

I have an idea!

A very common experience, often involving good humor and enthusiasm, a positive impression of a fertile mind, which produces something of its own, probably original. Except that not all our ideas are necessarily good ideas...

But there is still something curious: "I have an idea" cannot be commanded, cannot be decided. Trying to force the idea to come is one of the best ways to prevent it from happening, as it can arise at the most surprising moments. Martin Luther, according to legend, had the founding idea of the Reformation *in latrina*. That is to say, probably by relaxing the concentration due to his intellectual work, by thinking less.

"A thought comes when "it" wants, not when "I" want." If Nietzsche (*Beyond Good and Evil*, § 17) examines the consequences of this evidence regarding the very existence of this famous self, it remains nonetheless that "I" had an idea, that this idea is present in a consciousness for which it makes sense through the language in which it is formulated. This thought or idea certainly even requires clarification and deepening... The idea *requires* development, scope, content, that I devote time and energy to it, to give it body and substance. It can also be a fixed idea that I cannot manage to chase away, over which my will seems to have no hold. This clearly shows the *reality* of the idea. It *is* something, it has appeared in me, but it is up to me to take it out of a simple evanescence so that it becomes: concrete, effective, followed by effects, efficient therefore, or even truly *real*.

It can be a very concrete project that is simple to implement, like a cooking recipe that I have had the idea for. It can also be much more complex: a novel, a plot that comes to mind, a painting that I see in my imagination, a mathematical theory, or so many other things. A lot of time, work, energy for the idea... to come into existence? Into reality? But isn't the idea already something the moment it comes to my consciousness? And where does it come from?

There is also the question of whether I am the only one with this strange, new idea. Curiously, several people can have the same idea at the same time. Examples are numerous, including the differential calculus developed by Leibniz and Newton, the theory of evolution (shared by Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace), and even the invention of the airplane. These discoveries or inventions can be rooted in the logical structure of discoveries or anterior concepts, which implies an autonomy of this logic, the internal coherence of ideas. They then go beyond individual freedom and the totally autonomous creative capacity of the will. Is this a reduction of the scope of human genius? Without a doubt, in the perspective of its freedom, even if Ada Lovelace or Mendel, for computer science and genetics, show us minds that create ideas that do not fit into any relevant context at a given time.

What is an idea?

I – Idea and imagination

A – Idea, concept, image

The question must be taken in a strong, ontological sense: what reality is in question with regard to these "things," representations that constantly arise in my mind - or in my brain? What characterizes humanity is precisely this faculty of ideation associated with consciousness. This characteristic of the human species has a clear organic meaning—the very large brain mass that defines humans as a species within the living. We are so proud of it. The faculty of having ideas never really stops even during the course of the representations that make up our waking periods. Even in sleep, this brain still remains active, always producing ideas, in the broad sense. Representations, images, accompanied by sensations and emotional charges... We are this, and have a limited hold on this production of ideas: how can we stop thinking?

"I think therefore I am - I am a thing whose being is thought, and perhaps if I cease to think I cease to be" (Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*). The consequence of this observation is a division of being into two regions, traditionally called soul and body. How can such a duality be supported today, if not in terms of particularly dubious beliefs? The idea, the primary content of consciousness, is a mental, neuronal, measurable content in the brain and it seems particularly uncertain that this exists outside of corporeality, its materiality: how can one think without a brain? Assuming that something subsists beyond death, what representations and consciousness could there be without an organic, cerebral substrate?

How can we ignore all the progress made in medicine in its neurological dimension since the beginnings of scientific thought, in which Descartes was precisely a major player? Electroencephalograms, like MRIs, are not devices put in place by evil materialists wanting to twist the neck of religion. There is an undeniable objectivity to our neurological knowledge, which transforms the question of self-knowledge and which neither the philosopher nor the psychologist can ignore if they are concerned with objectivity or even simply with somewhat serious and coherent thinkings.

