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Forms of Life and Subjectivity
Rethinking Sartre's Philosophy



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2. Forms of Life and Ontological Conversion

1. Introduction

In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre lamented that philosophers had not paid attention to a question as important for human existence as that of conversion.¹ A few years later he partially developed his thoughts on conversion in relation to generosity in his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, written between 1947 and 1948 but published posthumously in 1983.² Simone de Beauvoir also devoted her attention to the theme of conversion; a theme that seems to connect with the concerns of authors of a more or less existentialist bent. Of course, the conversion that interested Sartre and Beauvoir was the one they called existential, that is to say, the one that implies a change in our way of being in the world. The so-called religious, moral, intellectual or cultural conversions ultimately respond to an existential change. From the philosophy of forms of life, this will also be the focus of my attention, bearing in mind that to exist is to engage in a particular form of life. In this sense, I take existential as equivalent to ontological.

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- 1 Various thinkers and philosophers of times prior to Sartre have reflected on conversion, certainly not as an existential phenomenon but mainly as a religious one. Hence the French author's statement is relevant only in the first sense, that of the conversion of the way in which the subject faces his existence. It should not be forgotten that Aristotle, and to a lesser extent some pre-Socratic authors, had already conceptualized what the ontological change consisted of, that transformation from one being to another, both in its substantial and accidental aspects.
 - 2 The original version in French, *Cahiers pour une morale*, was published in 1983 by Gallimard, although the first English translation, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, was not published until 1992 by Chicago University Press. See Ruud Welten, 'Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*: The Ontology of the Gift', *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 15:1 (2015), 3–15.

In this chapter I want to identify and examine the ontological structure of the phenomenon of conversion. That is, those elements present in every subjective experience of conversion. To do so, I start from the assumption that every conversion, if it is truly a conversion, is a transformation of one being into another. That is, it is an ontological conversion. The question is to discern what it is that is transformed. Or, to put in another way, it is a matter of first identifying the being and then the constitutive process of change. That is to say, the ontological unit that ceases to be what it was in order to become something different. One could say that that unit is the individual subject. But since what changes is his way of being and acting, and we can already agree that a way of being and acting constitute a form of life, I hold that the subjects change along with their form of life understood as an ontological unit. And this makes it of great importance for the study of their subjectivity, for every culture can be reduced to the form of life of its subjects, and they take their being and identity from it. Thus, the ontological conversion is at the same time a cultural conversion. However, I insist that between culture and form of life there is no direct identification. Culture responds to an ethnological and sociological level, while a form of life, as I understand it, responds to an ontological level. The latter is the foundation of the former. That is why different forms of life can be found in a single culture. The form of life of a subject does not have to respond to the national culture under which he lives. For what is called national culture is, in any case, founded on a hegemonic form of life, that is, the predominant one in a historical-geographical context.³

Thus, drawing on the phenomenological and anthropological analysis of rites of passage, I identify the ontological structure of all conversion through three phenomenological stages: crisis, rejection and affirmation. As I have been arguing, conversion can be explained as a change of form of life. Thus, this onto-phenomenological structure, which consists in a change of being, is essentially the passage from one form of life to another. Therefore, when the change of form of life does not occur, conversion does not occur either. By 'form of life' I mean the

3 I analyze the process in which this hegemony is based and its relationship to the subordinate forms in the last three chapters of this book, in which I explain the dialectic that structures the process of integration and development of a form of life and its subjectivity with concrete historical examples.

series of actions driven by the same principle—as I have shown in the previous chapter. And, as conversion is from one form of life to another, so, the transformation experienced by the subjects is a transformation in the pattern of their behavior and, therefore, in their way of understanding themselves.

With the above arguments, together with personal testimonies from various sources, I argue that any conversion, whether religious, moral or even intellectual, to be understood as a conversion and not as the mere evolution of its own traits with respect to a posited end, must be based on an ontological conversion. This change of being can only be radical, that is, the product of a crisis that serves as a catalyst for the rejection of the old form of life and the consequent affirmation of a new one. It is in such a way that the affirmation of the new form of life at the same time constitutes the authenticity, universality and intersubjective consciousness of the subject. It is for this last reason that this chapter on conversion should come right after the examination of the form of life as an ontological unit. The importance of conversion lies in the fact that it not only constitutes the subject as the incarnation of a form of life, but also shows the inherent, albeit paradoxical coupling between the contingency of being and the experienced necessity of transformation.

2. The Onto-Phenomenological Structure of Conversion

From the field of theology, Bernard Lonergan has examined the phenomenon of conversion and has established three fundamental types of conversion: religious conversion, moral conversion and intellectual conversion. In these three types, conversion goes from a state considered negative to a positive state, or vice versa, which he calls breakdowns.⁴ But in any case, the criterion that judges conversion is that of truth, goodness and love (or the lack of them). The authenticity of the subject is in relation to the attainment or approach to the positive extreme, an attainment that is never absolute.⁵ In it appear the Aristotelian-Thomistic debts of Lonergan. The negative extreme is qualified as self-closure and

4 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 240.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 252.

the positive as self-transcendence,⁶ in the sense of opening new horizons of experience, guided by love.

