

NECESSARY SUBJECTIVITY

From the book *Nature, Essence and Anarchy* by Paul Cudenc

The slogan “think globally, act locally”, sometimes attributed to Raoul Vaneigem,¹ has become something of a cliché since it became common in the environmental movement in the 1970s. But it nicely reverses the advice handed out by a capitalist system which recommends we think only of ourselves and our immediate surroundings and, at the same time, step back with a sense of disempowered resignation from the apparent impossibility of ever “changing the world”. And it provides us with a useful concept of transcending the limits of a false “either/or” choice in order to act simultaneously in two different modes. The phrase might usefully be expanded beyond the day-to-day level to guide us along the difficult existential path that we all have to tread. The “globally” could be extended outwards to the universal and the “locally” extended inwards to the individual vantage point, leaving us with “think objectively, act subjectively”. And here I will be suggesting that it is just this combination we need to embrace so that we can be fully and actively human – *an awareness of the objective reality of the world around us and a necessary subjectivity which provides the means to help shape it.*

To this effect, I would like to begin by considering the standard definition of the word “universe”. My dictionary says that it describes “all existing matter, energy and space”. The fact that the universe is defined specifically in this way poses questions about what the dictionary writers mean by the term. No matter how inclusive that definition initially appears to be, it leaves open the potential for exclusion, for non-accepted material to be left outside of its imagined limits. And this rules out all-inclusivity. “A defined One would not be the One-Absolute”,² as the philosopher Plotinus observes. We are left to wonder about the elements that lie outside their definition. Can an *idea*, for instance, be labelled as matter, energy or space? Perhaps if it is being *thought* by someone, it could arguably be regarded as a property of their physical mind, but the *idea itself* remains beyond physical definition. And how about clearly non-personal abstract concepts, like number? The existence of numbers (as opposed to the figures representing them, which are only human-constructed symbols) is real on an abstract level. The existence of the number 13 does not *depend* on the existence of 13 apples or 13 pencils. The fact that apples or pencils can be used to *illustrate* the number 13 indicates that the dependence is, in fact, the other way round. The abstract “13” is a pre-condition for the physical existence of 13 apples, pencils or anything else. Again, it could be argued that numbers *do* exist in the minds of actual people, and thus could be said to arise from physical existence. But that is not the *seat* of their existence. They do not need to actually be “thought” – let alone written down or represented by actual objects – in order to exist. If, somehow, every living being managed to banish the idea of the number 13 from

their heads, would 12 items plus another one result in anything other than 13?

Numbers are neither matter, energy nor space but are still very much part of the make-up of the universe. Plotinus regarded them as constituting, along with ideas, something he termed “the Intellectual-Principle”.³ The same applies to other abstracts, such as capacities and possibilities. The capacity of things in the universe to possess spatial dimensions, for example, is undeniably real. If they did not have that capacity, they could not exist on the physical plane. Possibilities are also real. There must necessarily be the possibility of something happening in order for it to happen. As Ananda K. Coomaraswamy notes: “The impossible never happens; what happens is always the realisation of a possibility”.⁴ If there were no possibilities, there would be no existence, nothing would ever happen. And yet capacities and possibilities are excluded from the “official” definition of the universe.

If I were to throw a party, announce that “everyone” was invited, and then proceed to list all the kinds of people that this term included (friends, relatives, neighbours), I would raise the suspicion that I was, in fact, trying to exclude one or more persons who would slip through the net of my definition of “everyone”. If I really meant “everyone”, I would simply say “everyone” without qualification. In the same way, the term “universe” does not mean “all that there is” if it is limited in any way. By using the term “universe” but subtly excluding anything that does not fit into their idea of reality (namely “existing matter, energy and space”), those who share the worldview of the dictionary-writers are presenting a so-called “universe” that is not what it appears to be.

They are also leaving a gaping logic-hole in our potential understanding. If numbers do not actually exist *within* the universe, where *do* they exist? Likewise with the *capacity* to be or do something and the *possibility* of something happening. How can any part of the universe be said to have the capacity or possibility of doing anything at all, if capacities and possibilities are *not part of the universe*? Are these abstracts seen as existing in some realm of abstraction *outside* the defined limits of the universe? What are the implications of this? A universe that has to allow for the possibility of something beyond itself? A universe with borders?

If so, it is also a universe with disputed borders. The separation of “non-existent” principles, or abstracts, from the “existent” things they describe causes further logical difficulties. When abstracts such as number or possibility become physically real (such as when there are 13 apples rather than just the concept of “13”) do they suddenly, then, spring into the universe without warning? Is their origin considered to come from beyond the universe? Or are they somehow seen as being *created* by the physical level on which they are represented? Does this back-to-front point of view suggest that the existence of 13 apples calls into being, retrospectively (as it were) and from out of nowhere, the possibility of “13”? There is a certain dishonesty here, which can be traced back to the use of the word “universe” – or, as far as my hypothetical party goes, the word “everyone”. Both words, through their root meanings (“universe” means “all together”) imply complete inclusivity but, as we have seen, this is not the case. Using the words as if they meant what they appear to mean, while knowing that the fullness of the

term is limited, is an act of deception. By announcing that I am inviting “everyone” to my party and then subtly limiting the definition of “everyone” to potentially exclude someone who is not welcome, I am trying to appear to be something that I am not. In forcibly evicting abstracts from their physical-plane “universe”, the dictionary-writers and their allies are simply restating their personal belief that these abstracts do not exist in themselves, that reality is limited to the purely physical (“matter, energy and space”). Their use and limited definition of the universe is therefore a *disguised ideological manoeuvre*, designed to exclude certain ways of seeing existence that do not meet with their approval, in the same way that my use and limited definition of the word “everyone” is an exclusion of certain people who do not meet with my approval, disguised as all-embracing generosity.