The psyche (that is to say, myself) is thus characterized first of all by the continuity of this mental activity, cerebrally measurable. The flow of ideas... But in relation to the question "what am I," always in the strong sense of the word *being*, let us note that I am this continuity of mental productions which at the same time are characterized by their unreality. An idea as such is not real, one cannot bump into an idea as one would into a wall or a door. That is the real, the tangible, measurable and material. One can measure a nervous influx, highlight a cerebral activity, but its contents, as conscious representations, are marked by the seal of unreality, of immateriality. This is obvious. An idea, like a dream, does not exist.

Understood in a somewhat strict and rigorous manner, an idea is not a concept: the latter accounts for the reality from which it is inseparable, it describes it in an operational manner even if some of these concepts may have always already been there, like the Kantian categories that make up understanding. However, the empirical concept of phlogiston is indeed obsolete and has for this reason disappeared outside the history of science. Is the same true of mental contents such as justice, freedom, the beyond, God, mathematical entities, utopia, beauty...? These are ideas, and we cannot remove from them a strong imaginary significance that contributes to their meaning. Imagination is part of the way in which we conceive some of them (even if Kant very clearly distinguishes between idea and imagination). They are more and other than concepts.

Let us think, for example, of works of art, which begin by being conceived, by "being" ideas, even if they are often discovered and developed through the work of the artist. Imagination is not necessarily

involved in the production of ideas, but it often remains central. Many beings that have been the object of solid and persistent beliefs can be analyzed as imaginary, or as belonging to a dream production that passes itself off as real: a centaur, a mermaid, all these composite beings that extend to forms of transcendence, began by being conceived, or dreamed of, as Freud suggests with the concept of *condensation*. The question has never really been scientifically addressed as to what the lucid dreams could have been at the origin of these beings to whom we have often given a cult and who live on in the memory of men.

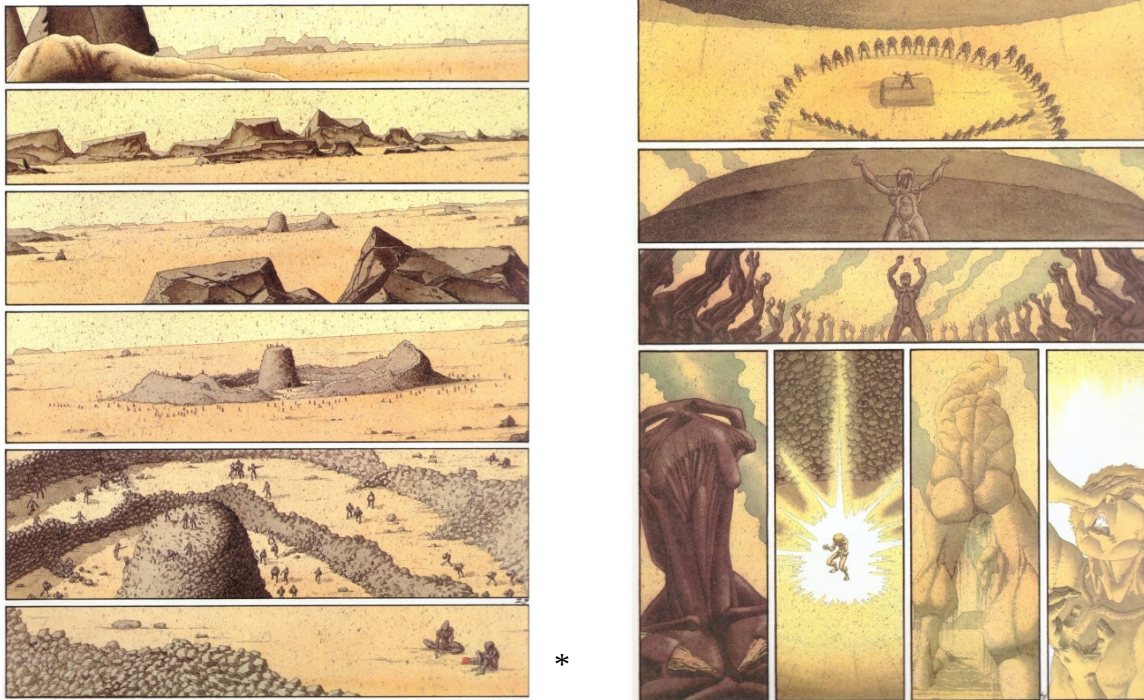
This is the exact opposite of Euhemerus. The gods do not seem to be human heroes deified over time after their death, but dreamlike and imaginary creations that come into existence. They will then have a long history that will involve a widely shared belief, because it is often imposed. Constraint.

