

Peter Sloterdijk

Das Schelling Projekt

---

The Schelling Project

1 Uncertain Preconditions

Peer Sloterdijk  
Grand Hyatt  
Marlene Dietrich Platz  
Berlin

March 12th, 2015

My dear Kurt!

I was happy beyond measure to meet you again after so many years. Of course, you saw it all for yourself, early craziness isn't something you ever forget.

Do me a favour and send me your address, and make it legible. In block capitals please. I struggle with your, forgive me, rather shaky handwriting. It's certainly full of character. Is character not often best served by a certain illegibility?

After repeated attempts to decipher your calligram, I remain as mired in uncertainty as ever. The postcard of Manet's Boy with a Sword from the Metropolitan Museum speaks for itself of course, but I find the address you scribbled on the back positively hermetic. You write as if you were an Egyptian who grew up with hieroglyphs, yet was a secret sympathiser with the Jewish script. Which entails the sequence of vowels and consonants becoming more prone to confusion. With natural languages this is not so important, everyone writes as orthographically as they can, some kind of meaning can always be recovered. In the case of URLs, the tiniest error results in complete failure. A dot in the wrong place, a forgotten vowel, one space too many, and instantly a message arrives

from the mailer-daemon: Sorry, we were unable to deliver your message. The first machine, it must be said, that says sorry.

We are planning to go all in. You too, my dear Kurt, will be kept up to date without interruption, seven days a week, at four in the morning if necessary. Send me an electronic address in legible script, I will pass it on to the team at once.

So today, you will receive another letter, on paper. I will have the concierge downstairs print it out later on. I shall not sign it, as I have an appointment in the city this evening. If everything goes according to plan they will take it to the post office with the last batch of post, and you will have the letter by lunchtime tomorrow.

I doubt there will be many more occasions I make such a concession to the transport system of yesterday. Is it even possible to imagine such a thing anymore? A sheet of paper is written on then has to spend an entire night in a rail coach; it rolls past forgotten villages, inhabited by old people nodded off in front of the television; it is stuffed in an envelope, stamped and sealed with writer's spittle, as if the sender had agreed to submit a DNA sample in anticipatory obedience to the authorities? Post and past have become synonyms. Don't all stale stories fit the schema: night train to God knows where?

The only missive I still send by train is the notarised Certificate of Existence that I must furnish by registered post each year if I don't want the pension fund to cancel my old age pension. Every February, when the skies hang lowest, I have my I'm-still-aliveness officially certified.

What we need for our project is everything except old-fashioned mail. Do you follow? It isn't the walk to the postbox that puts me off. I have paid my dues as a letter poster, likewise as a stamp sticker. I am approaching seventy, and that so quickly that I feel whipped. Can you imagine how many stamps I have licked to keep my spirit alive? And how many letterbox lids I have heard clatter shut, often with the feeling that post and fate were one and the same?

Nowadays, if we strive for efficiency, we are forced to use the internet. We oldies hail from a more leisurely era; we are

now being called upon to speed up. Many people today are trying to bring leisure back, because they fail to understand that the speed of light is not just a physical constant but also a moral dimension. Light neutralises harmful distance. Distance is a measure of permissible indifference. Anything further away than a tenth of a light second we can surely neglect in the future too, I think it's safe to say. In contrast, anything in the tenth of a second zone will be our business, sooner or later. Within the 20,000 mile zone we are all interested parties, and must play by the rules.

To be frank, the months since last summer, when we started to correspond about this proposal, have entailed a struggle against numerous bouts of discouragement. I'm sure our colleagues will have felt much the same. I had my doubts early on if we had turned to the right place. The German Research Foundation, my goodness: in the final analysis, is there any denying that it is now nothing but a drop-in centre for bootlickers and con artists? I also had concerns closer to home. Although we seemed to complement each other prodigiously, it became ever clearer how widely separated our frames of reference were. One can be committed to a common goal, yet the world remains a gateway to a thousand deserts, empty and cold. Forgive me, Kurt, I didn't mean it that way. Once you start quoting Nietzsche, you tend to overshoot the mark.

The fact that we managed to defy the difficulties can be accounted for above all by the golden rule not to expend too much energy on despair. That wasn't exactly positive thinking, but still, something close to it. There were times, as I was editing draft number what have you, when I had close to nothing left to counter the melancholy. In darker hours it was clear to me why our endeavour could not possibly hope to succeed. Before I fell asleep, the glaring evidence of its inevitable failure squatted on my ribcage like a grinning ape. In the end, you are left holding another anthology of loneliness. It was as obvious as the typical falsehood of our age that in case of loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks will deploy from overhead.

