

Learning to fly: inspiration and togetherness¹

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Abstract

In this paper, we use the concept of inspiration to explore solidarity and togetherness in organizational and non-organizational settings. We take issue with managerial interpretations that tend to singularly relate inspiration to motivation and draw on the insights of Wittgenstein, Irigaray, Serres and Sloterdijk to explain why forms of human togetherness or solidarity always have an airy or subtle quality often ignored in business literature but which might be nicely captured by the concept of inspiration. We also suggest that this concept should find a place in media-theoretical perspectives on organizations and that Sloterdijk's work on 'sphereology' is crucially important for the development of these perspectives. We end with some inconclusive and subversive musings on the anti-inspirational nature of business, professionalism and bureaucracy.

Introduction

"The dust blows forward and the dust blows back."
Captain Beefheart

It has often been assumed that inspiration is important for artists, mystics and perhaps also for scientists. We take it for granted that their outstanding achievements would not have been possible without the presence of some kind of force. This force, mysterious or religious as it may be, is frequently depicted as a reason for gaiety, enthusiasm and hope. No wonder, then,

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that it has also entered the more profane area of management thinking. Even people whose minds are generally filled with the logic of profit have started to talk in terms of soul and inspiration. This especially pertains to the discourse on leadership. Famous business leaders have been known to argue that they are the “soul” of their company and that spirituality is all that matters in their success (Kanungo and Mendonca, 1996: 102). Similarly, the late Robert Greenleaf (1977: 14), who coined the immensely popular expression ‘servant leadership’, claimed that the future of organizations, and indeed of our entire civilization, “will be shaped by the conceptions of individuals that are shaped by inspiration”. It is also often suggested that there is a link between certain leadership styles – particularly the transformational or visionary varieties - and inspiration. Avolio *et al.* (1990) endorse this argument. To make it more plausible they will also have us believe that inspiration is not an unfathomable concept at all. Indeed we only have to look at inspirational leaders to get a handle on it:

“Inspirational leaders often set an example of hard work, give ‘pep’ talks, remain optimistic in times of crisis and search to reduce an employees’ [*sic*] duties and workloads by using creative work methods.” (Avolio *et al.*, 1990: 14)

For Avolio and his colleagues inspiration seems to be a very special kind of *motivation* that is, however, available for any person in the organization who is willing to use their senses. Other authors argue that inspirational or ‘soulful’ leadership is not so much about motivating individuals as about creating a climate which fosters enthusiasm, commitment and, therefore, motivation. In this vein, consultants like Briskin (1998) and Schuijt (1999) have written about the possibility of stirring the soul within organizations. Briskin (1998: 189) is especially outspoken as to his expectations of soul-stirring. It wedges together, he contends, the material practicalities that pervade all organizations and the transcendental values of the spiritual realm. Briskin also makes a distinction between soul and spirit, arguing that the spirit’s call is “to look up toward higher abstractions and absolutes” whereas the soul “can look down” and as such allows us to cope with the contradictions of working life (Briskin, 1998: 190). Schuijt (1999), on the other hand, argues that inspiration brings the person closer to his or her soul. She concentrates on the distinction between inspiration and aspiration and argues that the former, contrary to the latter, is not at all about achievement. Nonetheless, she claims, in line with Avolio *cum suis*, that inspiration is a matter of hard work: “Inspiration is not a constant in our lives. We cannot wait or hope for inspiration. When we want to live our lives passionately, strenuous effort is necessary.” (Schuijt, 1999: 16). For Schuijt, this is the only way to make inspiration useful, controllable and, perhaps most importantly, marketable.

In the present paper, we wish to free the concept of inspiration from such jubilant managerial ideologies and to argue that it may help us to philosophically understand human togetherness or community. We wish to contend that, even though the very idea of ‘organization’ is strongly imbued with Cartesian assumptions, the notion of inspiration can help us to understand organizations in an entirely different and provocatively new way. More precisely, we argue that a) inspiration is a notion that might be developed to gain a more passionate understanding of organizing; b) that organizing is oftentimes hostile to inspiration; c) that inspiration is a challenging notion which need not necessarily be related to management or leadership mumbo-jumbo; and, finally, d) that inspiration can help us to develop a media-theoretical perspective on organizing.