Needless to say, I am not here suggesting that the actual writers of the dictionary, or any other specific texts, are deliberately conspiring to impose this limited definition of “universe” upon us. Their attitude is merely part of the culture of the moment, the contemporary world-view which shapes and limits our thinking, and the potential for our thinking, on so many levels. It is part of the modern blindness. The “rational” view of the world expressed by the dictionary definition arises from what is now a rather old-fashioned “scientific” outlook. This outlook is the religion of the industrial era and has necessarily become dominant in our culture in order to internally justify the way our civilization functions. Part of any dogma is the self-defensive aspect that insists that this dogma is an unquestionable truth and here the modern industrial dogma is no exception. The movement of society away from the appreciation of abstract ideas or principles, and towards a limited, purely physical, definition of reality is presented as movement towards enlightenment. Contingent reality, the way things are right here and now under our noses, is presented as the only reality. The 13 apples are *real* and the number 13 is merely *descriptive* of that reality. There is no such thing as the essential reality of something. There are no universal principles beneath the surface of physical reality. Human beings are nothing more than flesh-and-blood machines, whose behaviour is “constructed” and can be “programmed” into them. There is no such thing as “spirit”, because it cannot be scientifically identified or measured. The natural world is not a living being, but a resource to be exploited. The only possible world is the one we live in. Industrial civilization is the only destination at which humankind could ever have arrived. The continuation of that industrial civilization is the only possible future open to us. Anyone who says otherwise is a fool or charlatan. Nobody who challenges the fundaments of the dogma can be taken seriously. *Indeed, nobody who calls the dogma “a dogma” can be taken seriously, for there has never been a dogma which calls itself such, or could tolerate being identified as such.*

It is strange how blinded people can be to the existence of a dogmatic intellectual culture, when they themselves form part of it.⁵ Suppose we lived in a society which believed, for instance, that before human beings are born, they enjoy a kind of pre-existence as bees. That whole culture would be built around honouring bees, making sure they were happy, examining the behaviour of bees for portents of future human lives to come, identifying individual bees who might

soon become the hoped-for child of a human couple. Literature, art, poetry, music – all would be packed with references to bees in a way that to our eyes would seem insane. And yet, for members of that society, the bee-obsession would not only *not* seem insane, but would not even be seen to *exist*. “What bee ‘*obsession*’? That’s just the way things are”. Their language would, moreover, make it impossible to easily distinguish between bees as physical living insects and bees as the custodians of future human souls. To challenge the whole bee theory would not only be unthinkable heresy but also virtually impossible, as it would be taken as claiming that bees themselves did not exist.

In my writing, I have often tried to challenge the underlying dogma of contemporary industrial civilization – or at least to hurl a few pebbles of defiance in its general direction. I have discovered that it is very difficult to do so within the restrictions imposed by the language of that civilization, which means too much time and energy has to be spent on justifying or deconstructing the meanings of words. The way that the culture appropriates and redefines the symbols of our vocabulary to reflect its own ideological assumptions makes it difficult to pull clear of its gravitational field and express ideas which have no place within its dogma. This is very much the case with my intention here to go beyond the purely terrestrial sphere and discuss the universe. It is hard to do so by using an understanding of the universe that is confined to the physical plane and which, moreover, denies the existence of any other plane. I am therefore going to avoid the need to continually explain my own broader definition of the universe by using instead the term The Universe, with capital letters. And what do I mean by it? Simply “all there is”, “all together”, “everything”. There is nothing outside The Universe. The Universe is itself the definition of all-inclusivity.⁶

Here are two statements about objective truth. *1. It is impossible for us to be completely objective about the truth.* *2. There is such a thing as completely objective truth.* Why is it impossible for us to be completely objective? The problem is that, as scientists have demonstrated, it is impossible to be present in a system – even as a mere observer – and to be objective about what takes place within it. If The Universe is a system in which we are present, then we cannot be objective about anything that happens in The Universe. This is not difficult to grasp and needs no further explanation. But what about the second statement, that there *is* such a thing as objective truth? This is also easy to understand, but confusion sometimes arises when people mistakenly imagine that it is disproved by the first statement. This is not logically so. It does not follow that because we cannot ascertain the nature of an objective truth, then that objective truth does not exist. A goldfish in a bowl will never be able to look at the bowl, and at himself swimming around the bowl, and gain an objective impression of it. But the bowl, containing the goldfish, exists nonetheless.