For Lonergan, however, these three types of conversion are stages of the same phenomenon because they show a relationship of dependence between them. In fact, there can be no intellectual conversion without moral conversion, no moral conversion without religious conversion, and the latter is not possible without the help of divine grace.⁷ In this interpretation of Lonergan, as can be seen, conversion is absolutely linked to the religious aspect and supernatural intervention (Grace). These attributes of his interpretation fall far short of my purpose, but he gives us a roadmap in exploring the phenomenon of conversion, bearing in mind that, in short, he considers a continuity between the different types of conversion. I claim, however, that these types of conversion ultimately refer to and are supported by an ontological conversion, where the being is constituted by the form of life, that is, by the particular way of being and acting that is changed.

Drawing on the above background, I suggest that in order to understand the phenomenon of conversion in its necessary ontological structure, three constitutive phenomenological stages must be distinguished: the first is the crisis, that is, the apprehension of a situation in which the subject demands of himself a change in his form of life. It is difficult to imagine a conversion in which there is not somehow a spontaneous apprehension of the need for change on the part of the subject. It must be stressed that the situation is understood as a demand for change mediated by the form of life in which one is. This form of life and the principle that drives it make up the *objective* horizon of individual experiences. From one's own form of life arises thus its antagonistic form of life in a given situation. Such a situation is the attempt to give meaning to and illuminate an event. Secondly, the demand translates into the rejection of the subject's current form of life. At this stage, there is a dialectic between the form of life and its negation, in such a way that it is from the form of life that arises the situation that calls it to disappear. It has in itself the seed of its self-destruction, which is equivalent to saying that the subject as the incarnation of a form of life in its ontological contingency always ultimately has in himself the reason

6 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 267–68.

for his being and his persistence. Rejection leads to the identification of a new form of life made possible by the same situation. Finally, this identification of a new possibility of being supposes its adoption and commitment as the form of life of the subject.

The aforementioned stages constitute the phenomenological structure of conversion, which does not eliminate the unitary character of the individual experience. But it confirms that the absence of one of these stages would show an incomplete conversion, that is, an experience of crisis, as the demand for the rejection of oneself and one's form of life, but not a conversion proper. In Søren Kierkegaard we find a description of conversion as a unitary experience but composed of these very three phenomenological stages, that is, as the recognition of the *need for change*, the rejection of what in this crisis situation is considered the *past error*, and finally, the *new life* to which the convert is born led by a new way of being and acting (which he calls the *truth*):

Conversion cannot take place without its *being assimilated into his consciousness* or without his becoming aware that it was through his own fault, and with this consciousness *he takes leave of his former state* [...] Inasmuch as he was in untruth and now along with the condition receives the truth, *a change takes place in him* like the change from 'not to be' to 'to be'. But this transition from 'not to be' to 'to be' is indeed the transition of birth. But the person who already is cannot be born, and yet he is born. Let us call this transition rebirth.⁸

Such an onto-phenomenological structure seems to be present in every conversion experience. In the rites of passage studied by anthropologists such as Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, three stages very similar to those described so far can be observed, namely separation, transition and reincorporation or reaggregation.⁹ What differentiates this pattern of rites of passage in a given society from the experience of ontological conversion is that if in the latter it is initiated by a moment of personal crisis, experienced as the awareness of the demand for a change of life, in the rites the so-called 'separation' is dictated not by the free and

8 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. by Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 123–24. The italics are mine.

9 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 44; Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 94.

spontaneous individual experience but by the group, regulated by calendars and cycles. This difference is important, because, as I discuss below, if ontological conversion means a change of way of being and acting in a new community, rites seem to have the function of fostering the integration of individuals within their own community. Moreover, the transitional stage can only take place in a symbolic ritual, not in the actual experience of the subject, who cannot remain in a limbo between being and not being; in any case, that period would be a procrastination of the rejection.

All conversion, if it truly is, is the passing from one state to another, being this change motivated in some respect. What I call crisis is precisely the experience of that motivation to leave one and affirm the other. That such a structure is present in the various experiences of conversion can be drawn from the examples below, from the religious conversion of St Augustine and St Ignatius of Loyola to first-person accounts referred to by William James and the conversion advocated by Kierkegaard and Arthur Schopenhauer. In all of them there is a crisis, which I hope to be able to show is always an ontological crisis, of form of life, which is followed by a transformation of being. Such a transformation, only when completed, can be verified intellectually, morally and religiously. For each form of life determines a particular way of understanding, acting and feeling in the world.

The crisis arises from a contradiction between the form of life and a situation in which the latter is denied. Following Sartre, I hold that the situation is the way in which consciousness grasps the world.¹⁰ And as our consciousness is transposed by our form of life, our *world* is constituted by the latter. Thus, the crisis appears when consciousness presents this world to itself as impossible. This impossibility leads, in turn, to the opening of previously obliterated possibilities. Conversion is thus facilitated by the form of life that constitutes our consciousness. And this implies that our form of life not only determines the possibilities with which we affirm our subjectivity, that is, our habits, values and feelings, but also the possible conversions. It limits the ways in which it can express its negativity.

10 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (New York: Philosophical Society, 1948 [1940]), p. 269. In *L'imaginaire*: 'Nous appellerons «situations» les différents modes immédiats d'appréhension du réel comme monde.', p. 355.

