What Makes Life Worth Living

On Pharmacology

Bernard Stiegler
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What Makes Life Worth Living
On Pharmacology

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Translated by Daniel Ross

polity
Acknowledgements

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Do not be careless [me amelesete].

Socrates, in Plato, *Phaedo* 118a

Living itself [is a] therapy that makes sense.

Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*

The supreme effort of the writer as of the artist only succeeds in partially raising for us the veil of ugliness and insignificance that leaves us uncaring [*incurieux*] before the world. Then, he says to us:

‘Look, look
‘Fragrant with clover and artemisia
‘Holding tight their quick, narrow streams
‘The lands of the Aisne and the Oise.’

Marcel Proust, *Days of Reading*

Consumers consume consumptions.

Raymond Queneau
Introduction
The loss of the feeling of existing

A mother, according to Donald Winnicott, by taking care of her infant, even before the child is old enough to speak, teaches it that life is worth living. She instils in the child the feeling that life is worth living.

Maternal care, which obviously provides this feeling back to the mother herself, passes through the intermediary of what Winnicott called the ‘transitional object’. This object enables and conditions the relation between mother and child and, as such, it is not a mere intermediary: it constitutes the mother as this mother, in her very way of being a mother, and this child as her child.

The transitional object has a distinct virtue: it does not exist. Certainly, something exists that enables it to appear – for example, a teddy bear or cuddly toy. But what makes this teddy bear or cuddly toy able to open up ‘transitional space’ – which Winnicott also called ‘potential space’ – in which the mother can encounter her child; what makes this teddy bear or cuddly toy able to become the transitional object, is that, beyond that part of the object that exists in external space, beyond or beneath this piece of cloth, there holds something that is precisely neither in exterior space, nor simply internal to either the mother or the child.

In this beyond or beneath of both the exterior and the interior, there is something that holds between the mother and her child, and which nevertheless does not exist. What takes hold between the mother and child in not existing, but in passing through the transitional object, and which therefore finds itself constituted by it, links and attaches them to one another through a wonderful relationship: a relation of love, of amour fou.

What holds and is upheld as this link through which these two beings become incommensurable and infinite for one another, is what, by allowing a place for that which is infinite, consists precisely to the immeasurable extent [dans la mesure et la démesure] that it does not exist – because the only things that exist are finite things.

This consistence, more than anything else, and before anything else, is what a mother protects when she protects her child. This protection, which is care par excellence, is grounded in the knowledge the mother has of the extra-ordinary character of the object – and that Winnicott calls transitional precisely in order to designate this extra-ordinariness.

Such was Winnicott’s great discovery: the fact that maternal knowledge is knowledge of that which, in the transitional object, consists, though it does not exist, and which gives to the child placed under this protection the feeling that ‘life is worth living’.

I argue in this work that the transitional object is the first pharmakon.

The question of the pharmakon first arose in contemporary philosophy with Jacques Derrida’s commentary on the Phaedrus in ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’.

Writing – as hypomnesia, hypomnematon, that is, artificial memory – is that pharmakon whose artificial and poisonous effects Plato combats by opposing them to anamnesis, to thinking ‘for oneself’, that is, to the autonomy of thought. Derrida has
shown, however, that this autonomy nevertheless always has something to do with heteronomy – in this case, that of writing – and that, while Plato opposes autonomy and heteronomy, they in fact constantly compose.

The transitional object is the first pharmakon because it is both an external object on which the mother and child are dependent (losing it is enough to make this clear) and in relation to which they are thus heteronomous; and an object that, not existing but consisting, provides (through this very consistence) sovereignty to both mother and child: their serenity, their trust in life, their feeling that life is worth living, their autonomy.

The pharmakon that is the transitional object is the point of departure for the formation of a healthy psychic apparatus. And it is also, in particular through sublimation, a condition of keeping the psychic apparatus of the adult in good health.

But Winnicott shows that a bad relation to this object and to its heteronomy is just as possible as the care that it alone makes possible. Dependence then becomes harmful, that is, destructive of autonomy and trust. The care that the mother must take of her child, then, necessarily includes the way she protects her child from this object: from what it contains that is threatening. And eventually she must teach her children to detach themselves from it.

It is in this way that the mother must bring the child to adopt – or not – its transitional situation, that is, its pharmacological situation, on the basis of which the child will be able to attain, or not, the feeling that life is worth living. By bringing the child to adopt the pharmakon, what Winnicott calls the good mother also teaches the child to detach itself from the transitional object so as to engage with other transitional spaces, with which it will establish other relations, all of which may distance the child from the mother herself – despite which she does not lose her infinite dimension.

This is why the transitional object does not only concern the child and mother: it is also, as first pharmakon, the origin of works of art and, more generally, of the life of the mind or spirit in all its forms, and thus of adult life as such. It is, finally, the origin of all objects, because an object is always that which, once upon a time, appeared to a mind that projected it.