Different historians describing the same episode will all present different, subjective, versions of the truth. No matter how hard they try to be completely objective, they cannot succeed. Two former lovers describing the break-up of their relationship will do so in different ways – maybe radically different, maybe just subtly so. That is inevitable, because each experienced what happened from their

own subjective vantage point. Any “outside” account can only be dependent on various subjective versions, so objectivity is not possible there either. In both these cases it is perhaps unclear, at first glance, as to whether there is even an objective truth that *could* be described. Neither the nuances and complications of the social processes described by historians, nor the unspoken tensions and ever-twisting emotions that make up human relationships form obvious objective realities in the manner of a goldfish bowl. The objective truth behind what happens between people is something that could probably never be fully described with the limited tools of language, even if objectivity were magically made possible. But it is still there. Its existence does not *depend* on the ability of some theoretical outside agent to describe it in all its shifting detail and complexity.⁷

An actual sequence of events *did occur* in order to create the historical event or the relationship break-up. Actual objective truth *does exist*, even though it remains inaccessible to us. It is not truth that is subjective, just our experience of it. The ultimate objective truth is that there is such a thing as The Universe and that it embraces everything, without exception. This means, of course, that we are part of The Universe – not just present within it, but *part* of it. We are nothing else but The Universe. Our essence is entirely of The Universe. We are all twigs on the same tree, limbs on the same universal body. If we use modelling clay to make the figure of a little man, does the clay stop being clay when it forms a shape? Does it turn into “the figure of a little man”? If so, does it miraculously become mere clay again when the figure is rolled up and added back into the rest of the clay? Or is it always clay, but just taking on various temporary forms?⁸ On the other hand, although our essence is of The Universe, our particular form is human and we have to adopt human subjectivity in order to live. The little clay man still *takes on* the shape of a man, even though he is *made* of clay. We have to inhabit our bodies. We have to eat, drink, defecate, exercise, wash and so on. We have to be ourselves *in order to be human beings*. We have to think inside our own heads, speak through our own mouths.

This is not a problem for us – that’s what we do all the time without thinking about it. We live our human lives with a *necessary subjectivity* which is built into our bodies. We only see and hear what is around us (even if that consists of artificial images from elsewhere). We can only touch that which is within physical reach. Imagine if we weren’t limited in that way. Imagine, for example, that our universal essence allowed us to see through all the eyes of the human species at once. What a dream, to be able to see everything that every other human being could see, all the time, everywhere on the planet! And yet, of course, what a nightmare as well. My brain would be overwhelmed by the visual input of an entire species, billions of exotic faces and places streaming simultaneously into my head. How could I focus on chopping up a cabbage for my dinner? We are all limited by the physical form we take. That is what each of us is – a specific physical limitation of The Universe. And part of that necessary limitation is our subjectivity.

I have been using the words “essence” and “essential” and I am aware that this requires some explanation, if only because “essentialism” is sometimes

deployed as a term of abuse. The kind of “essence” that people usually take exception to exists on a purely social or political level. It is, as I set out elsewhere in this book, a *fake* definition of essence which sets out to limit and constrain human potential within a certain pre-ordained social framework. I am not using the idea in this way at all and I am very wary of the use of the term “essence” in relation to any sub-categories within humanity. However, I would talk about essential *human* nature. The definition of a human being is clear and uncontroversial and it follows that there are certain essential qualities that go along with being human. Obviously this does not mean that all human beings are *identical*, merely that they share a certain *essence*, even if that essence takes the form of a *capacity* to be or do something, rather than the physical reality of being or having done something.

Our identity as human beings is not just a word or label attached to us by our culture, but an objective reality, albeit one not fully describable from the subjective point of view in which each of us is confined. We might look at a caterpillar and conclude that its essence relates to its caterpillar-qualities. However, when it turns into a butterfly, its essence would appear to have changed. In fact, objectively, the essence of the creature in question includes all the stages of its existence. This includes its potential, in that the butterfly-quality still forms part of its essence while it is at the caterpillar stage. This remains the case even if it is, for instance, eaten by a bird before it can ever become a butterfly. It does not actually need to *become* a butterfly in order for it to contain the *essence* of butterflyness. As mentioned above, some thinkers have objected to the idea of essential reality on the basis that it defines and restricts the potential of the thing in question. *But that is to confuse an externally-imposed definition or restriction with a quality that is contained within.* The objective essence of a thing, which exists regardless of whether it is ever named or alluded to, is the wholeness of its potential being. Its essence is necessarily broader and higher and deeper than the physical form its existence will take, and so cannot in any way restrict that existence. Instead, *its actual existence will always inevitably be a restriction of the full potential available within its essence.* The actual reality of the existence of the caterpillar eaten by a bird is more limited than the full butterfly-potential which it possesses in its essence.

This limitation which is always implied in a particular existence also applies, of course, to our ultimate essence as an aspect of The Universe. Critics of metaphysical essentialism have therefore missed the point if they imagine that it is the idea of essence *per se* that is a restriction or a limitation. Instead, it is the movement *away* from the ultimate essence towards particular essence and physical form that limits potential. Our ultimate essence is unlimited: it is the *necessary subjectivity* of our existence that constrains us within certain boundaries.