B – The power of beliefs

A nymph, a genie, a ghoul, a unicorn—these don't exist. Nor does a gigantic old man brandishing lightning bolts, or his twin armed with a trident causing storms to rise on the sea. And yet, we can say that such beings *existed* in the minds of men who believed in them and worshipped them for a very long time. Has this ceased, moreover? Is a mental construct with a strong imaginary meaning therefore purely unreal?

Can a belief create something?

The great comic book creator Andréas devotes his diptych *Cyrus / Mil* (1984-87) to this theme. A highly complex construction, a work open to numerous interpretations, the albums take us far into an imaginary past, to a strange people, as if carried by an idea. These beings, devoid of articulated language, of any organ of oral and sound expression, build a temple at the same time as they arrive at the *word*. Once the temple is completed, the word emerges from the body of the "high priest," who then pronounces the first word that tears his face as a cataclysm is unleashed. The entire construction of this temple shows us a people carried by something they share, that animates them, and that only exists within this people: Andreas does not at all suggest the incarnation of a transcendence but meditates on the power of a belief that comes to *make* something be. These beings discover what they create and what carries them as they build their architectural work.



Let us note that this work is part of a movement of radical transformation of the comic strip, at the root of what we call today graphic novel. This period saw the appearance of many other great works and authors who today make us see that something happened, a mode of expression was radically transformed, without a doubt because something *was in the air of the time* and that great creators and artists put all their talent into it. This is how we can remember an era as particularly creative.

In *Creation Lake* (2024), Rachel Kushner speculates fascinatingly about times long ago, even before our species, *homo sapiens*.

“If we assume that symbolism is a way of storing information outside one’s own mind, the first *Homo sapiens* chose to store already numerous images, and by representing the animals he hunted, he exercised his power and his power of appropriation. Neanderthal, on the other hand, wanted to record what he saw in dreams, to introduce into the world what did not otherwise exist. The traces attributed to Tal on cave walls, rocks, animal bones, were all abstract codes, highly mysterious, and of transcendent beauty. (...) *Homo sapiens* was a *copier*. Despite his virtuosity in drawing hunting scenes and animals, he represented what was *already there*. Neanderthal was a *magician*, and this ability to create something new was the foundation of all true art. Making the invisible visible: that is what the artist does” (*Creation Lake*, pp. 100–101).



The surprising continuity of our archaeological and paleontological discoveries shows that we are ignorant of so much about such a distant past, particularly regarding the cognitive abilities of Neanderthals... Nietzschean genealogy sheds light on very obscure times, on shared contents of consciousness whose survival testifies to the life of the idea, in us, while we continue to entertain them with our thoughts, with our energy.

Where do our gods come from? How did they come into existence, through the power of our beliefs? Are these "imaginary" beings mortal? Can a God die from being forgotten? If the idea has a life, it may also have a death.

“ Here are forgotten gods, who might as well be dead. They are found only in dried-up tales. They have disappeared, entirely, but their names and images remain. (...) Not far from him lay a varnished brown mammoth skull, next to a small woman with a deformed left hand, covered in an ochre fur coat. Near her, three other women, tied at the waist, had been carved from the same block of granite: their faces appeared unfinished, sloppy, while their breasts and genitals were carefully chiseled; there was also a flightless bird, with a vulture's beak but human arms.

