

Abstract

What can field philosophy be? Nombre de philosophes, de Socrate à William James en passant par Leibniz ont mené des enquêtes et constitué ce qu'on appelle aujourd'hui en sciences sociales, des « terrains ». Comment pouvons-nous hériter d'eux ? Et quelle est notre spécificité, comme philosophes, par rapport aux pratiques des sciences humaines et sociales ? A partir d'une expérience de terrain qui a remis en cause les routines usuelles de l'enquête, et notamment la pratique de l'anonymat, cet article propose de réfléchir à ce que ces routines ont comme effet à la fois sur les personnes enquêtées et sur le savoir produit avec elles. Ce geste de remise en cause qui oblige à adopter d'autres manières de s'adresser à la situation conduit l'enquêteur philosophe à considérer son enquête comme une véritable expérimentation, et soumet alors cette dernière à l'obligation de se penser comme une pratique créatrice. A l'analyse, on se rend compte que ce n'est toutefois pas le propre de l'enquête philosophique, mais que c'est la dimension essentielle de toute enquête, que le scientifique la revendique explicitement ou qu'il tente au contraire de la minimiser pour faire de son enquête une copie de la réalité qu'il prétend révéler.

Many philosophers, from Socrates to William James or Leibniz, have conducted inquiries and constituted what is now called in social sciences, "fields". How can we inherit from them? And what is our specificity, as philosophers, in relation to the practices of the human and social sciences? Based on a field experience that questioned the usual routines of the inquiry, and in particular the practice of anonymity, this article proposes to think about how these routines have some effects both on the people surveyed, and on the knowledge produced with or upon them. This gesture of questioning the practices which forces us to adopt other ways of addressing the situation leads the philosopher inquirer to consider his investigation as a real experiment, and thus it subjects the inquirer to the obligation to think of inquiry as a creative practice. On analysis, one realizes that it is not however proper to the philosophical inquiry, but that it is the essential dimension of any them, be that the scientist explicitly claims it or that she tries on the contrary to minimize to make her inquiry a copy of the reality she claims to reveal.

Keywords

Philosophical inquiry, anonymity, social sciences, asymmetry, ethics of inquiry

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Récits de ceux qui restent, Paris, La découverte, 2015.) Some of her work has been translated in English: *Our emotional Makeup*, (Other Press, 2004); *What would the animals say if we asked the right questions ?*, (Minnesota University Press, 2016 ; translated by Brett Buchanan), and with Isabelle Stengers, *Women who make a fuss. The unfaithful daughters of Virginia Woolf*, (Minnesota University Press, 2014 ; translated by April Knutson).

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Out of The Books: Field Philosophy

What can field philosophy be? The first step in asking this question might be to subordinate it to another one, a question that is familiar to philosophers: from whom should we inherit our practices, and how? Philosophers have for a long time conducted inquiries in a manner that is relatively close to the one that defines a field enquiry. Let us think about Socrates and his alleged epistemo-sociological enquiry, asking people what they know and how they think. I am probably committing the sin of anachronism, however I would suggest that Socrates, in doing what he did the way that he did, inaugurated the typical gesture we recognize as the hallmark of most social scientists today, what Martin Savransky calls the “ethics of estrangement.”¹ The ethics of estrangement, Savransky argues, characterizes the epistemology of most social sciences, as “a method of inquiry that consists in *becoming estranged* from the realm of appearances made available by direct experience in order *to gain access* to a realm of facts and causes.”² This ethics of estrangement is the translation, into the field of social sciences, of the bifurcation of nature that Alfred North Whitehead denounced: “the bifurcation of nature involves a mode of understanding whereby experience only discloses that which is apparent, whereas the ‘relevant’ factors in the process of knowing the world must always lie, and be sought, somewhere else.”³

This particular form of epistemic and ethical bifurcation, which is well-established in the social sciences, led many investigators to define their work as the search for the hidden “causes” underlying the conduct of actors (often under the notion of beliefs). This ethics of estrangement would take the form, in Socrates’ case, of a judgment: you claim you know, you think you know, but this thinking and this knowing should be declared illegitimate; or, to put it in a nutshell, “you think you know, but actually, you don’t know and you don’t *think*.” Which is in a sense perfectly right: Socrates did not ask the people he addressed to think, or more precisely, he created a device that inhibits thinking and produced only mental paralysis. In all fairness I cannot claim that the human sciences repeat this Socratic discourse, but the effect of neutralizing thought seems nevertheless quite similar. Albeit by different devices. On the one hand, investigators rarely ask the question of how the people they interview might be interested in the questions addressed to them. And for good reason: most of the time people, quite rightly, will not be interested. On the other hand, if they were, not only could they question the relevance of these questions, but moreover, if they do not question the relevance, their answers could be considered as “biases”: “these people are not representative of common sense, because they are *interested!*”

But another device, largely unquestioned, seems to me still more at work: that of anonymity. It is very difficult to question this practice, since its motive is to protect the

¹ Savransky, Martin, *The Adventure of Relevance: An Ethics of Social Inquiry*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016.