While subjectivity underlies all human experience, it does not represent the *core of our existence*. That core resides, as we have seen, in the objectively-authentic and all-inclusive Universe. So, while our everyday existence proceeds from a starting point of subjectivity, this cannot be the case on a metaphysical level. There we must start from our essential belonging to The Universe, The

Whole, from which all else is a contingent derivation, a temporary blossoming. This metaphysical knowledge or *gnosis* is not necessarily easily achieved. In some ways our belonging to The Universe in this way seems obvious and in other ways unthinkable. Yes, humankind must be a part of The Universe, which must logically be the seat of our ultimate existence. Of course, we cannot really be “independent” or “separate”. And yet, there is something disturbing about the idea that humanity is nothing more than a passing and localised form that The Universe has taken. That thought makes us feel even more uneasy when we apply it to our individual existence and see that we are, in turn, merely a tiny part of the human species that is merely a tiny part of The Universe. We *feel* that our own sense-of-life exists within us, comes from within us, so how can we be simply a part of something so much bigger? Rationally, we might understand that although our form is individual, the stuff of which we are made is of humankind, of the planetary organism and of The Universe. But when we focus that understanding on our own selves and conclude that *we* (yes, *you!*) do not actually exist as individuals in the way we think we do, then things become more difficult for us to cope with.

Our primary self-identification as individuals is deeply embedded in contemporary industrial culture and applies even on the social, rather than metaphysical plane. While people may feel some sense of *belonging* to a community, or to the human species, they generally do not regard themselves as being *part* of that broader entity. Indeed, they often react angrily against any such suggestion, since a misunderstanding has developed, in which considering oneself to be a part of a larger entity is seen as a surrender of individuality and freedom. However, as I have argued elsewhere,⁹ this stems from a broader misunderstanding of freedom itself, and of the symbiotic relationship that it enjoys with *responsibility*. The individual is not “lost” or “devalued” by being part of a whole, but instead plays the vital role of *representing* the whole, of acting for the whole, of bearing the burden of actual physical existence on the behalf of a more abstract collective entity. A community cannot exist without the individuals that make it up. It is dependent on the individuals that make it up, even though its collective level of existence transcends that of any particular individual. When something is *dependent* on you, the individual, this lends you a weight, a responsibility, which is at the same time your *freedom* to participate in that entity. The assumption of the responsibility of being part of a community or species is the assumption of true individuality. The realisation of individuality is rooted in the acceptance of responsibility, the acceptance of one’s own reality and of the need to act on and through that reality.

The same thinking applies on a more abstract level, the “spiritual” one in which an individual becomes aware that the ultimate source of their consciousness lies beyond them, that the prism of individual self-awareness merely refracts the existential “light” of the organic Universe. Also here, people resent the idea that their individual freedom might in some way be compromised by the idea of being part of a greater whole, The Universe. Having seen the way that organised religions have distorted this spiritual understanding into a demand for “obedience” to institutions supposedly representing the separate

“God” which they substitute for an all-embracing Universe, they imagine that abandoning the certainty of separate individual existence would also mean abandoning individual validity. Again, this is not so. On the contrary, the importance of the individual as a limited manifestation of the Whole could hardly be greater! Each of us is the whole Universe itself, but condensed and channelled, through necessary subjectivity, into a specific physical form with a specific sense of existence. This is how The Universe actually manifests itself, *exists*, on a real and specific level – through its physical parts, including us.

A possible objection springs to mind: if this metaphysical realisation is so hard to come by, does this not indicate that human beings are not *supposed* to be aware that the separateness of their individual existence is ultimately an illusion? Does that term “necessary subjectivity” not mean, perhaps, that it is *necessary* for us to stay within our subjectivity and to not bother ourselves with ideas of universal wholeness or objective truth which we are not equipped to fully understand? Isn’t our role, in fact, dependent on *not* understanding that our ultimate being is universal? Aren’t we meant to simply carry on being human beings, in our necessarily subjective way, in the same manner that trees carry on being trees, worms carry on being worms, seagulls carry on being seagulls? In what way would an awareness of the limits of our own subjectivity help us live it out in all its necessity? Wouldn’t it, in fact, impede it, get in its way, interfere with the specific role that we have to play within The Universe, the specific responsibilities that we carry?

My answer is that, on the contrary, *to live the full potential of a human being necessarily involves an awareness of the limits of our own subjectivity*. This is one of the factors that makes us different from other parts of The Universe. Notice that I do not say this makes us in any way “superior” – what meaning can “inferior” or “superior” have when we are talking about the diverse parts of one living thing? Is a bird’s beak “superior” to its wings? Are the roots of an oak tree “inferior” to its leaves? Everything has its own nature and it is in the nature of human beings to have the capacity to rise up out of their necessary subjectivity from time to time and take a broader view of existence. How can we know if the same isn’t true of other creatures? I can well imagine that the swallow, as well as being very much swallow, is also infused with a sense of being part of the air, the sunshine, the life-system that provides the insects on which it feeds. But human beings have, nevertheless, their own particularly human way of feeling, and thinking, their unity with the Whole. Or at least they have the *capacity* for this feeling. If that capacity is not activated, not realised, this is *not* an instance of a human being merely being human and of going about their human business in a necessarily subjective way, naturally oblivious of any wider picture. Instead, it is an instance of a human being *failing to fulfil their capacity*, their potential, and going about their subjective daily business in a way that would better be described as *less-than-human*, for it in no way reflects the fullness of human essence. A human being who fails to transcend the subjective level of reality is like a caterpillar which never becomes the butterfly that is part of its essence. And the tragedy is made worse by the fact that it is not a hungry bird that thwarts this potential, but a blockage within humankind itself.

