

Absolute Typhos

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This essay was written in late 2012 and early 2013. It has several layers. Most fundamentally it emerges from an old plan for serial essay-writing, in which each essay should defend an indefensible proposition. It is also a sequel to the previous essay on the Cynics, allowing a harsher perspective on the idea of Spectacle, which had appeared in a number of other texts I was working on at the time. Finally, it was written in mind of the approach taken in the Sovereign Self pieces—it certainly recollects their voice—and was intended for publication in a follow-up of sorts to that newspaper which has yet to appear.

1

In a book on the ancient Greek Cynic philosophers I reviewed for the *Anvil* two years ago, I noted with interest the Cynics' use of the term *typhos*. This word, which in ordinary usage meant *smoke* or *vapor*, was used by them "to denote the delirium of popular ideas and conventions."¹ The author of the book adds:

For the Cynics, these are insubstantial 'smoke' in comparison with the self and its present experiences, which alone can be known and possessed. One Cynic goal is *atyphia*, complete freedom from *typhos*.

The idea seems to have been one of mental obnubilation. In some provocations at the end of the review, I asked:

What is *typhos* to you? I think of this as a promising alternative to terms such as *ideology* or *spectacle*. Rather than deploying a true-false, reality-appearance dichotomy (the starting point of so many boring conversations), to me *typhos* suggests an intimate, personal, singular limit. It is the limit of my interest in the world, in the ideas and experiences of others, and in some of my own ideas and experiences as well. Beyond this limit, I can make a habit of thinking, all is smoke, vapor, *typhos*.²

This essay answers the question *what is typhos?* along the egoist path already implicit in the asking.

The last paragraph in the book on the Cynics includes the author's appraisal of a contemporary interpreter, Navia:

Ancient Cynicism is not for Navia an object of "scientific" curiosity only. It is important for him as the closest approximation to the true ethical philosophy, and the salutary outlook that we in our technological culture now need most. One idea that surfaces regularly in Navia's work is the fear that contemporary human beings have become too dependent on a system that creates and then panders to unnecessary desires and that increasingly establishes itself as the sole reality.

¹ Desmond, *Cynics*, 244.

² "Cynical Lessons", in this collection.

Worse, this system of endless acquisition and consumption harbours terrible violence both to the natural environment whose dwindling resources support it, and to human beings who are progressively dehumanized, continuously pumped with ideas, beliefs and desires from the outside, and blinded by the swirling typhos of media images, advertisements, plastic celebrities and political cant.

The only solution is to wage “war” on this system, like an Antisthenes or Diogenes, and thus not in the spirit of mere renunciation. For Navia, the true Cynic criticizes out of a deep moral idealism, and the interpretation of ancient Cynicism as wholly negative is itself a sad reflection on our own moral impoverishment. We have, Navia argues through his scholarship, taken too little thought of the wisdom of the ancient Cynics: live simply, scorn unnecessary desires, do not follow the slavish crowd but speak the truth clearly in righteous war against untruth and, most of all, cultivate the virtue of *philanthropia* and learn to love others now, for it is from this that everything else will follow.

It is only with respect to the last two of these sentences that I will deviate from this diagnosis. And my deviation might mark the specifically egoist appropriation of this idea, which opens out soon enough onto the appropriation of a more well-known set of concepts. Unlike the Cynic *as imagined in this passage*, the egoist sometimes does not seem righteous. It is difficult, if not impossible, to pin “moral idealism” on an egoist. For them, war on untruth may seem like a losing proposition. And the virtue of *philanthropia*, if it is to be something other than a very old religious injunction, must be practiced according to one’s own needs.³ The specific problem to be considered here is: given that love for self and love for *some* others is of concern to an egoist, what happens when it is troubled, not to say undone, rendered impossible, by a *technological system* of some sort . . . ?

2

One half of humanity laughs at the other half... and the egoist, who does not believe in Humanity, laughs in another way...⁴

Let me begin again from a slightly different place: those who consider themselves Humanity, the People, unconfessed egoists and secret egoists alike—most everyone dismisses the egoist for some reason or another. The moralistic criticism that dismisses egoists as selfish is a barely thought through prejudice, a dull way of begging the question of morality. But as the following dialogue will illustrate, one can pass from that criticism to a more interesting critique. Imagine a dialogue between a Normal⁵ and an egoist:

³ I admit any egoist could have written that. With more originality, I hope, I have penned some notes on the universal injunction to love others, from an egoist perspective, in the essay called “A Lesson in Desire”, also included in this collection.