² Ibid., p.15

³ Ibid., p.15.

people being questioned. Consequently, to hear sociologists or psychologists who defend its use, the investigator guarantees at the same time a certain “truth” of the speech, a certain authenticity of the account: people might be afraid of the consequences of what they could say, and thus hide things from the interviewer, or even lie, depending on these consequences. The old positivist dream of a truth uninfected by the conditions of inquiry and the imperative of deontology reinforce each other here, to the point of diverting attention from the issues underlying or accompanying these choices of practices.

Since the official necessity under which the practice of anonymity operates (that is, to protect people) does not occur so much on the outside, it occurs mostly inside the relationship between the investigator and the respondent. To put it simply: the practice of anonymity distributes expertise, and builds, induces, or performs an asymmetry of roles.

What seems obvious to me today, however, did not immediately emerge as a logical consequence of the critical analyses that I addressed to social science practitioners. It was because anonymity was proving, in particular circumstances, to be a real problem and was putting me in difficulty that I began to question the imperatives that generally guide research. At the origin of this story, it was a matter of conducting an investigation. It turned out to be, from the outset, very difficult. We – the sociologist Antoinette Chauvenet and I – had to evaluate the effects of a therapeutic program of support for refugee families in camps from the region of Split in the former Yugoslavia. The war was not over, and the conditions of life in the camps, we realized, seemed to prolong without end the work of destruction. And I was often wondering whether this inquiry itself was not part of this process. I'm afraid that in some ways, at least in the early days, that this was indeed the case. Still, I tried desperately to find a solution to this problem.

The story around which this reversal of perspective took place therefore happened many years ago now, in a refugee camp. I found myself in front of a man in his 60s, a Muslim farmer originally from a village near Travnik, Bosnia. He was a magnificent gentleman with glowing white hair and even brighter blue eyes. We had accomplished almost every step: I had introduced myself, I had guaranteed anonymity, and we had discussed the topics that guided my investigation. I found myself in front of him and I carefully noted down in my notebook his words, as translated by the translator. He spoke to me at this stage of the conversation about the disappearance of his brother.

At that moment, he grabbed the pen I was holding and said, “You see, that's what we've been. You can take this pen and write with it. Those who do politics have written with us. They did not take their sons to play with and send them to war. They took our sons and wrote the war with them. We are but specks of dust in this story.” He stopped talking. All I could do was stay silent, and I saw that the translator was as perplexed and moved as me. What to do with his beautiful words? Who would dare copy the words of a poet by simply saying, “a poet said”? What this gentleman did was an act of resistance: taking my pen was not trivial. He resisted very politely, very kindly, and left me the leisure to interpret it as such, or not to understand, his resistance to being a “subject of investigation.”

So, to get out of the perplexity, or more precisely to do something about it, I explained to him: “your words are so beautiful that they cannot belong to me. We did all of our research ensuring the anonymity of the people we were interviewing, because we

thought it might give them confidence and protect them, and I'm wondering today if we were right to do so. We wanted to protect those who bear witness, but I think we should have let them choose, and leave the question open. Many of those I met told us that the sense of the loss of dignity was magnified by the fact that they were called, every one of them, 'you, the refugees,' like an anonymous mass marked with an identity that they had not chosen, and from which they cannot invent themselves. But, actually, we did not take seriously what they told us, each time that we wrote, in the anonymity of our interviews: 'a refugee told me.' I think we should have reflected on the question of anonymity with each of them, and that we will have to do it from now on. It's with you that I've learned it." He picked up the pen, looked at my outstretched page, then wrote his name: Jahija Smajié.