Good vibes

We start by suggesting that inspiration finds its condition of possibility in the hollowness and permeability of those who receive inspiration – those who are inspired. Unreceptive persons will never be inspired because their skin, their minds, their entire perceptive systems all function as insurmountable barriers to whatever comes from the outside. So inspiration is irredeemably exterior even though it can fill the interior. It is as if some kind of external élan takes possession of the person, blows through them, and then disappears again. Inspiration is thus never a permanent condition. Nor can it be controlled by the person. They cannot apply or produce inspiration at will. In this sense control, production and applicability are irrelevant concepts when we talk about inspiration. Nonetheless, uncontrollable as it may be, we would like to suggest that inspiration is a profound aspect of human togetherness. The person who is inspired meets some sort of otherness, be it a person, a sound, a landscape or whatever, and allows themselves to flow with the gust which this otherness generates. As Serres (1985) has pointed out, inspiration is *vibration*. The inspirational flow that comes over us is experienced not only as an intensified form of awareness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), but also as a pleasant and sometimes scarcely perceivable vibration that lightly touches the skin. ‘Good vibes’ are what a person may experience when someone else talks to them or when something manifests itself, no matter how dimly, to them. The possibility of having these experiences is, we argue, what constitutes humanity. Being human never starts with the ego or the subject but always with the ability to be inspired by something that comes from the outside. It is not related, as far as we are concerned, to free will or to a subject that controls its life in an independent way. Instead, inspiration is a concept we may use to take issue with such interpretations of humanity, because it stresses the importance of an external agent. The person who is inspired ‘goes with the flow’ of life. Outside is where the action takes place and they merely join in. This would suggest an indelible passivity on behalf of the person, but the choice to be a part of something that escapes them is not entirely passive. That is, they remain responsible (*responsive*) even though the individual, the self, the subject cannot be the driving force behind all events. To put it somewhat differently, human responsibility is grounded in the possibility of negation. We can ignore inspiration, we can prevent the vibes coming over us, we can make the choice to be unreceptive.

In this unreceptivity, we are unlike Homer. The Greek poet does not only ask the muse to assist him in writing the *Odyssey*, but even goes so far as to ask her to write the entire epic for him. More precisely, he urges the muse to tell whatever she wants to tell and to begin wherever she wants to begin (Homer, 1959: 429). Homer does not conceive of himself as the author or the creator of the *Odyssey*. Instead, his task was to receive the vibes produced by the muse. Homer was, in other words, a kind of medium. He was extremely proficient in what we nowadays would call ‘channelling’, in opening his channels to the wind – the inspiration - produced by the muse. The ability to do this is grounded in an individual’s hollowness or receptivity. Alternatively, as the ancient Greeks themselves would perhaps argue, it is grounded in the subject (*hypokameinion*) which is understood as the space where experiences come together or, more poetically, as the space where intuitions or inspirations might land.

This concept of the subject is entirely different from the modern or Cartesian reading which regards the subject as the sole origin of impressions and experiences. Since Descartes, humans are held entirely responsible for their experiences. The subject is the centre of the universe and everything in it is at their disposal. The very idea of being a part of the external world is anathema, even reprehensible, because it undermines the notions of free will and personal responsibility. Valuable as these notions may be, they have therefore helped to undermine the modern subject's capacity for inspiration.

Castles in the air?

Following Luce Irigaray (1983), we suggest that this marginalization of inspiration might be linked to a broader cultural tendency to forget about air. Members of Western cultures abhor airiness and prefer to be on solid ground. Yet air – not earth, water or fire - is the only element that makes their lives possible. It is light, free and permanently at our disposal. Our very existence is premised on our ability to join the flow of air around us: we breathe in air but we do so without appropriating it. Since air is ubiquitous, it also resists economical and managerial control. No other element is as spatial as air. Its ubiquity renders all efforts to locate it somewhat senseless. Air is what grounds our very existence without being obtrusive. It always permeates our bodies and as such connects us with the world. Still, one might say that it is its permanent ubiquity and all-pervasiveness that makes us forget about it. Irigaray writes: “This element that incontrovertibly constitutes everything does not impose itself on our perception nor on our conscience. While permanently present, it allows itself to be forgotten.” (1983: 15; our translation). This is, we would like to point out, a fortunate state of affairs. If we were constantly aware of what we breathe in and breathe out, we would never be able to get round to anything. The human condition is therefore one which allows us to easily forget what is most fundamental to it. Paradoxically, it is air's ubiquitous presence that becomes an absence. Yet it is this absence that renders possible the presence of all other things.²

Irigaray's musings about air are profoundly polemic. She criticizes Western philosophy for not having been able to theorize on what is absolutely pivotal in our lives. Solid ground is what has been most interesting for philosophers. Human beings are from the earth; they are, quite literally, *earthlings*. For most philosophers, earth became alluring because it seemed to be relatively stable. Even Heidegger, who emphasized that being should be seen as a process rather than a status quo, could not resist nostalgic feelings for the earth. Irigaray explains this by pointing out that air differs from earth in that it is volatile, flowing, elusive ... what, after all, are we supposed to do with air? We use earth to build sandcastles, but what should we build with air? Castles in the air? But do castles in the air look like sandcastles or, for that matter, ice castles? In our culture, air, important as it may be, therefore has negative connotations. We

² Now we can also see why the Bhopal catastrophe in India was so unsettling. Thousands of people died without knowing why. They were inhaling an odourless poison. They were breathing air that could not be expelled from their bodies. They were breathing a presence that was unable to become an absence. This catastrophe, we suggest, goes to the heart of our existence. Our ability to subject air to technological manipulation in this case transformed its absence into a presence that would not go away. For the first time in history, it became indisputably clear that air might become a contaminating presence.

may, for example, consider well-known expressions such as ‘airs and graces’, ‘to put on airs’, ‘to give oneself airs’ and so on. Our culture prefers solid ground. Moreover, if there is any talk of inspiration or spirituality, the etymological link with air is generally obliterated. Perhaps, then, the managerial discourse on inspiration is perfectly illustrative of air’s present absence. It is, we suggest, unlikely that you will meet many people in organizations who really believe that they should not look too much at their own feet (Kaulingfreks and ten Bos, 2001: 190).

