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1

Fixing One's Eyes on a Model

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To what extent have we ever stepped outside that European schema or are we even able to—can we even question it ("we" within the European tradition who still perpetuate those early Greek categories)? It is so thoroughly assimilated that we no longer see it—no longer see ourselves. We set up an ideal form *(eidos)*, which we take to be a goal *(telos),* and we then act in such a way as to make it become fact. It all seems to go without saying—a goal, an ideal, and will: with our eyes fixed on the model that we have conceived, which we project on the world and on which we base a plan to be executed, we choose to intervene in the world and give a form to reality. And the closer we stick to that ideal form in the action that we take, the better our chances of succeeding.

Goal, ideal, will

We can at least spot the origin of this habitual line of reasoning.* For the assumption is that, in the first place, the creation of the world must have involved some such procedure (although, of course, the very idea of explaining the world from the point of view of its creation is itself loaded with preconceptions . . .). The idea of a model was itself offered as a model, one in which a particular gesture

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*[Translator's note: The French here is *"ce pli ('pli' au sens où l'on dit: 'prendre un pli')."* Literally, *"pli"* means a fold. But metaphorically, *"prendre un pli"* means "to fall into a habit."]

came first. In his divine goodness and operating with a view to achieving excellence, Plato's *demiurgos* was bound to "keep his gaze fixed" on "imperishable being" so as to set it up as a paradigm and in order to realize its "shape and properties" (*idea kai dunamis, Timaeus,* 28a), and all that is "executed in this way must of necessity be beautiful." The craftsman of a city operates similarly, taking the great Demiurge as his model: "keeping his eyes turned toward" the absolute of essences, he endeavors to imbue the mores of his fellows with whatever he "perceives above" (*Rep.,* VI, 500c). "Up there" are the eternal forms, the perfect virtues that only a contemplative mind can apprehend. So, when drawing up the plan for a good political constitution, the craftsman of the city is like a painter who, working from the "divine model," tries painstakingly to reproduce it. Even the orator, usually a somewhat suspect figure, as soon as he ceases to be a flatterer keeps his gaze fixed on the ideal (*Gorgias,* 304d) and is constantly inspired by it in his discourse.

Despite the process of philosophical rationalization to which the notion of this power of Forms or Ideas* has been submitted, many have tried to detect in it vestiges of a mythical concept. It has been claimed that, in that it relates the visible to the invisible and attributes to the Forms set up as archetypes beyond experience the power to inform all that which is sensible, Platonism stems from a "primitive mentality" (as is shown by the analogies between the theory of the Forms [or Ideas] and an extratemporal world with an almost etiological function—such as that of the "Demas"—which Lévy-Bruhl associated with archaic societies). In this way, Platonism would have drawn its concept of efficacy from old religious sources from which philosophy subsequently strove constantly to distance itself. As is well known, from Aristotle onward the world's status purely as a copy is dismissed. It is no longer believed that the material world is simply a receptacle fashioned according to the will of the demiurge. The norm is no longer thought to be some intangible canon

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*[Translator's note: The French uses the word *"Idées."*]

that comes from outside to impress itself upon the world; instead, it is now regarded as the correct mean immanent in things, which as such depends on the particular circumstances of situations. But all the same, we still keep our eyes *turned toward* something. It is still by "fixing our eyes" on the ideal, here the ideal of the mean *(mesotès),* that, in the manner of "good artists" (*Nic. Ethics,* 1106b), we conceive of action. Aristotle tells us, more precisely, that it is "toward that ideal" that, "with our eyes fixed upon it," we shall "*guide* our work." Even if the correct mean varies, since it relates both to circumstances and to individuals, it is always what we set our sights *(skopos)* on, and its perfection is established as a norm that we must then embody in facts. The function of the model set up as a goal remains intact: the model is determined on a "theoretical" basis that, once established, must be submitted to "practice."

