole. Only the other's body (as a thing) is given to me in *presence*. Their inner bodily appearance is not given “in the original”.⁶² Hans Blumenberg would say that we could simulate it, i.e., make a theory out of it. From experience, this unity is only partially coherent: the other sometimes surprises us, given the *difference* between our view and the other's view of herself. In every personal experience of others there remains a gap that brings with it a psychic (*leiblich*) and mimetic tension. This tension rests on an indeterminacy that Richir's *Phantasia*⁶³ can attest to.⁶⁴ Thus, we either fill in the *distance* created by the incomplete or intertwined unity of psychic body (*Leib*) and physical body (*Körper*) directly and immediately via the *phantasia* or indirectly through the models of *Leib* and *Körper* created by the imagination. It is precisely in this *mimetic distance* that the self is apperceived as a whole (*Leib-Körper*)⁶⁵.

So, let's call this the “first movement”: It is “empathizing with the other” and experiences the other as a fragmented unity (*Leib-Körper*). Only then can I transfer the incomplete and fragmented unity of the body (*Leib-Körper*) of the other to myself. Only then can I transfer my own I-acts, sensation data, etc. to my body and apperceive myself as an incomplete unity.

This incomplete unity of my own body (*Leib-körper*) is seen in my inability to organize my experiences completely for myself. In fact, I connect my hunger, aching limbs, tiredness, or even my remembering with my body (*Körper*) by means of self-reflection, whereby this body (*Körper*), which is supposed to be mine, is not given to me “originally” like the body (*Körper*) of the other person and like my mental and psychic experiences are “originally” given to me. If the inside and outside body exclude each other, then the *zero point of self is therefore at a distance to the self*.⁶⁶ Therefore, even in the constitution (running through the transference) of the unity of my psychic and material body, we argue for a fragmented unity. I cannot transfer my psychic experiences to my physical body with the certainty of an absolute givenness “in original” (in both directions). While inner appearances are given immediately, outer appearances are not. I also have unconscious ego acts, experiences, and sensations. I have neither mastered the other, nor myself; I keep surprising

myself. If Husserl argues that the unity of the other as a *Leibkörper* is transferred to me, then so, consequently, is the incomplete unity of the *Leib-Körper*. If there is a tension in empathizing (introjecting) with the other, then this tension and distance must be transferred to me. Let us call this the "second movement": It is a self-reference (return to the self) and experiences itself as an incomplete unit (*Leib-Körper*) which signals a symbolically instituted self – the fragmentation of the self, demonstrating that all such symbolical institutions contain a point of indeterminacy. Let us call the two movements (apperception of the other via empathy and a return to the self as self-reference) centripetal and centrifugal movements.⁶⁷

But for us, crucially, this bodily dynamic movement in both directions arises from the affective inevitable distance – or what Richir calls a misalignment (*porte-à-faux*⁶⁸) between the other (as *Leib-körper*) and one's *Leib-Körper*s. This is a primal element in the formation of sense⁶⁹: unavoidable distance, without which there would be no movement overcoming the solipsistic experience to constitute the self.

With the centripetal and centrifugal movement, a self-relationship arises. The self can *rise out of itself* in order to *return back to itself* again. What are the consequences? It is only through this empathizing with the other and regaining a connection to oneself that the psychic body can understand itself as an absolute "here" (a zero point), based on which a "there" is conceivable. This means that without the double movements in both directions, articulating a distance between a *here* and a *there*, the self (and *a fortiori* self-experience) would remain impossible. Royce wrote that "Self-conscious functions are all of them ... social functions, due to habits of social intercourse."⁷⁰ We see this too in Althusser's account of the constitution of the subject from the authoritative and moral voice of the police: a passerby turned round and recognized himself as the "*there*" called by the police's "*here*": "By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject".⁷¹ The institution of a "here" and a "there" corresponds with the institution of the *Leib-Körper*, of the self.

Furthermore, this to-and-fro from oneself and back implies a "reflexivity" (thinking in the classical sense) related to the formation of meaning.