So that there is no misunderstanding between us, Kurt: our project must distinguish itself from the absurdity that is celebrated as Clusters of Excellence by the universities,

although in its form itself it resembles them. Regarding a project like ours, bodging together various "approaches" from different specialisations would be a blunder. Of course the approach bodgers claim that we should we always work in a strictly interdisciplinary manner. The truth is they want money and positions for their vassals.

The likes of that is none of our concern. We have exposed something that has brought us out of our shells, regardless of what we occupied ourselves with before. Once, one might have said that we had an idea on the brain. Don't fear pathos! Our brains must be wired in parallel in respect of the idea. Only then is the individual more intelligent as part of a group than alone. So let me recapitulate our hypotheses one more time.

Our team still comprises no more than five people. We can't expect to be joined by many more fellow combatants, two or three if we're lucky. Naturally, we should try to bring someone in from paleontology, which I suggest will not be easy. The newcomers would have to demonstrate first of all that they understood the philosophical stakes. We would not be well served by someone who could tell us bone for bone and tooth for tooth how hominid female became sapiens woman. New insights into hardware won't take us any further.

We know our paleontological friends, the bone readers and tooth diviners, better than we would like by now. The hours we have wasted on their elaborations! They will never be able to help us while they remain wedded to perspectives that can never be our own. Not that I have anything against them; they seem to me like lay members of the Skull and Bones society. If they find a molar with one cusp more than usual somewhere in East Africa, or a heron bone flute in the Swabian Jura, they reach for the tocsin and demand the history of humankind be written anew. Our thesis is that it ought to be approached from a completely new perspective right from the start.

So we reach the critical point: we need someone to represent neuro-gynaecology, or, let's not beat about the bush: paleo-endocrinology. This will remain our project's weak spot. Perhaps we will have to leave the position open until the very end. Better to draw attention to a lacuna than risk filling it with the wrong person.

It speaks for itself that Adam and Eve's hormones won't be disinterred by a trowel. Nothing remains of the very finest. No one has a correct understanding of how this awkward fact impacts our idea of the history of *homo sapiens*. In any case, we in the philosophical department don't even have at hand the prolix bones which are the subject of so much debate between our colleagues in the anthropological institutes.

At the moment we still struggle to make clear why the path we are taking is a more speculative approach than that of the folks from the old bones department. That the processes of life were steered by hormones one hundred thousand years ago requires no convoluted explanation. Semiochemicals - what a fabulous expression - were the hieroglyphs of animal and human evolution, and they remain so. This is as indisputable as continental drift, which no human being has ever seen with their own eyes. Imperceptibility is the calling card of the distant past: there came a time when the fragments of once conjoined landmasses lay thousands of miles apart, divided by an epic ocean trench, and there was nobody to bear witness to the alienation of continents. Say a disinterested camera in space had documented the drifting apart of Africa and South America with one shot per century. One would be in the possession of a captivating film that exposed the divorce of landmasses and revealed their increasing separation after the split, although the places where they once touched were still made plain for all to see by the courses of their coastlines.

We experience something similar with biospheres. Hormonally, we have long been drifting towards situations we can no longer maintain oversight of. All the same, the hormones that once gave life the decisive signal were quite real, as real as the solar wind, which as good as none of us can feel, excepting only the hypersensitive. By the by, someone should do something on angels, particles, and hormones one day.

Our ancestors, the Africans, drifted across half the planet on their continental plate without realising what was happening to them, and the hormones drifted in them. Let a certain amount of time pass, not even geological epochs. The real vanishes into the untraceable.

We will never be able to hold solid evidence in our hands of that which we seek to understand. Our colleagues in the paleo faction have no idea how good they have it with their

episodically appearing empirical finds. They have their bones and their hypotheses, which sprout, wilt, and land in the archives. In contrast to them we work like paranoiacs, solely with insinuations, of which the one is borne by the other.

What, as the descendants of the hairless apes, can we learn from the fact that nothing remains of the secretions of our ancestors except that which is inside us? Clearly we are operating a peculiarly oriented secret service, which must work from the premise that nothing of the most decisive factor ever comes to light. The new understanding of the most ancient of all things depends on this finding. The truth is that we do not possess the most ancient things. True archeology is ethereal. He who wishes to know the past can only operate in darkness. Darkness is not the unknown, as some psychologists had it, nor is it the mystical that supposedly reveals itself of its own volition. It is the not-nothingness which at first glance appears one with true nothingness. Untraceability is the first fact of natural history.