Simulacra

Central to Irigaray’s observation that our culture is unable to see what seems to be most important for its members is her concern about the inherent lack of subtlety in this myopia. People who prefer solid ground generally do not have enough subtlety to perceive something as volatile as air, let alone to understand its secret messages. Those who are generally unable to see what is volatile do not only miss what is swiftly evaporating, lively or ever-changing, but also what has wings and can fly (*volare*). They are, as Serres (1993: 44) points out, incapable of seeing angels. Angels, Serres argues, generally do not show themselves as heavenly warriors soaring down from heaven to tell us what to do. Their manifestations are far more subtle; a tree moving in a gust of wind (Serres, 1993: 25), a string or a veil carried by a breeze, perhaps even the paper bag lifted up and down by the wind and registered by a camera (rather than by a human being) in the film *American Beauty*. A great deal of subtlety is required if we want to see the peculiarity of these events. It is even more difficult to see their beauty or to interpret them as messages. What we are talking about here are in fact scarcely noticeable gusts of wind or, as Lucretius had it a long time ago, thin flakes of skin carried by the air and causing only the vaguest of shivers when they land on the human body. These flakes of skin - or simulacra - are at the limit of the visible and sensible (*sense-ible*). But it is only here that angels are able to convey their messages and thus to bridge the gap between language and reality. For Serres (1985), it is the skin and not reason where this exchange of messages takes place: here is the site where we may perceive a shiver, a small breeze, a volatile message ... our skin is, as it were, a subtle parchment with a delicate sensitivity to special messages from above.

Bewildering as they may seem, Serres’s ideas are based on an understanding that the Cartesian *cogito* is hopelessly isolated “from our physical bodies as seats and receptors of the five senses” (Kavanagh, cited in Assad, 1999: 65). Serres wants to re-establish the link between reason and sensation. Language, he argues, is the screen that prevents us from sensing the data of the physical world directly. This is not the place to discuss Serres in more detail, but his overall point is that our language is not subtle enough to capture volatile phenomena without somehow distorting or even destroying them. People who are addicted to language³ are generally unable to talk about their experiences with wind, breath, air, inspiration, let alone to find expressions for feeble shivers, slight touches of the skin, improbable gusts of wind. This is, we suggest, also not the sort of language which leaders in organizations want their followers to speak. These people may crave inspiration, but they will not be rewarded for the ability to receive subtle messages hanging in the air. Below, we will

³ And which of us is not? Addiction, as Serres (1985) points out, literally means ‘enslaved by language’. *Addicere* means ‘to speak for’ or ‘to speak to’.

see that the organizational discourse on inspiration is therefore totally out of touch with subtlety. Besides, we hope to make clear that the ability to ignore the ground on which you are standing is, all 'realism' in organizations notwithstanding, quite important for togetherness.

How to draw a line

As we have suggested, to be inspired – to receive inspiration - is like breathing air. This suggests that a principle of vitality is involved: like air, inspiration is a necessary condition for life. We should understand it as primordial in the sense that it is the kind of breath that makes life possible. Inspiration is the blow experienced by a newborn child. It is this blow that activates the child's respiratory system (Sloterdijk, 1993). From this it follows that inspiration is entirely different from aspiration which is not primordial and can best be understood as the ability to keep on breathing. It is therefore linked to ambition and desire. The person who aspires sighs for more, for difference, for excellence. The sigh allows us to exceed our wishes, to go further than we might have expected, to improve on what has been. In the end, the person ends up heaving sighs in order to continue. The sigh is a secondary breath that allows us to work even harder and even better.

Inspiration, on the other hand, resists labour. An inspired person does not heave sighs. As a matter of principle, inspiration never 'takes it out' of a person. On the contrary, they are, as we saw above, merely receptive. The person waiting for inspiration accepts their passive role in the process. This point is generally poorly understood in popular management literature - perhaps understandably, since it seems to be absurd to tell managers and business leaders, those self-declared heroes of activism, that they are forced to await elusive and airy events. Inspiration is only interesting for them if it is controllable and marketable. Wittgenstein (1992: §232), however, has argued against the idea that inspiration can be controlled, sold or even learned. His line of reasoning is ingenious. Suppose that you want to draw a line. There are, Wittgenstein argues, two possibilities: either you can follow a rule that dictates how you should draw the line or you listen to an inner voice that indicates that you should draw the line in this way rather than that way. Although it is perfectly possible that both processes engender the same line, we should understand them as fundamentally different. When you follow a rule, you don't wait for a clue but immediately start to apply the rule; when you listen to an inner voice - that is, when you wait for an inspiration - you passively wait for a clue that may or may not come. It is, Wittgenstein goes on, quite easy to teach a person how to follow rules; it is, however, difficult, if not absurd, to teach them how to receive inspiration. To put it differently, it would be difficult to explain to someone what you are doing when you are drawing a line by means of inspiration. Similarly, mathematical wizards would find it extremely difficult to explain how they have done their figures, but this is by no means the same thing as suggesting that wizards are bad at figures (Wittgenstein, 1992: §236). You may of course point out that certain attitudes or behaviours are more favourable to inspiration than others. Patience, listening skills or, more generally, receptivity might be important. These suggestions can be found in the self-help books that are available nowadays for those who crave inspiration. The crux of Wittgenstein's argument, however, is that in the case of inspiration it is impossible to demand that someone will draw the same line as you did because he or she does not apply a rule. On the contrary, this person wants to *compose* a line and allowing them to do this requires more patience than the average manager possesses (1992: §236).