If the *Leib-Körper* corresponds to the symbolically instituted self (Richir), the *Leib* corresponds more to this phenomenological self *thrown into* and given in experience ahead of any institution. This means that *Leib* excludes a *doxa*, a "what" (*quid*) as it remains the invisible of an invisible⁷² but attestable to in the most primitive base of experience where everything happens "in distances (as nothing of space and time) and distances of distances."⁷³ This distance – as nothing of space and time – as that which is "unfathomable" (*insondable*) and "elusive" (*insaisissable*) is that "other thing", "the split in the ego"⁷⁴ that is found in us. It is different from every other thing which we could capture as a human content. Besides, it is not just different from that distance articulated by Heidegger: "Only through original distances, which he forms in his transcendence to all beings, does the true closeness to things increase in him".⁷⁵ This Heideggerian distance is *forged by Dasein* himself; so, it is not a *distance in Dasein* as explicated by Richir. Through this later we are confronted with the questions of birth and death, from a transcendental past and a transcendental future – Richir attests to the fact that this transcendental dimension of distance (both in Heidegger and Richir, distance of *Dasein* points to transcendence) has contained a theological resonance since classical philosophy. This distance constitutes the incomprehensible in us and, for Richir, the incomprehensible "is the fact that we humans never completely adhere to our experience",⁷⁶ to the

point that this experience would only be a “mental behaviour” or an “animal behaviour of thought.”⁷⁷ In other words, humans correspond neither to themselves nor to their experiences, so that what we call experiences are simple simulations (thoughts, mental activities, etc.) to fill in the gap of human incomprehensibility. The transcending moment of the distance in us remains indeterminate: it determines nothing, the determinations come from us.⁷⁸ The only attestation to this transcendence of inscrutable distance resides, according to Richir, in our “non-adherence to our life and our experience”.⁷⁹ In other words, the human person does not correspond to his life as he is not equated to his experience on a one-to-one level. Rather, the human person becomes and remains, following Augustine, a question unto himself (“*quaestio mihi factus sum*”⁸⁰). He becomes, so to speak, incomprehensible (as thought upon thought) by thought itself that strives to grasp it.

Here we find ourselves at the register of the *language* phenomenon which carries some senses that are in the making. Sense in the making, thought against thought, refers to those thoughts, feelings and ideas that emerge beyond concepts each time we think of something we cannot yet fully grasp. Beyond being non-positional they are evasive because they transcend thought (or better, thought transcend itself). Sense in the making could be understood as an enigma of thought “because on the one hand I embody it and on the other hand it escapes me”.⁸¹ This distance (the incomprehensible in us) borne at the dynamic and zero-point of the experiencing subject explicates why the human person in experience (of thought) remains an enigma to himself.

If we have established that distance makes the inherent connection between plurality of concepts and concept formation (beings) from indeterminate difference (Being) (Heidegger), strategic planning, decision-making, simulation, theorization (Blumenberg) or thinking, self-constitution and the enigmatic character of the experiencing subject possible, then the next challenge for us is to provide attestations to this. I follow a *via negativa*, i.e., an examination of two phenomena (a. the earliest phase of ontogeny in child development, and b. the notion of God) where distances are absent.

3.1.

The psychoanalytical thesis which claims that infants, initially in their ontogenetic history, are unable to discriminate between the self and world attests to the idea that thinking and effective interaction require a distance. Newborns’ relative indifference to their environment, according to William James,⁸² indicates that their experience is characterized by an “original blooming buzzing confusion”⁸³ or, according to Piaget, “synesthesia”: a confusion of the senses. This undifferentiated view has always been debated. Assoun hinted that we should first ask “how, departing from an undifferentiated ‘I-feeling’ (*Ichgefühl*), the separation happens of an ‘inside’ and its ‘outside’?”⁸⁴ Freud saw no distinction for the newborn: responses to displeasure, both exogenous and endogenous, remain the same. Only later, with the repulsion and detachment from outside displeasure, does the ego seem to be able to recognize “an outside”.⁸⁵ This is consistent with the idea that the self is not initially self-evident. The undifferentiated symbiosis or union between child (subject) and mother (object (Winnicott, Mahler, etc.)) precedes the differentiation called the self:⁸⁶ a transitional space.⁸⁷