From now on, for us theory and practice are interfolded, coupled.* And this coupling, the solid basis of which we no longer even dream of questioning, forces acceptance from us (for however we reformulate those terms, we cannot get around them). In fact, I regard this as one of the most characteristic moves made by the modern Western world (or maybe quite simply the world as a whole—if it has been standardized in accordance with the Western model): a revolutionary designs the model of the city that must be built; a soldier sets out the plan of war to be followed; an economist decides on the growth curve to target; and, all of them, whatever their respective roles, operate in a similar way. Each projects upon the world an ideal plan that will then have to be incorporated into factual reality. But what does "incorporate" mean here, given

The model remains in sight even if it is immanent

The implied coupling of theory and practice

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*[Translator's note: The French here is *"Le 'pli' théorie-pratique: Le pli, désormais est pris."* The meaning of *"pli"* here is more complex. In addition to the idea of something that has become habitual, the author uses the notion of a *pli,* an "interfolding," to convey the idea of an implicit combination. Both Western thought and Chinese thought carry underlying implicit assumptions, and he believes it is useful to "unfold" them or bring them to the surface and make them explicit.]

that they are already operating *in reality?* First, they conceive of working "for the best"; next, they draw on their "willpower" in order to impose their models upon reality. To impose is to superimpose, as if imprinting a transfer on a new surface and using force to do so. Our inclination is to extend to everything this model-making, the principle of which was developed by science, for, as is well known, science (European science, or at least classic science) is itself simply a vast operation of model-making (mathematization in the first instance), the technique or practical application of which materially transforms the world, thereby testifying to its efficacy.

The question that therefore arises is whether what works so well from a technical point of view, by enabling us to control nature, works just as well for managing human situations and relations. Or, to express that in terms of the two separate categories established by the Greeks: is the efficacy of the model that we recognize at the level of production *(poesis)* equally operative in the domain of action *(praxis)*—in what Aristotle describes as not the domain in which we "make" things, but that in which we "accomplish" them? For even if we have distinguished between the two, we may nevertheless have copied the one from the other (as we have indeed modeled action on production). Even when "things" become human affairs, we should still like to remain in the reassuring position of "technicians"—artisans or demiurges. Now, as we are well aware and as Aristotle was the first to recognize, although science may impose its rigor on things by understanding their necessary aspects and thereby achieving technical efficacy, the situations in which our actions are performed are, for their part, indeterminate. Our actions cannot eliminate their contingency, and their particularities cannot be covered by any general law. In consequence, action cannot be classified simply as an extension of science. So just as, for Aristotle, matter, an indeterminate power of contraries, always remains more or less recalcitrant to the determination that "form" seeks to impose upon it, similarly the world is never altogether receptive to the order that we wish it to have: inevitably, there is always a discrepancy between the planned model for our action and what we,

Can one continue to operate as a technician when it comes to determining behavior?

with our eyes fixed on that model, manage to achieve. In short, practice always to some degree falls short of theory. The model remains out there on the horizon on which we fix our gaze. The ideal, up in the sky, is inaccessible.

2

But that is by no means all that there is to be said in this story (the long "theory-practice" story), since philosophy cannot accept such a failure. After hoping for so much from the human aptitude for science and after allowing us to glimpse the perfection of essences, how could it resign itself to leaving us in such a wretched state: ill-equipped to manage in the world and to maneuver so as to succeed in our projects? In this uneasy debate between form and matter or, as the tragic poets were already putting it, between "the best" and "the necessary," Aristotle thought he had discovered a faculty for dealing with practice, a faculty that, taking over from theory, could fill in the gap. This ability was at once intellectual ("dianoetic") and directly linked with action and could thus mediate as was required. "Prudence" *(phronesis)* is the name traditionally given to this practical wisdom. Whoever "is able to deliberate well about what is good and advantageous for himself" (*Nic. Ethics,* VI, 5) may be called prudent and possesses this practical ability. Given that such a person only deliberates on that which is contingent, prudence is not a science; nor is it an art, in the sense of a *techne,* since it is aimed at action *(praxis),* not production. The two defining characteristics indicate its own specific function: it operates not as an extension of science but alongside it, drawing on a different part of the rational soul. While the soul's scientific part aims to contemplate all that could not be other than it is (metaphysical and mathematical objects), its "logistic" part is designed to take charge of the need for action within a constantly changing world; it calculates and deliberates on the best thing to do. In this, it is complemented not only by "an accurate eye" but also by "an alert mind" or "good judgment" *(gnome).* It is exemplified not by scholars absorbed in their speculations, but in "the administrators of households and cities"; not by a

> Might "prudence" fill the gap between theory and practice?