There are clear adverse consequences to individuals' lack of a sense of belonging to community or species – a loss of social responsibility, little empathy with others, an absence of community spirit, a general disassociation from the interests of humanity as a whole. In the same way, there are adverse consequences to our unawareness of our consciousness's source in universal rather than individual existence. We lose our connection to nature, for instance, and lose a sense of *meaning* in our existence, a sense of *belonging* to something much bigger than ourselves. We also suffer from the fear of death. We generally assume that our sense of "being alive" is something that is linked to our specific individuality. It miraculously appeared in a puff of existential smoke at the moment of our conception or birth (or at some unspecified point in between – this is never very clear!) and will remain with us until our demise. What happens next is a matter of controversy. Various religious dogmas suggest that this individual sense-of-being continues beyond death. For those within those cultures who find these theories unbelievable, the only alternative seems to be to conclude that there is no further sense-of-being and that the individual is consigned to the void of non-existence. This is a chilling prospect. The idea of not existing at all, not even on the level of non-awareness, the idea that not only will everything that you have ever known, experienced, thought, felt or dreamed no longer exist, but that even the deepest flicker of *you-ness* at your innermost core will have been extinguished, is difficult to take on board.

The absolute nothingness at the heart of this prospect is enough to make you conclude that life, in that context, is nothing other than absurd, a kind of cosmic joke. The gnawing awareness of that ever-approaching oblivion will forever be present in the back of your mind as you live out your life. Perhaps, to escape this shadow of fear, you will plunge yourself into activities that take your mind elsewhere, that distract you from this dreadful "reality". What a way to live! What a negative foundation for an existence! And yet, what an unnecessary burden to carry! There is no need to believe in the simplistic religious notions of life-after-death to escape the horror of the awaiting vacuum. If you can understand that our ultimate essence is in The Universe – that The Universe is a living entity of which are simply a part – then you can understand that your sense-of-being is not tied to your individual existence at all, but pre-dates it and will outlive it. This sense-of-being is the spiritual sap which feeds the branches, twigs and leaves of the tree of universal life. The leaf may fall but the sap still flows. It is this sap which feels, which *is*, inside us. Our necessary subjectivity enables us to function on a day-to-day basis, but it also hides from us, most of the time, our ultimate reality. Our ultimate reality lives on after our individual death and therefore our individual death will not be the absolute void and darkness that we fear, but something more akin to a withdrawal from the specific, a pulling back of the existential focus from the lens of our individual life to the broader view.

It is not so much extinction that awaits us, but diffusion. Diffusion not into darkness, but into the light of the living Universe. Our individual death will not lead to non-being, but to continued being on a level which has always been there, but which maybe has not been a part of our self-definition. When the sun shines

and the sky is blue we cannot see the stars. But they are always there. Darkness falls on our particular part of the planet and we are able us to see the vast reality of the cosmos that surrounds us. When the sun has risen again, and the curtain of the sky is once more pulled shut, do we forget that the stars and planets are out there? Do we claim that because we cannot see them, they do not exist? There are those who talk about the being of the individual as the fundamental reality and in saying this they imagine that they are in opposition to the idea of essence. But they are not! Because the being of the individual *is* the being of The Universe. When the individual asserts to themselves the reality of their existence, this is The Universe speaking to itself, via the restricted channel of this individual. All being flows from the essence of The Universe. How can it be otherwise if we have defined The Universe as absolutely everything, without exception?

We have arrived back at the two statements cited earlier. *1. It is impossible for us to be completely objective about the truth.* *2. There is such a thing as completely objective truth.* There is no contradiction. The subjectivity of individual being, and sense-of-being, is an aspect of the overall objective truth of The Universe. The Universe includes everything. This (obviously) includes us. Therefore our ultimate being and essence are of The Universe. As a consequence, our being does not arise from merely-individual existence and our merely-individual death will not entail the end of that being. Failure to understand the above insight amounts to failure to understand the fundaments of our existence within The Universe. And yet, this lack of understanding is rampant within contemporary culture to the extent that it is those possessing the understanding who are regarded as straying from the norm.

It is worth speculating a little as to why this might be the case, as to why metaphysical attempts to transcend subjectivity – which are sometimes termed “spirituality” – are so often derided. The reasons seem to me to be very complex and to be intertwined with the development of the society in which we currently live. I say “intertwined” because it is not always clear what comes first – the social forces which repress “spiritual” belonging in their own interests or the lack of “spiritual” belonging which allows the interests of these social forces to predominate. A common feature of these reasons also seems to be a form of self-concealment which has enabled them to avoid detection and reversal. For instance, the discrediting of the idea of “spirituality” as I define it – an urge to surpass subjectivity and connect with universal levels of reality – can be partly blamed on religion. The natural soaring of the human spirit, its reaching-out beyond the narrow limits of individual self, is corralled into a different set of narrow limits by religious dogma. There are no greater enemies of true spirituality than organised religions such as the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁰ While movements towards spirituality can occur within religions (Sufism within Islam, for instance) they are often crushed by the forces of religious anti-spirituality. The narrow unspirituality of religion repels people with the greatest sense of *genuine* spirituality. Religion’s *claims* to represent spirituality succeed in repelling these people from the very *idea* of spirituality, which would otherwise have attracted them. Things are made even worse by opponents of religion who

dismiss spirituality as a disguised form of religion. At the same time, the word “spirituality” is used by other people to describe something that falls short of true spirituality, that is in fact a kind of vapid sentimentality dressed up in quasi-spiritual clothing. The emptying-out from the word “spirituality” of any authentic meaning makes its true essence almost invisible to us. We are not even aware of the potential existence of this authentic spirituality, so how can we be aware that it is something from which we have been largely separated?