⁴ Old egoist saying.

⁵ There are Normals insofar as there are processes of normalization, powers of the norm (see what Foucault, and Macherey after him, have written on this) and they are not resisted by individuals or groups. Of course, from an egoist point of view normality has no intrinsic importance.

Normal. You only think of yourself, you do not understand the world as I do, empathetic and well-informed...

Egoist. But what if I, and a few people I know, are the only real people? What if there is no 'real world'?

Normal. See what ridiculous things your egoism has led you to believe!

Egoist. You are the one who believes in too many things, the world first of all.

Normal. Ah! That is why you only think of your own affairs! You don't even know that the world is out there! You should pay more attention to the news, learn more about the world around us ...

An egoist ought to enjoy the challenge of responding to the more interesting (because more exaggerated) critique that diagnoses him as a solipsist, switching from the moral to the epistemological register to win one for the Normals. (This switch might emerge from the incredulity with which amoral positions are received. The Normals understand morality and immorality very well, and are usually eager to diagnose them. When someone claims to have slipped out of the net of morality, the response is usually to diagnose them as immoral; when that does not work, we get the switch at stake here, which buttresses the moralistic perspective by proposing that the amoral one just doesn't perceive the world as it is—which, of course, is a disguised way of saying *doesn't perceive things as one ought*.)

The egoist is accused of thinking, of acting as if she is the only one in the world. (This translates the assertion that there is no World into the parlance of the Normals.) If this accusation of solipsism is more worth my time than that of selfishness, it is because it is a real critique, not the barely disguised manifestation of a moral prejudice. Though still moralistic at its core, this critique has to do with desire or will: the way that one does or does not reach out beyond oneself, and who or what one embraces as one's concern.

Why would an egoist deny the World? Why minimize one's concerns?

3

Suppose that what Debord, and Tiqqun after him, wrote about the spectacle, is relevant to these questions. Suppose that most interpersonal relations are mediated (governed, controlled) by images. Suppose that in some sense our efforts to express ourselves and our discourse, precise and well-honed though we may make it, are always occluded by a wash of images in rapid succession. Suppose the spectacle, its stupidity. It is not primarily that the images are representations, or fakes, for that matter, that is at stake; but that they are vectors for the communication of stupidity and confusion in the guise of information and dialogue.

Imprisoned in a flattened universe bounded by the screen of the spectacle that has enthralled him, the spectator knows no one but the fictitious speakers [interlocuteurs]

who subject him to a one-way monologue about their commodities and the politics of their commodities.⁶

What concern could an egoist possibly have for such one-way communication? Amusement alone, it seems to me. And good taste dictates that amusement comes to an end soon enough. After that comes the World: for what others call the World is the detritus of my amusement. Their concern for the World is not mine, because I cease to make the image-wash my concern when I am no longer amused.

I have said the same thing in two different ways: if the idea of spectacle makes sense, it is because I feel the imposition of technologically generated image flows, vectors of stupidity, whose potential to amuse is limited. I am offered something other than persons in the image-wash: crude masks, delayed gratification, promises of future connection, friendship, community, belonging... there is no one there.

...the demand for sensational news becomes translated into repetition. The all-too-well-known phenomena of saturation, of boredom, of lightning transitions from interest to tedium, produce techniques aimed at overcoming those very reactions: techniques of *presentation*. Ways are found of varying the way news is presented. 'Presence' itself, which is used to epitomize authenticity, becomes a technological construct, a mystification.

[...]

Facts, ideas—what ideas there are—and subjects come back again and again. No one recognizes them. Non-recognition is organized technically to combat memory and previously acquired information. The confusion between triviality which no longer appears trivial and sensationalism which is made to appear ordinary is cleverly organized.⁷

While others, inasmuch as they pass rapidly from image to image, might be said to have a short attention span, I might be said to have a short span for extending my concern beyond my own affairs. That is amusement, nothing more.

Repetition, *image-wash* ... It was probably not the intention of Debord or the other spectacle-theorists to critique the mass media alone. The spectacle was not television, and is not the internet. It is, wrote Debord after Marx, a kind of social relation, a relation of minimum autonomy and endless buffeting, corralling, controlling through images. It is a grammar and a semiotic. It is a relation of *power*: *one-way communication* is *asymmetrical*, always in my disfavor. For an egoist what is at stake is less the question of mediation (to which I will return later) than the massive asymmetry as well as just the massiveness, the technologically enhanced powers of the masses.