So, against strongly Cartesian intuitions about the subject, we wish to emphasize the passivity of inspiration. This passivity provides us with an explanation of why people often link inspiration with that which is transcendental. Talking about inspiration seems to entail talking about what gods, angels or muses can do to us: it suggests that we have no option but to wait, somewhat helplessly, for them to do it. The first assumption here is that it is always a living entity that inspires us. As we argued above, life is a necessary condition for inspiration. The passive object, in other words, can only be animated by a living being. The second, more important, assumption is that this passive object consists of a certain space into which the inspiring entity can breathe its air. In other words, the passive object is assumed to be cavernous enough to let the air blow into itself. Hollowness equals viability. Perhaps this is why the good Lord Himself created, as we will see below, a small puppet with vessels and channels inside. So someone who is *full of themselves*, who is always busy, who has an enormous ego, who does not listen, might perhaps become a happy person but will never become inspired. An effort of the will does not suffice. It is absurd to say “I want to become inspired now!”, but it is not absurd to say “I want to draw a line in this way”. Management, control and rule are always related to an effort of the will: inspiration, on the other hand, relates to receptive and uncontrollable openness.

This openness, we suggest, can best be thought of as communication. As we will point out in the next section, it is impossible to become inspired under solipsistic conditions. Solitude is bad for those who crave inspiration. That is, inspiration always presupposes the existence of two living entities that are involved with each other. As such, inspiration lies at the heart of human togetherness in the sense that it conditions a more or less permanent relationship between those involved. Inspiration is identical with conspiracy: breathing together. In what follows, we will argue that inspiration = conspiracy = culture.

Before presenting this argument, however, we should first elucidate further the ways in which inspiration differs from aspiration or motivation. We will do so by asking whether it is possible for a person to be so full of themselves that nothing can be absorbed from the outside any more.

Mourir un peu

The modern Cartesian subject has given up the idea of finding inspiration in the external world and therefore embarks on a project of thinking this world away. The inside is simply so overfull as to make breathing in from the outside virtually impossible. As a consequence, this subject has an unstoppable proclivity towards control and domination. The world disappears behind a veil of technique: the Cartesian subject understands this world as raw material that should be put at the disposal of the self. It is impossible for this subject to engage with the world. Even worse, it is convinced that what comes from the outside represents a danger simply because it cannot be controlled. In other words, everything for which this subject is not responsible stands for chaos and fear.

All this is merely to suggest that a certain measure of courage seems to be necessary for the surfer who wants to become a part of what already exists and who wants to have the world

blown into them. Yet, as we have seen, we Westerners seem to have forgotten about the airiness of this kind of courage. This is partly caused by the fact that air is an element that cloaks itself in ubiquity. People therefore tend to forget that they are already taking part in what exists and start, rather painstakingly, to centre on the self. Of course they still breathe, but it is clear that what was inspiration is replaced by aspiration. Whatever blows along does not fall, as it were, into their lap; that is, it is not absorbed as an unexpected pleasure or delight but is transformed into ambition or simple lust for control and domination. The aspiring subject finds that inspiration equals shameful stupidity and passivity. But all aspirations and ambitions cannot conceal the deep sigh typical of the average *unhappy* mediocrity: “If only I could be ...”, “If only I could have ...”, etc. Such a life is scarred by the perpetually incomplete domination of a world that should be conquered in order to make it tolerable. Against all odds, the individual envisages themselves as a ruler: “If only I was in charge ...”. To abandon this self-image is tantamount to admitting defeat and opening the way for chaos. For an ambitious and aspiring subject, life is a perpetual struggle. They remind us of a boxer who gasps for oxygen in order to fight and fight and fight until they are finally out of breath.

Talking about motivation, moreover, does not involve talking about air, breath, spirit or enthusiasm. On the contrary, motivation seems to be about sober-mindedness, explanation, causation, rationality and so on. In Lalande’s *Vocabulaire Technique et Critique de la Philosophie*, for example, we encounter the following definitions:

“Motivation: relation between an act and the motives which account for it and on which decisions are based. Motive: each mental cause that produces a volitional act; a situation of the mind dominated by intellectual elements that would completely determine a certain act of the will if they were the only elements involved.”