Another example of self-concealment by the ideological forces which repress genuine spirituality would be their “official” definition of the universe, discussed earlier. By confining the meaning of “universe” to the physical plane of existence, they block off the possibility of a metaphysical approach, forcing the invention of another term (“The Universe” in this instance) with which to express the real and forbidden content of the word, while not appearing to be doing anything of the sort. A further example can be seen regarding the manifestation of spirituality through a connection to nature, which is a stepping stone between the human level of existence and the awareness of our belonging to The Universe. This spirituality was not only suppressed by the hostility of religion, but by the hostility of an increasingly debased society which saw in the natural world only the means for exploitation and superficial enrichment. But alongside this open antagonism to nature-spirituality gradually came concealed varieties. Because nature was often taken to be brutal and competitive, an attachment to nature was sometimes taken as an endorsement of all that is lowest in humanity, as the opposite of an elevating spirituality. Because sometimes the love of nature, in the face of these trends, later took on an overly sentimental quality, the love of nature was itself taken as sentimental or “unrealistic”. The idea that our belonging to nature is both spiritual and real became difficult to find and express amidst all the confusion created by false definitions – and this difficulty itself became a further means by which the idea was lost from view.

Layer upon layer of assumptions has been built over the original loss of authentic spirituality, a whole modern pseudo-philosophical language has been constructed in which it is now impossible to express the banished ideas. And, following the pattern already identified, this denial conceals itself by presenting itself as an advance in thought and those that dissent from its world-view as hopeless relics of a discredited past. The dogma of “progress” dictates that it is considered insane to search for insight in the works of the great philosophers who were writing hundreds or thousands of years ago. All thought must be contained within, and referred back to, a prescribed body of “up-to-date” thinking, whose superiority is apparently ensured merely by the amount of time that separates it from its predecessors. It fits in well with the rejection of all notions of essence and meaning to insist that there are no eternal metaphysical truths that can be rediscovered and re-described by generation after generation and that only propositions derived from theories enjoying contemporary intellectual popularity can be regarded as serious contributions to human thought.

Our understanding of The Universe is always going to be incomplete. It has to be: we are part of it and necessarily bound to living out our particular part in it, seeing it through individual eyes and occupying a specific physical space.

Given the absolute scope of The Universe, we could never in any case hope to come anywhere near describing it. The Universe would not be The Universe if it could be regarded objectively, as an object, from “outside”. But our understanding is further obscured, and to an extent that we often do not understand, by the way that our limitations also apply to *time*. If we turn back, for a moment, to the dictionary definition of the universe (without the capital letters), we will recall that it spoke of “all existing matter, energy and space”. There is a secondary implication behind the word “existing” here. As well as referring to a physical existence of some kind, it also implies an existence in time, in the present. This has to be so, for otherwise the matter in question would not be seen as “existing” in physical terms either. A dinosaur is not an abstract idea, but a very real and solid animal. However, would it be spoken of as “existing” in current times, except in the shape of fossilised remains? We may say it “existed” in the past, but the use of this tense shows that we do not regard it as “existing” now. We appear to limit our definition of “existence” to that which exists at the moment in time in which that definition is being made. What is our justification for this? It would seem to be based on a very clear attachment to the exclusive reality of what we call the “present”. But what is this present? Is it something so absolute that it can be used as the foundation stone on which to build our whole conception of what is or isn’t real?

In fact, our experience and understanding of time is another aspect of *necessary subjectivity*. The same considerations are at play. The fact that we cannot simultaneously see everything happening in the world does not mean that all those things are not happening, that all those billions of other human lives are less real than our own. We are merely restricted, for practical reasons, to the subjectivity that is part and parcel of our personal existence. We can only live the one life. In terms of time, the fact that we can only live in the present does not mean that the past and future do not exist. How could we live our lives if we did not experience them from a certain vantage point to the exclusion of all others? How could I focus on chopping up a cabbage for my dinner if I could simultaneously see that I hadn’t been born yet, the cabbage didn’t yet exist and also that I had already eaten it, grown old and died?

The whole of a recorded piece of music is already embedded in the groove of a vinyl record. But we cannot listen to the whole of it at once, in a glorious split-second explosion of sound. Why not? Because the dimension of time is part of the reality of music (and indeed of speech). It needs to exist in time, with temporal extension, in the same way that a sculpture needs to exist in an actual physical space. When the needle follows the vinyl groove it reproduces the music in the dimension in which it makes sense, the dimension of time. Likewise with our lives. The sense of “the present” that keeps us poised between a constantly approaching future and a constantly receding past is like the needle on the record. We need to experience it this way in order to make sense of it all. That doesn’t mean that, objectively speaking, the rest of the record or the rest of reality cease to exist. All of that is simply hidden from us by the blinkers of the necessary subjectivity by which we have to lead our lives. We remain aware of the past and the future, of course, in the same way that the enjoyment of the

record involves a sense of continuity between what we have just heard and what is still to come. But in our conscious minds we set them aside from the thing we call reality. The past is often very real, but we classify our awareness of it as memories. The future is more obscure, since the needle of our lives has yet to activate it, but its reality is waiting for us.