Thales or an Anaxagoras, whose "difficult" and "divine" knowledge is "of no practical use," but by a man of action: Pericles. Pericles is rehabilitated by philosophy thanks to his ability to manage human affairs.

So it is that, with Aristotle, and as has been pointed out ever since, philosophy returned to "things"; after aiming too high, it became realistic. But, all the same, I am not sure that this means that "prudence" really implies a "logistic" ability that can answer the perceived need and that is based on the principle of efficacy. In the first place, when it comes to defining this practical faculty according to his own criteria, Aristotle finds himself trapped in a vicious circle, as his commentators have not failed to point out. Aristotle defines "prudence" as follows: "Prudence is a practical disposition, accompanied by correct reason with regard to what is good and what is bad for man" (*Nic. Ethics,* VI, 6). But what is the source of this "correct reason" that must accompany deliberation and serve as a norm, if not—precisely—science itself? We know that, unlike Plato, Aristotle no longer believes either in the possibility of deducing the particular totally from the general or in action based on principles. So he can only define prudence by whatever is prudent: the criterion of prudence, which cannot be established by science, can only be provided by a man of whom it is generally said that "he is prudent." Given that Aristotle no longer trusts the transcendence of the norm, by the same token he finds himself forced to the opposite extreme and condemned to empiricism. For, in the absence of any essence in relation to which it can be defined, prudence can only be discerned through the existence of remarkable individuals. Aristotle thus finds himself unable to account for prudence beyond what has always been said by common sense. It therefore turns out to be extremely difficult to establish a definition of this practical faculty that is supposed to make good the inadequacy of theory. Or is it the case that the Greek intellectual premises (from which Aristotle cannot dissociate himself, as is shown by his definition of prudence in accordance with "correct reason," *orthos logos*), by making this prudence ungraspable on the basis of a criterion, topple the theory itself?

On what is prudence founded?

Furthermore, and despite the tendency of the popular definition of prudence by which he is inspired, Aristotle is unable, or unwilling, to separate his own thought on prudence from ethical considerations. The position adopted by Greek philosophy orients action toward morality, and Aristotle cannot dissociate himself from this position. Although it is he who goes the furthest, in Greek philosophy, in his attempts to think through the conditions for efficacious action, the latter is always transcended by the end to which it is directed (the "advantage" for which the prudent man aims is not his own personal profit, but profit for the community; ultimately, he is concerned for the city; see *Nic. Ethics,* III). This is shown in particular by the way in which Aristotle opposes what is prudent to what is clever *(deinos)*. Whereas cleverness is an ability to combine the most efficacious means, regardless of the quality of the end, prudence, for its part, is concerned about that end. Prudence, an ethical take on cleverness, is always directed toward the good; and pure "cleverness" is set aside.

Prudence/cleverness

Cleverness is dismissed

3

But how can we believe that the Greeks, with their well-known taste for stratagems, were never captivated simply by cleverness and the art of succeeding? Very early on and in a wide variety of fields of action, they celebrated *mètis,* the kind of cunning intelligence that knows how to adapt to difficulties. In their fine study devoted to this subject, Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant tell us that *mètis* combines "flair, sagacity, foresight, adaptability, pretense, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism.". . . Odysseus, clever Odysseus with a thousand tricks up his sleeve, is the hero most richly endowed with *mètis:* he is *polumètis.* And Zeus himself starts off by swallowing the goddess Mètis in order to absorb her wisdom and to be sure of avoiding all the traps that could bring about his downfall in dealings with both gods and men.