The question of protective anonymity, which never arose, turned out at this very moment to be a question that we had closed off too quickly. A question closed to the mode of secrecy that separated the things of which one is ashamed and the things of which one is proud (and that must remain outside); that separated refugees from professionals (like me, as I had a name that would be written in reports, articles and later in a book).⁴ I had to learn to ask this question, to negotiate it, and to negotiate the risks with those I questioned. The risk that I thought I would have to avoid was only one of the possible risks – the risk of disclosing – but it prevented me from taking into account the other risk, the one that I confronted at that moment with Jahija Smajié, the risk of "separating," of isolating, of making people talk while silencing, of stealing the words or of drawing them out from the speaker. The risk of retying the secret to its etymology: "*secretus*," to separate, to isolate.

The question of anonymity had emerged as an inescapable and unquestionable aspect of research, and now I saw the possible effects. What I call the "no name" effect was all the more dramatic in these circumstances, since, in a way, anonymity extended what might be called a regime of insult – "you refugees" – a regime of insult that was all the more violent since the fact of being named or considered a refugee was experienced by people as extremely discrediting. As they said to me: as someone unworthy, as no one in the sense of being nobody⁵, a third-world person, someone from the other side of the world.

If, therefore, this effect is particularly terrible in these circumstances, it nevertheless obliges us to reflect on what it can produce in other, albeit less dramatic, research situations. Let's open with what looks like a paradox: anonymity creates identity. This is what I will call here the "no name effect": the position of "subject" in an investigation is created by erasing the name. I mean "subject" in the sense that psychology gives the term, that is, as an "anyone" defined by their lay position in an experiment. In other words, it is by erasing the name that the asymmetry between the layperson and the expert is constructed, it is by erasing the name that the particular posture of the one who will assume the role of the investigated is constructed in relation to the person who is defined in the same gesture as an expert. In a way, anonymity plays as an essential element of the device in the form of an induction that goes far beyond that of a "feel free

⁴ Antoinette Chauvenet, Vinciane Despret et Jean-Marie Lemaire, *Clinique de la reconstruction: Une expérience avec des réfugiés en ex-Yougoslavie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996).

⁵ TRANS: "nobody" appears in English in the original: "personne au sens de nobody."

to say anything you want” or even a “speak without fear” that gives itself as a motive: be free, indeed, your words will have no consequences. Just think for two seconds about how people can perceive and translate the situation when told that their words will have no consequence.

Do not misunderstand me, I am not conducting an individualistic or humanistic advocacy of recognition of “subjects” this time in the sense of “subjectivity” (as psychotherapists say, “we forgot the subject”): this is a pragmatic and epistemological position. It’s a pragmatic and epistemological question therefore; here is the effect of “no name” practices: they are always at risk of putting people in situations where they are unlikely to be interesting, and unlikely to be interested.

One can also wonder whether the devices are not really aimed at, or to put it more moderately, are not satisfied with, the fact that people are not that interested, or do not allow themselves to actively take interest in what the device proposes to them.

What Mr. Smajié proposed to me, with his act of resistance, was to change the device: to recount the nightmares and sadness made him into, and confined him within, an unacceptable identity, namely that of a victim; instead he proposed to think together. He opened the field of questions, literally, because he proposed to move from a personal history to the history of a collective. Not “that’s what happened to me,” but “that’s what happened to us.”

At the beginning of this story I pointed out the deep uneasiness with which I was conducting this investigation: I often left people’s homes feeling that I was participating in a process that was making them feel even worse.

We had a chance with Mr. Smajié. But this chance, we had to learn how to create it. Each time. Also, at each subsequent visit, we tried to grasp it (but never knowing – but do we ever know it? – if we created that chance or simply grasped it. All we could say was that it was a regime of attention that we were learning). So we tried to make every visit during this inquiry an opportunity to learn, to think. To those people who told us about the importance of religion in their lives, we said that it interested us, and that we wanted to know more. And the conversation was transformed into theological exchanges and comparisons. To the one who told us that freedom does not mean anything if we cannot afford a bus ticket, I had the audacity to say that what he told us finally made sense of what I had read of freedom in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, but that I had not understood at the time. I say “audacity” because that’s what first occurred to me: “you see where we are, and yet you come to talk to me about philosophy?” It was, however, a rare, rich interview where the exchange really meant something.

It was therefore a matter of looking, each and every time, for the moment when we began to think together. A continual craft, but it paid off: people thanked us, not just for paying attention to their situation, but for giving them, during the time of the visit, the impression that they were something other than refugees. And the conclusion of the visits, in these cases, unfolded in a joyous way. And I shared this joy, because I had, each time, the feeling that we had succeeded, together, to add something to the situation. Our inquiry has become experimentation.

