

## How Side Effects Can Be Positive. A Reading of Beck's Metamorphosis

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### **How to cite**

D'Andrea, F. (2022). How Side Effects Can Be Positive. A Reading of Beck's Metamorphosis.

[Italian Sociological Review, 12 (8S), 949-969]

Retrieved from [<http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v12i8S.597>]

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v12i8S.597]

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### **3. Article accepted for publication**

Date: July 2022

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Italian Sociological Review  
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# *How Side Effects Can Be Positive. A Reading of Beck's Metamorphosis*

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*In grateful memory of Carlo Mongardini*

## **Abstract**

In this essay I will contend that Beck's idea of metamorphosis fits within the complex model of human evolution on which I am working and aptly describes what is happening to Western culture. What is currently beginning to crumble is the primordial paradigm – what I define the *Ur-Paradigma*, a set of generative cultural traits whence issues most of the form and trajectory of a given culture – that has influenced and (mis)directed the course of history so far. This leaves us without tools or theoretical frameworks that are up to the task of understanding the sense and direction of global events. The withering of the *Weltbild* brings to light a few of the items of the *Ur-Paradigma* and the bias they lent to some crucial representations on which we built the world we live in: the “birth of Athena” representation of Man as a creature that appeared perfect and immutable out of the blue, instead of being the fruit of an age-long evolution; the idea of knowledge as an unchangeable given, universal and objective. Only within such a perspective must side effects be conceived of as necessarily negative, as they represent a mistake in the otherwise flawless human planning. They should instead be thought of as the logical issue of the reductive process that leads to knowledge, leaving an essential gap between what we know and ‘the meaningless infinity of events in the world’ (Weber). Mongardini understood this gap as a ‘sphere of *indetermination*’ from which sprang the processual quality of sociality, and he foresaw that play might be a category of a new thought, at ease with process and becoming. This essay aims to be the first step towards such an end.

Keywords: humanity, knowledge, metamorphosis, paradigm, play.

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## 1. The leopard defeated

There is a long, deep imaginal coherence within Western culture that can't be spotted by Modern eyes. Modernity's grand narrative needs an interminable series of breaks and separations to keep standing. Latour notes that 'the moderns have a peculiar propensity for understanding time that passes as if it were really abolishing the past behind it. They all take themselves for Attila, in whose footsteps no grass grows back. They do not feel that they are removed from the Middle Ages by a certain number of centuries, but that they are separated by Copernican revolutions, epistemological breaks, epistemic ruptures so radical that nothing of that past survives in them – nothing of that past ought to survive in them' (Latour, 1993: 68).

There are reasons for this temporality, that is to say the interpretation of the passage of time, but this is not the place to discuss them in detail<sup>1</sup>. What is needed here is an idea of the consequences of this peculiar temporality: 'As Nietzsche observed long ago, the moderns suffer from the illness of historicism. They want to keep everything, date everything, because they think they have definitively broken with their past. The more they accumulate revolutions, the more they save; the more they capitalize, the more they put on display in museums. Maniacal destruction is counterbalanced by an equally maniacal conservation. Historians reconstitute the past, detail by detail, all the more carefully inasmuch as it has been swallowed up for ever. But are we as far removed from our past as we want to think we are? No, because modern temporality does not have much effect on the passage of time. The past remains, therefore, and even returns. Now this resurgence is incomprehensible to the moderns' (Latour, 1993: 69). The hypothesis that we might have been doing quite a lot of things over and over again, sharpening our tools and excavating abysses where none was needed, is part of this inconceivable mass of reappearances and returns, and therefore requires some kind of preliminary discussion just to be taken into account. To make things clear and prepare the reader for what follows, it is best to put forward the central idea of this essay: *Modernity is at an end and its passing is not simply a change of paradigm, but something far more substantial and challenging*; to describe it, Beck's last proposal seems the most apt: 'Even though I have been teaching sociology and studying the transformation of modern societies for many years, I was at a loss for an answer to the simple but necessary question "What is the meaning of the global events unfolding before our eyes on the television?"', and I was forced to declare bankruptcy. There was nothing – neither a concept nor a theory – capable of expressing the turmoil of this world in conceptual terms, as required by the

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<sup>1</sup> About this, see Latour, 1993: 62-79.

German philosopher Hegel. This turmoil cannot be conceptualized in terms of the notions of “change” available to social science – “evolution”, “revolution” and “transformation”. For we live in a world that is not just changing, it is metamorphosing. Change implies that some things change but other things remain the same – capitalism changes, but some aspects of capitalism remain as they have always been. Metamorphosis implies a much more radical transformation in which the old certainties of modern society are falling away and something quite new is emerging’ (Beck, 2016: 3).

Beck’s insight helps me in shaping my thesis more accurately. *The already mentioned imaginal continuity affects the way in which Western culture represented its world as something given and definitive over which humans had rights and control*, as can be seen in its founding cosmology: God worked six days and that was it. Nothing more had to happen, humanity just had to care about creation – a task soon forgotten – and exploit it for its own ends – or until its end, as seems more and more likely. There is no becoming under our skies, everything is pre-formatted as the climax of whatever came before, which was at any rate nothing worth taking into account or having any influence on our time. Right from the start we imagined our world as a setting that would always be there, for which we had no responsibility and that would hinder or help our progress depending on our ingenuity. It is here, within our Culture as opposed to Nature, that things can happen and change, leaving the wider context untouched. What, however, if this dichotomy Culture/Nature is an illusion, what if it was only a reassuring strategy that made us blind to a cosmic process we are still part of, even though almost totally unaware of it?