We shall see that, ultimately, things can constitute a world only insofar as they irreducibly proceed from the transitional character of the object. Having become ordinary and everyday, and in this sense ‘mundane’ (or ‘intramundane’), the transitional object conserves its pharmacological dimension, even if this ‘mundanity’ tends to conceal this dimension. As such, it can always engage not only curative projection processes but poisonous ones, becoming, for example, the support of an addiction, the screen of melancholy, and even a drive of destruction, of murderous madness, of those dangerous states that result when the feeling that life is worth living has been lost.

To lose the feeling that life is worth living may drive one to furious madness.

Re-reading Playing and Reality over the last year in order to prepare a course which to some extent lies at the origin of the present work, I was astounded to discover that, according to Winnicott, the patients under his care had ‘lost the feeling of existing’. I was astounded because I immediately recalled that these were the exact words, ‘lost the feeling of existing’, that Richard Durn wrote in his diary when he admitted or
forewarned, but a forewarning to no one in particular, that this loss was so abyssal and painful that it could well lead him to commit a massacre.6

The pharmakon is at once what enables care to be taken and that of which care must be taken – in the sense that it is necessary to pay attention: its power is curative to the immeasurable extent [dans la mesure et la démesure] that it is also destructive.

This ‘at once’ characterizes what I call a pharmacology, on which and from which I shall try to open perspectives in the pages which follow.

As far as I know, Derrida never envisaged the possibility of such a pharmacology – that is, of a discourse on the pharmakon understood in the same gesture in its curative and toxic dimensions. And this can only be a source of regret for us, those who, in the twenty-first century, are trying to remain non-inhuman beings, and for whom the question of the pharmakon is not merely an academic issue for learned philosophers: it obsesses each and every one of us.

This state of affairs [état de fait] requires a rule of law [état de droit], a thought that, even if it can no longer secure a clear separation between fact and right – a difference between heteronomy and autonomy that would be not only clear but absolute – nevertheless learns to distinguish them in a new way, that is, without opposing them. The pharmacological question that now concerns each and every one of us thus becomes a primary question for the academic world and for the world as a whole.

This pharmacological question haunts planetary consciousness and the planetary unconscious, just as it haunts the immense loss of trust that inevitably results from the loss of care. This question thus characterizes the economic and spiritual crisis afflicting the ‘earth-ark’.7 This crisis is therefore unprecedented, which means that it is more critical than ever.

Krisis means ‘decision’. We all now know that it is the future of terrestrial life that is at stake with unprecedented urgency. We all know, whether we admit it or whether we prefer to know nothing about it, nor even to hear about it, that with the historical sequence that began to unfold in 2007, every step counts, and seems to be systemically overloaded with consequences that would be extremely difficult to reverse – if not absolutely irreversible.

It is in this context that there arises, today, the question of care, and of its condition: the pharmakon.

Notes

1 This mother, the ‘good mother’, could clearly also be the father, or some other guardian – and ultimately any benevolent and protective psychic power. And this is the idea behind The Kid, in which Chaplin takes on the maternal role to perfection. Furthermore, in Taking Care of Youth and the Generations (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), I drew attention to the fact that Moses and Jesus are adopted children, the former by Jochebed and Amran, the second by Joseph, notwithstanding the fact that in the Koran filiation is defined not by blood but by milk. This means that care is what makes possible a process of adoption – of the child by its mother, and of the transitional object by the mother–child pair, within which the ‘mother’ is the educator through which is created what Bowlby described as the
relation of attachment – thus also the relation between Charlie and the Kid. We shall see in this work, and in particular in Chapters 4 and 8, that care is a process of adoption, and that it is to that extent precisely not adaptation. Adaptation is the source of the bad relation to the transitional object, according to Winnicott (see p. 21). We shall also see that it is because the non-inhuman-being is in a thoroughly pharmacological situation that education is always an adoptive relation.

2 ‘La vie vaut le coup d’être vécue’: this phrase from Winnicott could also have been translated into French as ‘vaut la peine d’être vécue’, ‘worth the effort of being alive’. And we shall see that pain or effort is a crucial subject in these matters (see the final part, ‘Pharmacology of the Question’).


4 And it is necessary to relate this, as we shall see in what follows, to what Freud and Lacan called das Ding.

5 This book emerged from a course I gave at Goldsmiths College at the University of London, and from lectures delivered at the invitation of Cambridge, Columbia, Albany, Northwestern and Cardiff universities. I wish to thank Scott Lash, Martin Crowley, Gerald Moore, Benjamin Fong, Mark Taylor, Tom Cohen, Sam Weber, Michael Loriaux and Laurent Milesi for hosting me.

6 A massacre that subsequently took place on 23 March 2002 at the Nanterre town hall.

Part I

Pharmacology of Spirit

Is it not remarkable that this theme, spirit […] should have been dis–inherited [forclos d'héritage]? No one wants anything to do with it any more, in the entire family of Heideggerians, be they the orthodox or the heretical, the neo-Heideggerians or the para-Heideggerians, the disciples or the experts. No one ever speaks of spirit in Heidegger. Not only this: even the anti-Heideggerian specialists take no interest in this thematics of spirit, not even to denounce it. Why?