In this perspective, inquiry is both experience, in the common sense of the term, and experimentation, in the sense of both testing and putting into continuity an ensemble of experiences. “When the experience,” writes Joëlle Zacs on John Dewey, “is accompanied by an awareness of what it ‘does’ and ‘transforms’ (or ‘creates’ as in art), it is the new conditions thus produced which become an object of interest, and which may eventually lead to new specific problematic situations, by the very fact that they are now part of the

conditions of the environment in relation to which investigator develops skills, desires, knowledge or science.”⁶ An inquiry, according to Dewey, is the set of transformations that the very process of inquiry imposes, concrete and existential transformations, for the objects studied just as much as the inquiring subject. An inquiry, from this perspective, is therefore much more a logic of creation, of creative experimentation, than of discovery.

The inquiry, from this point of view, may, I believe, be a philosophical gesture. However, it is not a question of proposing a rival method, but rather of claiming that *every inquiry*, in the end, is an experimental and creative form, that it either assumes as such or that it refuses to assume; a refusal which is, for example, the case with the positivist sociological approach, which aims to discover a reality already given, already stabilized, with procedures asserting this stability, with questions wanting to be neutral, with a large and distributed sample, and a “modest” investigator in the sense of Donna Haraway’s modest witness, who disappears behind the strength of the data.

The philosophical inquiry does not pretend to do anything different: instead it pretends to do exactly the same thing, but by assuming and claiming what the positivist sociological inquiry conceals while doing so, namely the creative part of every inquiry, and by measuring the consequences. The inquiry studies what it creates while studying it, and the changes it provokes. Experimentation cannot be defined any better.

Accepting the inquiry as creation certainly modifies the starting position. Thus, the major risk of many inquiries is that of interpretation, the act of making knowledge behind the backs of those about whom we are inquiring. How to avoid the risks of this temptation to interpretation? To avoid this risk, the investigator will have every interest to delegate, as far as possible, the theoretical part of the work to her respondents; it then remains to be seen if the theoretical questions that interest us may interest them. The advantages of this pragmatic method, which delegates this part of the work as much as possible, and which asks the actors themselves to carry out the analysis of the reasons for thinking what they think, are considerable: the researcher is constrained to be even more polite because she can no longer develop a knowledge behind the back of those she has questioned. The respondents, for their part, can construct their analysis in all confidence.⁷ They will be invited to better understand that they must take charge of the interesting part of the work. It is up to them to make the connection between what they think and what determines their particular way of thinking.⁸ We therefore switch, as Antoine Hennion wrote, analyzing how amateurs define the relationship to tastes, from

⁶ Joëlle Zacs, “La politique comme experimentation,” in *Le public et ses problèmes* (Paris: Presses Université de Paris, 2003), p.18.

⁷ The fact that interpretation always comes after must in no way suggest that the position of the respondent is not affected. The very fact of answering questions about biography, the traumas of childhood, the “life stories,” as is the case in many studies, and the fact that the respondents, generally, do not allow themselves to point out “but what does this have to do with my project?” shows that they submit themselves from the outset to the interpretation of the researcher.

⁸ This is what I tried to implement during an investigation that I conducted with Jocelyne Porcher. See Vinciane Despret, “The Becomings of Subjectivity in Animal Worlds,” *Subjectivity* 23:1 (2008): 123-139.

“critical analysis to pragmatics”⁹ – we do not think or act “because” of social determinisms, but rather “with” them.

A few lines back I claimed that inquiry, from this perspective, may be a philosophical gesture, that it is not a question of proposing a rival method but of basing itself on the fact that, by taking it on, all inquiry is an experimental and creative form. And as a philosopher, I claim this practice and strive to honour it.

But it also comes just as deliberately from the philosophical gesture, it inscribes itself in a conversation with philosophers who have themselves conducted inquiries, whether to challenge them and break with their own gesture (like that of Socrates), or on the contrary, to inherit from them. It is from this perspective that I assume the entirely philosophical practice of summoning philosophical ancestors, who I ask to guide the experiments, always cobbled together, to which my inquiries give shape.