This is, I will contend, what metamorphosis means. What is at an end is an entire conceptual universe focused on stability and immutability, a *Weltanschauung* that has become a *Welt* while forgetting itself and lacks now any efficient tools with which to survive its downfall. This is why the ‘notions of “change” available to social science’ are not up to the task: they presuppose a deeper, immovable layer that is no longer there, that cannot protect us any longer from our mistakes and misunderstandings. *Facing the XXI century cannot be simply a matter of devising new policies or new technologies to put things back in place because that place is no more*; humanity should create a new, different one and to this end it will have to rediscover itself as the ultimate agent in charge of its world and try to make it better.

To achieve this, we need a different understanding of the way in which Weber’s ‘finite section of the meaningless infinity of events in the world’ (Weber, 2012: 119) comes to be. I am putting forward the hypothesis that a culture develops from an *Ur-Paradigma*, or primordial paradigm, i.e., a set of generative cultural traits whence issues most of the form and trajectory of a given culture. As I will show, human knowledge and understanding started well

before the advent of Reason, so the *Ur-Paradigma*, the founding core of a *Weltanschauung*, is most likely made of corporeal, emotional and symbolico-imaginal intimations rather than rational, economic and instrumental considerations, intimations we are scarcely aware of. I chose to refer to this set in German to tap the evocative power of that language's philosophical and sociological tradition, to instantly point to the ancestrality of the paradigm and to the long-term perspective in which it should be understood. Becoming aware of the complexity of the needs and visions that move us seems to me an essential step to face the oncoming metamorphosis. As you will see, I make an intensive use of Beck's theory, particularly of his last book, as I find it fits very neatly within the framework I am sketching. He knew nothing about the *Ur-Paradigma*, however, so every insight and proposal regarding it is entirely my own.

We will take into account the notion of *fundamentum inconcussum*, which is at the heart of the *Ur-Paradigma*, to try and understand – really understand I mean, not just say the words, but feel their impact! – how this obsession for a solid place to stand on and start building anew began and how it gradually gave form and direction to the whole Western enterprise. Before Beck's insight, however, I had difficulty making sense of the Modern accent on change, almost a divinization, which seemed to contradict my reasoning, hinting at an evolution and modification of the deep currents that I think have guided us from the beginning, and still do. It was an evolution I would have welcomed, even though it gave me the lie, for it is actually hard and tiresome to try and think beyond your “natural” patterns and schemes looking for something else you do not have words to describe.

This momentous transformation was clearly perceived by Simmel, who derived from it some of his more stimulating ideas, especially about the dynamics between Life and Form. He was also the first to put his finger on the unheard-of character it was showing at the beginning of the XX century. In *The Conflict of Modern Culture*, he initially wrote: ‘Life, as it becomes mind, continuously creates such artefacts: self-sufficient and with an inherent claim to permanence, indeed to timelessness. They may be described as the *forms* which life adopts, the indispensable mode of its manifestation as spiritual life. But life itself flows on without pause. With each and every new form of existence which it creates for itself, its perpetual dynamism comes into conflict with the permanence or timeless validity of that form. Sooner or later the forces of life erode every cultural form which they have produced. By the time one form has fully developed, the next is already beginning to take shape beneath it, and is destined to supplant it after a brief or protracted struggle’ (Simmel in Frisby, Featherstone, 1997: 76). This can be understood as what Beck calls ‘change’, a more or less superficial motion that leaves intact the foundations of culture.

Soon after, however, Simmel added: 'We are at present experiencing this new phase of the age-old struggle, which is no longer the struggle of a new, life-imbued form against an old, lifeless one, but the struggle against form itself, against the very principle of form' (Simmel in Frisby, Featherstone, 1997: 77). I must confess to not having fully understood the implications of this statement until I was brought to think about metamorphosis. I still went along with Mongardini's words: 'In this effort on the part of life to do away with every form and to show itself in its very essence, while it is only able to manifest itself through forms, is for Simmel "the tragedy of modern culture". The practical outcome of all this is that *change tends to become the absolute value of our time*' (Mongardini, 1976: cxxxvi); I could not find a way to make this primacy fit within my new perspective. I have been wondering for a long while how it is possible for the value of change to assert itself within a culture that has always prized unchangeability above everything else, without having to admit to a capacity of this culture to evolve beyond its age-old limits. Again, I would have liked it much better that way, it would have meant hope. And yet I felt it was too easy an answer.

This feeling might also have come from a lack of imagination and courage, from the perception of something you cannot find the words to say and yet it is there, lying in wait. Something you ultimately do not want to say, because it means turning your whole world – the one you were raised in – upside down, in what I came to define, with the first glimpse of understanding, as 'a spiritual earthquake' (D'Andrea, 2019: 38-40). It is the same sense of helplessness, the same impossibility to run and hide somewhere safe that you experience when the deep foundations of your being-in-the-world threaten to give way: an earthquake is mainly physical, a metamorphosis is intimate, but in both cases you are left with what Kafka called 'seasickness on dry land' (cit. in Rella, 1993: 24). The crucial question here is about what is left after everything crumbles, and the answers diverge: in the former case you will still be there and you will have to rebuild, if push comes to shove to adapt to new circumstances making the best of what you already knew; in the latter case you will have to create a brand-new world, because your ancient tools will no longer work, and you will have to experience, almost first-hand, what Weber called 'the meaningless infinity of events in the world' (Weber, 2012: 119). Because a *Weltanschauung* is so much more than a matter of perspective: *it is an act of creation and dynamic definition, it is the appearance of a liveable and welcoming world within the chaos and all that needs to be done so as to keep it real and coherent.*