It seems to me that those who came up with the concept of spectacle, and most of those who continue to use it (along with most theories of ideology, dominant discourses, and so on), could be judged to have diagnosed correctly much of what goes on in societies like ours, but failed in the task of describing how one is to live if one in fact thinks things are this way. The stratagems,

⁶ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, § 218.

⁷ Lefebvre, "Renewal, Youth, Repetition", in *Introduction to Modernity*, 166.

programs, or recipes for rupturing representation, for seizing control of public space or production, have consistently failed. What groups, milieus, or would-be communes have come into existence as a result of collectively held beliefs about resisting the spectacle increasingly rely on spectacular means to spread their message, and, if we consider social networks, to remain in existence at all. They have become massified, or rely on massification for their communications, at least.

All recognition *within* the Spectacle is only recognition *of* the Spectacle.⁸

So, as always, it falls to the egoist to take one step farther in the direction of sobriety and skepticism. And in this case that means: enough critique! I understand the problem. Intimately. But also: enough collectivist recipes for overcoming it! The spectacle theory, and its relatives, the theories-of-ideology, rely too much on these overly optimistic or naturalized justifications for forming smaller societies with others.

This is where an egoist may embrace what seems most ridiculous in her way of setting out from herself with respect to every important question:

*... we want to be great like our perversity...*⁹

My description of this may be couched in the form of an experiment: *embrace quasi-solipsism*.

4

Live as though the only people that really exist are those you have met face to face; every other person, from politicians to celebrities, internet acquaintances and the populations of distant lands, are then something like fictions or simulations. Imaginary persons. Clumsy masks. That is, it is not so much that the spectacle, ideology, or what you will distorts their appearance, messages, or reality, but that it constructs it wholesale. To live out this quasi-solipsism, I think, will be an experiment that maximizes my own autonomy.

*Never think of men except in terms of those specific individuals whose names you know.*¹⁰

Rexroth might have more exactly said: think—with concern, with care. As though beyond my face-to-face acquaintances I was surrounded by a realm of *typhos*. The milieu, groups, subcultures: relative *typhos*. Politics, entertainment, sports, consumer cultures, etc.: absolute *typhos*. The difference with the spectacle-theory is that I do not suppose any collective way out. There is not a reality hiding behind the mediatic veil. There is my fascinating solitude, my autonomy insofar as I can appropriate it; there are those few mysterious ego-to-ego relations that I call friendships. That is all that is real—ethically real, so real in every other sense as well. The difficulty is not in piercing the veil of distortions, the social lie (it will never happen); the difficulty is in turning away, in becoming fascinated with what is my own, what I have made or can make my own.

⁸ Tiqqun, *Theory of Bloom*.

⁹ Novatore, "Towards the Creative Nothing", in *Collected Writings*, 46.

¹⁰ Kenneth Rexroth.

Beyond that, relative *typhos* is the tenuous realm of face-to-face relations. Here I have a chance to greet another and be greeted in return, to communicate with a minimum of affinity. But it is a chance and nothing more. My neighbor's mind may be so clouded in *typhos* that her words only repeat bits and pieces of spectacular propaganda; and as a result she will never know me except as a more or less friendly mask.

But it is with absolute *typhos* that the real controversy probably lies. Here is where the judgment of others falls hardest on the egoist. Let us make their spite our own, reversing the perspective. They are, in some sense, right; I have a great indifference for the world. I do not, in the end, claim that the great masses of my continent or the populations of distant lands are not real. Nor do I claim that there is no flesh and blood human sitting in a special chair in an office in a white house. But I do suggest that for an egoist these are simply not to be considered ethical persons, because we will always and only know them through the spectacle. With respect to imaginary persons, such as the president or celebrities, this is eminently so in the sense that they are figureheads, single bodies puppeted by production teams and think tanks.

With respect to the great masses and distant populations, they exist as technologically enhanced abstractions: population data, surveys, information, opinion polls, networks... so many Causes. Why do the Normals think of the masses or the faraway Peoples? Due to their participation in one or more social Causes. But I acknowledge no morality that would compel me to meet the population of a distant land. It would only be the taste for adventure or risk that might make me want to take steps in that direction. That aside, I remain indifferent.

Could I meet the individuals that supposedly compose these masses? If I am inclined to wander through the realm of *typhos*, I may go to meet them. There I may find relative *typhos* or, interestingly enough, other persons may surface and make themselves known. But that is something other than an end to the technology of *typhos*, the spectacle.