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, familiar with child psychology (Piaget) and with the thesis of Freud, Melanie Klein, Henri Wallon, Gustave Guillaume, Antoine Grégoire, etc., has, in his work “*phenomenology of perception*”, traces of the psychoanalytic

thesis. Though repeatedly ascribing subjectivity to the child – capable of intersubjectivity⁸⁸ – he then tends to differentiate between the child's and the adult's experience: the sensations are related to one another via the body bound together. The child cannot distinguish⁸⁹ the contents of the different senses (Piaget's *synesthesia*). Helena de Preester has claimed that for Merleau-Ponty "experience starts with interoception and the neonate does not have the ability of external perception. External perception is rather vague."⁹⁰ Elsewhere, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a first and second stage in the child's relationship to others. The first stage is pre-communication – an anonymous collectivity, which he calls group existence. Here, individual consciousness and objectification of one's own body are not yet evident because the *distance to* and *the distinction between* the other and the self⁹¹ has not yet taken place. All this is realized in the second stage. Besides, in *The Visible and The Invisible*, the child's *perception precedes thinking*, his dreams projected into things and thoughts into others – thus, a block of common life is formed in which perspectives remain indistinguishable.⁹²

Because thinking in the classical sense is absent, psychologists, anthropologists, psychoanalysts, and phenomenologists speak instead of "proto-conversations" (Mary Catherin Bateson), "pre-speech" (Colwyn Trevarthen), an "undifferentiated we" (Psychoanalyse), "transitional space" (Donald Winnicott), "transcendental interfacticity" (Marc Richir). Remaining in this latter example, we can see that in this initial phase, which gives rise to hallucinatory experiences (Richir) or to illusions,⁹³ thought remains impossible. However, this phase can be transformed into lively exchanges, *i.e.*, into language phenomena⁹⁴ (*phénomènes de langage*) which is the most basic phase for the development of thought and meaning. So, via the transitional area (Winnicott) and with the aid of a sufficiently good mother,⁹⁵ children will be able to develop a *thought inherent distance* that moves them away from the illusion which sees everything, including their mother's breast as an extension of themselves, thereby developing a sense of self and the capacity to think of themselves as separate from the world.

3.2.

If reflexivity, interaction and thought remain excluded from the phenomenon of "God" then this is primarily because of the lack of distance in the same phenomenon. I have described the way in which Being thinks itself (as an "absolute idea") as *the same* (*das Gleiche*): "a closed circular circuit" or a "symbolical institution" where all distinctions and differences are included in this same universal.⁹⁶ Theology, as noted above, is that science which *begins* with the result (the *end*).

The above corresponds to the classical metaphysical understanding of God. For instance, Anselm of Canterbury's ontological proof takes the indubitable existence of God in "reality" from existence in "understanding", where actuality corresponds to possibility. From being that than which nothing greater can be thought (*quo nil maius valet cogitar*)⁹⁷ – *i.e.*, from essence – follows existence. God acquires the status of the limit of thought – to think the most universal is to think God, for one would have elevated himself beyond the sensual and feeling to the region of thought.⁹⁸ In the concept "God" human understanding cannot stretch further since there is no differentiation in him – his being is auto-determining. God, as Hegel says, is the only Being that exists through its very being. Some of the formulations found in Hegel and Anselm concretize this: "all proceed from him and return to him", "self-contained who is in absolute unity with himself", "spirit essentially with itself" (*wesentlich bei sich seiende Geist*), "this pure relation to oneself, the absolute being and staying

with oneself”,⁹⁹ “existing by itself alone” (*solum existens per seipsum*)¹⁰⁰.

God, coinciding with himself, implies a lack of distance (difference). The implication: God is not a thinking being, incapable of changes (regret, new conclusions, solutions, or answers). The thoughts of God coincide with his acts, eliminating the distance between abstract thinking and practical thinking and making a reflexivity between a here and there impossible.