The crisis as such cannot, however, be confused with conversion. If the crisis is the motor of conversion, this cannot be obtained without the rest of the stages, that is, the affirmation of a new way of being and acting. From the psychological perspective, however, the crisis has been seen as a type of conversion, the so-called non-volitional conversion.¹¹ This would consist of a certain awakening or inner illumination. From the philosophy of forms of life, I argue that this non-volitional conversion cannot be considered a conversion as such, but precisely the apprehension of a crisis, a demand which can only be satisfied by a free and voluntary change in the form of life.¹²

This onto-phenomenological structure, therefore, allows us to understand the procrastination of rejection after the crisis. That is to say, the case in which, although the demand for change has been grasped, neither the rejection of the current form of life nor the affirmation of the new form suggested by the situation in which the world presents itself to the subject is achieved. This is the kind of pseudo-conversion that would reflect the passage narrated by St Augustine in his *Confessions*,¹³ and identified by psychology, in my opinion erroneously, as a non-volitional conversion.¹⁴ For a long time, Augustine had, he tells us, understood the truth of the Christian life, without, however, being able to live in accordance with it:

I had now no longer my accustomed excuse that, as yet, I hesitated to forsake the world and serve thee because my perception of the truth was uncertain. For now it was certain. But, still bound to the earth, I refused to be thy soldier; and was as much afraid of being freed from all entanglements as we ought to fear to be entangled.¹⁵

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- 11 William Paterson, *Conversion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), pp. 160–61. Throughout the history of Christianity, there have been proponents of different types of conversion. While the Church has officially defended only non-volitional conversion, i.e., that which amounts to awakening by grace or divine intervention, the so-called Pelagian school has defended conversion only through effort and willingness to change. A third position, held by the semi-Pelagian school, is closer to what I am defending in this chapter, since they considered that there is conversion only through the combination of sudden awakening or understanding and the voluntary behaviour that affirms it.
 - 12 The latter is what psychology calls volitional conversion. It was Edwin Starbuck who came up with this distinction in 1911. See E. Diller Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion* (London: Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1911).
 - 13 Augustine, *Confessions and Enchiridion*, ed. by Albert Cook Outler (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp. 151–52.
 - 14 See Paterson, *Conversion*, pp. 160–61; Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion*, pp. 101–02.
 - 15 Augustine, *Confessions and Enchiridion*, p. 164.

This non-volitional conversion is assumed by William James, who considers that conversion is fundamentally the emergence of ideas elaborated and retained in the subconscious. He calls this emergence of new ideas ‘sudden conversion’, which for this philosopher therefore has an intellectual character. James demonstrates this ‘sudden conversion’ through the case of a subject who, after having had such a conversion experience, nevertheless continued to behave as he had before the conversion, and even wondered, uneasily, why his life did not seem to change: ‘I had been converted and fallen away instantly. But although I was quite full of drink (not muddled, however), I knew that God’s work begun in me was not going to be wasted.’¹⁶ The notion of conversion advocated by James is at bottom no more than a recognition of the demand, not the change itself. It is the moment of crisis. If this recognition does not lead to a change of life according to a new ontological principle born of the same crisis—as one of the possible negations of the previous form of life—conversion leads to a period of uncertainty and indecision, probably of anguish, due to the lack of inner resolve to carry out the change that has been understood as necessary, just as we see it expressed in Augustine.

Conversion, which lies on the apprehension of a crisis, that is, on a contradiction with regard to the form of life that constitutes consciousness, is cultural, for it responds to our *world*. And that means not only the triviality that conversion to Christianity or Buddhism is not possible without experience of such religious practices, but rather that conversion to such practices presupposes the apprehension of a borderline situation in which such practices are presented as the only authentic way out of the previous form of life. Thus, for example, as Benedict Anderson showed, conversion to official nationalism could only take place at a time sustained by nineteenth-century industrial capitalism (especially supported by capitalist printing), and as a reaction to the situation of imagined marginalization in which such capitalism (married to imperialism) placed the aristocratic and conservative class.¹⁷

16 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York, London, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras: Longmans, Green & Co., 1917), pp. 222–23.

17 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), pp. 109–10.

A paradigmatic case is that of Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*.¹⁸ Valjean is a convict who has broken his word to return after being granted provisional freedom. Understanding that a man who has been confused with him has been imprisoned and will be condemned to the galleys for life, Valjean can only prevent it because the principle of his present form of life is to be an honest man, defined as a friend of kindness and righteousness. He can not allow another, an innocent man, to suffer on his behalf even though Valjean feels the possibility of the self-deception in taking the matter as God's will, and therefore, as a course of events that must not be altered; a thought that is, however, overwhelmed by the demand imposed on him by the situation, as Hugo masterfully describes:

He confessed to himself that all that he had been arranging in his mind was monstrous, that 'to let the matter alone, not to interfere with God', was simply horrible, to let this mistake of destiny and of men be accomplished, not to prevent it, to lend himself to it by his silence, to do nothing, finally, was to do all! It was the last degree of hypocritical meanness! It was a base, cowardly, lying, abject, hideous crime!¹⁹

