

“Absolute Surfaces” and Absolute Domains of Survey

Up until now, we have simply opposed the unitary domains of activity (cortical consciousness, embryonic and organic consciousness, individuality of nonstatistical physics) to machines without equipotentiality or to Gestalt-forms with only a pseudo-equipotentiality. Can we define the content of these domains and the relation of their properties to their nature more positively? To begin with, let us consider a simplified case.¹ A physical surface, the surface of a table for instance, can be defined *partes extra partes*. If the surface is checkered (Figure 26), the various fragments of the marquetry will be external to one another.

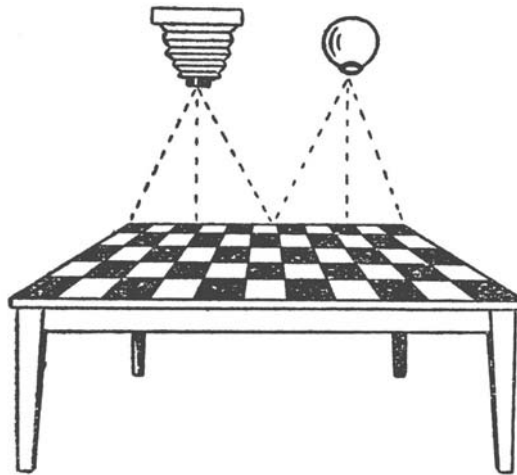


Figure 26.

Relative to any one among them, they are all *somewhere else* on the surface. To capture the entire surface, a camera has to be placed at some distance, along a perpendicular dimension. By the same token, a living being that can be localized as a body must have its eye situated roughly like the camera to perceive the whole surface and its decorative pattern. If I look at a photograph of the table's surface, I will be forced once again to place my eyes at some distance from it. I have to be in

a second dimension to photograph or perceive a line. I have to be in a third dimension to photograph or perceive a surface.

We know—it is one of the commonplaces of popular books on mathematics—that one-dimensional beings in a one-dimensional world cannot see a line as a line but only as a point; that infinitely flat beings living on a surface would believe they have sufficiently protected a treasure T by enclosing it within a circle that deters the indigenous thieves V, V', V"; but a thief evolving like us in a third dimension could touch T without touching the protective circle (Figure 27). By analogy, it is easy to conclude that all the points of our solid bodies are simultaneously visible to an observer who exists in a fourth dimension. Solid bodies are "open" in the fourth dimension as a circle is open in the third. A four-dimensional being could see and pierce our heart without touching our skin. In short, an observer always has to be situated in the $n + 1$ dimension to see at once all the component points of an n -dimensional being. And yet *this geometric law, which applies to the technique of perception, that is, to perception as a physicophysiological event, is invalid for visual sensation as a state of consciousness.*

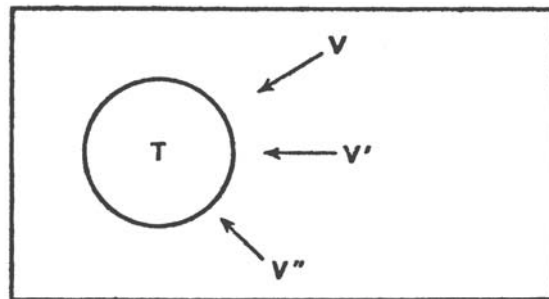


Figure 27.

Let us shift our attention from photographic observation and the organic mise-en-scène of perception to my visual sensation in itself. Like the table or the photograph of the table, it contains multiple details, checkers which are also in a sense *partes extra partes*, each existing at a different location from the others. This time, however, "I" do not need to be outside my sensation, in a perpendicular dimension, to consider each and all the details of this sensation. Even when, instead of fixing my attention on the table, I "inspect" my sensation (to register my astigmatism or my myopia), I do not have to place myself outside my sensation to know it. If I were to observe the cortex of a being in the

process of looking at the table, I would have to be outside this cortex; but if I were experiencing my own sensation, I would not have to separate myself from it. This is fortunate fact, because I would otherwise need a third eye to see what my first two eyes see, then a fourth to see what my third sees, and so on.

