

One walks along a forest path, and stops to look around and find a stick to be used for a cane. What happened? At least three things: the walking has changed, the look has changed, and, most important, the forest has changed. There are several anthropological theories that seem to connect the "origin of man" with these changes. To them, they are specifically human, and are at the root of history and culture. One wonders, however, whether these changes do not presuppose themselves a specifically human situation. (This hypothesis does not involve necessarily religious connotations.) Let us consider how one walks in a forest. There seem to be four ways to do it: lost in thought; observing the forest; enjoying the forest; and looking for a way out of the forest. (There may be other ways, and the four ways mentioned may be combined, but let us forget that.) Let us then consider how these four ways of walking may turn into the looking for canes.

One thing seems to be clear as a start: animals do not walk that way. They do not do so, because these four ways of walking presuppose a distinction between the one who walks in the forest and the forest. In that sense animals do not walk in the forest, they are a walking of the forest. And this is the reason why it does not seem radical enough to try and start to tell the history of mankind with describing the tools one finds at certain archaeological places. In order to be able to make tools, one must be able to walk in the forest. This is what considerations like these seem to suggest.

To walk in a forest lost in thought means to disconsider the forest and one's own walking. One's regard is concentrated on one's thoughts, and the forest and one's own walking body are excluded from one's field of vision. Now this is against nature in two senses of the term: it is against nature because it disregards nature, and because it is against the natural tendency of vision to look without. Such an anti-natural attitude is possible only if the situation permits to disregard nature, (the forest and one's body). It permits it if everything in the situation is as it ought to be: "in order". Therefore it seems to be a very late situation in the history of human conquest of nature. In fact: this sort of walking is a model for all post-historical situations. But there is a curious contradiction in it. The thoughts one is lost in while walking this way must be about some thing, in order to be true thoughts. And the something thoughts are about is in the last analysis something in nature. Now if nature is as it ought to be, if it is "in order", there is no problem there, and nothing is to be thought about. Thus: in order to get lost in thought, there must be order about me, and if there is order about me, I can have no thoughts to get lost in. Now this is a serious objection to all optimistic "progressive" commitment.

To walk in a forest observing it involves a specific type of looking.

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It transforms the forest into my object. That is into something that is different from me, but that I can take possession of. This is, of course, the scientific attitude and its objectivity. Some believe that it eliminates me as a subject of observation. But such radical empiricism is mistaken. To be a subject that observes does not mean "to put oneself into brackets". It means to admit oneself different from the object, (alienated from it), and to try and overcome this alienation through knowledge and possible transformation of the object. The observing look is the alienated look, and the beginning of a commitment against alienation. The observing subject is a hole which tries to suck in objects in order to be something. (It is quite possible that the observing subject denies this and affirms his objectivity and "pure" observation. But this is his subjective prejudice.) In other words: he who walks a forest observing it admits that he is alienated from it, but tries to overcome this alienation by swallowing up the forest. Why does he want to do it? In order to transform the forest into what it ought to be, and thus be able to get lost in thought. This is a serious objection to scientific commitment, "pure" or otherwise.

To walk ~~in~~ a forest enjoying it is an attempt to open oneself to it and become part of it. (To become like animals are, only they need not attempt it, and therefore probably do not enjoy it.) Mystics, (and to a lesser degree romantics), affirm that they achieve this. But we have to accept their declarations at face value, because private experience cannot be communicated. Seen thus, enjoying is the complementary method to observing: the one tries to be possessed by the object, the other tries to possess it. (This is possibly one aspect of the difference between Occidental and Oriental cultures.) (And the Chinese say that we do not know how to walk in a forest.) But one has a feeling that the aesthetic method, (the one that enjoys), is open more or less to the same objections that the epistemological method is open to, (the one that observes). Namely that the fusion of subject and object, (be it "unio mystica" or knowledge), does not do away, (even if achieved, which is hard to imagine), with the paradox of human condition. This is a serious objection to all dialectics as methods of "salvation".

To walk in a forest looking for a way out of it involves a different type of looking. It sees the forest not as an object, but as an obstacle which puts itself between myself and my aim: for instance the place where I live. It must be overcome, so that I might return to myself. I am lost in the forest, but I can hope to find myself, ("my way out"), because I can put myself somehow above the forest. For instance I can look at maps or at the position of the sun in the sky and thus see the forest from above. I am not opposed to the forest, (like in observing or enjoying it), I can transcend it. My transcendence is a theory or a set of theories, (maps and astronomical theories), which have been supplied by culture, (by oth

ers). But there is no guarantee that my transcendence will lead me out of the forest. The maps may be bad, or the forest may have changed since the maps were made, and there may be clouds in the sky, or I may be reading the maps and the sun's position in a wrong way. And I can even imagine that some maps are purposely misleading. (The relation between theory and praxis is complex for many reasons.) But, no doubt, walking that way in a forest is a better model for the human condition than the three more noble ways already discussed are. It involves the question: how and why did I get lost in the first place? And the question: What if I get out of the forest, shall I go back to it or stay out? These questions have no easy answers and have to do with freedom. Possibly every anthropology should start with this type of questions.