Thus, in contrast to Socrates, I take inspiration from the very different gesture of William James, conducting his own inquiries, be it about religious experiences or about the experience of emotions. In both cases, James went on to address his questions to the ones who know, the ones whose expertise could help him to learn something new and often unexpected: in the former case, the ones who cultivate a passionate, even if problematic, experience of living in a world where God matters, and in the latter case, with theatre actors, who know about creating, discriminating, disclosing, and sharing emotional experiences — in other words, those who know how our emotions may make us feel. The inquiry is an inquiry about the way some people cultivate an expertise; how they hesitate, how they think, how they complicate a problem.

In addition to James, I would also choose Leibniz as an ancestor to inherit from, the Leibniz Isabelle Stengers taught me to love, and more precisely the Leibniz she introduced me to through the reading of a woman philosopher (at some point this mattered for us), Emilienne Naert.¹⁰ What Emilienne Naert emphasized in Leibniz’s work was in some ways very similar to what I found so inspiring in James’s methodological choices: not only that Leibniz also wanted to learn (and not solely to enter into polemics about the issue he addressed, an issue that mattered to him) but, like James will do, Leibniz addressed his inquiry to the ones who know, not by virtue of being a mere authority (in fact, it is quite the opposite), but because they have cultivated a particular relationship, the relationship of the “amateur” with the very issue he wanted to learn about — amateur understood here in the sense of the one who knows, who develops an expertise, a love and a taste (I am referring here to Isabelle’s article in this issue, “Dare to Taste”). Simply said, field philosophy requires taste, and moreover good taste.

Not only does Naert provide a portrait of Leibniz as someone who is “sincerely” attached to a thought that is not polemical, but moreover, it is important to Naert to give full meaning to the singularity of this philosopher who proposed that women should be addressed about the most important problem, that of the love appropriate to give God. I quote here from our book, *Women Who Make a Fuss*: “Thanks to Naert, we can in fact

⁹ Antoine Hennion, “Affaires de goût: Se rendre sensible aux choses.” in *Sensibiliser: La sociologie dans le vif du monde*, edited by Michel Peroni and Jacques Roux (La Tour d’Aigues: Éd. de L’Aube, 2006), 161-174.

¹⁰ Emilienne Naert, *Leibniz et la querelle du Pur Amour* (Paris, Vrin, 1959).

understand the meaning of Leibniz's advice to the polemicists: if it is a question of speaking about love, it is necessary to trust the experience of women because they are competent in the matter. And they are competent not because they are 'carried away by feelings'. Speaking to women, to those 'femmes savantes' of the epoch, whom Molière ridiculed, implies neither condescension nor 'essentialism'. Could we go as far as to make Leibniz – the master of abstraction, who made of abstraction a politeness of thought and of politeness a constraint on creation, and who was, as such, "marked" by ridicule – the prospector of what could be another 'genre' of thought? For if women are competent in matters of love, it could very well be because of their attention to manners of doing, saying, and thinking. Because of their refusal of letting a duty to 'speak truth' bar the road to 'speaking well'. Because they do not set themselves up as 'leaders of a sect' or claim to silence others but share a disinterested love of language and thought."¹¹ I would add, yes, indeed, a disinterested love of language and thought, but also a real interest in love or, more precisely, a real interest in thinking about and with love. Because these women Leibniz was addressing were, without doubt, interested by these matters, just as they were also without doubt interested by the questions Leibniz raised.

Making field philosophy means for me, therefore, to inherit from James and Leibniz's gestures. But this means also to inherit from them as philosophers, in this case as creators. I would like to re-emphasize this essential dimension. A field does not pre-exist our inquiry as a field of inquiry (it does of course exist as something else, as a milieu, as a collective, as a situation), but to address this situation as a field-to-be of inquiry or of experimentation is, as Souriau would say, to promote a situation in another mode of existence.

How to create does not have a general answer, and we learn, from some field workers, that each situation-becoming-a-field where interesting things happen, where we learn something that comes to matter to us, requires imagination, tact, daring, opportunism, humour. Making field philosophy involves then (but with cautious care) to learn from people who know how to create a field, in the actual sense of creating. I will focus here, however briefly, on the fieldwork of two anthropologists.

The first one is the French ethnologist Elisabeth Claverie.¹² Her work interested me because she offered to those whom she addressed the most unexpected mode of response. She followed and questioned pilgrims on pilgrimage with the Virgin of Medjugorje, and she became interested in the very sophisticated way they think. She did not ask, as social scientists usually do in this situation, how they believe, what they believe, or even more than usual in that field, "how can we explain such an odd thing as people believing in a supernatural being?"