I would be like the man J. W. Dunne² speaks of, who, wanting to create a complete painting of the universe, (1) first paints the landscape, (2) then realizes that he forgot himself and represents himself in the act of painting, (3) then realizes that he forgot to represent himself in the act of painting himself, and so forth (Figure 28). Because it is consciousness-knowledge and not observation-knowledge, self-enjoyment essentially dispenses with infinite regress and a "serial universe." Dunne believes that infinite regress is inevitable because he turns knowledge and consciousness into a kind of observation or, as he says, "description." The observation of an experience must then be, once again, the observation and description of this experience as my own. But another observer has to observe and describe the second observer, who observes and describes the first, and so on. In fact, as Dunne says, "the mind which any science can describe can never be an adequate representation of the mind which can make that science."³ From this perfectly true thesis, Dunne draws a perfectly false conclusion: "the process of correcting that inadequacy must follow the serial steps of an infinite regress."⁴

Obviously the right solution is that the "description" or "observation" of the mind (or the subjective domain) is a whole other matter than the subjectivity of the described or observed "mind."

Dunne's conception, though it amused many people, has not had great success in contemporary philosophy. But perhaps we have not carefully examined the consequences of the negation of infinite regress. Let us return to the surface of the seen-table. It does not obey geometric laws. It is a surface seized in all of its details, without a third dimension. It is an "absolute surface," which is not relative to any point of view external to it, which knows itself without observing itself. If I were to place my eye on the table, I would see nothing, but I need not be "at a distance" from the sensation to see it extended. In contrast, I cannot turn around the sensation to consider it from various angles. "I" (my organism) can turn around the table to *obtain* different sensations, but "I" cannot turn around my sensation once I obtain it.

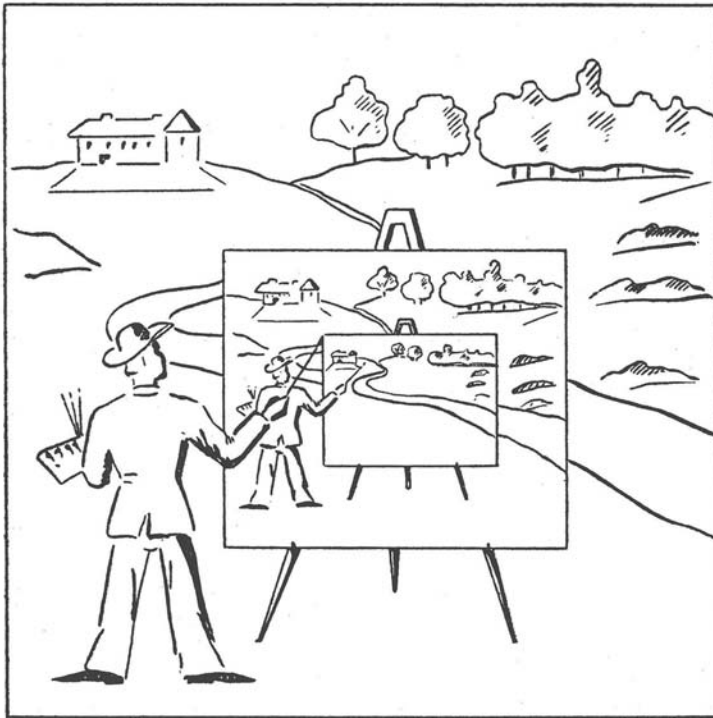


Figure 28.

The seen-table is also a one-sided surface (like the Möbius surface, but in an entirely different sense): if I saw in my visual field a peripheral luminous stain moving forward, no mental procedure would allow me to see it moving backward (as an oculist who looks at my retina would observe it in his ophthalmoscope). This fact is tied to the nongeometric nature of conscious survey. If the perceptible surface could be seen from both sides, it would not be a sensation but an object.