I already wrote in detail about this, as well as about Simmel's and Weber's insights on culture, reality and *Wechselwirkung* (D'Andrea, 2021b), so I will let the interested reader refer to that essay, while I try to add something new to this line of enquiry. To this end, let us get back to the necessity of new tools and of

a vast rearrangement of understanding. I think this is what Beck meant when he wrote: ‘Large-scale threats are abolishing the three pillars of the risk calculus. [...] But this implies that norms, measuring procedures and hence the basis for calculating the hazards prove to be inapplicable. Incommensurables are compared and calculation turns into obfuscation, resulting in a kind of “organized irresponsibility”. It rests on a “confusion of centuries” (Günther Anders). The challenges of the beginning of the twenty-first century are being negotiated in terms of concepts and recipes drawn from the early industrial society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The threats to which we are exposed and the security promises which seek to contain them stem from different centuries’ (Beck, 2009: 28). Still, at that time, it seemed that all we had to do – as hard as it might be – was find new ways to cope. Now I think Beck was trying to negotiate the difficulty, the reluctance I spoke of; he was looking for ways to hint at the need to think beyond what we are used to knowing as thinking, to radically modify our *Anschauung* so that it can help us understand what is going on and maybe survive.

In Beck I have always liked the indomitable ability not to give in to despair and easy catastrophism, the will to find a silver lining no matter what. It was a great help along the way and it still is. As we will see, his knack of turning the tables on hard-set prejudices and forcing you to look in almost inconceivable directions is a precious gift, something of which we are in dire need. And yet looking in those directions has a cost. I am not talking about acceptance and prestige within the academic community; I am talking about the fact that a large part of yourself is made of the same things you feel the need to go beyond and criticize and so your pursuit is in some measure a self-destructive act – which, by the way, is a strong reason why these things tend not to change. To reach some kind of balance, you look for new configurations and weak spots in the overall architecture that might make your quest easier; I don’t know whether you do it on purpose, or whether it is a deep-set protection instinct, or whether you just need time and breathing space to take the next step. In any case, I think this is what risk was for Beck: a lockpick and an apt metaphor to come to terms with what he was seeing: for a long while risk was something we knew of, but did not really believe in. It fit almost perfectly within the wider frame of control and domination: the ‘risk calculus’ gave the impression of an essential manageability of its dynamics. It was a ‘state-sanctioned risk contract involving precautions to curb the side effects and costs of industrial decisions and to ensure their “just” distribution [...]. For it recognizes the systemic origins of hazardous side effects while at the same time involving individuals in their compensation and prevention’ (Beck, 2009: 7).

This worked quite well for early Modernity, but things change: ‘Risk society means precisely a constellation in which the *idea* of the controllability of



decision-based side effects and dangers which is guiding for modernity has become questionable. Thus it is a constellation in which new knowledge serves to transform unpredictable risks into calculable risks, but in the process it gives rise to new unpredictabilities, forcing us to reflect upon risks' (Beck, 2009: 15). We are almost beyond the range of explicability afforded by the old categories of "evolution", "revolution" and "transformation": it is the driving idea of controllability – hence of technological and computable domination – that is giving way; as we have seen, it is not merely a crucial trait of Modernity, but it issues from primordial assumptions that are in turn caught in the turmoil and start to break. It took seven more years for Beck to put this into words: 'Metamorphosis is not social change, not transformation, not evolution, not revolution and not crisis. It is a mode of changing the nature of human existence. It signifies the age of side effects. It challenges our way of being in the world, thinking about the world, and imagining and doing politics' (Beck, 2016: 20).

## 2. The *ur-paradigma*

Even though 'the metamorphosis of the world is something that happens; it is not a programme' (Beck, 2016: 18), I think that this 'changing the nature of human existence' needs some ground-breaking work in order to issue positive results. One of the main questions to be addressed to this end is probably the self-representation of humanity in the West, an item that seems to have disappeared from learned discourse and discussion, while at the same time becoming more and more conspicuous in pop culture and in literature<sup>2</sup>. It is directly linked to the way in which we imagine our world – and create it accordingly – so it has a great, misunderstood importance: sadly, its current version is a "beautiful" lie, partial and out of touch with what we now know about our long evolutionary march. Again, I discussed this subject elsewhere (D'Andrea, 2017; 2019; 2021a; 2021b), but I will need a brief sketch of its core hypothesis to keep going. Our understanding of ourselves is basically built around Descartes' motto *Cogito ergo sum*, which can be rephrased as "I am human because (and as long as) I am rational". I know Descartes has been conclusively criticized about this: the problem is that no one bothered to inform the rest of the world of this denial and so, while philosophy moved on to Kant's "I think" (which by the way is perfectly in line with my argument), common sense

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<sup>2</sup> By way of example see Crippa, 2021; Fo, 2019. Humanity – or rather what it means to be human – is one of the main themes in songwriting: listen to *Human* by Rag'n'Bone Man (2016), *Something Human* by Muse (2018), *What It Means to Be Human* by Hayden Calnin (2021) for a start.

incorporated Descartes' idea and transmuted it into an aspect of reality, taken for granted, invisible. Now, Descartes' errors were more than logical faults or philosophical inexactitudes, they had to do with the underlying idea of what is human, an idea that has been there for millennia together with the other one we already met, the necessity of an unshakeable foundation. So, to be honest, Descartes was not responsible for those errors: he "only" put them in a fair copy and concurred to build Modernity in their wake.