Theology accepts the didactic method’s lack of distance and conformity between beginning and end: “What is thus said at the beginning must then be said identically at the end”.¹⁰¹ For Falque, this conformity renders all theological problems (or questions) solved in advance.¹⁰² The theological method seems, then, to be founded in itself; it gives an air of self-sufficiency.¹⁰³ In contrast, Falque described the philosophical method as “heuristic” which requires a non-conformity of the beginning and end of the reflective act. The philosophical attitudes of wonder¹⁰⁴ (Thales, Plato, Aristotle) and doubt (Descartes) attest to this infinite open-endedness. Whereas theology (for Heidegger) focuses on Revelation (*Offenbarung*) which does not thematize human thought, philosophy is that science in which revealedness (*Offenbarkeit*) of the phenomena becomes topic.¹⁰⁵ In essence, philosophy is an adventure of thought in its most poignant radicality.

4. Conclusions

Here, I have tried to establish that without the concept of distance, it would be difficult to conceptualize thoughts and their formations as ideas or senses (indetermination), eventually requiring linguistic concepts (determination). Thus, I have described thinking as a zig-zag movement (reflexivity) between an indetermination and determination. If it is true that distance plays a strong role in the formation of thoughts, ideas and concepts, and is crucial in distinguishing between adults, neonates and supra-human beings (angels, God), then could there also be a correlation between distance and the degree of development of thoughts or subjectivities in different socio-cultural milieus? Is a linguistic group’s capacity to make fine differentiations in its grammatical resources indicative of the richness of its world views, philosophical capacities, or its level of progress in science/technology? Could the consciousness of distance be indicative of the subject’s sense of autonomy and its self-understanding as groupist/collective/anonymous? Could a strong sense of distance impact on the different ways individuals approach the world? And could these different approaches not directly or indirectly impact on the individual’s sense of progress-oriented approach in the world? These are questions that go far beyond our present resources and ability but are reserved for an interdisciplinary community of experts from different fields. However, they seem, all the more, to attest to the plausibility of our thesis. And to all the above questions I hypothesize that a *weak* (groupist or collective subjectivities) vs. an *acute* (individualistic or autonomous subjectivities) sense of distance will correspond respectively to simple and complex societal structures largely due to the non-complexities and complexities in the exercise of thought.

Funding and/or Competing interests

No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript and the author has no competing interests to

declare that are relevant to the content of this article

Footnotes

¹ Kant (1998, p. 18).

² Berger (1966).

³ Plato (1856, 189e).

⁴ Aristotle (1956, III 4-8).

⁵ Mansfield (2000, p. 15).

⁶ Waldron (2003, p. 146).

⁷ I explicitly reference western philosophy to differentiate the “autonomous self” or “thinking” from “collective subjectivity” or “thinking” as evident, e.g., in *Ubuntu philosophy*. According to Desmond Tutu, “*ubuntu* does not say, ‘I think, therefore I am.’ It says rather: ‘I am human because I belong. I participate. I share’” (Tutu 2004, p. 27).

⁸ Heidegger (2006, pp. 54-55).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁰ “Es ist daher unmittelbar eins mit seinem Andern, dem *Nichtseyn*,” Hegel (2006, p. 38).

¹¹ By symbolic institution, Richir understands the dimension of the determinateness of experience insofar as it is given to us, as practice or human representations which are always already encoded.

¹² “Womit muss der Anfang der Wissenchaft gemacht werden?” (Hegel 1812, p. 1).

¹³ “For Hegel, the thing about thinking is thought as the absolute concept” Heidegger (2006, p. 56).

¹⁴ “Für uns ist die Sache des Denkens, vorläufig benannt, die *Differenza/s Differenz*” (*Ibid.* p. 56).

¹⁵ Aristotle (1979, 1054b 26-28).

¹⁶ The primary substance according to Aristotle is not generated and is opposed to matter which has the potentiality to be or not (Aristotle 1979, 10330b16-20). Primary substances are non-composite, even though they could be the basis of composite substances (e.g., philosophers such as Descartes, Kant, Hume, Butler etc.). The difference between them might then lie in their material composition. In substance they are primarily the same. The primary substances are therefore the actualities which are “prior to every principle of change” and “to potency”, as they are without matter themselves (Aristotle 1979, 1051a 4).

¹⁷ Aristotle (1979, 1055a27).

¹⁸ Bell (2006, p. 124).

¹⁹ Aristotle (1979, 1006b8-12).

²⁰ Bell (2006, p. 127).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Heidegger (2006, p. 71).

²³ Heidegger (2000, p. 82 [59]).