Let us suppose that thanks to some theories I believe to have found the direction that leads out of the forest, but that there is a thick growth of brush in that direction. I then suddenly look about with a totally new way of looking. I look for a stick that could be used as a cane to cut my way out of the forest. I can do this for two quite different reasons. The first is that I have a theory that points at a way out, and without it there would be no sense in looking for canes to cut that way out. The second reason is that I know that sticks can be made into canes, and I cannot look for possible canes without it. The first reason says that I have an epistemological model, and the other says that I have an ethical model, and I cannot look for canes in the absence of any of these models. It is the possession of these models that makes me man, (namely a potential cane-maker), and not the cane making itself.

Through this new type of look of mine the forest has changed completely. It is no longer just an obstacle, but it is also a challenge. I see it now as a place full of potential canes called "sticks" that are there waiting for me to become real. That is: waiting to be plucked out by my hand and turned by my hand against the forest. Pieces of forest waiting to become anti-forest. The contradiction "transcendence-immanence" thus changes into creativity, and the forest into a field of culture. Now this does not, of course, explain anything, (it does not explain, for instance, the beginning of history), but it does throw a light on the spot where explanations should come from.

It does, for instance, some service to considering the other three nobler ways of walking, the philosophical, scientific and aesthetical one, that make it so difficult to understand what canes are. Take the aesthetic first as an example. I enjoy the forest, I open myself to it. But it must be admitted that this is not enough: the forest itself must in some way open itself to me. The mystics may say what they will: this is not automatic. If I want to become one with a mushroom, I must first see it. And a good way to do this is to take a stick, turn it around like a cane, and fre

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the mushroom. Which is a proof that after all I am not there alone in the face of The Mushroom. When transforming the stick into cane I was following a model given me by others. They are there with me. Aesthetic experience, (and the mystic one), although private, is made possible by culture. Possibly some inspired artists tend to forget this. And some of present tendencies toward "immediate experience" seem in reality to recommend canes coming from a different culture.

Take the scientific way of walking in the forest as a second example. To observe means to discover. It means to separate some aspects of the forest from its totality, (with the hope to integrate them again later). A good way to make that separation, (and that discovery), is to take a stick, turn it around like a cane, and use it as an instrument of observation. But a cane is the result of an ethical model, a model that says "sticks ought to be canes". The so-called "value-free" observation, not to mention "value-free science as such, is a myth, and canes prove it.

Take the philosophical way of walking in a forest as a last example. It is well and good to say that if I am lost in thought the forest has ~~xxx~~ disappeared from my field of vision, and that I see, within my thoughts, what may be called the "true forest". (This is, after all, what "to be lost in thought" means at least ever since Plato, up to Husserl and the structuralist method, although the interpretation of the term "to be lost" and "thought" may vary.) But since the forest in which I walk is not as it ought to be, (and everybody agrees to that), it will happen that I am hindered by a stick while walking. I then may, "automatically", (that is: conditioned by culture), pick that stick up, turn it around, and use it for my walking. In fact: I walk better, and therefore get better lost in thought, after I did that. (This may be called a pragmatist, or Nietzschean, irruption into philosophy, or by any other name one prefers, and it has to do with the famous "death of philosophy" which it is so elegant nowadays to speak of.) Anyway, the fact that there are sticks around which are not yet canes, and which therefore must be taken into account by those who are lost in thought seems to be an argument for the marxists. But then the cane itself cannot be very well assimilated by those who are lost in thought by the marxistic method.

What are canes, then? The "ought-to-be" ~~stick~~ of sticks, which presuppose epistemological models. They become real, when one is lost in a forest, and, trying to find one's way out, applies theory to praxis. And they prove that one is never alone in the forest. And that there is no knowledge without them. And that there is no "pure" theoretical thinking without them. But that, on the other hand, they are impossible without theoretical thinking. They are, in short, examples of the human condition. Instead of trying to explain canes through man, would it not be a good method to try and explain man through canes for a change? Although, maybe, man cannot be explained, whatever the method?