The prejudice about humanity that got so beautifully formulated by the French philosopher was about what Fink later on called "the Centauresque Metaphysics of the West" (2016 [1960]: 61-70): the dichotomy body/soul that became the problematic relationship between Descartes' two *res*, one mechanical and measurable, the other sparkling with mathematical intelligence and rationality. Talking about the long imaginal continuity we started with, this vision can be traced back to an illustrious antecedent, the Charioteer myth in Plato's *Phaedrus*, that has much to do with Fink's words, as the damnation of the soul to a prison of flesh is caused by an unruly animal, a black horse unheeding of Reason's commands. The idea that the body is an obstacle to Man's true ascension, a useless ballast we should do without as soon as possible, is another item of the primordial paradigm; it has strongly biased the course of Western culture and still does: in my humble opinion it is the imaginal drive that is behind the whole digital narrative and is now reaching a new climax with the Simulation Theory (D'Andrea, 2020a) and the Metaverso new gold dream. The dualistic perspective on humanity that it affords is at the base of Fink's metaphor of the Centaur and leads us to think that everything good has to be linked to our brain, the seat of the *res cogitans*, which has been trying forever to cope with the body's messy reality and is finally getting the upper hand thanks to our technological genius. Humanity's evolution in a nutshell is the history of our mind getting rid of corporeal limitations and disturbing inclinations.

This is also the gist of our self-representation as human beings. If we talk about changing human nature, then, we might as well take this idea into account and find the nerve to check it for inconsistencies. If we tried, we might for instance read an interesting statement by Damasio: 'What is missing from the traditional neuro-centric, brain-centric, and even cerebral-cortex-centric accounts is the fact that nervous systems began their existence as assistants to the body, as coordinators of the life process in bodies complex and diversified enough that the functional articulation of tissues, organs, and systems as well as their relation to the environment required a dedicated system to accomplish the coordination' (2018: 66). Strange as it might seem, the first error of Descartes that Damasio brought to light (1994) was not to be the last: not only emotions play a crucial role in decision-making and rational thinking, but *the body comes well before the mind*. Scientific evidence allows now for a rather different tale of

humanity's long voyage towards self-awareness (D'Andrea, 2019; 2020a) which contradicts the Centauresque illusion that guided us so far: its crumbling away is part and parcel of the metamorphosis to come.

Let us have a quick look at this alternative narrative: according to Solnit (2001), 'the only given is that upright walking is the first hallmark of what became humanity [...]. Most early evolutionists proposed that our human characteristics – walking, thinking, making – originated together, perhaps because they found it hard or unpleasant to imagine a creature who shared only a part of our humanity. [But] Walking came first» (Solnit 2001: 32; 34-35). Having recourse again to ancient myths – those we thought we had left behind, in the remote and now forgotten dawn of our species – we can say that up to now we have imagined the advent of Man like the birth of Athena, who emerged full-grown from Zeus' forehead: here too we can spot a symbolic harmony with other well-known tales, which share a divine intervention, a strong spiritual/intellectual flavour and the immediate contemporaneity of every trait we have chosen as a hallmark of humanity: self-awareness, intelligence, language. It comes as no surprise, then, that the idea of humanity as an ongoing process which began millions of years ago can be found 'hard or unpleasant' to handle: it goes against the grain of our deepest convictions. And yet, we started by standing upright and walking and we have been slowly evolving ever since. This is just a first glimpse of what it has been like to become human, because 'we stand in the deepest need of a new conceptual framework that will allow us to understand an evolutionary process in which self-organization, selection, and historical accident find their natural places with one another. We have no such framework as yet' (Kauffman, 1995: 150). According to our bias towards division and disjunction we broke no sweat looking for ways in which matter and energy might get together and create something new; we already took a look at our founding cosmogonies: it all happened long ago and far away without us getting involved, there is no change but entropy's endless slide towards chaos and we have to make the (economic) best of what we are given.

The new idea of an 'intelligence without a brain or mind' (Damasio, 2018: 58) is deeply unsettling: on the one hand it requires a brand-new conceptual framework, because 'nowhere in science have we an adequate way to state and study the interweaving of self-organization, selection, chance and design' (Kauffman, 1995: 185) from which this intelligence and self-awareness finally issued. We do not know how to study and understand an active, lively process where all the dimensions cleverly listed by Kauffman interact and influence one another, even though we sprang from this process and are most likely still part of it. Neither "hard" science, nor social science know how to cope with this unheard-of combination: "This reality cannot be represented as structuration, it must be seen in its unfolding as a process, to describe which we have as yet no

adequate concepts' (Mongardini, 1989: 17). On the other hand, it forces us to face some rather 'unpleasant' facts that might finally do away with the careless anthropocentrism we based our *Weltanschauung* on: we were human long before being self-aware; we managed to survive down the eons thanks to some other intelligence and form of knowledge that had nothing to do with language and thought as we know it; intelligence and knowledge came at the end of our path and marked an infinitesimal part of it, the part we thought of until now as the whole history of humanity – incidentally, also the part that threatens to bring us to extinction.

All this has a number of consequences. It makes for another excellent example of how the imaginal level can influence and mislead rational thinking: we have been aware of evolution for two centuries and still we do not make full sense of it. Right from the start, it took a while just to figure out that it might have something to do with us, as the dichotomy animal/human is another facet of the Cartesian perspective in whose wake we are used to thinking of all other living beings as fully separated from us and subject to our every whim, need and desire: they are nothing more than useful fragments of space, so why should their ways bother us? After having decided that we might share with them some kind of evolutionary development, we tried to limit it to the rational sphere, which was and still mostly is the one and only starting point. No one<sup>3</sup> cared to ask why language and self-awareness should have appeared all of a sudden, no one wondered why on earth, if every other life form seems to be the result of an age-long process, we should have sprung turnkey out of the blue instead of walking the beat like everything else. It might have to do with the fact that we are still deeply convinced of being God's favourite children, no matter what science and reason tell us, and so we hear only what we want to hear and pay lip-service to the rest – the bothersome, unpleasant part. This is hardly in line with our rationalistic self-representation, though, but it would be close to our everyday experience, that knack we have of looking the other way, making as if we understood and keeping on doing what we shouldn't.