Detienne and Vernant tell us that, while the kind of intelligence designated by *mètis* is deployed at many different levels, the emphasis is always on "practical efficacy,"

The cunning intelligence of the Greeks

Odysseus

that is to say, on "the pursuit of success in a particular field of action." *Mètis* is characterized in particular by the fact that, through some more or less fundamental maneuver and by making the most of circumstances, it is possible to win out over brute strength. By deceiving his opponent in the chariot race and seizing his hoped-for chance when it arises, Homer's Antilochus manages to turn the situation to his own advantage. As the field of application for *mètis* is the world of all that is shifting, multiple, and ambivalent, this kind of intelligence is infinitely adaptable and nimble; it is said to be "lithe" and "multicolored." Because the realities that it affects are usually tugged this way and that by contrary forces, it has to remain polymorphous and mobile; because it needs to control a constantly changing situation, it remains open to all possibilities and itself changes constantly in order to adapt to circumstances. Even more ungraspable and elusive than the world in which it operates, thanks to its malleability it is able to triumph where there are no hard and fast rules for success. Its model—or at least its favorite bestiary—combines the roles of the fox and the octopus. Like the former, it is adept at turning back on its tracks; like the latter it is able to seize hold of its victim and paralyze it. Similarly, Odysseus is so devious that he can foil the attacks of any opponent and ensnare him with his eloquence.

The "agility" of the mind when faced with the variability of things

Mètis, which will stoop to any means, thus seems to represent the universal model of realism. And yet, reading Detienne and Vernant, one senses that it is peculiarly Greek. For it carries a double imprint: it is at once technical and magical. It is Athena, after all, who presides over *mètis*. Its technical dimension is unmistakable in both hunting and fishing, and is illustrated by skill in the art of driving a chariot or steering a boat. A good helmsman is one whose *mètis* allows him to master even the uncontrollable heaving of the waves; and although that is certainly a matter of action, it also refers to production, for Athena not only guides the ship, but also built it. At the same time, when it comes to Athena's or Medea's machinations, one fears their *philters* and their tricks. They also make use of other powers, ones that are darker than purely hu-

man intelligence, for they have not broken with the world of spells and enchantment. The efficacy revealed by *mètis* is not yet free from the magic of myth.

Even more important, nowhere in Greece do we find any theory relating to this cunning intelligence. We can detect it at work, sometimes in obsessive fashion, in social and intellectual practices everywhere, but no text ever analyzes it for us, explaining its roots and its sources. So the only way for Detienne and Vernant to study it is to turn to the myths that show it at work, where it is detectable but always more or less below the surface, "immersed in practical operations that, even when they use it, show no concern to make its nature explicit or to justify its procedures." Insofar as it presupposes movement and elusiveness and is thus refractory to the imposition of any form set up as a model, *mètis* foils any attempt to stabilize its identity on the basis provided by Being or God, to which Greek thought is devoted. Only the Sophists made an initial attempt to open philosophical intelligence up to the disturbing features of *mètis,* and it is known that this line of inquiry was soon suppressed. Inevitably then, "*mètis* remained outside what was to become the field of Greek science" (in fact, the very word *"mètis"* soon disappeared from the Greek language). Was it simply through lack of interest in the subject that knowledge turned away from it, being primarily concerned to discover consistency in things and to impose order on the world? Or was it perhaps because the means at the disposal of Greek theory (which remain very much the means that we still use today) were inadequate when it came to pinning down the perpetual instability in which action must take place? At any rate, however important this practical efficacy was recognized to be and however delightful it was to evoke it, among the Greeks it was never theorized.

Cunning intelligence eludes thought

4

The subject of warfare provides evidence of how difficult it is to theorize how to act. Given that warfare, as action, is radical and leads to extremes, it is particularly well