Jacques Derrida, Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question
1

Apocalypse Without God
1. Apocalyptic feeling and economic war

In 1919, Paul Valéry began ‘La crise de l’esprit’ with the following words: ‘We later civilizations … we too now know that we are mortal’.¹ We too, earthlings of the twenty-first century who have not been through a world war, and who form present-day humankind, now know that we are capable of self-destruction. And if in the past the possibility of such an extinction of our kind was inconceivable other than as the consequence of God's anger – of original sin – today there is no longer any religious reference at the origin of this extreme global pessimism.

The cause of this mood, which became even more downbeat in 2009 after the collapse of the Copenhagen summit, is an economic war without mercy: a concealed conflict, a bottomless hypocrisy, a constant struggle, exhausting the Earth and its inhabitants, and leaving a billion of them in abominable economic misery while ruining the whole of the human world ever more quickly and ever more irreversibly, such that, in this war disguised as peace, it will not be long before everyone loses.

The name of this war is globalization – a globalization in which industrial technologies have become weapons that destroy ecosystems, social structures and psychic apparatuses. If the time has come for an armistice and, with it, for the negotiation of a new peace treaty, which would be a new contract, and not only a social contract, but a scientific, technological and global contract; if too many ruins are being accumulated in the name of ‘development’ and economic competition, then this raises a preliminary question: what relation to technics and to technologies would enable us to think the reconstruction of a global future?

The economic crisis of 2007 and 2008 has exposed the profoundly destructive nature of the globalized industrial system. Everybody now knows that it is no longer feasible to continue pursuing the ‘misgrowth’ [mécroissance] that is a global economic war disguised as a consumerist peace by the psycho-power of marketing.² Yet nobody can see how to re-find the path capable of leading to peaceful growth and development. It is this combination of knowledge and non-knowledge that leads to the spread of this ordinary, everyday apocalyptic feeling – the feeling and the knowledge that something has come to an end.
So many horrors could not have been possible without so many virtues

In what he analysed in 1919 as a crisis of mind or spirit, Valéry highlighted above all the fundamental ambiguity of this spirit – of the science, reason, knowledge and even the moral elevation that made possible so much ruination, death and devastation throughout Western Europe, beyond what any previous historical epoch could ever have imagined:

So many horrors could not have been possible without so many virtues. Doubtless, much science was needed to kill so many, to waste so much property, annihilate so many cities in so short a time; but moral qualities in like number were also needed. Knowledge and Duty, then, are suspect. Valéry, just like Husserl a little later, and like so many thinkers who were overwhelmed between the wars, thus described the way in which the First World War revealed that spirit is always composed of two contrary sides: it is a kind of pharmakon – at once a good and an evil, at once a remedy and a poison, as Plato said about writing, which is the technology of the rational mind.

The evidence for this pharmacology, for this ambiguity and hence for this fragility of spirit, impressed itself on Valéry and his contemporaries in the form of a series of interconnected crises – military, economic and spiritual – through which science is ‘dishonoured’. After the First World War,

everything essential in the world has been affected by the war [...]. The Mind [or Spirit] itself has not been exempt from all this damage. The mind is in fact cruelly stricken; it grieves in men of intellect, and looks sadly upon itself. It distrusts itself profoundly.
3. ‘Sciences of fact’ and ‘humanity of facts’: the extinction of the Enlightenment

Sixteen years after Valéry, Husserl in turn spoke of a crisis of science. This crisis proceeds from a ‘change which set in at the turn of the past century’, which concerns ‘the general evaluation of the sciences’, and which aims at ‘what science in general has meant and could mean for human existence’:

The exclusiveness with which the total world-view of modern man, in the second half of the nineteenth century, let itself be determined by the positive sciences and blinded by the ‘prosperity’ they produced, meant an indifferent turning-away from the questions which are decisive for a genuine humanity. Mere sciences of fact create a mere humanity of facts.7

At the time Husserl was writing these lines, Hitler had already been Chancellor for two years, and a plebiscite bestowing upon him the title of Führer had received support from 92 per cent of the German electorate.

The change in public evaluation was unavoidable, especially after the war, and we know that it has gradually become a feeling of hostility among the younger generation. In our vital need – so we are told – this science has nothing to say to us. It excludes in principle precisely the questions which man, given over in our unhappy times to the most portentous upheavals, finds the most burning: questions of the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of this human existence.9

Reading these lines in 2010, how can we doubt that this malaise in relation to science has returned with even greater force? It is thus the spirit of the Enlightenment that seems to have been extinguished, writes Husserl. The Enlightenment – that is: the ardent desire for learning, the zeal for a philosophical reform of education and of all of humanity's social and political forms of existence, which makes that much-abused Age of Enlightenment so admirable.9

Having become ‘positive sciences’ and ‘mere sciences of fact’, and forming a ‘mere humanity of facts’, the Enlightenment has been inverted into Darkness. It has its hymn: ‘We possess an undying testimony to this spirit in the glorious “Hymn to Joy” of Schiller and Beethoven.’ But this hymn (which has become that of the European Union) can ‘only with painful feelings [be heard] today. A greater contrast with our present situation is unthinkable.’10