This situation is an extraordinary one, in which the affirmation of one's own being leads to its negation. This particular character of conversion is described by Hugo as follows: 'of all these occasions, it must be said, none had ever been anything like that which was now presented'.²⁰ His form of life and its principle thus lead him to his denial, that is, to recognize in front of the tribunal that he is a convict who has deceived society—and therefore contrary to what his principle of honesty dictated. In such a situation, saving the innocent by sacrificing his own person leads to a form of life beyond honesty: that of the saint or the tragic hero, which is extended through the selfless care he provides for Cosette (an orphan girl taken under his responsibility). This transformation takes place precisely by Valjean acting according to the maxim of his form of life in a situation that requires his denial. This contradictory situation could only be apprehended in this way from the previous form of life (its negativity). Only through the denial of the principle of honesty can

18 Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. by Charles E. Wilbour (New York: Modern Library, 1992 [1861]), pp. 192–97.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 192.

one reach that of the saint or hero (a self-sacrificing form of life?). That is, when in a crisis, the *honest* man recognizes himself as a dishonest one.²¹ This very paradox is grasped by Schopenhauer:

The knowledge of the contradiction of the will-to-live with itself can, through great misfortune and suffering, violently force itself on us, and the vanity of all endeavour can be perceived. Hence men who have led a very adventurous life under the pressure of passions, men such as kings, heroes, or adventurers, have often been seen suddenly to change, resort to resignation and penance, and become hermits and monks. To this class belong all genuine accounts of conversion.²²

If for Schopenhauer the will-to-live of every being can be denied just in its affirmation, the text quoted from his major work presents us with what this philosopher describes, borrowing a line from another German author (Matthias Claudius), as a 'remarkable, catholic and transcendental change'.²³ This change precisely shows the dialectic between the affirmation of a form of life and the negation to which it leads. And he gives as an example an episode from the biography of Raymond Lull, who abandoned his life of sexual debauchery after contemplating the rotten and cancerous breast of a woman he ardently desired:

Raymond Lull, who had long wooed a beautiful woman, was at last admitted to her chamber, and was looking forward to the fulfilment of all his desires, when, opening her dress, she showed him her bosom terribly eaten away with cancer. From that moment, as if he had looked into hell, he was converted; leaving the court of the King of Majorca, he went into the wilderness to do penance.²⁴

In none of the examples given can conversion be identified with crisis. Nor can it be accepted that the demand for change in itself produces conversion, for this would be the same as cancelling human freedom. Therefore, the demand that we recognize in the crisis presents us with a challenge but does not determine us to conversion. At all times, we remain free to act according to the demand or to ignore it and continue

21 *Ibid.*, p. 192.

22 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), p. 394.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 394.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 394–95.

our present form of life. The latter would lead to what Sartre called bad faith or *mauvaise foi*:

To be sure, the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth. Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth.²⁵

It presents itself as a self-deception because by not acting as we have understood that we should act, we continue to live a form of life that no longer makes sense to us. The consciousness from which the demand for change is born is constituted by a form of life that has shown itself to be impossible. But since we are free to deceive ourselves or, on the contrary, to assume the challenge of the demand, the phenomenon that since Aristotelian moral doctrine has come to be called *akrasia* is always possible;²⁶ that is, that behaviour which is inconsistent with the knowledge of what is good for one, or as the classic saying says: 'I see the better and approve it but I follow the worse' [*video meliora proboque deteriora sequor*].²⁷ Ultimately, the latter is equivalent to a crisis that we have not been able to assume (due to laziness, fear, insecurity, social pressure, etc.) as a real change in our form of life. Sometimes such

25 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956 [1943]), p. 49. For an analysis of this concept in Sartre's thought, see Simone Neuber, 'Self-Awareness and Self-Deception: A Sartrean Perspective', *Continental Philosophy Review*, 49:4 (2016), 485–507.

26 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *Complete Works*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), II, 1145b 25–35, Book VII, p. 3884. 'For Socrates was entirely opposed to the view in question, holding that there is no such thing as incontinence; no one, he said, acts against what he believes best—people act so only by reason of ignorance. Now this view contradicts the plain phenomena, and we must inquire about what happens to such a man' (Book VII, p. 3884). *Akrasia*, sometimes translated as 'incontinence', refers in Aristotle to the opposition between reason and passion, i.e., I see what reason tells me, but I follow my desires. In this sense it has nothing to do with the moment of crisis that has been mentioned, because it is not the body or the passions that prevent me from acting according to my self-demand, rather it is another form of life, which has a different principle and other habits. It is the habits and the environment or the lack of assurance that cause me not to fulfil my conversion when my consciousness presents my past way of being and acting as impossible and undesirable. So, the Aristotelian *akrasia* must be adapted to a contradiction between the subject and himself as an ontological unit, and not between his body and his mind, which are after all constituted by a particular form of life.

27 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Vol. I: *Books I–VIII*, trans. by F. J. Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), Book VII: 20.

self-deception consists in appealing to deterministic forces superior to ourselves, as occurs in the aforementioned text of Hugo in which Jean Valjean tries to resist the apprehended demand on the grounds of not interfering with God's will.