The emphasis in popular management literature on what is seen as the overriding importance of motivation is, we contend, a hallmark of this rational conception of human behaviour. All our actions should, this suggests, have a particular reason or a particular goal and cannot be done ‘just like that’. We act in a certain way because we have goals and are convinced that these goals are worth the effort. We are accountable for our actions: explaining why we do something is to explain what motivates us. Moreover, our ability to account for what we are doing shows that we are in control of our lives. Motivation, therefore, has nothing whatsoever to do with what comes from the outside. It conforms perfectly to the Cartesian view of the autonomous subject which is, we conclude, only capable of motivation and incapable of inspiration. So, we argue that motivation and inspiration are adversaries. Motivation is not about airiness or vitality, but about reason. It can easily be made explicit. Whereas it is quite difficult to say what inspires or animates you, it is straightforward to construct a discourse on what it is that motivates you. Such a discourse provides listeners with a rationale (*rationale*) for your behaviour and also makes you accountable for your actions. If, for example, you contend that A motivates you, another person may wish to ask why B, C, etc. are not motivating and you may provide them with an explanation for this state of affairs. To a certain extent, you always have an overview of what motivates you in the sense that you know why B, C, etc. do not have the same effect on your behaviour as A. Having this overview is precisely what makes you accountable: you are able to offer an explanation for not choosing B, C., etc. Motivation can therefore be made transparent by the use of language. Inspiration is an entirely

different matter. The wind that blows in and through you is an external force that resists precise description. Its externality makes inspiration less knowable. Somehow it lies beyond your range. Direct knowledge of inspiration is impossible. What you know of it is only its effect which might be described as increased sensibility, gaiety or energy. These effects provide you with a deeper understanding of what it means to experience a revelation. A new world has opened up, but how that came to happen is entirely mysterious. It simply got a grip on you. It blew itself into you.

So we argue that rationality and language are akin to motivation rather than inspiration. Another element we have to consider here is steadiness or continuity. Motives that drive our behaviour are somewhat enduring, not inconstant. In this sense, a motivation might be argued to tell us something general about how we are in touch with our own lives. The difference between motivation and inspiration here is really that inspiration is *breathtaking*: it is always a new breath and represents new life, while motivation is linked to what has always been. Motivation's constancy is also a crucial feature of motifs in art or in music. It is the recurring theme that drives the painter, the composer or the designer who all start to work by embroidering on one or more basic themes which are recognizable for the spectator or audience. This motif surpasses the concrete work and provides us with clues about the meaning of the artist's entire oeuvre. Motifs/ motives, in other words, can be understood as *patterns*, not only in art but also in our behaviour. We understand that these patterns are underlying constants on which particular forms of behaviour can be constructed. So, a surface/depth dichotomy is in operation here. Beneath what people actually do, deeper motives lie concealed. No doubt then that these deeper layers of our lives are, in a sense, more important than the actual forms of behaviour they seem to make possible. That is, the assumption of these underlying patterns provides us with an excuse to ignore the whimsicalities of human action. In all their purity, they render action perfectly explicable and, more importantly, controllable. The managerial interest in motivation can hence be explained as a desire for the control of human action by reducing it to underlying and enduring behavioural patterns - to *motives*. The construction of these patterns is a major managerial tool. Inspiration, on the other hand, can never become a managerial tool since it does not come to us in more or less regular patterns: it is far too whimsical for that.

Motivation has thus become part and parcel of managerial practice. It is widely recognized that harsh orders or directives are not particularly effective in what is now known as the knowledge economy. More and more management practitioners feel that they should let go, at least to a certain extent, of the hierarchy of command and merely focus on the goals of the organization. This entails that they do no longer tell employees what to do. Instead they demand that their staff's behaviour develops around particular patterns which are thus deemed to be more important than the actual behaviour. This might be seen as bureaucracy's weirdest paradox: only beneath its surface do we find clarity and control. Yet when the surface is readily sacrificed for purposes of managerial control, we may wonder how long it will take before we end up in room 101 of Orwell's *1984*.

To recap, motivation simply denies receptivity to life and thus the possibility of inspiration. Motivation, *c'est mourir un peu*.

Visitability

As should by now be clear, we wish to liberate inspiration from the discourse on motivation. We have shown that Irigaray, Serres and Wittgenstein provide us with clues as to a different understanding of inspiration. We will now turn to Sloterdijk's (1998, 1999) recent books on 'sphereology' and argue that in these texts inspiration is developed as a concept that allows us to gain a deeper understanding of human togetherness. We should develop what we may call *avicultural* skills if we are to overcome our Cartesian isolation. We should grow wings.