Instead of imagining The Universe as a massive cosmic blob of matter, energy and space we have to picture a blob that also includes what we think of (from our subjective point of view) as the past and the future. Against any objection that the dimension of “time” cannot reasonably be included in the definition of any “thing”, I would point back to the example of music and in addition to films, conversations and football matches. In their full manifestation (rather in terms of a physical disc, transcript or result) they all extend over a temporal dimension and yet their integrity as an identifiable “thing” is not questioned. There is no subjectivity that confines The Universe, there is no restriction to the particularity of one specific viewpoint. It does not merely exist at one point in “time”, at one point on the groove of the record. *It is, itself, the whole record rather than the notes we happen to be hearing right now.* It is the whole piece of music, the subjective discovery of which, from our particular perspective, we perceive as the playing of the record, the passing of “time”.

This understanding also, incidentally, helps us to grasp the nature of “possibilities”, mentioned earlier as abstract realities denied in the purely-physical definition of the universe. Possibilities have to exist before anything can happen. There is the possibility that I will fall off the weir the next time I try to cross the river. If there was no possibility, I wouldn’t even need to think about where I put my feet. I could run across with my eyes shut and know that I could never fall off. However, the possibility of me falling into the river is clearly real. It exists. But what happens to that possibility, that real possibility, when it doesn’t turn into reality? When I have successfully crossed the river without any accidents, what becomes of the previous possibility of me falling? We can now see that possibilities are not really speculative notions, as they might appear from a subjective viewpoint in time, since they do not in fact refer to things that “might” or “might not” happen in a future yet to be formed. Rather, they are part of the structure by which the “future” – that is to say, the extension of The Universe in the dimension regarded by us as the “future” – takes shape. They form part of the invisible, internal dimensions through which The Universe exists, like magnitude or quantity. As such, they have no actual content in themselves. They are principles, frameworks. The “possibility” of something existing or happening is not a prediction and it is not negated by the eventuality of that thing not coming into being. It is merely the means – neutral and waiting to be activated – by which that thing *could* happen. The possibility of me falling into the water is an abstract pre-condition that has to exist if I am to (possibly) fall. That pre-condition continues to exist regardless of whether or not the reality is fulfilled. If I do not fall, it does not become retrospectively impossible for me to have fallen! That possibility remains, from within the subjectivity of the point before I started to cross the river.

This last point is important, because it is a reminder of the way that

possibilities, and thus the “future”, remain open from within the subjectivity of a place in “time”, regardless of the timeless nature of The Universe. At any particular moment in the subjective reality of “time” we can never be sure of how the process will continue to unfold. The idea that The Universe embraces all time – that from its absolute viewpoint everything is, has and will be happening simultaneously – is worrying for some lovers of human freedom. It seems to imply that there is such a thing as immutable destiny, that the future has already been written and all we can do, as human beings, is live it out with dignity and acceptance. And yet that is not the case at all. *The non-existence of time is only true from the unique viewpoint of The Universe.* It is, and can never, be true from our own necessarily subjective vantage point in the midst of time. Moreover, in the same way that we cannot be objective observers of a Universe of which we are part, we cannot be objective observers of time passing, of “fate” unfolding.

We make our own decisions in life, we steer our own course. Everything that happens to us in our own lives follows on from a choice we have made. This is not to say that we choose, or deserve, everything that happens to us. We can accidentally find ourselves in the right place, or the wrong place, at the right or wrong time. But we will have arrived there by means of a certain choice we have made at a certain point. It could be countered that the choices we make, blind and inexplicable as they often seem, themselves form part of the “fate” that controls our lives. We are propelled forward, it might be argued, by invisible and irresistible forces that guide us along the path that we were always meant to, that we always had to, follow. From a retrospective personal point of view, of course, that might *appear* to be true. Once a thing has happened, it is fixed and might look as if it had “always” been going to happen. From the alternative perspective of a Universe transcending time, events may also look that way. A process works itself out, lays itself out within the sequence of time, and seems complete in itself. How could it ever have been any different? However, both these imagined perspectives fail to take into account the reality which necessarily conditions our experiences. *They deny the active nature of our present-tense subjectivity.* We do not experience the present as an “observer”, casting our mind back from some point in the future and watching what is happening with the full knowledge of how it will all play out. Neither is it somehow possible for us to transcend time altogether, in the way that The Universe does. We are human beings, existing on a physical and temporal plane of reality. We experience the present from the point of view of the present, the stage of the time-process at which it is being shaped. *Our presence-in-the-present empowers us to participate in the process at the only point at which that is possible.* To retrospectively justify our actions on the basis that we were simply going along with what “had” to be, is to hide from our own freedom and our own responsibility, to pretend that somehow we were not “there” in a real present in which our presence was a formative part. It is to deny the important understanding that the future, in the guise of possibilities, remains open from within the subjectivity of our place in time. It is to deny that possibilities have a reality, tied to our time-perspective, and that they necessarily (all “possibilities”

are, by definition, possible!) have the potential to turn that abstract reality into a physical one. *Most importantly, it is to deny that we, as human beings present in subjective time, have the power – indeed the responsibility – to help decide whether or not possible reality becomes physical reality.*