The demand, which is nothing more than a self-demand, leads to a rejection which, in a sense, is also a self-rejection. William James called this stage of conversion 'self-surrender'.²⁸ But he did not understand it in an ontological sense, but in a cognitive one: the giving way to other ideas, to another way of conceiving the world. However, from an ontological point of view, this self-surrender must be understood as precisely the rejection of one's own being and identity.²⁹ In this sense, this is very much what is meant by conversion: ceasing to be one in order to become another—what Hegel expressed with the statement 'die to live'.³⁰ In the same examples of personal conversions offered by James, one can perceive this ontological change: 'I did not know where I was; I did not know whether I was Alphonse or another. I just felt changed and thought I was another me; I looked for myself and I couldn't find myself.'³¹ The convert does not recognize himself; his former self has disappeared. In another example from James, the rejection of the subject himself implies in turn the rejection of his former *world*:

I must first pass a sentence of death [...] upon everything that can properly be called a thing of this life, even to reckon myself, my wife, my children, my health, my enjoyments, and all, as dead to me, and myself as dead to them; to trust in God through Christ, as touching the world to come.³²

The rejection of one's own form of life, that which is taken as the only possible way of being for the subject who identified with it, can lead to the rejection of all forms of life, in an affirmation of death or the convergence with it—experienced through constant suicidal thoughts—as the only possible way of being in the world. In this case, not committing suicide,

28 James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 208.

29 This self-surrender reflects at the level of the subject what at the level of the form of life we can call assimilation; when the community or part of the community converts to a hegemonic form of life with which it comes into contact and which it initially resists. I return to this in Chapters 6 and 7 of this book.

30 Cited in Paterson, *Conversion*, p. 129.

31 James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 225.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

or not making the negation of life the ontological principle of one's consciousness, is perceived as self-deception. In *A Confession*, Leo Tolstoy provides us with candid examples of this phenomenon of conversion: 'It is not good deceiving oneself. It is all vanity! Happy is he who has not been born: death is better than life, and one must free oneself from life.'³³

Rejection as a moment of conversion exhibits the essential freedom of consciousness, as Sartre and existentialism advocated. At the pre-reflective level, consciousness freely and spontaneously surpasses itself and refuses its previous form in order to adopt a new one. This means that it is the subject in its consciousness that freely self-demands the change and freely rejects its previous self in order to affirm a new one with which he now begins to identify. This explains, or at least makes sense of, the personal experiences of those who say that before conversion they were aware of the need for change and of a certain rejection of their form of life but failed to bring it into reflective consciousness. In fact, there would be no ontological conversion without such pre-reflective recognition of the need for change. In this same pre-reflective consciousness or self-consciousness is revealed the beginning of a new way of being and acting with which the subject realizes his personal identification. This identification is followed by active commitment through behaviour (since resolutions of conversion are usually typical at this point of the experience), which aspires to express the principle of the new form of life in each of its actions, that is, a 'total commitment', for 'it is not by a particular case or particular action that you are committed altogether'.³⁴ The rejected form of life eliminates the possibility of acting in the world according to its principle; while the acceptance of the demand with the identification of the new form of life and the commitment assures a new way of acting. In rejection, the subject transforms his consciousness, thus escaping the anguish and distress produced by the torments of the existential crisis, a moment expressed very vividly by Schopenhauer:

We then see the man suddenly retire into himself, after he is brought to the verge of despair through all the stages of increasing affliction with the most violent resistance. We see him know himself and the world, *change*

33 Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and What I Believe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 45.

34 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1960 [1946]), p. 43.

*his whole nature, rise above himself and above all suffering, as if purified and sanctified by it, in inviolable peace, bliss, and sublimity, willingly renounce everything he formerly desired [...].*³⁵

The third of these phenomenological stages of conversion is, thus, the affirmation of the form of life that arises from a given situation. As an example of this last stage, which is what remains to elaborate on, we can think of the situation highlighted by many activists and scholars concerning the problems that humanity faces due to the form of life of the global, post-industrial and capitalist society.³⁶ In this situation, understood as a threat to the survival of the human species and the planet (stage 1), the form of life that the situation itself provides is that driven by a principle opposed to the present form (stage 2), which is associated with the destruction of the natural environment and alienation of human life, that is, the opposite would be a form of life driven by the principle of preservation and care (stage 3). In this sense, again in Tolstoy, we have the rejection of his life of denial and alienation, shared with a certain community of his time, and the affirmation of a new form of life, the life of the Russian peasants—with whom he lives and works in Yasnaya Polyana:

I turned from the life of our circle, acknowledging that ours is not life, but a simulation of life—that the conditions of superfluity in which we live deprive us of the possibility of understanding life, and that in order to understand life I must understand not an exceptional life such as ours who are parasites on life, but the life of the simple labouring folk—those who make life—and the meaning which they attribute to it. The simple labouring people around me were the Russian people, and I turned to them, and to the meaning of life which they give.³⁷

This conversion, according to Tolstoy's own confession, dragged out over years of existential crisis, meant the affirmation of a form of life that was rejected in the past, which is now once again shown to be the most natural and true way of being human. The meaning of life was restored once again in the form of the religious and traditional life of the peasants. Thus, his denial of life as form of life was rejected. This

35 Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, pp. 392–93. The italics are mine.

36 Ingolfur Blühdorn, 'Post-Capitalism, Post-Growth, Post-Consumerism? Eco-Political Hopes beyond Sustainability', *Global Discourse*, 7:1 (2017), 42–61.