Taking evolution seriously into account, we need to explain how we got here 'without a brain or mind' and how knowledge grew with our brain appearing and becoming more complex (MacLean, 1990): to this end, I will put forward the *Ur-Paradigma* hypothesis and then will try to sketch the importance of play in trying to cope with the new idea of reality that follows in the wake of what has been said so far. Before that, however, another unpleasant aspect must be noted, for future reference: once we accept that cognition and knowledge came and grew in time and that self-awareness was achieved a few millennia ago, we cannot but ask ourselves what is their state of the art, so to speak. In

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<sup>3</sup> Except a few, of course. See for instance Sheets-Johnstone, 2011.

evolutionary terms, the time we have been what we are now is the blink of an eye, hardly sufficient to bring a new tool to perfection or merely to refine its possible flaws. So, it might be wise to stop and reconsider: what if this is just the start and we are, for the first time in our long history, actually involved in our own evolution? Whether we like it or not, evolution happens, just like metamorphosis: the pandemic should have made us finally see that. With our imaginal obsession for stability, we might have got it all wrong, misunderstanding the beginning for the climax, not criticizing and correcting what should surely be criticized and corrected in the name of our already accomplished fulfilment, justifying the unjustifiable in the name of the alleged immutability of human nature. It is just so easy to get along with our worst traits blaming it all on this fetish, this comfortable and dangerous delusion...

With this said, let us get back to the idea of the *Ur-Paradigma* and see what it might have to do with the oncoming metamorphosis. I hope I have been able to show that we ought to consider the possibility that our intelligence and awareness came about in a long evolutionary process in order to be connected to our previous skills and aptitudes. This is a major repercussion of the reject of the “birth of Athena” representation of Man: if we are still walking on, we must have started somewhere and evolved from then on. Evolution is not a linear, mechanical succession of improvements that must necessarily lead to triumph, as the myth of Modernity proclaimed: ‘We need to acknowledge the fact that there was neither a single line of evolution nor a simple progression of complexity and efficiency of organisms, that there were ups and downs and even extinctions. We need to note that a partnership of nervous systems and bodies was required to generate human minds and that minds occurred not to isolated organisms but to organisms that were part of a social setting’ (Damasio, 2018: 73). Neural networks gave birth to nervous systems and their partnership with bodies led to brains that evolved in turn. Each time we gained a better understanding of several environments: ‘The “surround” of a nervous system is extraordinarily rich. It literally is far more than meets the eye. It includes the world external to the organism – the only surround that is commonly and regrettably thought of, by scientists and laypersons alike, in discussions of this sort, that is, the objects and events in the environment surrounding the *whole* organism. But the “surround” of the nervous system also includes the world *within* the organism in question, and this part of the surround is commonly ignored to the peril of realistic conceptions of general physiology and of cognition in particular’ (Damasio, 2018: 79).

In my recent sketch of a complex model of humanity (D'Andrea, 2021a: 562), I suggest that ‘the order and the overall contribution to our successful evolution of the various components of our life process is as follows:

- 1) Body

- 2) Feelings/Emotions
- 3) Imagination
- 4) Reason'

There is no reason to deny the fact that each step had a related form of knowledge and that *each improvement issued from the previous one*. Reason was the last to appear, precisely to better manage several millennia's worth of existing knowledge and qualitative perception of the world. *My guess is that existing knowledge was already structured around some few fundamental insights and biases which I call the Ur-Paradigma*. As 'minds occurred [...] to organisms that were part of a social setting', it is likely that these paradigms were different from one social setting to another and that they gave rise to the myriad of different objective cultures that flourished and disappeared on planet Earth. Nowadays cultures are no exception.

*Reason then started to function on the basis of something that preceded it, in the making of which it had had no role and that it took as given.*

These are a few of the items I think form our *Ur-Paradigma*:

- a strong belief in an essential difference between body and soul;
- the need for an unshakeable foundation, the *fundamentum inconcussum*;
- the adhesion to a diurnal imaginal regime (Durand, 1984), from which follows
- the choice, among logical operations, of disjunction and separation against conjunction and connection.

In the wake of Morin, the «*determination of master logical operations*» (1999: 8) is a crucial part of the paradigm: it is a preference that lends a flavour of "naturalness" to the selected option, making it the first that comes to mind and gets applied, thus framing a specific kind of world. This is no place to delve deeper into this very partial list. What is relevant is the perspective that leads to the idea of a primordial paradigm: *the possibility that gestures, expressions of a body in movement, slowly began to mean something, to open up a vast range of associations that became images and symbols*, in a cosmogonic process that Durand (1984 [1960]) grasped and described; later on, when language appeared, rites and images turned into myths and religions and then came the *Logos*. The *Ur-Paradigma* should have begun with the first hint of *sense*, the dawn of understanding and meaning, and should have allowed our forebears to carve a 'finite section [out] of the meaningless infinity of events in the world, endowed with meaning and significance from a *human perspective*' (Weber, 2012: 119). This brings us back to Weber and starts to shed some light on why I have been discussing this ancient paradigm at length. Many have praised Weber's definition of culture, few have bothered to ask themselves if and how it might actually work, as this idea of *giving sense to the world* goes straight against the grain of our current beliefs:

we are detectives looking for clues to an existing sense, not artists or semi-gods infusing meaning into a meaningless confusion, turning a part of it into a habitable world, a home. Or are we?