²⁴ Heidegger's contestation about the identification of Being in the context of the ontological difference resonates with Kant's thesis, "From the impossibility of an ontological proof of God's Existence" (Kant 1998, p. 668ff). Kant refutes the *minor premise* of Anselm of Canterbury's ontological proof, while leaving the *major premise* and the *conclusion* untouched. According to Heidegger, Kant refutes the minor premise because Being (Dasein, Existence) is not a real predicate. This amounts to refuting the ontological claim which wanted to derive existence (*Being*) from the concept of God (Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975 (1989 second edition), p. 39). Heidegger explicates the Kantian thesis: "Being" is not a real predicate means it is no predicate of a *res*...but a position...it is not a predicate of a thing (*Ding*)" (Heidegger 1975, *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 50). I.e., Being is not a determination (identity) as the history of western metaphysics (onto-theology) has it. However, Heidegger criticizes Kant for failing to differentiate between Being and *being*: "Zwischen Sein überhaupt und Dasein wird zunächst nicht unterschieden" whereby *Dasein* represents, for Kant and the ancients, "being" or the modus of being of natural things (*Ibid.*, p. 43; see also p. 36).

²⁵ Heidegger (1969, pp. 68-69).

²⁶ Heidegger (1976, p. 175; *Cf.* 1978, p. 285).

²⁷ Ekweariri (2021, p. 66)

²⁸ Blumenberg (2006, p. 570).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 582.

³⁰ Cf: Herder (1784, p. 98): "The form of man is erect; in this he is unique on earth." According to Aristotle (*De Patribus Animalium*), whom Herder cited, man walks erect because of his divine nature.

³¹ Blumenberg (2006, p. 518).

³² Blumenberg (2007, p. 10).

³³(Mengert 2015, p. 111).

³⁴ According to Blumenberg (with the league of anthropologists such as Scheler, Cassirer, Plessner, Gehlen, etc.). See Recki (2020, p. 5).

³⁵ Blumenberg (2006, p. 570).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 592.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 575.

³⁸ Mengert (2015, p. 112).

³⁹ Blumenberg (2006, p. 518).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 581.

⁴¹ Blumenberg (2007, p. 10).

⁴² For Wittgenstein, thought (thinking) and language were apparently the same and the former served as a vehicle for the latter (Wittgenstein 2009, § 330-329).

⁴³ Blumenberg (2006, p. 593).

⁴⁴ To act from distance, the preconditions of a conceptual system, of calculating powers, gaining of time and time lag (hesitation) become essential and the discarding of the animalistic spontaneous reaction (overhasty and thoughtless) in favor of a hesitating and conscious reflection from which rationality emerges.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 556-557.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 558-559.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 599. We might imagine that the leap to *homo erectus* brought some insecurities to man who now could look into the distance with its looming horizons. This might have motivated man to begin to pose questions to himself. This might have been the origin of theory using concepts of language.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 600.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 614.

⁵¹ Blumenberg (1998, p. 13).

⁵² Husserl (1952, p. 90).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁵⁵ This term refers to the perception of material things, e.g., the body. The primordial presence differs from that determination of interiority that is given in apperception through a reflective awareness of the inner content in *a-presence* (*Appräsens*). See Janke (1971). But apperception presupposes empathy or introjection. For a detailed analysis see Liangkang (2015).

⁵⁶ Husserl develops a different word, *a-presence* (*Appräsens*), for the mode of givenness of the inner determinations of subjects in front of the ego. Interiority, unlike perceptual objects, is not given for several subjects in primal presence (Husserl 1952, p.163).

⁵⁷ Husserl (1995, p. 120); my italics.

⁵⁸ Husserl (1952, p. 167); my italics.

⁵⁹ According to Richir, if Husserl speaks of *Aussenleib*, then we must understand this only in terms of language phenomenon (sense), as an expression of the psychic body (*Innenleib*). But if we speak, instead of an *Aussenleib*, a physical body, then the dimension of sense is not the focus. (Richir, 2017, p. 36).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

⁶² Richir (2004, p. 280).