37 Tolstoy, *A Confession*, p. 79.

obviously implies a series of conversions in the course of a biological life, an experience that seems not uncommon; that is, the return to a form of life that was abandoned, and which is now taken up again as an old but new way of being in the world:

As imperceptibly and gradually the force of life in me had been destroyed and I had reached the impossibility of living, a cessation of life and the necessity of suicide, so imperceptibly and gradually did that force return to me. And strange to say the strength of life which returned to me was not new, but quite old—the same that had borne me along in my earliest days.³⁸

It should be noted that the gradualness of the process to which Tolstoy refers here follows his decision to affirm a certain form of life, with its values, feelings and habits. The gradualness refers to the process of commitment and integration into one's own form of life. That is, he gradually became integrated into the life-denying form and gradually became integrated into the religious form of the Russian peasant after his free adoption of it and rejection of the previous one. The affirmation thus consists in the verification of conversion through the adoption of a new form of life, in whose habits the constitutive principle of consciousness is expressed. Thus, the change effected is verified in each of the subject's actions, as was well understood by the Methodists and Puritans, according to Max Weber: 'Only by a fundamental change in the whole meaning of life at every moment and in every action could the effects of grace transforming a man from the *status naturae* to the *status gratiae* be proved.'³⁹ The statuses referred to by the quotation clearly show an ontological change. Otherwise, without a new way of being and acting, there can be no real conversion.

3. Conversion and the Constitution of Subjectivity

Inasmuch as conversion is the transformation of a being, it seems inevitable at this point to ask whether there is any kind of ontological continuity on which the authenticity of the subject can be based. The answer to this question varies depending on whether conversion is

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001 [1905/1930]), pp. 71–72.

understood as a gradual process or a radical change. Authors such as Lonergan think of conversion as a gradual phenomenon, like a progress along a straight line.⁴⁰ They understand that authenticity lies in moving closer and closer to the positive end of that line, characterized by ideals such as Truth, Goodness and Love. The latter guide us towards what constitutes our authentic selves, which are identified with human nature. Conversely, at the other end of the line would be that which separates us from our genuine nature and thus renders us inauthentic:

Human authenticity is not some pure quality, some serene freedom from all oversights, all misunderstanding, all mistakes, all sins. Rather it consists in a withdrawal from unauthenticity, and the withdrawal is never a permanent achievement.⁴¹

According to this, conversion would be that state of greater or lesser authenticity in relation to these absolute ideals or criteria. However, the latter, when considered as absolute, seem to be far from the human capacity to understand and even to achieve. So it can only be up to the relevant communities and institutions, whether religious, scientific or humanitarian, to judge the attitudes of a positive conversion towards truth, goodness and love. But these, being historical and partial, may be erroneous or illegitimate at later stages of humanity's progress. So that what today is understood as an attitude revealing our genuine human nature, at later times may be judged as an inauthentic attitude. In other words, the absolute criterion thus leaves conversion to the mercy of the authority that provides and supports these criteria, and from them and only from them could a positive or negative conversion be judged; or, what is the same, its authenticity or inauthenticity (in Lonergan's terms). And this implies that the reason for its authenticity lies not in the conversion itself but in external criteria. Therefore, the subject is considered more or less authentic according to whether he adapts to these external criteria, which in reality do not imply a change of being but an evolution or an involution. Moreover, one might even question whether an evolution guided by external criteria is a path towards authenticity, and not rather one towards alienation.

In contrast to Lonergan's approach, Beauvoir argued that, in existential conversion, the convert, 'by renouncing to seek the guarantee

⁴⁰ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 104.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

of his existence outside of himself, he also refuses to believe in the unconditioned values that would rear up across his freedom like things'.⁴² For her, it is precisely these 'absolute values' that remove us from our own authenticity. After all, for Beauvoir, authenticity consists in recognizing that one is free and that being, desires and values are never absolute, for we impose them on ourselves freely and spontaneously: 'existential conversion [*la conversion existentielle*] does not eliminate my instincts, desires, projects, or passions; it merely prevents all possibility of failure by refusing to posit as absolutes the ends toward which my transcendence throws itself [*poser comme des absolus les fins vers lesquelles se jette ma transcendance*] and by considering them in their connection with the freedom that projects them [*dans leur liaison avec la liberté qui les projette*]'.⁴³ Thus, for her, as for Sartre, to be authentic is to ground one's being in the essential freedom of one's consciousness.⁴⁴ So the authentic being acts recognizing that he or she could always have acted differently and therefore could always change his or her way of being, given a necessary motivation. On the contrary, the inauthentic is, for Sartre and Beauvoir, believing oneself to be natural or subject to fate and other forces that transcend our freedom.

For existentialist authors, therefore, authenticity is based not on external absolute criteria, but on the very essence of consciousness, which is freedom. To be authentic is to not betray this essential freedom, which is equivalent to being nothing in a natural and fixed way: 'To exist authentically [*exister authentiquement*] is not to deny the spontaneous movement of my transcendence [*ce n'est pas nier le mouvement spontané de ma transcendance*] but only to refuse to lose myself in it [*refuser de me perdre en lui*]', which means the refusal to surrender our freedom.⁴⁵ Elaborating on this existentialist approach, and given the relevance that conversion has for the constitution of subjectivity, what I maintain is that authenticity is based on the conversion of the subject when it has understood the need for change. And this entails a nuanced difference with respect to Beauvoir. If for her, again, one is authentic as long as one does not betray that 'essential freedom' that makes us never be what we

42 Simone de Beauvoir, *Philosophical Writings* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 293.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 293.