She didn't do this not only because she knew that she would not learn anything new and interesting from these kinds of questions, but all the more because she could anticipate the effect of these questions. She knew that there are always "bad" causes to account for the practice of pilgrimage (or other practices involving strange beliefs). The need to determine the causes of something designates this very thing as an anomaly; it cannot expect any other consequence than that of impoverishing the objects of study. Therefore, Claverie did not ask why people believe, any more than she even talked about

¹¹ Stengers, Isabelle, and Vinciane Despret. *Women Who Make a Fuss: The Unfaithful Daughters of Virginia Woolf*, translated by April Knutson. (Minneapolis: Univocal Press, 2014), p. 72.

¹² Claverie, Elisabeth. *Les guerres de la Vierge: Une anthropologie des apparitions* (Paris, Gallimard, 2003).

beliefs. She explored and learned with people *how they think*. “How people think” therefore became the actual issue of her fieldwork.

What Claverie did in this regard has a profound familiarity with James’s work when he explored not only the way people think (be it as a general or a janitor), and how the way they think may matter for them, but moreover, I would say, *how they take care of what matters for them with thoughts*. To take care of what matters with thoughts appeared to me to be a first thread common to the most interesting and creative fieldwork.

To take care of what matters with thoughts concretely takes the form, in the pilgrims’s experiences, of *hesitation*. Hesitation is a sign that identifies that thought is occurring, and that this thought is taking care of something that matters. The practice of hesitation may take numerous forms: the openly contradictory alternation of positions, such as how pilgrims constantly alternate, as Claverie notes, from “a critical position (it [the apparition] is not there, it is not possible) to a position of belief (it is there, it is possible) and then back”¹³; they use semantics or syntactic devices that introduce ambivalence; they talk about what the Virgin “makes them make,” undermining the origin of action; and more. The remarkable feature of these situations is thus the deliberate effort by people to maintain this alternation, this ambivalence.

The hesitation of pilgrims finds its echo in the work of Claverie herself: she learns to hesitate with them. This is particularly clear when she writes that her methodological choice, translated under the form of an obligation, had become to follow how “the actors establish what they consider as real and as unreal.”¹⁴ Claverie’s practice, for all these features, is what Isabelle Stengers calls an “ecological practice”: a practice that takes into account the fact that the inquiry participates in the ‘milieu’ of those it addresses; therefore, a practice for which the question of the good ‘milieu’ is crucial. In other words, it is a practice for which the practitioner is herself taking care of what matters with thoughts and learns to create what I would call the relevant “milieu of thought.”

Isabelle Stengers wrote in her book *The Virgin and the Neutrino*, “To fabulate, to tell otherwise, is not to break with ‘reality’, but to seek to make visible, to make one think and feel aspects of this reality, which usually are taken as accessories.”¹⁵

The creative dimension I wish to be the hallmark of every fieldwork may take numerous forms. It may take the form of a device that sparks the creation of thoughts; it may transform the relationship between the enquirer and the one she is addressing; it may disclose some dimensions of the situation that were not visible or felt; or as in Claverie’s inquiry it may completely redefine what people actually do. Creativity is, therefore, both the means and the end of fieldwork. I found a beautiful example of this process in a story told by the anthropologist Heonik Kwon, with whom I will conclude.¹⁶ Kwon works in Vietnam where he studies the relationship between the living and the dead, including how souls of soldiers remain important in the lives of the living. Kwon retells a story that happened to him while he was conducting his study, and this story

¹³ Ibid, p. 139.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 435.

¹⁵ Stengers, Isabelle. *La Vierge et le Neutrino* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006), p. 169.

¹⁶ Kwon, Heonik. *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

lead him not only to take care with thoughts, but to do it through a very interesting fabulation that could help him, as fabulations can sometimes do, to feel and to think what the situation requests from him.