Sloterdijk (1998: 28) starts by asking us to reconsider an age-old Gnostic question: 'Where are we when we are in the world?'. The answer to this question follows immediately: 'We are in an exterior that carries interior worlds'. Such an answer indicates that we can no longer know ourselves to be secure in the cosmos. Our primary response to this situation is to develop an interior world crammed with feelings of anxiety and solitude. Psychology as a discipline is really a consequence of our uprooted condition: the soul is only important for those who have been driven away from their houses and for whom togetherness has become a serious problem. Psychology is always for and about those who have lost the way. In contradistinction to people like Heidegger, Sloterdijk wants to point out that our rootless condition is not primarily linked to modernity but can be traced back to Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise. That is, only in post-paradisaical conditions can we begin to fathom the scope of that ancient Gnostic question: are uprooted people like us still capable of constructing places where togetherness is a possibility and where they can be who they are? Sloterdijk's entire project centres around this question, which he rephrases as follows: are we still able to construct spheres? "The sphere", Sloterdijk contends, "is the intimate, enclosed and shared round shape inhabited by people provided that they are successful in becoming human" (1998: 28). Living with other people entails that you have been willing to construct spheres with them. Human beings are creatures who create spherical words that can best be understood as immuno-systemic creations in space, inhabited by those who feel that the exterior world is a constant threat.

What we have here is thus a theory of spheres or a sphereology. Central to this sphereology is the understanding that it is pre-eminently a theory of media. Messages, senders, channels and languages are the key notions in this theory. Sphereology as a theory of media tries to understand 'the visitability of something by something in something'.⁴ This notion of visitability

⁴ The importance of visits has also been stressed by Michel Serres (1985: 259-283), who hints at the etymological relationship between 'visit' and 'vision'. There are, however, important differences between Serres and Sloterdijk. Serres is more attentive than Sloterdijk to the dynamics that enable togetherness. In order to see others, he suggests, a person has to move. To enable movement one should not lock the door but open it. For Serres, togetherness has far too often been understood from a static perspective. It is as if two persons sitting together on a couch is its pre-eminent example. The experience of togetherness, however, is more accessible to people who leave their houses, go for a walk, who randomly traverse the landscape of which they therefore become a part. The sort of non-linear, chaotic experiences made possible by *randonner* (roaming, walking, trekking etc.) are explicitly offered as an alternative to the modern Cartesian experience which merely registers the landscape in order to gain a theoretical and instrumental knowledge of it. Such an

is closely linked to that of inspiration. It is, Sloterdijk claims, what allows people to be together in communities or rather what allows them to construct spheres. These spheres are places where people are inspired by human and non-human others. Those who are inspired have, in other words, been visited by others and an interesting characteristic of these visitors is that they are not intending to leave soon. Thus they lay the foundation of the solidarity needed to preserve the sphere. Sphereology can therefore best be understood as a study that endeavours to understand how solidarity as a precondition of being-in-spheres is created and maintained by human and non-human entities.

Clay and wind

The archetypal form of togetherness is that between God and human beings. It is here, Sloterdijk argues, that one comes to understand what true inspiration entails. Working in clay, God creates a puppet or dummy into which he breathes air in order to give His creation life. Thus God is skilled in ceramics: he tinkers with clay to create His puppet. It is only at a later stage that a decisive amount of ‘pneumatic surplus value’ is added to this still lifeless yet hollow creature which will henceforth be called Adam. Ceramics and inspiration are therefore the fundamental divine techniques in the universe. People have no difficulties with the former technique: they know how to handle clay. Inspiration, however, is an entirely different story, since people generally do not know how to give life to statues or puppets. To breathe life into the lifeless is God’s secret speciality, even though one has to admit that contemporary biogenetic experiments seemingly purport to unravel such mysteries.

At face value, the first form of togetherness therefore seems to be strongly hierarchical. However, Sloterdijk insists that the intimacy in this first sphere should in fact be thought of in terms of a bipolarity. God’s pneumatic techniques can only be carried out if He is willing to accept that Adam blows back some of the air that circulates in his channels. This has enormous consequences: as soon as God starts to breathe life into the clay puppet, Adam starts to breathe life into God. In other words, God does not precede the pneumatic technique that is applied here to create a living human being. It is rather that God and this living human being come to life simultaneously. The creator/ creation dichotomy is therefore deceptive. The air that flows into the human being is, at least to some extent, blown back into God. We should understand this archetypal sphere in which God and Adam live as a resonating system in which the air that is circulated is not only to be understood as inspiration but also as conspiracy or respiration. When it is said in the Holy Bible that God created man in His own image, we should understand this to mean that God and man are simultaneously creating each other. In other words, clay puppets can exist alone in the universe but, in order for them to come to life or to become human, at least one other living entity is indispensable. A human being never exists in isolation, even though Cartesians would have us believe that this is possible. Sloterdijk insists that it is impossible to speak sensibly about human beings without taking into consideration what or who inspires them. They never begin their lives as isolated or

experience is one that Serres (1985: 280). describes in terms of *dépayement* (literally ‘de-landscaping’) which denotes feelings of despair or uprootedness. Serres’s ideas might be used, we suggest, to add to Sloterdijk’s sphereological project, provided that we understand that Sloterdijk seems to be somewhat suspicious with respect to movement. See, for example, Sloterdijk (1989).

atomistic individuals but always as part of a couple. The point that is made here is profoundly Heideggerian: Dasein is a being-in-the-world which is premised on care (*Sorge*) and this care can be understood as a kind of solidarity or sympathy with other creatures and/ or things (Heidegger, 1979: 193; see also Kaulingfreks, 1996: 89). Sloterdijk, however, wants to correct Heidegger in the sense that for a human being 'being-in-the-world' is always 'being-in-spheres'.