Why would an egoist deny the world? Because absolute *typhos* cannot be appropriated, cannot be made my own. So *I embrace quasi-solipsism*.

5

Could one in fact live this way? From the egoist perspective, I would say that in some way everyone already does. As always, it is the egoist who reveals the fact. It is the egoist who confesses, who admits that she sets out from herself in every circumstance that matters. The rest, the People, the Humans, the Normals, well . . . somewhere in them they have the same perspective. But it is occluded, obnubilated —

*... the collective tempests and social hurricanes ...*¹¹

their self-fascination is interrupted and mediated by every Cause that intrudes upon their solitary discourse.

And that mediation, that interruption, with its resultant mental fog: that is what we call *typhos*. I will conclude by noting that in proposing this egoist reconstruction of the Cynic idea of *typhos*, I have only made reference to the spectacle theory and ideology critique out of convenience, supposing their familiarity to many of my readers—not to mention their ongoing popularity. But

¹¹ Novatore, "Towards the Creative Nothing", 44.

I will note that this egoist version does not include the humanistic core that makes the spectacle theory so philosophically weak. Let me cite at some length from one of Debord's harshest critics:

What does *The Society of the Spectacle* have to say? That market society has become separated from itself by alienating itself in spectacle, the inverted image of social reality, the 'present model of life' in which we venerate our own power turned against ourselves. That this generalized separation has engendered the all-inclusive spectacular, which is 'the real world turned upside-down' and the 'visible negation of life', a negation that, in its turn, subdues living persons for its own purposes. But also that this illusion will come to an end once the 'atomized crowd subjected to manipulations' liberates itself by taking hold again of its own essence, which has been alienated in the fantastic form of spectacle or ideology.

[...]

... one should write 'society' instead of 'humanity', and 'spectacle' instead of 'ideology'. Except for this detail of phrasing, the 'Situationist' discourse follows word-for-word the tracks of Hegelianism: objectification, separation, negation, reversal, reversal of the reversal. Humanity's liberation will come about through the reuniting of what was separated: the predicate and the subject.

[...]

This modernist refresher course in an ideological form of argument advanced in the Germany of 1840—but which the human sciences have since relegated to the status of an edifying tale—rests on the idea of a generic nature, of man's pre-existent essence. It is difficult these days to be unaware that the nature of man is not to have a nature, and that this lack of origin is precisely at the origin of the making of man, the technogenesis of the human.

Essentialist ontologies are obliged to wipe away everything that has been discovered since 1848 [. . .] The theological postulate of a human 'essence' is an inheritance of the revealed religions for which God created man after his own image, once and for all.¹²

The egoist idea of *typhos* allows us to learn from spectacle and ideology theory, but evades this critique. This perspective or experiment does not involve facing off a false humanity, whose relations are mediated by images, and a real humanity, with real human relations, which I will agree with Debray sounds like a 'theological postulate'.¹³ It contrasts the minute realm of what I can know as my own (which, in its importance to me, may be colossal) with the vast amount of deviations from my affairs that are offered to me. *Typhos* is, let me restate it, simply the limit of my interest in the world. Even if I suppose (and I more than suppose it, I think it's so—you need not agree) that there is no human nature, and that this is tied up with the "technogenesis of the human", I can still suspect, as an egoist, that this technogenesis seems to have gone horribly wrong, and has unleashed waves of Normality, stupidity, and typhoid confusion over the earth. Not the media, but the technology of the mass. So the earth becomes a world, egos or persons

¹² Régis Debray, "Remarks on the Spectacle", 135-136.

¹³ Supposing one wants to put this in terms of the history of philosophy, one might remember that egoists follow Stirner's way of breaking with Feuerbach, not Marx's. If it is even a question of a break for Debord: as Debray points out, he is close to Feuerbach on a number of points.

become Humanity... indeed, this suggests the Cynics only ever faced relative *typhos*. Perhaps their moral idealism and so on had to do with the sense that they could speak the truth, that it would resonate beyond them.

Not so for us. *Atyphia* seems impossible. If technogenesis means anything, it is that the human mass drags typhos with it, that the communication machines improve it, that we do have reason to speak of an endless interference in our affairs. It is something other than an alienation of essence! But it is absolute typhos. And I ask, again: why would I invest any of this with belief or interest?

Ethically, in terms of the life of an egoist, there is no Spectacle, no Society, no Thing of Things. There are my concerns, and beyond that, **typhos**.

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