About levers.

For ARTFORUM

He who finds a point of support may lift the world from its hinges. This is the priciple of the lever, and the man who discovered it was not Archimedes. It must have been his predecessor from the Valley of the Neander, unless the lever be an even more ancient invention. This article will try to consider some aspects of that invention. Because the writer suspects that the whole process called "human history" (more aptly to be called "the process of humanisation of anthropoids")is closely linked to levers. One word of caution: although the lever is a machine ment to lift objects, this article will not necessarily be uplifting.

The lever is a machine, which means that it is a trick intended to cheat something. The lever is a machine which cheats heavy bodies out of their heaviness, and it does so without taking them lightly. In this the lever behaves like some Oriental fighters: it uses the strength of its adversary to fight him. Mechanics may be the Western form of Judô: it fights nature by turning the laws of nature against nature. Now here on Earth (where we all live provisionally) all the bodies are heavy. They all tend toward the center of our planet. Levers are intended to do something about this terrestrial tendency downward. Heavenly bodies appear to be different. They appear to be circling weightlessly forever. But Newton has shown that heavenly bodies are just as down-to-Earth as are all the other bodies: he has unified terrestrial and celestial mechanics. He has shown for instance that one day in the far future the Planet Mercury will necessarily fall by accident into the Sun, as the famous apple has fallen by accident necessarily upon his own head. By doing so Newton has lifted the Earth and all the bodies upon it (including our own bodies) into Heaven. No need to commit oneself to the establishment of Heaven on Earth: Newton has already done so. Unfortunately however Heaven is just as down to Earth as are our own bodies. The lever is just competent here on Earth as it is in Heaven.

All bodies are heavy, and if they are up they must come down sooner or later. We ourselves are heavy bodies, and according to our tradition we have fallen already. Platon thinks that we have fallen from the realm of the eternal ideas into the realm of mere appearances, and Judeo-Christians believe that we have fallen from Paradise into this sorry world. But even if this were so, and even if we are fallen men and women, some of us try to get up again and stand upright. We even call an early ancester of ours 'Homo erectus', the Upright Man, to show that we have not been knocked out by Platonic oblivion or by Hudeo-Christian sin, and that we are still fighting. What lever did we use to stand upright? How did we cheat the heaviness of our bodies? Let us look mechanistically at that question. Let us suppose that we have not fallen from Platonic ideas nor from Paradise, but from some East African tree tops about two million years ago, and see if there is an answer.

Try to imagine the situation. There is a forest, and in the trees there live heavybodied animals like Chimpansees and Gorillas. Although they tend to fall down like all other heavy bodies, they stay up because they have developed a few acrobatic tricks during Darxinian evolution. They have survived because they

are fit for that Darwinian circus. And then, to put it like Nietzsche, each day grew colder, the trees became rarer, and the distances between them grew wider All of a sudden, those anthropoid acrobats were no longer fit for survival. No complex probability calculus is needed to understand that as they jumped from tree top to tree top accidents became ever more frequent. This series of accident which became ever more necessary in the new traffic situation should have been the end to the anthropoid story. Instead, those necessary accidents are the Origin of Man (and no doubt of Woman also). Because not all the fallen anthropoids broke their back when they fell on the savannah which had by now taken the place of the forest. Some of them survived somehow, although they were savannah misfits, and we are their descendents.

Before considering how those misfits became Homines erecti, one thing mus be kept in mind: there must have been very few survivors. The ecological catastrc phy which swept East Africa two million years ago must have wiped out most of the tree top dwellers. If one tries to intuit such a scenario, one can see how a few very heavy bodies of hairy apes fall heavily on the ground and then struggle to somehow get up. Such a heavy fall must have caused a great impression on the inhabitants of the savannah, and the whole ecosystem must have trembled. Possibly we can hear the impact of that fall on the ecosystem even now in the lamentations of the eco-nuts, as we can hear the echo of the Big Bang as a back noise in the Cosmos. It is difficult to imagine that there were very few potential humans about at that time, and that each of them was important. Now there are between five and six billions of survivors from that catastrophy, and since they are all statistically equal, each of them is just as important as everybody else, which is to say unimportant. They assemble in the hundreds of thousands in open spaces, lift their arms with open palms or close fists toward the sky and shout, and each horse with a policeman on its back is more prominent than the crowd of humans. Two millions of years ago every potential human being was prominent, and it is in i this anti-statistical, anti-democratic situation that the lever must first have been invented. To invent the lever a genius is needed, and indeed all the fallen apes must have been geniusses. If not, they could not have survived a situation to which they were unfit. We, who are the victims of demographic inflation, can no longer intuit such an aristocratic vision of the Human Being.