As experience demonstrates, I can turn my attention or my "mental prospection" to this or that detail of the sensation without moving my eyes—for instance, to this white or black square. I can swap the black or white squares in their roles as figure and ground, but these "displacements" of the internal observation do not obey the laws of physical displacement and observation and do not have the same effects. The sensation's multiple details are distinct from one another, and yet they are not truly *other* for one another, because they constitute my unified sensation. They have a well-determined order; they even have metrical relations (e.g., the squares appear equal), but this order or equality does not have a purely operational value, like the technique of the craftsman who inlaid the table. Order and multiple relations are immediately given in an absolute unity, which is nevertheless not a fusion or a confusion. This amounts to saying that my sensation is a form proper, a form and

not a pattern, a structure, an assemblage of elements, or a Gestalt-form.

Relative to the multiplicity of details in my sensation, "I"—the indefinable "I"—appears as the unity, as a unity endowed with ubiquity. Here as well, sensation and subjectivity generally escape the ordinary laws of physics. It has been said that the core of the theory of (special) relativity amounts to the realization that one cannot be in two locations at once. In this sense, the absolute subjective expanse escapes the jurisdiction of the theory of relativity. "I" am simultaneously in all the locations of my visual field. There is no step-by-step propagation, no limit speed, for such a domain. If I look at two clocks in a single glimpse, they will be one, despite their difference. There is no "absolute elsewhere" in a subjective domain, because there is no absolute alterity between details. If I were to number the cases of the checkerboard, the squares at one end would be farther away from the squares at the opposite end than from the middle squares. And yet this variable distance, which appears in the ordered figure of sensation, is not a true distance that would require physical means and energy to be overcome.

The notion of **absolute survey**, of nondimensional survey, is the key not only to the problem of consciousness but also to the problem of life. It allows us to grasp the difference between primary consciousness and secondary consciousness, a problem we have already tackled.⁵ Since the question is a difficult one, let us reflect on concrete cases with the help of images.

a. To begin with, let us schematize a man writing on a cluttered table as seen by an observer and, on the other hand, **a protozoan (the example of a living being with a nervous system)** in the process of skirting an obstacle by trial and error (Figures 29 and 30). The observer sees the man turn his head and eyes, that is, his attention, toward the objects placed on the table. He can measure the distance between the man's eyes and his paper as well as the distance between the protozoan and the obstacle. Similarly, he can follow the progression of optical stimuli and neural influxes from the seen objects to the retina, to the occipital area, to the motor cortical centers, and then to the medullary centers.

b. Let us now suppose that I myself am the seated man. Here is what my visual field affords me (Figure 31). This visual field immediately presents both my body (of my head, only the vague circle of my glasses and the more vague images of my nose and lips are visible) and

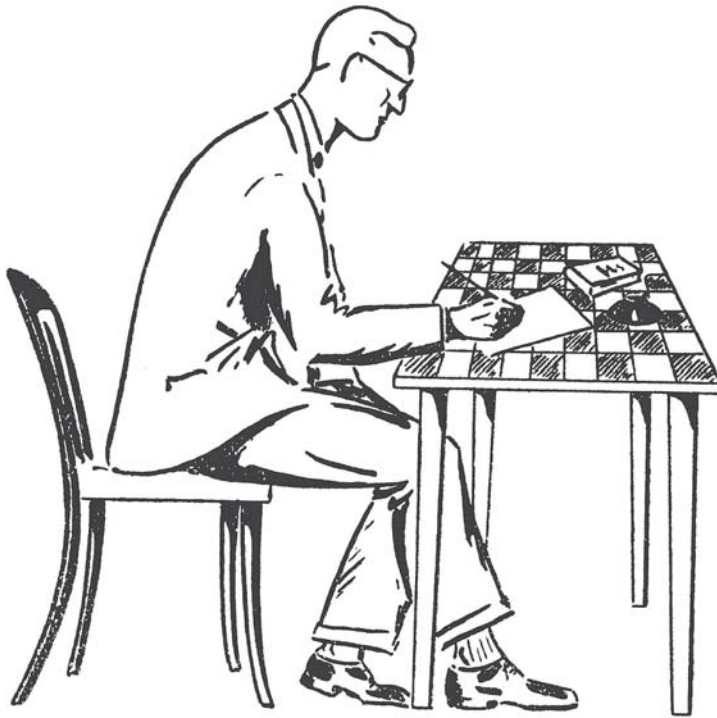


Figure 29.