⁶³ For Richir, the phantasy (as such) captures the non-representational, objectless, archaic and wild (*sauvage*) dimension of the “symbolical institution of imagination” (*institution symbolique de l’imagination*). In §18 of Hua XXIII, we read for instance of what Husserl called “richly passive phantasies” (*reichlich, passive Phantasien*) which, for Richir, is not yet activated through a transposition into intentional imagination. Husserl (1980). Cf. Marc Richir (2000, p. 85).

⁶⁴ This indeterminacy can be traced back to models attempting to determine it through capturing the imagination. The imagination is equipped with the intentionality that targets the *Bildobjekt* (mental image) in which the *Bildsujet* (object itself mediated by the mental image) is simultaneously given.

⁶⁵ The dash (–) marks for us this inevitable gap in the constitution and experience of the other whose outside and his inside seem to be mutually exclusive. Based on the *phantasia-affections*, they unite again, or this unity is simulated by the imagination (phantom corporeality).

⁶⁶ Richir (2004, pp. 280-281).

⁶⁷ See Fazakas (2020, p. 33).

⁶⁸ Richir (2017, p. 39).

⁶⁹ Sense refers to the most inchoate and indeterminate dimension of meaning.

⁷⁰ Royce (1898, p. 196).

⁷¹ Althusser (1971, p. 74). *Cf.* Butler (1997, p. 5).

⁷² Richir (2006b, pp. 270-271).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

⁷⁴“Every ego is split, always. When there is no more division [Spaltung], there is no more ego” (Comte-Sponville 2008, p. 199).

⁷⁵ Heidegger (1976, p. 175).

⁷⁶“L’incompréhensible... est le fait que nous, hommes, n’adhérons jamais complètement à notre expériences” (Richir 2006b, p. 328).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

⁷⁸“la transcendance ... ne détermine rien, que les déterminations viennent de nous” (*Ibid.*, p. 329).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 329

⁸⁰ Heidegger (2010, p. 130).

⁸¹ Richir (2006a, p. 96-97).

⁸² James (1890).

⁸³ Rochat (2018).

⁸⁴ De Preester (2002, p. 212), *Cf.* Assoun (1989, p. 45).

⁸⁵ Assoun, 1989, *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁸⁶ *Cf.* Kaniel (2022).

⁸⁷ The transitional space (between subject and object) is indispensable to experience, enabling the transition from illusion to objective perception (disillusionment). To achieve autonomy, the infant must be freed from the illusion is that the breast is part of himself and thus requires the *gaze* of (a sufficiently good) mother.

⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1966, p. 410ff).

⁸⁹ Merleau-Ponty (2001, pp. 145-146, 148).

⁹⁰ De Preester (2002, p. 217).

⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 248).

⁹² Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 27).

⁹³ The illusion arises from the assumption, “that there is an external reality that corresponds to the infant’s own capacity to create”. I.e., the infant behaves as though the mother’s breast, or the external environment were part of it. The child’s cries are a reaction to the frustration of this assumption (Winnicott 2005, p. 16).

⁹⁴ Richir’s notion of “phénomène de langage” aims to articulate meaning that is more original than language itself – “original” not in the sense of a metaphysical presupposition, e.g., *Arche* (αρχή). The language phenomenon marks a constant adventure of the senses in search of linguistic expressions, not being characterized by telos (τέλος).

⁹⁵ A good mother’s work is to introduce distance, arising as a delay to natural exigencies (the infant’s demand for attention, breast-milk etc.), gently pulling the infant away from the illusion: “The good-enough ‘mother’ [...] is one who makes active adaptation to the infant’s needs, an active adaptation that gradually lessens, according to the infant’s growing ability to [...] tolerate the results of frustration” (Winnicott 2005, p. 14). Without this adaptation, “it is not possible for the infant to begin to develop a capacity to experience a relationship to ... or even to form a conception of external reality” (*ibid.*, p. 14).

⁹⁶ Hegel (1832).

⁹⁷ Anselm (1984).

⁹⁸ Hegel (1832, p. 52).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 49-51.

¹⁰⁰ Anselm (1984).

¹⁰¹ Falque (2013, p. 155).

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Kneer (2015, p. 357).

¹⁰⁴ Recently Espen Dahl has described wonder in terms of a transitional space of “an unresolved tension between the familiar and the strange” (Dahl 2019, p. 57).

¹⁰⁵ Welz (2013, p. 453).

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