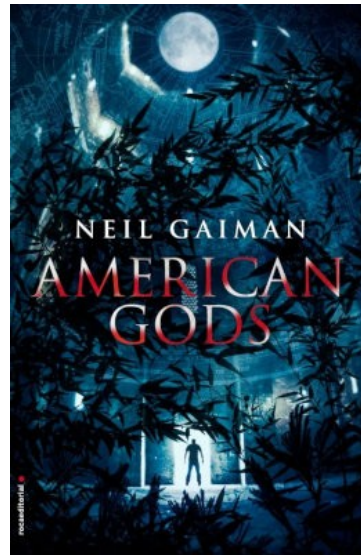
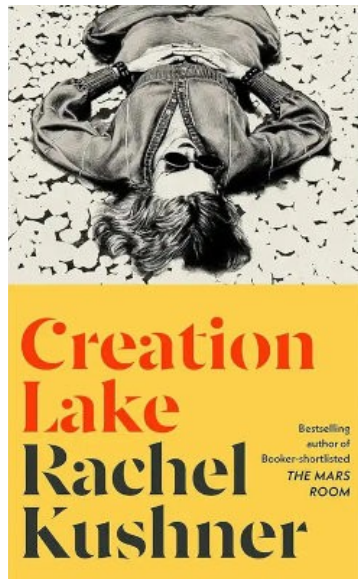
These are the Gods who have faded from memory. Even their names are lost, and those who revered them are as forgotten as they are. Their totems were overthrown long ago. Their last priests died without passing on their secrets. The gods die. And when they truly die, no one mourns them or remembers them. It is harder to kill an idea than a living being; but eventually you can do it. (Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, p.76, 2001)



Those who first arrived in what would one day be called America conceived of divinities. The description Neil Gaiman gives us in *American Gods* strongly arouses the imagination, takes us back to origins that are truly our own. They explain what we are and how we were able to arrive at particularly bloodthirsty cults - perhaps blood and suffering are a form of nourishment for the reality of the idea? Nietzsche greatly emphasizes the role of violence in the constitution of memory in man, which we find in the corporal punishment we inflict on children: "that way, you'll remember it!" Thus the idea can take shape, come into existence in the consciousness of people who will put the best of themselves into it. It will take a considerable amount of acculturation work to achieve the death of beings who have been worshipped for so long, to whom so many sacrifices, so many human lives, have been given. What remains today of Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca and so many others who have nourished themselves for so long on the belief of men and their blood, for whom so many temples were built and so many lives sacrificed?

The poignant and very sad conclusion of the immense novel *Julian* by Gore Vidal, depicts the death of the ancient religions of antiquity, defeated by Christianity despite the attempt of an emperor who tried to restore their reign (Julien the Apostate, 361 - 363). But can we say that the Gods of Antiquity are truly dead, when they are still at the foundation of our culture even if we no longer worship them? In a certain way, they still come to us, today, in our imagination because they are not forgotten, current examples are legion. Alongside their use in various artistic forms, cinema, novels, etc., let us especially mention the strength of beliefs that remain, maintain themselves in us:

“Ancestral Neanderthals or any other hominid form that somehow survived—they do exist. They live on, yes. And guess where? *In our minds*, and in our culture, because of these eternal stories of Sasquatch or snowmen that we keep dreaming about, hoping to see, and dreading” (Rachel Kushner, *Creation Lake*, p. 48).



We could add both ghosts and aliens, modern myths into which we have invested so much energy. Very strange phenomena, visions of the supernatural can thus be interpreted in psychological terms, as CG Jung does:

"The more limited a being's field of consciousness, the more his psychic contents (his imaginations) will appear to him with a character of externality, that is to say, almost exterior to himself, in the form for example of magical instances or spirits projected onto living beings (the latter are then invested with supernatural powers in his eyes); thus magicians and witches are born." (Jung, *Dialectic of the Ego and the Unconscious*, ch. 5)

Jung did not experience all the inner experiments based on psychedelic drugs that produce results comparable to those of years of meditation, according to very ancient techniques. Let us remember Spinoza: "we do not know what the body can do." CG Jung's collective unconscious cannot be separated from this long cultural, mental evolution, which makes us what we are through the sedimentations of universes of meaning that remain within us. It is its product. This in no way refers to an immaterial universe that would exist outside of this complex and mysterious human psyche in which ideas always live: we now understand how rich and complex this notion is in the multitude of its meanings.