Look: as a rule, once a year, every second year in any case, they dig the ilium of a *sapiens* woman out of the East African sand, who, shall we say, lived 70,000 years ago. The broadsheets explode in jubilation, as they always do when new arguments emerge for convergence between humanity's ancestors. UNESCO releases funds for further excavations. A shoulder blade, a cuspid with portents of humanity, a fibula, a cervical vertebra, something always turns up. Unhappily, we have more than enough ancestors. In some cases, not enough time has passed for them to vanish into untraceability.

So, Ilium Woman. Let's call her Eve, Lilith, Hanna. At once a being forms in your mind that shatters all arguments of distance. It could be your great-grandmother or a second cousin.

We know less than nothing of her daily routine and her love life. Did the word love have any meaning for her? The possessor of this pelvic bone must indeed have been "in the world" in her own way, and have taken an interest in people and things. Yet do we really have a right to explore the inner life of Eve? Did she even have what we would call an inner life? Did she feel unease when the sun sank behind the hills in the evening? Did she feel afraid when she and her kin

waited for the rain while the scorched savannah earth cracked to pieces?

She likely saw elephants raising their trunks and showering their backs with dust. She saw newborn gnus clattering to the ground from their mothers' burst vaginas, soaked and helpless delicacies for lurking maws. She saw the hunters return home, carrying themselves manfully to conceal their dejection. She saw the campfires glow in the savannah night. And she knew that the people who feel the fire, with fearful eyes and warmth-seeking nerve endings, they are: we.

I'm sure you've guessed that there's something in particular that I'm driving at. Lilith-Eve-Hanna was indisputably a woman, or, to express it as non-ideologically as possible, a female individual. In the social sciences faculty one might say: a person with a sexual identity based on feminine norms. The researchers at the Leipzig Institute are quick to confirm that her genital apparatus can have displayed no difference from that of contemporary female examples of the genus *homo sapiens*. Nevertheless, we must assume there was a difference, since the developments that led to the current state of affairs would otherwise remain shrouded in even greater darkness than they do now.

Forgive me if I skip over the intermediary stages. Most probably, at the appropriate times Lilith allowed herself to be mounted by those male members of her tribe who had right of access. At this point in time, doggy style was doubtless still the order of the day. Nowadays people are wont to forget that until very recently - recent from an evolutionary perspective - the human female, just as her predecessors among the great apes, was an animal copulated with from the rear. This can still be seen today, indirectly, in some African variants of the womanly rear silhouette, and also in the Brazilian bottom sculptures, which unmistakably add further weight to the bio-conservative drift position. Indebted to the hominid inheritance. Even in the era of globalisation, in certain locations evolution endows a rather indiscreet rear-entry steatopygian premium, even after the transition to face-to-face lovemaking has started in many a place. By the by, that inane word "missionary position" completely unjustifiably denounces the universal human tendency to emphasise the element of encounter in sexuality, even if the new trolls act

as if a perfunctory straddling should once again be the alpha and omega of lovemaking, whether caught on camera or not.

Out of the depths of time our problem surfaces now, if you permit me to speak so casually. It is more than safe to assume that during the tens of thousands of years of erotic benightment Eve felt relatively little in the way of pleasure when the dark mounter came round. If it was quick, and over without complaint, then that was as much as she could expect from the procedure. Feminine composure began in the moment Lilith sank her head and disdained asking for the caller's credentials. An unavoidable importunity set in, which at times proved not to be entirely repulsive, provided the guest allowed himself a few minutes for the undertaking, perhaps even a little more, if he happened to be a premature dilly-dallyer, a remote forerunner of historical libertines. Man of the most ancient times may have obtained licence from understanding his impelling hormones as spirits which commanded he seek the proximity of the female antipodes. Any man of that age was intuitively aware of the demons which penetrate us and whip us to fiery release. They enter at unpredictable intervals to enforce their will. A man is a medium for spirits of release.

From the woman's point of view, the aroused man came and went as faceless chance. The erect rider was nothing more than a panting shadow, who departed silently after taking care of his business.

At some point kinships systems imposed themselves on this near formless activity. From then on, to mount a woman was to be an element of the social structure. By God, even the great Lévi-Strauss allowed himself to be blindsided by the concept of kinship. At least he understood that itinerants of sexually receptive women would sooner or later become spouses. From that point on, access rights to the providential canal were subject to stricter management.

Let's change the subject. The domestication of man is too broad a topic and that of woman too regrettable.