### 3. The play of side effects

The image of the detective investigating a self-standing reality is at the core of our current idea of science: research, discovery, data (Big or small) all belong to a clear semantic field. However, they are also a recognizable constellation in the imaginal sphere that speaks of stability, immutability and autonomy from us. We might ask ourselves how we would go about gathering knowledge on the *fundamentum inconcussum* and we would answer: in the exact way we have been doing it for a few centuries. This way of doing things issues from the now familiar items of the paradigm: disjunction – *Spaltung*, as Durand called it – here in the form of the dichotomy subject/object; the need for a stable foundation; the Charioteer's perception of not belonging here. What if Beck's metamorphosis has to do with the waning of these strong points, the ones we have always believed would always be there?

In the long-term hypothesis I am sketching here, “always” is a problematic term we are quite fond of: I'd rather think of it as “for some time that we perceive as very long, but it isn't”, just like our conscient existence on the Earth. If this is true, we might be reaching the end of that “always” and should be looking for a novel way of understanding the world and our place in it. At this point I need to make some things clear: my approach is inclusive and contradictorial, that is to say that it does not reject anything in the name of its opposite, but considers it possible that they actually coexist, beyond the logic constriction of the excluded middle. I do not think that we should throw all away and start with a clean slate: we should instead become aware of the complexity of knowledge and of its *creative, active quality* and try to assess the consequences of its misunderstanding and how we might cope with them. A corollary of this is that *my proposal is not deterministic*: a culture is far more varied and unruly than we pretend. There were moments in which things might have gone differently, thinkers who envisioned other *Weltanschauungen* that are still there, in the heap of ruins at the feet of Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* (2019 [1940]), waiting perhaps to be made real (D'Andrea, 2021b). Even today, there are power words and ideas that seem to herald a new world, the change in human nature we already discussed: cooperation, solidarity, inclusiveness, environment. And yet, as already happened, there is a deep current at work that twists and bends them to make them fit within the age-old Procrustean bed, something that resists change even while proclaiming it a valour, like Tomasi di

Lampedusa's Leopard, so that things can ultimately stay as they are. My guess is that we are living the last gasp of the *Ur-Paradigma* and there is little time left to take stock and adopt a new vision, because 'the institutionalized national-international *Weltbild*, the world picture, the significance in how humans today apprehend the world, has withered. "World picture" means that for every *cosmos* there is a corresponding *nomos*, combining normative and empirical certainties as to what the world, its past and its future, is all about. These "fixed stars", fixed certainties, are not fixed any more. They are metamorphosed in a sense that can be understood as the "Copernican Turn 2.0" (Beck, 2016: 5-6).

I don't know if Beck shared the longest-term perspective I am putting forward here and sadly we can no longer ask him. In his last book, however, he took a bold step out of the mainstream knowledge and beyond his own well-known theory: 'The theory of metamorphosis goes beyond theory of world risk society', an approach he had already revised and expanded when coming to grips with the world risk society in 2009. When explaining why the new framework left behind the old 'concepts and recipes' we already talked about, he wrote: 'It is not about the negative side effects of goods but about the positive side effects of bads. They produce normative horizons of common goods and propel us beyond the national frame towards a cosmopolitan outlook' (Beck, 2016: 4). It will be interesting to focus our attention on the vocabulary used in this sentence and on the thought architecture it reveals, as well as on the directions it suggests for future developments and solutions. Before coming to that, however, I would argue a bit more about the thinkability of the longest-term perspective. As I said, few took the pain to figure out how Weber's 'finite section' might come into being. I recently noted an almost literal accord between Weber and Simmel on this subject (D'Andrea, 2021b); now I would suggest that Simmel foresaw the possibility of a dizzying extension of the Life process, such as would make his philosophy of Life more than a well-constructed theory and a captivating use of metaphor: an insight of what palaeoanthropology and population genetics were later to discover. While reading Simmel a while ago, we may not have noticed a crucial passage: 'Life, as it becomes mind, continuously creates such artefacts'. There, in five words, is what Damasio is trying to make acceptable to our culture; what I have been writing about for a few years: the advent of intelligence and awareness within an age-old process and the way in which their bearers face 'the meaningless infinity of events in the world'. They create forms, they reduce the ungraspable complexity to something manageable, losing something each time, but making a world out of this loss. Knowledge follows in this wake: it gets more precise as reason and then *Verstand* assert themselves, at a cost, until it loses sight of the nature of the process and thinks itself on the way to omniscience. This is the ultimate root of the impossibility of knowing everything, the fact that making



reality out of chaos has a price. As Beck wrote, 'we had to await the events of the second half of the twentieth century to learn what Socrates meant by his puzzling statement "I know that I know nothing"'. Ironically, our continually perfected scientific-technological society has granted us the fatal insight that we do not know what we do not know. But this is precisely the source of the dangers that threaten humanity' (Beck, 2009: 47).

These forms may be created according to the *Ur-Paradigma*: not by chance those that make up our world are thought of as 'self-sufficient and with an inherent claim to permanence, indeed to timelessness', even though this might not be true for other cultures. This notwithstanding, however, life's 'perpetual dynamism comes into conflict with the permanence or timeless validity of that form', thus revealing its imaginal quality, I would add, and 'sooner or later the forces of life erode every cultural form which they have produced'. The *Weltbild* withers, as Beck has it. I think it is more than that: the *Ur-Paradigma* itself might be conceived of as a form, the longest-lasting one, the precondition of all other lesser forms, thus being itself subject to the erosion caused by the 'infinity of events in the world'. If this is true, the depletion of its germinal, poietic capacity is at the base of 'the struggle against form itself' observed by Simmel, of the tragedy of Modern culture. I discussed what I think is the reason for this fading away of sense elsewhere (D'Andrea, 2021b). Here, I'd rather explore possible ways out of the awkward position we are in. I will then turn to Beck's knack for finding the fabled silver lining and see if we can turn 'the positive side effects of bads' to our advantage.