We share these ideas, which we all know because they are at the foundation of a common culture that dives into a past that is always there. But insofar as such beings live from us, go beyond our individuality and perpetuate themselves beyond the times and this or that culture, we can call them *trans-subjective*. It is not a simple intersubjectivity as a place of exchange or construction of the self discovering the other and living with him, something that phenomenology knows well. Rather, we must see in the idea a being that lives from us, that survives its creator, that finds its strength, even its power, in the continuity of its passage from consciousness to consciousness, from culture to culture, through eons of time.

II – Idea, idealism and ideology

We can therefore no longer say that the idea is unreal, it is trans-subjective. But we can deepen this notion of idea differently by looking at the modes by which it comes into existence.

Where does this very notion of an idea come from?

We have seen that it was not with Plato that man began to have ideas. However, we owe to him the formulation, the precise construction of this notion, the very meaning of the word if not the very words of εἶδος and ἰδέα. Plato is one of the greatest, if not the first, *idealist*. It is clear that the break in reality to which he proceeds (and Descartes will clearly assume its continuation) was not formulated at this time, in particular because it presents a strong religious significance as we have mentioned. But the reference to Plato remains unavoidable.

The traditional distinction between idealism and its opposite, materialism, lies in the causality of one in relation to the other. In relation to our questioning of the origin of these mental contents that we call ideas, do they exist in themselves, by themselves, and outside of us? Are these ideas thereby the cause of the world, of nature, and of ourselves? Or are ideas simply the result of our interaction with the world, of experience? In this respect, we would more correctly speak of empiricism than of materialism, but the issue is always the same: is it the idea that causes matter, or the opposite? And *what is an idea*?

The particularly clear and central Platonic affirmation is that of the reality of a world of Ideas, of an intangible immateriality more real than the materiality of the world and of nature which are the places of our life (even if what we designate under the name of *matter* does not make sense in ancient Greece). The Idea *is*, more rightly than my own body, than this illusion in which we are plunged as in a sleep from which we emerge at death. These Ideas are the cause and model of the world which we call real.

The *Phaedo* and especially *The Republic* set out what the history of philosophy considers to be the theory of Ideas. All or part of these transcendent realities can be expressed with clarity, light, and precision, insofar as they can be the principles of a world in their image. These Ideas of Justice, Virtue, Beauty, and Good can be the principle of life here below, here and now, as the foundation of a social organization in their image. Platonic thought is always inseparable from its political meaning; it is difficult to reduce it to a simple ontology, even if what we call real is always an ontological degradation of an immutable and eternal model.

Later in his work, through narrative and imagination, Plato will seek to give substance to this ideal city in the constitution of a myth whose origins he will seek to mislead: Atlantis, of which he speaks to us at the beginning of the *Timaeus* and to which the unfinished dialogue *Critias* is dedicated. The Greeks, "a people of little memory", have forgotten part of their origins, traces of which are preserved in the temples of Egypt.

Modern Egyptology has never found this trace. It seems that Plato is the author of this legend. Atlantis is not real. Yet it inhabits the history of humanity, we are still searching for it and still giving it body and form through sometimes surprising and very current artistic expressions, as in the television series *Stargate*, to mention one of the latest revivals. It is within us that Atlantis exists and continues to fascinate us. It *lives* within us.

Thus, in Plato, the purest expression in language and writing of what a human reality would be, in conformity with the Idea, is the ideal city. He thus founded a historical movement of considerable importance – we can undeniably observe *the history of an Idea* that continued after him.

It would later take the name Utopia.



This Idea is in movement in the history of men, it is *real* outside of this or that brain which formulates it, in which and through which it comes about. A book has reality only in the materiality of its pages, of its cover if we stick to defining reality as material. As we have seen, the idea takes on an autonomous reality, it comes to be something particularly concrete and tangible. Reality can in fact be approached as *efficiency*, that which is capable of producing effects in the world of which this eidetic reality is the cause. Classically, we hold that there is at least as much reality in the cause as in the effect, what should we think of this?

The book is first of all *Utopia*, by Thomas More (1516). As the beginning of a very rich literary movement, it is classic to identify its term with Voltaire's *Candide* (1759). Is it the death of the idea? It is rather the end of its premises.