Example: The failure to produce a theory of warfare

suited to reveal the dead-ends into which any concept of efficacious action will lead us if it proceeds from model-making or limits itself to a technical view. As we are perhaps beginning to see, these two do tend to go hand in hand. In support of that hypothesis, let me call on the testimony of Clausewitz, at the other end of our European tradition, in the early nineteenth century, when he was assessing the attempts that had been made to produce a theory of warfare in Europe. For he considered all those attempts to have failed. According to him, the failure stemmed primarily from the fact that people were beginning to conceive of warfare as they conceived of everything else, that is to say, from the point of view of material production; and in so doing, they failed to notice the fundamentally active principle on which warfare is based. The science of warfare had begun to concentrate on the art of making weapons, constructing fortifications, and organizing armies, and the ways to get the latter to move as was required. It had thus shifted from siege strategy and military tactics toward an increasingly elaborate art of mechanics. When it attempted to systematize the material data, it either reduced superiority in warfare simply to numerical data (thereby making warfare depend on mathematical laws) or else it proceeded by way of a geometrification of one of the crucial factors (for instance, on the basis of the angle of the army's thrust in relation to its basic position—see von Bülow—or according to the theory of its internal alignments; see De Jomini). Clausewitz sternly concluded that such ways of proceeding produced "purely geometrical results that have no value at all." With a unilateral point of view that failed to take variability into account and was exclusively concerned with material factors, such theorization was incapable of "dominating real life." So, with the conduct of warfare proving to be resistant to theory, the only way to account for military successes was to invoke the natural dispositions and "genius" of those involved (which, as we all know, are beyond the bounds of theory). Clausewitz reckoned that the true conduct of warfare had thus only been revealed "in a marginal and anonymous way" in the comments penned by "eye-witnesses and the writers of memoirs."

How did Clausewitz himself, wishing to progress be-
yond such dead-ends, set about thinking through warfare?
At first sight, his method seems somewhat surprising. He
begins by conceiving warfare according to a "model"
form, as an ideal and pure essence, "absolute warfare."
Then he goes on to contrast this model to "real" warfare,
as modified by the facts of reality. Although he considers
that past thinking about warfare missed the point in set-
ting out to make a model of something that could not
be modeled, Clausewitz still cannot break free from the
theory-practice notion. Unable to break out of the com-
mon rut according to which Western thought conceived of
action, his only solution is to reconsider the traditional
interplay between model and reality, then to set those
terms in opposition and think about what divides them.
According to his model, warfare implies a limitless use of
force that, logically, tends to lead it, in reaction to attack,
to extremes (that envisaged total destruction). Yet "every-
thing appears in a different guise if one moves from ab-
straction to reality." Because warfare is never an isolated
act and never depends on a single decision or leads to an
absolute result, the tendency toward the extreme, which
constitutes the essence of warfare, is always to some
extent attenuated in reality (only Napoleon, the "god of
war," succeeded in making warfare match its ideal).

The problem of this dilution is one of the most inter-
esting that Clausewitz ever raised: what is the nature of
"these nonconducive circumstances" that block the "com-
plete realization" of the principle of warfare? Unable to
shake free from the theory-practice relationship, the rela-
tion between "ideal" and real warfare, and being at the
same time all too aware of the reality that that relation-
ship failed to reflect, Clausewitz eventually manages to
make use of this perception—but he does so by turning it
around: he accurately perceives that this mismatch consti-
tutes the peculiarity of warfare. The defining characteris-
tic of warfare is precisely the inevitable distance that sep-
arates the reality of it from its model. In short, to think
about warfare is to think about the extent to which it is
bound to betray the ideal concept of it.

The essence of war-
fare is to betray its
model

All this forces us to ask point blank what conditions

are necessary for a science of the conduct of warfare to be possible (just as, in the past, Kant asked: what are the conditions necessary for a science of metaphysics to be possible? or, going even farther back, to Newton: what are the conditions necessary for a science of physics to be possible?). And we are bound to recognize that, of all the forms of logic that rule the world of action (which are, however, copied from those that rule the world of knowledge), the most rigorous of them, that of the "law," is inapplicable to the conduct of warfare because of the changeable and variable nature of the phenomena involved.