Let us take a hypothetical step back for a moment and ask ourselves why human beings possess this subjectivity-in-time which means we are always riding the crest of the breaking wave of reality as it unfolds. We have seen that it is necessary for our individual daily existence, but is there more to it than that? Here's a related question: as the reality of the Universe unfolds (within the subjectivity of time), how does it shape itself? What are the forces at work that allow it take on the form that it takes? Obviously, it forms *itself* – as it is, by definition, all that there is – but what aspect of itself is involved in the formation? The aspects of The Universe involved in shaping a very time-specific and particular area of reality will be those most relevant to that area. Thus in the world of human affairs, that ongoing self-shaping will naturally be carried out by The Universe by means of human beings. At first glance, that phrase “by means of human beings” might ring alarm bells. Am I saying that, after all, human beings are not free and responsible for their own actions but are merely tools of The Universe? No, because human beings are living parts of The Universe and our freedom and responsibility are, likewise, aspects of The Universe. If an individual anarchist describes themself as part of a broader anarchist movement, this does not mean that they have surrendered their individual freedom and responsibility. Likewise, that broader anarchist movement would not be an anarchist movement without the freedom and responsibility of the individuals out of which it is constituted.

The Universe, in order to be alive, needs living parts. Human beings are among those living parts (and I only focus on human beings on the subjective basis that I am human!). In order to live, in order to form itself, shape itself, it needs those living parts to carry the responsibility appropriate to their sphere of influence. That is why they exist, that is what they essentially *are* – specific and subjectively-functioning organs of the overall whole. The Universe would not be The Universe if it had no actual presence on the physical level of being, if it had no actual presence in the present moment. It needs to *contain the function of subjectivity* in order to be able to be present and to participate in its own self-shaping. We are one of the ways in which The Universe exists on this physical and time-bound plane. We are its representatives, as it were, its avatars in this time and place.

In a metaphorical way, The Universe *descends* into us in order to act through us and through our being. It descends in the sense of passing from an abstract level to a physical one, which is often described as the passing from a “higher” to a “lower” level,¹¹ but without any sense of inferiority or superiority since we are considering different modes-of-being of one and the same entity. The necessary subjectivity with which we lead our lives is also the necessary subjectivity with which The Universe takes on a real form and becomes both present and active in its own self-shaping. Thus, in a way, we are doubly present in our own subjective experience. Firstly, we are there as our individual selves leading our own

individual lives. Secondly, we are there as manifestations of The Universe, of which we all form a living and active part. There is no contradiction between these two forms of presence – they are two aspects of the one reality, two sides of the same coin.

There is a problem when we become too immersed in the one aspect and lose sight of the other. Most commonly, human beings become too attached to the subjective aspect and cling to their individuality at the expense of any larger belonging. But it is also possible to err in the other direction, to retreat from the “illusions” of the physical world and seek reality on a purely spiritual plane. Neither of these is acceptable. We have to be aware of our supra-individual belonging and at the same time understand that we have a duty to use our own individual presence in this world for the benefit of a greater collective interest – whether that be our community, our species, our planet or an intangible sense of *good*. We have to see both sides of the coin at the same time, by setting it spinning perhaps,¹² by living in a state of permanent oscillation between the knowledge that there is an objective truth we can never properly know and the determination to lead our own subjective lives in the *best* way we can. Infused by the *gnosis* of our ultimate belonging to The Universe, our necessary subjectivity is set free to be *real, present and active* at a particular place and at a certain time, to play its part in the self-shaping of history without the crippling fear of individual death – to joyfully accept the full responsibility of authentic human existence.

1. Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: histoire secrète du vingtième siècle* (Paris: Éditions Allia, 1998), p. 276.

2. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. by Stephen MacKenna (London: Penguin, 1991) p. 380.

3. Plotinus, p. 389.

4. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *What is Civilisation and Other Essays* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1989), p. 70.

5. “There is nothing more difficult than to become critically aware of the presuppositions of one’s thought”. E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), p. 54.

“The individual who has been more deeply marked by this impoverished spectacular thought than by any other aspect of his experience puts himself at the service of the established order right from the start, even though subjectively he may have had quite the opposite intention. He will essentially follow the language of the spectacle, for it is the only one he is familiar with; the one in which he learned to speak. No doubt he would like to be regarded as an enemy of its rhetoric; but he will use its syntax. This is one of the most important aspects of spectacular domination’s success”. Guy Debord, *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). p. 38.

6. In *Forms of Freedom* (Sussex: Winter Oak Press, 2015) I use the term “the entity-that-is-not-an-entity” to describe what I am now referring to as The Universe, having encountered the same problem of the general definition of the universe in purely physical terms. It now seems appropriate to me to use the term The Universe for these purposes.

7. Any more than the reality of the sound made by a falling tree depends on someone having heard it – see 2. *Denying reality: from nominalism to newthink*.

8. As Plato writes in *Timaeus*: “Suppose a man modelling geometrical shapes of every kind in gold, and constantly remoulding each shape into another. If anyone were to point to one of them and ask what it was, it would be much the safest, if we wanted to tell the truth, to say that it was gold and not to speak of the triangles and other figures as being real things, because they would be changing as we spoke”. Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. by Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 69.

9. *Forms of Freedom*.

10. See Paul Cudenc, *The Stifled Soul of Humankind* (Sussex: Winter Oak, 2014).

11. See 6. *The Eye of the Heart*.

12. See Paul Cudenc, *The Fakir of Florence: A Novel in Three Layers* (Sussex: Winter Oak Press, 2016).