There is a utopian socialism in the course of the 19th century, which shows us that the idea is not dead from Voltairean caricature. We find, with Joseph Fourier in particular, *phalansteries* as concrete utopias. These attempts to make utopia exist in this world are not new: we can take the examples of hospital cities during the Hispanic expansion in the new world as the first achievements explicitly inspired by the work of Thomas More. The name of Vasco de Quiroga stands out strongly. However, we will find the clearest illustration of the power of the idea with a current that will claim to be non-utopian, that is to say, masking itself as no longer falling under idealism and criticizing this very notion of idea in its being and its origins.

Marxism is one of the most idealistic schools of thought there is.

There is something very shocking about this statement.

Of course, Marx claims to overthrow the Hegelian idealism from which his thought proceeds by founding a historical, scientific materialism with a revolutionary aim. Obviously, Marxism is considered one of the most materialist philosophies there is. But we do have with Marx the affirmation that it is a question of moving beyond the interpretation of the world to transform it – in the name of an idea. The objective justifications of this idea would allow us to move away from a utopian socialism towards a scientific socialism. But whatever the readings, inaccurate or not, of Karl Marx's work, the fact remains that its historical continuity is indeed that of the same idea whose development we have been following since Plato. It is the same idea that is at work, we are witnessing its historical development, in that it is quite clear that there is already a form of "communism" in Plato. There is much to be said about the forms

of proto-communism in Thomas More as in Campanella. Let us note that the ideal cities conceived throughout the golden age of utopia are not at all the realms of human freedom, but rather societies where men must always conform to an idea as a model. We clearly see in Campanella's *City of the Sun* that its inhabitants are not ordinary men, to live in such a perfect world. Were perfect men needed to build the perfect city, or was it the city that produced them? This very awkward question is not treated as such by Campanella, in whom we find much more the simple untheorized observation of a different, if not superior, humanity.

With Marx and his successors, who will claim Marx's legacy, men will have to work to ensure that reality conforms to this idea since it is the key to history: this is called Stalinism, which is the historical continuity of the idea that took hold of Karl Marx and experienced a particularly fruitful – and bloody, criminal – *historical continuity*. To this extent, we consider Marxism as the completion of political idealism that has its origins in Plato and passes to Thomas More and his successors. This is called ideology.

The origin of this very concept of ideology is found in Marx. He defines it as false consciousness, thus opposing the idea to reality. But one of the clearest illustrations in history of this incarnation of the idea that forces reality to conform to it, we find it once again in the work of Stalin – Hannah Arendt will show another “illustration” with Hitler. The completion of ideology is the Idea that presents itself with the world as an object to be transformed in its image, according to its model. This is called totalitarianism.

The memory we have of these historical figures leads us to confuse them with the ideas they embody, having devoted their lives to bringing them into being. This is why Marxism in its historical application must be considered the paroxysm of idealism. It is the continuity of the Marxist idea, formulated in his works. What concretely persists for the men who live this history is the realization of the Idea; it takes shape and becomes real with Stalin – and Hitler.

Here are the gates of utopia, the ideal city :



Isn't the goal of ideology to *change man*? Is it man who creates the idea, or the other way around?

"The higher phase of communist society, when the enslaving subordination of individuals to the division of labor has disappeared, and with it the antagonism between intellectual and manual labor , when work has become not only a means of living, but even the first need of existence; when with the development in all directions of individuals, the productive forces will increase, and all the sources of collective wealth will flow forth in abundance..." (Marx, Critique of the Gotha Program, 1874)

Hasn't such an idea "become real"? Let us listen a little over a century later to the echo of such an affirmation in the work of another great historical figure whose name is still associated with that of the communist utopia:

"In entering the positions of culture and education, the working class has intellectuals as the main object of its work. The correct assimilation of the Party's policy regarding intellectuals is an important guarantee for achieving victory in the struggle. The very important note from the editor of the magazine Hongqi , published in the press on September 5, 1968, brings the voice of our great leader, Chairman Mao."

Of course, these great actors, or rather criminals, of history have an overwhelming personal responsibility. To say that they are the actors of an idea into which they have melted does not excuse them in any way. But what did they themselves invent? Are they not rather the playthings and instruments of forces into which they have dissolved? How can one evoke the mere name of Stalin without immediately bringing to mind the idea of communism and its shipwreck?