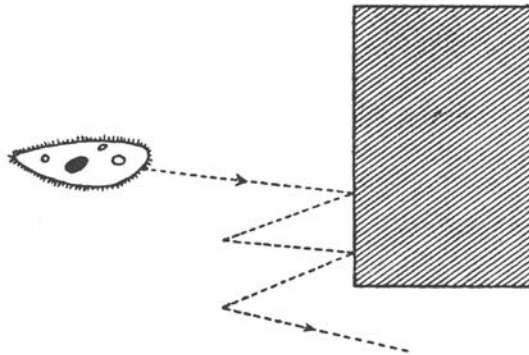


Figure 30.

the objects I observe, namely, my table, the books that clutter it, and the paper on which I am writing. A perceptible distance immediately appears between my seen-body and the seen-table, a distance that seems to correspond to the distance between my real body and the real table that the observer is measuring.

Biology teaches us that this field of sensory consciousness is localized in my occipital cortex; it is probably the very reality of my area striata or of a certain level of this area.⁶ But at any rate what is certain is that all the details of the sensory image have to be given immediately in an absolute unity, because there is no third retina or second

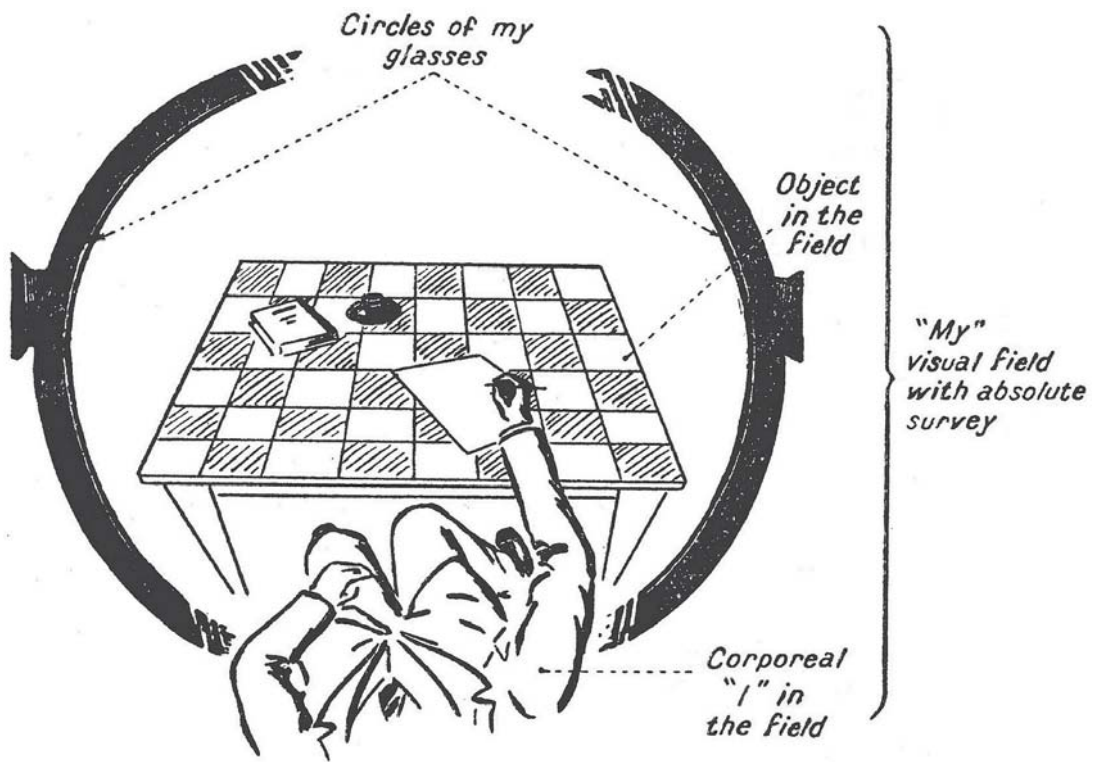


Figure 31.