To start with, it is interesting to delve a bit into the deeper layers from which the expression 'side effects' gets its meaning. We usually do not "waste" time in this exercise: as Morin notes, 'it is amazing that the education which aims to communicate knowledge is blind as to what human knowledge is, what its devices are, its infirmities, its complexities, its tendencies both to err and to mislead, without concerning itself at all with explaining what knowing really is' (Morin, 2015: 67). It might instead be one of the first things we ought to relearn, as it is very instructive. "Side – or collateral – effect" makes sense only if we embed it into a pre-existing vision we have already met: the idea of the infallibility of our knowledge, of its perfect match with reality. From this stems the corollary of the subsequent perfection of our projects, which can easily be found in the peculiar way in which we assume that an announcement is equivalent to the actual implementation of what is announced. There is something magical in this attitude, imaginal rather than rational...

This being the case, whatever happens outside our foresight cannot but be a mistake due to human or mechanical error, something to be avoided or corrected and out of which nothing good can come. In other words, *side effects belong in a scenario in which knowledge is right and reality is wrong*. Malicious, I would

add, as is more evident in another way to express the same concept, ‘perverse effect’: here the idea of something intent on hindering our glorious progress, something malevolent and bent on our ruin is clear. Turning once again to myth, Fate is there, forever mocking our best efforts to make order of the chaos of the world. Side effects should instead be understood as the visible reminder of the essential lack of precision of our knowledge, of the inevitable gap between it and the meaningless complexity of the flow. They come out of the *Wechselwirkung* between what we know and what ‘we do not know [t]hat we do not know’: they are the stuff of uncertainty and once they are freed from the negative prejudice related to our delusion of control, they might actually have some surprises in store, like the unthinkable – until now – ‘positive side effects of bads’. As we have seen, Beck closely connects metamorphosis and side effects: the former ‘signifies the age of side effects’, a phase in which the imagined power over the world we thought we had is expropriated and we are shown how things happen with or without our planning and consent. In writing this I may be extending Beck’s intent a bit further than he had in mind, but the gist of his idea of ‘emancipatory catastrophism’ is not so different: ‘It is the experience of the catastrophe that violates the “sacred” norms of civilization and humanity and, with that, creates an anthropological shock from which institutional answers become possible and can be institutionalized on the global level, not automatically but through significant cultural and political efforts’ (2016: 115). Between the lines, there is recognition of the fact that institutionalization, hypertrophic normativity and organization, and rationalization coalesce into Weber’s ‘iron cage’, to a degree of which we were not and probably still are not aware: willed by us in the name of the sempiternal *fundamentum inconcussum*, they paralyze every possible adaptation and active repair of our ‘finite section’ until there is *almost* no other way out than a deflagration. Beck is very careful in underlining that he does not mean ‘to suggest that we need a catastrophe [...] to achieve emancipatory politics’ (2016: 115), that this peculiar coincidence of catastrophe and metamorphosis is only evident as a post-argument. Nevertheless, it is hard not to notice that it brings to mind Simmel’s ‘struggle against form itself’ and that it allows us to put forward the practical, methodological idea of *a novel kind of form, no longer self-sufficient and permanent, but dynamic and pliable, adaptable to the never-ending process of creating and maintaining a culture*. The fact that metamorphosis has essentially to do with forms was clear to Beck: ‘The origin of the word is Latin via Greek – *meta* (change) *morphe* (form) – and changing form is the key (first found in English in 1530 relating to magic or witchcraft). The best matched synonym is transfiguration, not reconfiguration. Thus, the notion of “metamorphosis” can be defined as a major change into something different and implies a complete

transformation into a different type, a different reality, a different mode of being in the world, seeing the world and doing politics' (2016: 6).

The new way of shaping the world should allow for 'the interweaving of self-organization, selection, chance and design' mentioned by Kauffman. Echoing both him and Beck, Morin wrote: 'At the close of the 20th century we had learned that the vision of a faultlessly ordered universe should be replaced by a vision in which this universe is the game and the outcome of a dialogic (an antagonistic, competitive, complementary relation) between order, disorder, and organization' (1999: 43). This brings us to another key element of the 'different mode of being in the world, seeing the world and doing politics' required by Beck: play.

You might ask yourself: haven't we been through enough yet? Not only should we start considering the possibility of our sound reasoning being not so sound and of our unicity being not so unique, but we should take into account a childish, useless activity as well? I definitely sympathize, but I also underline the fact that maybe, just maybe, the current, disdainful definition of play is another example of a biased framing, a strategy to keep at bay something that doesn't fit within the paradigm, but is too stubborn to just fade away: 'Play stands opposed to the seriousness of life, to care and work, to the concern for the salvation of one's soul – it appears as something "non-serious" and "non-binding," [...]. At best one grants a restricted worth to play in the adult economy of life; one acknowledges it as a therapeutically effective remedy for overloads of work, worry, or seriousness. But considering it as a means of relaxation puts it precisely in the service of those phenomena of life from which it is otherwise demarcated disparagingly. Play, however, is not at all taken seriously in its own right' (Fink, 2016 [1960]: 36). In fact, play has a lot to do with what it means to be human outside the utilitarian paradigm: play has to do with delight and awe and doing things for their own good and pleasure, with nothing else in mind. Play might even be 'a symbol of the world', as Fink suggested with a crucial insight: he saw that the biased framing was founded on an ontology where 'that which always is and always comports itself in the same way, which does not arise and does not pass away and does not change, which is immutable, unmoved, and permanent, counts as the strongest Being. That which, though it now is, nevertheless once was not and will someday no longer be, that which is constantly subject to alterations and exhausts its power of Being in time, has a lower status of Being. Permanence or impermanence in the flow of time thus forms a basis for an evaluation of beings in their "ontological status." No longer the degree of a mythically understood "power," but rather the degree of a "strength of Being" interpreted in regards to "permanence" decides the hierarchy of all worldly things that is thought philosophically' (Fink, 2016 [1960]: 38).