Kwon notes that in the Da Nang area, a visiting guest sometimes receives, at the end of the conversation, a glass of water that is said to be given by a spirit. This first glass, ordinary water from an ordinary well, should taste moderately salty. If you happen to take another one from the same jug, the water tastes normal and fresh. This somewhat unsettling experience of salty water, Kwon says, does not happen to everyone, or every time. If you have what is known as a “heavy soul,” it is less likely that you taste salt in the unsalted water – considering that, according to popular religious discourse, having a light soul refers to the ability of one’s soul to communicate with other souls. But Kwon worries: he drank gallons of water and his spirit tasted the salt only a few times. This surprises his informants: they knew that he was doing research on ghosts, so how could a student of ghosts be so incompetent in sensing the taste of spirits?¹⁷

If this question affects Kwon, the experience itself arouses perplexity. “How is it that the water from the village well can taste like diluted seawater? For some and not for the others? Is it my body or soul that recognizes the salt? ... If I cannot sense the salty water when others can, who has the problem, them or me?”¹⁸

These questions require no solution, though one can always respond. This is their performative force. Kwon notes this when he writes that, to the question of whether the salt is in the water or in the mouth (to avoid saying, in the head), whether it is normal to taste it or not, and to the question of how to understand this strange phenomenon, he received, he says, no reasonable answer. “Instead, the experience of phantom salt led me to other events and stories, and my thirst for being able to taste like others opened a way of understanding these events and stories in a new light.”¹⁹ One of the most enduring proverbs in Vietnam says: “Ancestors ate too much salt, descendants desire water.” This proverb, which can be used in very different contexts, can have a lot of meaning. One of them is connected with this story: “True human desires ... are not those of an isolated individual. It is the individual who feels the desire, whereas the origin of the desire, like the spirit’s phantom salt, may be with someone else, for it is in the presence of this other that the water becomes salty. The desire to remember, likewise, can be a desire that rises somewhere between the past and the present and something that is shared between the remembering self and the remembered other. ... The experience of phantom salt makes the intersubjective nature of remembering somatically clear.”²⁰

Kwon performs a gesture that is beautiful and precious in anthropology: he lets himself be instructed by the events that his inquiry creates. In the same way that the living may be called by the desire to remember the dead, without trying to elucidate from whom or where this desire emanates, Kwon lets himself be called by the enigma of the proverb, or more precisely, he turns the proverb into an enigma that will guide him in his understanding of events. This is what it means to be instructed: honouring the problem means following it up and letting oneself be led by it. By transforming his questions into

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 104.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 104.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 105.

²⁰ Ibid, p.105-106.

riddles, Kwon resists the temptation of an assignation. He refuses to dismember an *agencement*: the act of commemoration responds to a desire, so one cannot choose whether it emanates from the one who is remembered, or the one who takes charge of remembering.²¹ It is a relation of forces that holds together in an event; the desire to be remembered and the desire to remember “hold” together, there is no precedence. Dismembering this *agencement* by giving ontological priority to the imagination of the living – “he would be the real cause of this desire” – or to the will of the dead, would deprive it of all meaning and would destroy what Etienne Souriau calls its “brilliance of reality” (“*éclat suffisant de réalité*”), its own ontological strength, its “way of being” (“*manière d’être*”) as *agencement*.²² In his practice, Kwon cultivates an essential virtue in these situations: ontological tact. Ontological tact takes care of that which gives the situation its power to exist. Kwon takes care of what matters with thoughts.

In other words, the requirement to which Kwon submits his inquiry is to accept that the questions do not call for explanation or elucidation. They call for creations. These are riddles, that is to say, the beginnings of stories that set those who are summoned by the enigma to work in a very particular way: what do we do with this? To what kinds of tests are we called and what manner of living will make it possible to understand these riddles? It is still an enigma: it is this that confers on those who affect us the power to make us think.

One lets oneself be led, as does Kwon, to other events and other stories, imagining they were waiting for you. And the riddle was both the key and the guide. With Kwon there was no desire to perform interpretation. There were just experiments with senses that could become possible. I say the senses – not meanings but tropisms – that is to say, affects that magnetize you, forces that pass through you and steer you. This is an experiment, a trial: what should I do with this? What kind of meaning is requested of me? What is my obligation to the meaning I am seeking? What becoming should I offer to it? This story more than any other testifies to what happens to the anthropologist, and I would designate this ‘happening’, using Stengers’s terms, as the ecology of becoming: “Becoming able to think and feel.” And, therefore, this is not anymore about what philosophers can do to the practice of fieldwork, but about what the practice of fieldwork may do to philosophers.

Translated by Brett Buchanan and Matthew Chrulew

²¹ TRANS: for Despret’s concept of “*agencement*,” see Vinciane Despret, “From Secret Agents to Interagency.” *History and Theory* 52.4 (2013): 29-44.

²² Souriau, Etienne. *L’instauration philosophique* (Paris: Alcan, 1939), p. 10.