Now I shall take a great leap forward. Last night I embraced my fiancée, who was visiting me for a day. Yes, my dear boy, there is something new under the sun. For the sake of it, let me add that the act was performed predominantly in the good

old European style. Let the rest be silence. My mirror neurons didn't need to be activated for me to know that it was a beautiful experience for my beloved, in every sense of the word, and just as much as for as well, within the bounds of the possible.

Do you get why I'm talking about this? I mention this private episode not out of the foolish pride of an old man placing one last trophy on his mantelpiece. The apathetic ilium of the African woman, which has long been gathering dust in a Leipzig storeroom, and the sighs of my beloved - to be precise, rather uncivilised cries, garnished with a coquettish protest against 'too much' - these are all, viewed objectively, inevitably parts of one and the same story.

Story? There, a chance beginning in the savannah dusk, a pre-personal intimate collision between two sexually mature individuals of biologically modern type. Here, one evening at the cusp of winter's end and spring's beginning, somewhere in Central Europe at the start of the 21st century, an encounter between a man and a woman, both matured well past juvenile age, both members of a culture of prolonged courtship and the female orgasm.

This process consists almost exclusively of interruptions. What we call evolution is a black and white film with rare spots of colour, most of which reveal little to nothing.

Not that I intend to say by that the storied tradition of high-speed copulation was ever left forgotten and abandoned in the savannah. It accompanied the exodus we know as humanity from Africa to Tierra del Fuego. It is highly likely that the quickie comprises the greater part of erotic interaction between the exemplars of bipedal motion even now, indeed, a significant proportion of men today behave like long-distance drivers indulging themselves at a truck stop when they perform the consummation of marriage, if one can call it that.

Be that as it may, things couldn't remain at the prehistoric standard everywhere. A portion of the emigrants took a new direction in sexual matters. At some point the new archetype for the measurement of erotic time appeared among these latter humans, and it was called the night of passion, although it would be the height of foolhardiness to cling too literally to the period between sunset and sunrise. The night of passion

occurs when a couple stops time and puts it to one side, where it appears merely as the outside world. Wherever the couple is, night falls. Besides, I am convinced that the night of passion is a modernism, a side effect of the development of huts and houses. Only in the protection of this inner sanctum could an atmosphere of luxurious security arise, without which the Embarkation for Cythera would stick in the shallows.

Between the ancient accident in the savannah and the episode by the Rhine of today arcs a rainbow of never-posed questions. I can only say one thing about it with certainty: it is not a special effect to impress an audience. Nor is it an optical illusion, such as appears after storms as soon as the sun reaffirms its presence. The arch is the span required by lust to reach the pinnacle of the possible. A bridge of light extends in women across tens of thousands of years. Inquiet fluorescences straddle it, eruptions of energy flicker above its pillars. Almost all of this happens via invisible transmissions between synapses. As yet, no personal addresses have been organised which could receive these discharges like handwritten post from the universe to the ego.

All of this alludes to something not entirely obscure: that between heaven and earth limitless amounts of energy are in motion with which we have no common frequency. Phenomenal space is a narrow gap in reality. There is an eye, that picks out this and that thing, there are waves, which peregrinate through infinity. That eye and wave should meet is almost beyond possibility.

Our sole means of accessing these seas of waves is through what we call perception. Yet perceptions are, I'm sure I don't need to tell you this, mere episodes. The real world is everything that exists beyond perception. Unless, that is, the eye enjoys second sight and looks for some moments into some otherwise impenetrable zone. Or the abstract vibrations have mercy on us and for a few seconds switch to frequencies we can comprehend.

So when we engage in speculative physics, with Schelling as our patron saint, we know very well what we are doing. We also know, roughly, what we don't know. This has nothing in common with the esoteric. From the almost anaesthetic fleeting copulation under the spell of periodically excreted hormones beneath the African night, to the soap and silk swathed nights

of passion enjoyed by East European and Hanseatic ladies, who will let nothing deflect them from their aim of uncovering all the erotic possibilities of this life on earth: there is something leading from there to here that we can safely call a direction.

Perhaps it is not a direction at all. More like a ballistic curve. It resembles a pyrotechnic ascent in which the earlier gives impetus to the latter. Is it a coincidence that the cries of onlookers at fireworks displays correspond so closely to the vowels which announce a libidinous climax?

This gay science is still green. It poses the question of whether the adumbrated arch ought still be understood as a chapter of natural history? Is it not rather an addition to the history of civilisation? Must we sit back and accept the ever less plausible distinction between nature and culture here too? Might it not be that the avantgarde of spiritual evolution established itself in the nerve endings of the female genitals?

© 2016 Peter Sloterdijk, Translation Bryn Roberts