Now consider that hairy ape, that aristocratic genius, as he lies there flat on his back and tries to get up somehow. You should not compare him to a new-born baby, because there are transcendent parental arms who help the baby to get up and slowly, painfully, after several months, become Homo erectus. No such transcendent arms float over the fallen ape, because his simian parents have hidde within the receding tree tops. You should rather compare him to a fallen beetle. However, the ape does not fidget about with six legs (like the beetle does), but with two legs and two arms, and each arm is equipped with a curious five-legged spider. Is is those spiders which are the saviors of the fallen ape, and it is they, the human hands, which merit closed examination where the invention of lever and human history are concerned.

As the fallen anthropoid over there in East Africa twomillions of years ago is trying desperately to get on his feet (which are not made to support his heavy body), his two hands scan the surface of the ground he fell unto. They finger around, they touch, they grasp, they hold, they manipulate, they turn around the objects they had grasped and they are holding. Those two surealistic fivelegged spiders are executing those complex gestures ever since, they have scanned our surroundings ever since, and the result is what we call civilisation. Each motion of that complex gesture has been submitted to scrutiny, and a catalogue of all the motions has been repeatedly suggested. For instance thus: perception, conception, understanding, evaluation, production. The remarkeable thing about this dance of the hands within the world is that it is so unlike all other animal motions. Take a normal, eight-legged spider as an example. It sits within its net and waits for something to happen. If something strikes the net, it executes motions. But the something that strikes the net (and thus the spider's attention) must fall within one of three types: it must be either comestible, or copulable, or dangerous, and if it is neither it will not be noticed by the spider. The same goes for simian hands, which are so similar to ours: they will reach out to grasp food, or a sexual partner or to avoid danger (for instance hold fast to branches). But our hands do the oppos they reach out to grasp mostly objects of a fourth type. Objects that cannot be eaten, nor copulated, nor do they represent any danger, like stones that lie there on the ground and sticks which were broken off branches. Our hands are Kantian in the sense in which Kant says that beauty is that which pleases without being interesting. Our hands execute disinterested motions. And the fallen anthropoid shows why: out of desperation.

You may object that young animals play around, and thus execute similar motions. But the objection is not valid. To understand why, take this example: The fallen anthropoid fingers, touches, grasps, holds unto and manipulates a stick, turns it around and uses it as a lever to lift himself up into an upright position. You may state this in a different manner: he understands that sticks ought to be levers, and then he evaluates the stick and realizes the lever. To be sure: the fallen anthropoid plays around like many other young animals, but while doing so he distinguishes between what is and what ought to be, between the real and values, and thus creates the sciences and culture. In other words: in order to get on his feet the fallen anthropoid must play around with his hands and thus produce a lever, which is to say that he must produces scientific knowledge and artistic values.

This phenomenological description of the Origin of Man and of Human history in general has taken the lever for its point of departure. It is thus a mechanistic vision of Humanity and of culture. But before you condemn such an attitude as being too simplistic, consider the principle the lever stands on/ We must first find a point of support, before we can use the lever. Now that point cannot be itself part of mechanics. It must necessarily be trans-mechanics. And this is true of every approach toward the Origin of what we are: it will finally come up against something that transcends it. Probably because our Origin is not entirely localized in a specific space, be it Platonic ideas, Paradise or tree tops. There is something out-of-space, utopic about us. Look at a lever and you shall see it.