Soaring

The question the sphereologist wants to ask now is how this archetypal form of togetherness between God and Adam should be conceived of and how it may lead to more complex forms of togetherness. In other words, how is it that the primeval couple makes way for communities, project teams, nations or organizations? The answer to this question hinges on the concept of 'solidarity'. Sloterdijk argues that solidarity should be seen as a 'phenomenon of transference', but what exactly is being transferred when we have an instance of solidarity? To understand this, we should develop a deeper understanding of what Sloterdijk means by a sphere.

Sloterdijk describes a sphere as bipartite, from the beginning a polarized and differentiated yet intimately and subjectively construed circular shape. This shape can thus be understood as a space where a commonality of experiences is rendered possible. In and by means of spheres notions such as inspiration or resonance acquire a specifically spatial connotation. Living in such a sphere (bubble, egg, globe etc.) is living within a 'shared subtlety'. Sloterdijk claims that this subtlety is characteristic of human beings insofar as they are 'beings-in-spheres'. However, the subtle commonality that is characteristic of humankind is under constant threat from whatever comes from the outside. Spheres should therefore also be seen as immunological spaces in which human beings find protection from the always threatening outside. It is only in these spheres that they are able to live and to resist, say, the forces of nature. Can we then safely say that spheres are *cultures*? Well, cultures can be understood as enabling people to liberate themselves from brute facts and, as it were, to rise above them.⁵ As beings living in spheres, people are soaring entities (*Schwebewesens*): this ability to soar above the harsh realities of life is "entirely dependent on shared feelings and common assumptions" (Sloterdijk, 1998: 48).

Spheres are thus spaces where people are able to soar. These spaces are simultaneously dynamic and static. They are dynamic in the sense that the sphere as a product of human togetherness is never perfect or complete. People will always have to work hard if they are to sustain the sphere in which they are living. In spite of all the efforts they may put into its sustenance, each sphere is destined to fall apart. On a micro level this may refer to lovers who break up, to youngsters who leave their families, or even to a photograph that is torn into

⁵ Tuan (1999: 28) defines cultures as "mechanisms of escape". For him, the human being as a cultural species is "congenitally indisposed to accept reality as it is". This is a thoroughly Nietzschean point: "The human species uniquely confronts the dilemma of powerful imagination that, while it makes escape to a better life possible, also makes possible lies and deception, solipsistic fantasy, madness, unspeakable cruelty, violence, destructiveness – evil."

pieces. On a macro level we may think of entire dead cultures; organizations that are shut down, communities and their languages that are destroyed, cities that are burnt, genocide ... Cultures can thus be understood as big, comprising spheres which seem to be totally distinct from the small symbiotic forms of togetherness. The latter are, like the one between God and Adam, permeated only by one bipolarity.

Eve's lessons

Sloterdijk's point here is that these small symbiotic spheres cannot survive very long because they are too static to withstand exterior threats. Sooner or later the inhabitants of these small-scale spheres will feel annoyed by the endless hugging and cuddling that is taking place. God himself understood this perfectly. He decided to put an end to Adam's wretched shelter by allowing a woman to come to the fore. It is therefore the woman who puts an end to the symbiotic security in which Adam finds himself. Eve teaches Adam invaluable lessons about pluralism and freedom. Only from an extremely religious viewpoint can the female character in this story be assessed as negative; from more reasonable perspectives, the male character in this story should only be grateful to her. In amazement he comes to understand that there are options in this universe: should I be loyal to God or should I be seduced, inspired and animated by Eve? After some deliberation he makes a choice for which heterosexual males ever after should be grateful: he allows himself to be seduced by the woman and breaks with God. This, however, does not so much hint at his willpower as at hers. We may wonder whether Adam has gained more than an elementary understanding of the situation. In fact, he plays an entirely passive role in the paradisaical drama: Eve shows him the exit from paradise and, with the inevitable hard-on, Adam trudges at a distance behind her. His erection is the limit of his solidarity. In the end, it is the desire to get laid by Eve that allows him to give up his intimate relationship with God.

The Almighty feels rebuffed by Adam's sexual appetite and recedes into a cosmological background where He becomes a somewhat melancholic and highly ambivalent symbol of veritable and superior togetherness. In post-paradisaical circumstances, it is only the female who is capable of forming intimate relationships. The male has to pay the price for his relentless desire in that he continually experiences a hopeless incapacity for engagement, commitment, solidarity and togetherness. He soon understands that togetherness is not based on lust but on willpower. Generally, he is unable to work up enough of it. As a consequence, males throughout history have been burdened by nostalgic worries about the lost relationship with God. They have felt attracted to desolate spaces where they are more likely to meet God than a human being. Only in deserts or on endless oceans is it possible for the marginalized God to bring some light into the darkness of the human mind – to *inspire* that mind. Only in these spaces can the symbiotic relationship with the Almighty be revitalized.