"The binding logic that serves as a principle of action permeates the entire structure of totalitarian movements and regimes. This is the exclusive work of Hitler and Stalin; for this reason alone, and although they did not add a single new thought to the ideas and propaganda slogans of their movements, they must be considered ideologues of the greatest importance." (Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Ch. XIII)

Conclusion: the Idea as a trans-subjective being

In everyday language, the words utopia and ideology have become very vague after a long history. This is why it is important to understand the meaning of notions that are not obsolete, from which humanity has suffered greatly. Can we speak of the death of utopia? Of the end of ideologies? Nothing seems less certain, especially relative to the death of the subject. Perhaps it is when ideology ceases to be visible that it acquires the most power as a determination of our consciences, of what constitutes the world for us and the heart of what we judge as obvious and just.

What is the place of consciousness and human freedom in the development of one's own ideas, the contents with which it identifies? We will call intersubjectivity the relationship between subjects who exchange, share mental contents in their mutual relationships. It is in theory the place of a lived freedom. This is not at all what we have just identified in the history of ideas that live and transform in the time of history: let us return to *trans-subjectivity* which is that of the idea, that is to say of what it passes from one subject to another, deepens, gains in extension as in reality through subjects who have a limited mastery of such a process.

This trans-subjectivity means that the evolution of the idea escapes the subject who began by formulating it. It will experience a whole history that will constitute its reality. It is the autonomy of a mental content that crosses time, eras and cultures by taking hold of subjects in turn who will define themselves by this idea. We have already seen how such a process signifies the institution of quite concrete social constraints since what was pure ideal form in the continuity of simple writings can

become the foundation of human relations, both social and cultural: the idea determines relations between men, gives them form, meaning and content. Its trans-subjectivity as a passage from one mind to another through time thus becomes a position that overlooks and dominates a shared culture, and even transcends its borders.

Let us conclude this discussion by listening to CG Jung speak to us about these “ideas” which live and exist within us and have a formidable power even if we are not aware of them:

"I would like to recommend to my reader to study a comparative history of religions by animating the stories found there, which are as if dead to the ordinary reader, by filling them with that emotional life which the believers who lived their religion must have experienced. In this way, through this medium, the reader will get a rough impression of what lives and what is found "on the other side." For the ancient religions with their cruel or kind, ridiculous or solemn symbols were not born from a serene sky, but were created by and in this human soul, as it has always been and as it lives at this moment in each of us. All these things, by their basic structures, by their archetypal forms, live in us and can at any moment fall upon us with the destructive power of an avalanche, namely in the form of mass suggestion against which the isolated individual is defenseless. Our terrifying gods have only lent themselves to a change of name, and their new appellations rhyme with "ism." Would anyone have the nerve to claim that the World War or Bolshevism, with their attendant catastrophes, were ingenious discoveries? Just as, outwardly, we live in a world where at any moment a continent may collapse, a pole shift, a new epidemic break out, so inwardly we live in a world where a comparable cataclysm may occur, albeit only in the form of ideology, with an idea as its starting point, but this form is no less dangerous and unpredictable. CG Jung, *Dialectic of the Ego and the Unconscious*, ch. 6 (1933).

Jung is very lucid in a text written at the time of the rise of Nazism and before the Second World War. However, let us underline his reservation at the end of this passage: "certainly only in the form of ideology." The hindsight of history shows us how what is a "simple ideological form" becomes real. We can truly question the weight of human freedom in the face of the power of ideal determinisms. We have spent centuries reinforcing what was "simple innocent mental content," what choice do we have left when we are confronted with these contents in all the power we have given them?

Our conclusion will be very dark concerning freedom, starting from the observation of a personality that comes to be determined by "his choice" of the idea. To what extent is this choice free? Could Stalin have been someone else? An anonymous person? A fascist? And Hitler pursue a career as a painter? Why am I the way I am? What is my freedom, and the scope of my self-awareness at the heart of all this immense blanket of illusions?