So, in the case of warfare, it is just a matter of a "method," in the sense not of a logic but of "an average probability, judging by similar cases." This results in a way of proceeding that is "normally" adapted, which, having progressively become assimilated, becomes "customary," a "routine," and so, in the heat of action, gets to be used "more or less automatically" (hence "professionally," facilitating the progress of the military machine). It is therefore considered to be the "best" (or "least bad") way of operating even if the particular circumstances of the situation remain undetermined. However, when constantly and uniformly applied, such a "method" eventually engenders "a mechanical sort of aptitude" and becomes increasingly inappropriate as one progresses from the level of tactics to that of strategy. The trouble is that the more one is engaged in managing overall action, the more one relies on an ability to appreciate the particularities of a situation and therefore on one's own personal talent. At this level, given the inevitably singular and therefore unprecedented nature of overall military action, any formalization, which implies repetition, is extremely dangerous. And faced with the impossibility of relying on a model, theory is inevitably found wanting. In any case, Clausewitz himself, in his reflections on warfare, aspires to do no more than "educate" the mind of a future military leader or, even more modestly, "to guide him in his self-education" by providing him at least with a reference point on which to base his own judgment: in short, to "cultivate" him but not to "accompany him onto the battlefield."

Nevertheless, however wary he may be of abstract

"Routine," which keeps a low profile

models applied to the way that things proceed, as soon as he moves from theorizing warfare to telling us how to wage war (for he is surely not content with such a low profile), Clausewitz cannot conceive of warfare without a "plan of war" devised in advance. This, for him, remains "the framework for the whole act of war," because it determines the series of actions that can lead to the projected goal. Even in the "apparent thrust" of the moment, one should never be "deflected from" or even led to "doubt" the difficult task of "achieving" that goal. Thus, when he adopts the point of view of practical necessity, Clausewitz returns to the schema that his theoretical reflection has undermined: first one's understanding conceives the ideal form, then one commits one's will to it—an "iron will" that "overcomes all obstacles"—in order to make that project come about. . . . Strategy may later modify the initial plan, since "in warfare, more than in anything else, things do not happen as one thought they would and from close-up appear altogether different from how they appeared at a distance." Warfare is not a matter of willpower "applied to inert matter," as was wrongly believed by earlier theorists. Instead, it "lives and reacts," and the vivacity of reaction will necessarily foil any preconceived plan. Hence the conclusion at which Clausewitz arrives returns us to the impasse with which we are already familiar: "Clearly then, in action such as warfare, in which a plan based on general conditions is so often upset by particular and unexpected phenomena, it is necessary to leave far more, generally, to talent and to rely less than in any other domain on *theoretical recommendations*."

The plan of war may clash with variable circumstances

Clausewitz forged a concept to explain why the ideal model intended as a guide for action fails: namely, friction. He suggested that this concept was sufficiently general to make it possible to distinguish between real warfare and the kinds one reads about in books, because it is generally true that "in warfare everything takes place at a lower level because of all the countless secondary contingencies that can never be closely examined on paper and as a result of which one always falls short of the theoretical goal." The reason Clausewitz speaks of friction is that he himself clings to a mechanistic model in his thought about

"Friction," a "machine"

action (and to the technical point of view that accompanies such a model): however well "oiled" the military "machine" may be, countless points of friction nevertheless remain, and, however minimal, these eventually produce sufficient resistance to throw the action off course. "In warfare everything is simple" (in the initial plan), "but the simplest of things proves difficult" (in practice). Clausewitz tells us that this difficulty can be compared to that which we experience as soon as we try to execute a movement as natural as walking in the water.... What distinguishes warfare in practice from the ease with which it may be planned is an overall difference—a difference of "climate" or "atmosphere," as it were: it would be illusory to think of reducing it by resorting to yet more theory. Only by adapting through experience, in other words, through practice, can one hope to improve the situation.

Unsuitable for model-making

Yet in warfare even such an adaptation can never wholly eliminate the gap between theory and practice. Ever since Aristotle (or perhaps even since Plato), Western philosophy has been trying to forge some means of mediation between theory and practice, a means in which "prudence," the ethical interpretation of the *mètis* of the ancient heroes, represented the first link. However, the gap between reality and its model cannot be plugged. That is why, in the case of warfare, the best that Clausewitz could do was theorize that deficiency on the part of theory. We can see that warfare is not a science. But, Clausewitz adds, nor is it an art, and it is striking "to note the extent to which the ideological schemata of the arts and sciences are ill-suited to this activity." And he immediately spots why: it is because the activity of warfare affects an object that *lives and reacts*. But for all that, as we, along with Clausewitz, still note, however much we criticize those "schemata," it is not easy to avoid them.