44 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 527.

45 Beauvoir, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 293.

are, and not act as if we could not have acted otherwise, what I claim is that it is in the radical event in which the demand for conversion to a different form of life arises that our being is founded and therefore its authenticity.

Thus, based on the onto-phenomenological structure of conversion that I explored in the previous section, I believe it must be insisted that, contrary to Beauvoir and Sartre, the understanding of the demand for change, even if freely accepted, would lead to an inauthentic life if ignored.⁴⁶ So the demand born of our understanding of the impossibility of our form of life determines our authenticity. To be authentic requires in such an extreme situation the rejection of who we were and the affirmation of a new being, verified in a new form of life. This transformation is based on a self-demand, but it is still a demand and therefore a call for a necessary change. Who we become after the change is authentic as long as we continue to recognize the need to be and to act in that way. On the contrary, the inauthenticity of the subject, what we can call living an inauthentic life, means continuing to live according to the ontological principle of a form of life that has been apprehended as undesirable, unnecessary and unworthy.

Therefore, from the perspective opened up by this chapter, being authentic cannot be determined by absolute external criteria, but neither can it be grounded in the essential freedom of consciousness without further ado, for then to be authentic is always to be nothing, and that is contradictory, and arguably false, as the Aristotelian argument demonstrates regarding the assertion that everything is always changing, which is the same as saying that nothing is ever truly anything: 'if all things are in motion, nothing will be true; everything therefore will be false. But it has been shown that this is impossible. Again, it must be that which is that changes; for change is from something to something.'⁴⁷ That is, truth is that which it is, and it is so because it has been transformed into it. Therefore, it was true before and after, but it might not have been true if it had not changed when necessary. Something changes precisely by being true to what it is. Moreover, to support that we are nothing

46 For a detailed account on authenticity in existentialist terms, see Daniel Breazeale, 'Authenticity and Duty', in *Fichte und Sartre über Freiheit*, ed. by Violeta L. Waibel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), pp. 11–48.

47 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *Complete Works*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), II, 1012b 25, p. 3441.

is not to recognize the strength of the form of life as in-itself-for-itself. Thus, to be authentic is to constantly renew with our way of being and acting the conversion that we have consummated, bearing in mind that conversion is ontological and radical, and with it we cease to be who we were and become someone else. And this for the reason that we can never cease to be the incarnation of a form of life, from which our subjectivity derives. Otherwise, we would have to admit that the sustained state of a human being can exist independently of a form of life, that is, outside of a particular way of being and acting. And this is a state of limbo that is impossible even to imagine. One is always something, and incessant change is not a legitimate option either, as has been shown, neither ontologically nor psychologically. We are that being that we give ourselves in conversion, which born of a contingent situation cannot be but necessary. We are necessarily that which we have understood that we have to be, at the risk of living otherwise an inauthentic life, marked by dissatisfaction, insincerity and even guilt, as personal experiences of procrastination such as that of St Augustine show.

In this sense, one can exemplify, with these words of Henry David Thoreau, the problem of the authenticity of a form of life that is contingent but is lived as necessary: 'So thoroughly and sincerely are we compelled to live, reverencing our life, and denying the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre.'⁴⁸ In fact, it is in the change of life that authenticity lies, for although we can live in different ways we can only live in one particular way at a time, and that determines our being and our actions until we apprehend the need for a new change. It is in the apprehension of the possibility of change that we glimpse a new authentic self.

Now, if authenticity is not the correspondence with an absolute criterion or always being someone different from what one is, but the necessary transformation of the subject's form of life by which he ceases to be what he was in order to be someone else, is it not being authentic to become another? And is this other not precisely the incarnation of a new form of life? The commitment of the convert to his new form of life is the commitment to an image of being human (as was conveyed

48 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 11.

in the Introduction and in the first chapter of this book). Therefore, in every action of the subject, this image of the human being or anthropological image is revealed. The subject's consciousness of such actions is the self-consciousness of that other which constitutes his or her form of life as a universal. The subject is thus constituted by the self-consciousness of that universal way of being.

Therefore, the otherness is the incarnation of a universal, which mirrors the Heideggerian 'thrown-project' in the world; an incarnation that as such demands of us a way of being and acting that turns us into a being that is always another, or in the words of Paul Ricoeur:

The notion of a thrown-project [...] indeed carries to the level of concept the strangeness of human finiteness, insofar as it is sealed by embodiment, hence what we call here primary otherness, in order to distinguish it from the otherness of the foreign. One could even say that the link, in the same existentials of state-of-mind, of the burdensome character of existence and of the task of having-to-be, expresses what is most crucial in the paradox of an otherness constitutive of the self and in this way reveals for the first time the full force of the expression 'oneself as another'.⁴⁹

Moreover, this otherness is real not only in my incarnation but also in those other subjects who likewise incarnate this universality of the anthropological image. That other subject or co-subject is not an analogy or a projection of me in the other. As it is a common incarnation of the same way of being and acting, my co-subject is somehow another self who exists and acts in the world where we both affirm a common identity, which, without ceasing to be constitutive of our own self, neither does it cease to be that of another.