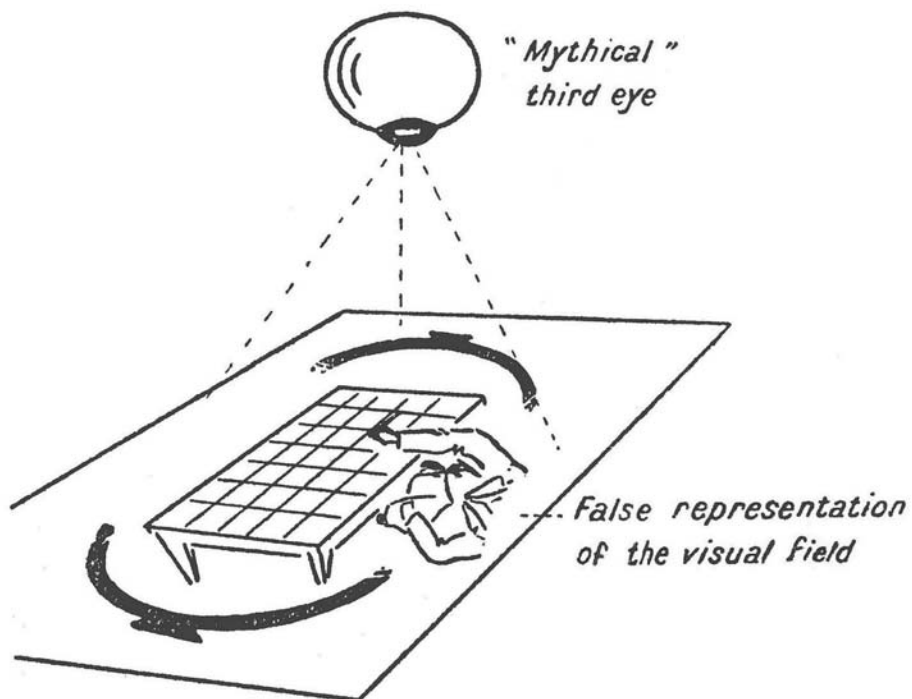


Figure 32.

striatal area that can see this visual field from the outside as the observer sees the man in the process of writing. The "I" or the conscious unity, whatever it may be, has the acute impression of surveying this field of consciousness as though it observed it from the outside. I can hardly resist the temptation to imagine myself, to imagine the "I," above the apparent circle of my glasses, by identifying this "I-unity" with a kind of center of the invisible head that my sensation allows me to presuppose. And yet it is clear that the "I," the unity of consciousness, is not at a distance, in a perpendicular dimension, from the totality of the visual field in the same way that my eyes and my head are at a distance from the paper on which my hand is writing. The image of my glasses and the vague shadow of my nose and my eyebrows form part of my visual field. Thus the biologist who observes me from the outside can localize all of these perceptible forms, like all the images of my body, in my area striata, where—it is worth repeating—there is no third eye. My visual field necessarily sees itself through an "absolute" or "nondimensional survey." It surveys itself without positioning itself at a distance and in a perpendicular dimension.

It is therefore a gross error to imagine the visual field in the occipital area as a kind of photograph, or as those cinematographic montages in which a three-dimensional scene suddenly becomes an album page that begins to turn before us on the screen. Between the "I-unity" and the visual field, there is only a purely symbolic "distance" (Figure 32).

Assuming we accept the natural hypothesis that the visual field has some connection to the occipital area, the visual sensation proves then that at least a certain part of the organism is capable of direct self-consciousness: it sees itself through absolute survey, without any observer in a perpendicular dimension.

c. Because the occipital area, which is modulated by optical stimuli, ultimately has to see itself, to enjoy itself, why couldn't the protozoan "see" itself directly just as much as our cortical tissue? The protozoan has neither eyes nor mirror; but neither does our cortex have an eye or a mirror to see what the eyes have already brought it. Seeing itself, the protozoan or its "unity" in absolute survey will not see external forms in this field of self-enjoyment (it will not see, for instance, the form of the obstacle it is trying to skirt). It has no sensory organs that would permit the modulation of a part of its organism according to

the pattern of external objects. Its field of consciousness will only be its own organic form, which is in principle the entire universe for it. This surveyed, organic form could be as distinct as our visual field and could present all the structural details of the cytoplasmic architecture as clearly as our visual sensation presents all the details of the checkered and cluttered table we are looking at. This organic form or primary consciousness is not vague or psychoid. It has no reason to be so. It can never even be "myopic for itself," like a visual sensation in the secondary consciousness, because it is not our occipital cortex that is myopic but our eyes.