We are now familiar with this need for permanence and immutability: it is one of the key traits of the *Ur-Paradigma*. Through Fink's insight, we appreciate the essential influence it had *in the making and ordering of our world*, whose hierarchy has been founded, since the beginning of rational thought, on the 'permanence or impermanence in the flow of time'. Now, in the wake of Weber, we know that our whole finite section 'is constantly subject to alterations and exhausts its power of Being in time' so the choice in favour of immutability might not have been a wise one, after all. We tried to impose our imaginal hunger for eternity<sup>4</sup> on the flow of the world and we failed: some cultures knew it from the start, others had to wait for technological progress to rub it in their faces (Capra, 1975), even though a few lonely masters tried to draw attention to the flow... After this ride I do not think you will find it peculiar to go back to the dawn of philosophy, perhaps even to Sophia itself, the kind of knowledge the first thinkers already perceived as lost and longed for – and this might be a mythical way of describing the complex, integrated understanding that was there before "I" took control. There, anyway, the first choice was made, Parmenides versus Heraclitus, stability against the flow and after two and a half thousand years here we are (D'Andrea, 2020b).

So, we need a way to deal with a reality-creating process we did not know was there, happening on its own despite our *hybris* and efforts, and which has a lot in common with social history as described by Beck: 'Someone who wants to explore how certain facets of the metamorphosis of the world appear or, alternatively, fail to appear in certain contexts and themes must raise the question of the return of social history. What is special about the return of social history is that, in the light of metamorphosis, it cannot be demonstrated in terms of intentions, ideologies, utopias or political programmes and conflicts, class struggles, refugee movements or wars. Rather, it slinks in, as it were, through the back door of side effects. The interpenetration of side effects and global historical change is the joke and punchline of the argument' (Beck, 2016: 48). An aspect of the new way should be a knowledge-obtaining strategy akin to play. I am trying to refrain from the use of terms that convey the idea of mechanical building or engineering of information, such as the ones we usually employ to the point of insensibility as to the impact they have on our understanding of the whole process and its nature: tools, data and all the paraphernalia of "objective" knowledge. It is not easy, but it might be a good exercise for times to come. In this constellation, play should have its rightful place, since 'to everything that is intensely processual and, given the value and tension producing it, that cannot be fixed in unilinear form in its component

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<sup>4</sup> Closely related to our culture's antithetical relation with death. See Durand, 1984 [1960].

parts, common imagination has given the name of *play*. We speak of life as a game to define a gap between chance and need. We speak of a power play to describe a situation that is the outcome of component parts that are impossible to fix and define clearly' (Mongardini, 1989: 18-19). In a far-sighted book dating back to the end of the XX century, *Saggio sul gioco*, Mongardini grasped the potential importance of play as a means of coming to grips with the processual nature of sociality, something, as we have seen, 'to describe which we have as yet no adequate concepts'. As I focus on the processual nature of reality, some extension and adaptation will be in order to make his insights fit within the constellation I am describing, but having known him for most of my life I am fairly confident he would have approved of them. When talking about 'the figure of the social actor' and his/her role in the social process, Mongardini writes: 'Yet when we wish to translate the complicated interdependence of human actions into sociological theory, the actor's capacity for play is frequently set aside, perhaps because it could alter the symmetry of the scientific representation: we realize, however, that relations of interdependence cannot be forced into a system, not only because each relationship contains within it some sort of reservation on the part of the actor, but also because each situation contains within it a certain potential for play by the actor that makes it impossible to set into a defined scheme or pattern of uniformity and repetitions' (1989: 27). And then: 'What is actually the margin of play in the actor's behaviour constitutes the sphere of *indetermination* from which arises the processuality, particularly in its most intense and socially meaningful forms' (1989: 27).

If for a moment we set aside the actor, we are left with several elements that are easily connected to the post-Einsteinian view of the universe that the cutting-edge hard sciences are striving to achieve: 'complicated interdependence', 'sphere of indetermination', 'processuality', and that echo Kauffman's words. What is then needed is a discussion of the idea of subjective freedom that moves away from modern limitlessness, so that man can be put back into the world process as an active, interdependent part of it that no longer fits within the Nature/Culture dichotomy. Play will be an invaluable asset in this 'transfiguration', for once freed from paradigmatic prejudice it may reveal new, fertile potentialities: 'Creativity always has associated with it an element of play, which may or may not lead to fresh perceptions [...]. New thoughts generally arise with a play of the mind, and the failure to appreciate this is actually one of the major blocks to creativity. Thought is generally considered to be a sober and weighty business. But here it is being suggested that creative play is an essential element in forming new hypotheses and ideas' (Bohm, Peat, 1987: 47-48). Although "innovation" is one of the most abused words, these 'new hypotheses and ideas' seem to be getting scarcer and scarcer: it might have

to do with the element of weight that Bohm sees associated to the idea of thought, a weight that should have no connection with something so exquisitely spiritual and light as thought, and yet we value ‘a “strength of Being” interpreted in regards to “permanence”’ that almost inevitably brings with it ideas of ponderousness and stability. If even one of the most influential quantum physicians of the XX century argues in favour of play as an ‘essential element’ of thought, it may be worthwhile to take it into account to cope with the oncoming metamorphosis and the new assessments of old things it calls for.

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