Pneumatics

A tentative conclusion can be drawn from this: where choices become a possibility, safe dwelling places can no longer be taken for granted. Freedom is for the uprooted and homeless. Those who are free always long for a place to stay; but those who are not free want to leave such a place. This is the profound tragedy of a symbiotic life-in-spheres. For

Sloterdijk, it is only the tragic, catastrophic tendency of bipolar spheres that allows us to construct a historical perspective on cultures. Again, he insists on understanding such a cultural history in terms of communication, media and transference: between the intimate partners of the archetypal sphere, transitional objects, new issues and sub-issues, pluralities, messages and new communication channels constantly demand space and attention. The choices made by the initial partners determine the direction of the developments that follow. New inspirational relationships come into being. Sloterdijk's entire *Sphären*-project boils down to the writing of this cultural history that in his view starts with the end of the symbiotic partnership. What he wants to write is a sphereological tragedy in which a key role is played by the concept of inspiration. In this tragedy, forms of inspiration are constantly succeeded by other forms of inspiration. In a sense this is a history of bursting bubbles. Spheres that collapse or die cause an existential uprooting or shock, the only answer to which consists in an effort to fit the new, the strange, the exterior, the accidental and whatever else undermines the sphere into a bigger and more flexible spherical shape than the small symbiotic bubble. In this bigger sphere more and heterogeneous forms of inspiration can be accommodated. In this sense, Sloterdijk's history should make clear that culture can be understood as efforts to recast the exterior as a new interior in which what is new and strange finds shelter.

In Sloterdijk's language, microspheres are transformed into macrospheres: the primeval couple becomes a family, the family becomes a horde, the horde becomes an organization, a nation, a people, an empire, a global village ... the challenge for these macrospheres is that in order to survive they should somehow be able to reinvolve or preserve the inspiration characteristic of the first symbiotic bubble. Ethnospheric air-conditioning is therefore indispensable for them. Forms of togetherness and solidarity are doomed to die without pneumatic technologies breathing in new air. However, the transition from the microsphere to the macrosphere is not only of a quantitative but also of a qualitative nature. Something of the inspirational quality that permeates the microsphere will inevitably be lost. In other words, the bigger the sphere becomes the more difficult it is to preserve it. Why? Solidarity, Sloterdijk contends, is increasingly replaced by an entirely different cultural dynamic that absorbs so much attention from its members that it seems to become independent of them. Nations, corporations or governments become abstractions in which people share without the slightest chance of inspirational engagement. These macrospheres therefore tend to become simulations of more intimate spheres and the 'blow-jobs' to be done there are exceedingly difficult. All too often they degenerate into ideology-producing machines that mock the very idea of authentic and receptive solidarity. Under these circumstances, the relationship between the individual and the organization, culture or nation is more important than the mutually inspirational relationships amongst people. It is only then that it becomes clear that the danger does not only lie in the exterior. Indeed, solidarity is often corroded due to internal forces.

It is now that we begin to realize fully why it is that organizing is generally hostile to inspiration - why it is that organizations dislike wind - but why at the same time this hostility contains within it the seeds of its own destruction.

Organizations dislike wind

Macrospheres are often symbols of homelessness, because even in these wider contexts people will continue the search for engagement and solidarity. To a certain extent, we are all like the male character who nostalgically longs for the lost intimate relationship with God. Small wonder then that organizations often present themselves as substitutes for homelessness: “This is the place where you can feel at home: WE OFFER YOU A FINE AND CHALLENGING WORKING ENVIRONMENT!”. Simultaneously employees are offered a professional – read anti-inspirational - ideology that endorses a ‘cool’ relationship with work and ignores soft values such as solidarity, involvement and inspiration. Think of the football player who professionally fouls an opponent. Of course, the opponent is expected not to take this personally. Nor should a dismissal from the field of play – or from the organization - be taken as such.

The bureaucracy can thus be seen as a Cartesian substitute for the sphere. By means of rules and procedures it focuses on individual employees rather than on the relationships between them. Think here of the careers employees are expected to follow. Relationships with others are at best means that allow you to achieve your goals. Hence relationships are allowed or even welcomed in organizations - but only insofar as they obey some principle of utility. Uprooting, radicalism and revolution are currently cherished as new organizational values in these ‘globally competitive’ times. But re-structuring often causes a lot of rumpus because people are torn apart. The desire for inspiration and solidarity is never completely extinguished. People will never perfectly comply with rules and commands. And even the most meteoric careers will always contain an element of discontent. As long as they exist, therefore, bureaucracies will always invent more and more sophisticated procedures, fully aware that people will not be able to comply with them. Sooner or later, their immunity to exterior inspirations disappears. All spheres, no matter how big they are, are heading towards their own catastrophe. They are, if anything, best thought of as soap bubbles that will inevitably burst.

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