In other words, there is at bottom only a single mode of consciousness: primary consciousness, form-in-itself of every organism and at one with life. The secondary, sensory consciousness is the primary consciousness of cerebral areas. Because the cortex is modulated by external stimuli, sensory consciousness gives us the form of external objects. But this particular content does not represent an essential trait of consciousness and life. There is no reason to deny subjectivity, primary consciousness, self-survey, and the self-enjoyment of their own form to our noncortical and even nonneural cells or to our organism in general. The "I" does not participate in this self-enjoyment because it is specialized in sensory consciousness.

It is not surprising that the "I" of secondary consciousness should be irremediably cut off from primary consciousness, that "I" should have no direct primary consciousness of my organism. This disconnection represents a normal phenomenon of "distribution," like the "distributions" that fragment the areas of development in the course of embryogenesis and "determine" them by specializing them. Cenesthesia, as we have seen,⁷ has nothing to do with primary consciousness. It is a secondary consciousness in the same way as visual consciousness; both presuppose a healthy cortical area (parietal area). Likewise, the instinctive drives and the sensations of organic need, which emerge in the secondary consciousness, cannot give the "I-consciousness" any intuition of the essence of primary consciousness. To believe that they do is an inexhaustible source of philosophical error, for by imagining organic consciousness on the model of the drives through which it communicates with the secondary consciousness, we attribute to it, for no good reason, the vague and confused character that belongs uniquely to these messengers.

Contrary to an ingrained prejudice, consciousness or the x unity of nondimensional survey is not essentially perceptive or cognitive of spatiotemporal structures. It is essentially active and dynamic; it organizes spatiotemporal (organic or sensory) structures that are given to it in its field of survey. Consciousness cognizes only ideas-forms, themes, or transspatial types, at which it aims beyond the field of survey and according to which, as ideals or norms, it organizes or improves the organization of structures-forms in the field.

This is the most delicate point of our difficult question. We should vehemently deny the existence of a geometric dimension that provides a point of observation external to the sensory field. But we should affirm no less vehemently the existence of a sort of "metaphysical" transversal to the entire field, whose two "extremities" are the "I" (or the x of organic individuality), on one hand, and the guiding Idea of organization, on the other.

For the primary consciousness (e.g., the protozoan's), the guiding Ideal is the organic type. For the secondary consciousness of an animal with a nervous system and sensory organs, the guiding Ideal is both the organic type and an *Umwelt* intimately connected to this type, according to which the bee, for instance, only sees in the external forms captured by its sensory organs the flowers as reserves of nourishment, the hive as refuge, and so on, and searches for and maintains them in this state. For the human secondary consciousness, the guiding Ideal is the world of essences and values, detached from the human organic type. But in these three cases, consciousness is not an inert domain that is simply unified by the absolute survey; consciousness is organizing. The protozoan strives to maintain its organic type despite the physicochemical phenomena that tend to alter it. The bee shapes the world according to the instinctive gnosis that characterize its specific *Umwelt*. "I" strive, for example (Figure 33), to tidy up my seen-table by referring to an ideal of order; or I strive to maintain my tools in good condition; or, more generally, I strive to realize my ideal norms by incarnating them in the beings and objects that surround me.

Up to now, we have proceeded as if "absolute domain" were synonymous with "absolute surface" and our schemas have accentuated this impression. But because the absolute surface is intuited without a third dimension, nothing in fact prevents us from conceiving more

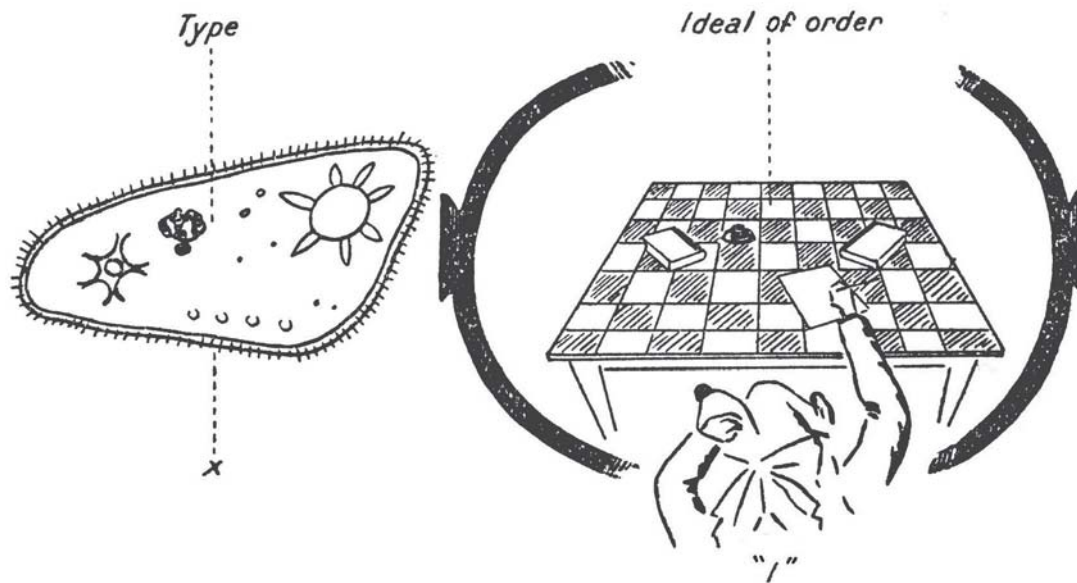


Figure 33.

general absolute domains—absolute volumes, for example. Primary organic consciousness has to resemble an absolute volume rather than an absolute surface because, when observed as a body, it appears as a volume. But because the geometric laws do not apply to the subjective domains, the primary consciousness of a three-dimensional organism, while constituting a form in which all the details are simultaneously present, does not require the hypothesis of a subject lodged in a fourth dimension. Primary organic consciousness must even correspond to an absolute domain of space-time. The organism is never an instantaneous anatomical structure; it is, rather, a cluster of processes. A species is characterized as much by the phases of its development as by its adult form. A “type” is spatiotemporal. Its embryological forms are part of its anatomy in space-time; its development is inseparable from its being. In principle, absolute domains imply a possibility of time-survey and space-survey, but with limitations to which we will return. In the case of absolute domains, it is the whole space-time of physicists that has to be “surveyed” without any supplementary dimension.⁸

The survey of the “I” is purely metaphorical. The “inspection” that the “I” seems to perform on its domain of survey is equally metaphorical. In fact, domain, “I,” and Ideal form an indissociable whole that *is* active inspection; a different “inspection” corresponds to a change in the domain, a change in the “figure,” or a figure-ground mutation. The role of the subjective domain in the regulation of subordinated

organic mechanisms and tools is thus clear. These organic tools are not pure tools that are simply inspected by a custodian or a worker in the flesh. The extraorganic material tools and factories elude in great part their proprietor. Humans cannot be everywhere at once to ensure that everything runs smoothly and to repair what deteriorates. By contrast, the organic tools, at least in young organisms, are "maintained" by subjective equipotential domains that "survey" and "inspect" them with the ubiquity inherent to subjective domains and to absolute surfaces, that repair them in case of light wear or lesion by correcting the blind operation of subordinate amboceptors.

The difference between the inspector in the flesh (relative to his extraorganic tools) and the field of inspection of organs is the same as the difference between the physical and technical conditions of observation and those of conscious sensation. In both cases, it is necessary to come to a stop without ascending to infinity. If a tiny internal inspector had to oversee the organism of the engineer by wandering in him as the engineer wanders in the factory, who would oversee this internal inspector? Very fortunately for us, the inspection of our organs is final and absolute; it is self-inspection. By keeping track in his office of drawings and graphs that reproduce the state of machines and supplies in the distant factory, the engineer tries to imitate the mode of organic and cortical inspection. These graphs and drawings can be seen all at once, while the real factory operates semiblindly, by a succession of productions and services. And the engineer can avert a lack of coordination that emerges in the graphs before it is really experienced in the services. This "artificial cortex" must nonetheless rely on the real cortex of the engineer, who is an absolute surface, a drawing that reads itself.

Here again, there is no doubt that absolute surfaces and absolute autosubjective domains are primary relative to all the categories of pseudo-forms, *patterns*, *structures*, various *assemblages*, *Gestalten*, and so forth, and cannot be composed of them. The drawings and graphs in the engineer's office postdate the factory, just as the visual sensation of the checkered table postdates to the table. But the engineer who built and assembled the factory clearly had "in mind" an overall outline of this assemblage, just as the craftsman who created the checkerboard "saw" it or referred to its image.

If absolute surfaces are accepted as primary, then another paradox

will arise. The history of evolution seems to require the idea of a progressive formation instead of preexisting absolute forms. The engineer's cortex (as well as his consciousness) precedes the drawings and graphs he uses; it was formed in the course of embryogenic development. But, as we have seen, this cortex simply retains the equipotentiality of the embryo that derives from the equipotentiality of the egg, which in its turn derives from the germinal equipotential cells. Because equipotentiality is the typical manifestation of absolute forms, it can be said that as high as one climbs in the history of living forms, one always discovers an absolute form that has subsisted uninterruptedly for hundreds of millions of years of biological evolution. From primitive living beings to humans and their brains, formation does take place, but this formation starts from a different absolute form and not from dispersed elements. There is a formation by continuous improvement in the constant presence of an organic domain. It is never a question of formation through the assemblage of bits and scraps.

If there is, strictly speaking, no beginning for absolute domains, there cannot in principle be any end. In fact, we do not see how a subjective domain of self-inspection could come to an end on its own. Aging and death are conceivable only in the case of a secondary inspection (like the engineer's inspection of a factory) bearing on machinery that is itself detached from organic subjectivity and repaired only at long intervals. The body of a metazoan is made up of organs that, macroscopically, are quasi-autonomous factories subject to the risk of equally macroscopic accidents. The possibility of replacing these organs with automata is the underside of their perishability. In contrast, the impossibility of replacing the living tissues as such with constructed automata is the underside of their imperishability. There are indeed microorgans in a protozoan, in a germinal cell, or in the cells of a tissue cultivated in vitro. But we should realize that these microorgans are not made up of autonomous amboceptors; that subjective "inspection" is total and perfect, because all these living beings are potentially immortal; and that, from germ to germ or from cell to cell, none of the currently living cells, derived by division or fusion from other cells, has ever died. The heart, as a large innervated and irrigated muscle, can malfunction, but the cardiac tissue with its embryonic rhythm is theoretically immortal.

There is certainly a relationship between immortality and equipotentiality, because equipotentiality enables the regulation of lesions, because Lashley could not have carried out on the rat's heart the interventions he made on its cortex, and because embryologists can slice an egg or a young *Triton gastrula* in two without killing it, whereas a sagittal or other cut of an adult *T. gastrula* would infallibly kill it. Like equipotentiality, virtual immortality is the sign of the presence of an absolute domain, whose primary inspection maintains its form indefinitely. It is the sign that the microorgans' order of magnitude is related to the order of magnitude of the dynamism inherent in primary subjective bonds. If virtual immortality is rarely real, it is because even an absolute domain can be violently destroyed by relatively immense forces, which result from accumulation in the world of physical aggregates. Even though its bonds may have a primary order relative to the step-by-step bonds of the physical world, they are quantitatively too weak to resist these forces. Owing to their more accentuated unity, the absolute domains of physics (atomic or subatomic individualities) have by contrast considerable binding energies. They are virtually immortal. It is well known that the disintegration of an atom is quite a story, much more so than the disintegration of a human being.