In short, converging here with Sartre, the individual is a universal singular: 'For a man is never an individual; it would be more fitting to call

49 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 327. What Ricoeur calls 'embodiment' is what Sartre (and this book) calls 'incarnation', both referring to Husserl's notion of making the flesh or *Lieb* (lived experience of oneself) part of the world, or also in Ricoeur's terms, 'mondanéiser la chair'. Moreover, the difference that Ricoeur points out between primary otherness and otherness of the foreign would be equivalent in the phenomenological ontology presented in this book to the difference between the incarnation of my form of life and the incarnation of another form of life by those whom I do not consider to be co-subjects. For a discussion of the phenomenological concept of flesh/lived body (*Lieb*), see Jakub Čapek, 'Oneself through Another: Ricoeur and Patočka on Husserl's Fifth Cartesian Meditation', *META: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy*, 9:2 (2017), 387–415.

him a *universal singular*. Summed up and for this reason universalized by his epoch, he in turns resumes it by reproducing himself in it as a singularity.⁵⁰ But this universal condition, I insist—beyond Sartre—is given to the subject by his form of life. The latter is the identification with this image of being human as the only possible way of being. As a result, its adoption implies the assumption that to be human is to act according to the ontological principle that constitutes it. On the contrary, any individual who does not conform to it cannot legitimately call himself a human being. Therefore, the adoption of this anthropological image as the core of our subjectivity imposes a necessary appeal on others, because as Sartre said: ‘in fashioning myself I fashion man’.⁵¹ In conversion, therefore, as Kierkegaard said, the individual in giving himself a new form of life, goes beyond the universality of his previous form, so that ‘the single individual isolates himself as higher than the universal’.⁵² But, to be higher than the universal implies being above it, and this only happens because the consciousness of the individual transcends itself by freely giving itself a new universal, a new image of being human through the form of life that is affirmed.

Now, if we continue to elaborate on this universal-singular subject (as an incarnation of a form of life), we have to ask to what extent we require other individuals to share our form of life, and hence our image of being human, since this is in essence intersubjective (as the Sartrean concept being-for-others implies).⁵³ That is, the adoption of such an image necessarily dictates the possibilities of both my own behaviour and that of others. In fact, I can only take my identity as a human being because of the assumption that I share with other subjects their way of being and acting, that is, because of the potential community that is born or reborn with me in conversion. This again puts us at a crossroads with respect to Sartre’s ontological phenomenology. For the French philosopher, the being-for-itself or consciousness as essentially free requires that others recognize its freedom, that is, it requires to be

50 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821–1857*, Vol. I, trans. by Carol Cosman (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. ix.

51 Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 30. In *L’existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Nagel, 1966): ‘en me choisissant, je choisis l’homme.’ p. 27.

52 Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, p. 105.

53 Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre: A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 242.

treated precisely as a being-for-itself. But in the same way, it requires others to be free.⁵⁴ Therefore, consciousness or the for-itself, in order to persist in its being, requires that others take it as an end in itself, and not as a means, and, by the same token, it also requires that others—the other for-itself—take themselves as ends. Only someone who recognizes himself as free can recognize others in the same way. And at the same time, I cannot be free if others are not. This is what Sartre calls, with the Kantian expression, ‘the kingdom of ends’.⁵⁵

The issue, from the perspective of the philosophy of forms of life, is that the subject, in order to be that which he freely wants to be, requires that other individuals also freely make themselves subjects of that form of life, which is identified with the exclusive image of being human. Contrary to Sartre, it could be said that the freedom of our consciousness—that freedom with which we self-impose a new being in conversion—seems to require not only that others too are free for their conversion, but also that they freely impose on themselves a particular way of being and acting that makes them our co-subjects. The self, in order to be, needs that potential community with which it shares its form of life. This is the Ariadne’s thread that leads us from freedom to imposition and from the convert to the proselytiser, as I will return to in the next section.⁵⁶

This conclusion, however, is at odds with those who, like Emmanuel Levinas, seek to understand the individual as particular totalities—characterized by their idiosyncratic existence.⁵⁷ These totalities, that he claims to be plural, isolated and irreducible entities, which escape conceptualization and almost understanding, in the end are but mere abstractions—precisely what he tries to flee. For an element or part can only be abstract if it lacks the mediation of its totality, and in this case,

54 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. by David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1983]), p. 9.

55 See this concept in relation to intersubjectivity in Sebastian Gardner, ‘Sartre, Intersubjectivity, and German Idealism’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 43:3 (2005), 325–51.

56 For political and sociological factors in conversion, see Timothy Steigenga and Edward Cleary, *Conversion of a Continent* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

57 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (London, Boston, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), p. 44. In *Totalité et infini: essai sur l’extériorité* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), p. 35.

of the form of life that provides its particular way of being and acting. Levinas argues that

To affirm the priority of *Being* over *existents* [*a priorité de l'être par rapport à l'étant*] is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent (the ethical relation) [*quelqu'un qui est un étant*] to a relation with the *Being of existents* [*l'être de l'étant*], which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom [*subordonne la justice à la liberté*].⁵⁸

In doing so, he stands against the ontological tradition, which homogenizes the opposite and gives priority to the same over the other, being over the existent, freedom over justice.⁵⁹ But to presuppose that the existent is prior to being is to presuppose it prior to its consciousness. And this could be admitted; it could be said that the individual exists prior to his consciousness of being; and to add that he even exists prior to his consciousness of sharing a form of life with a (potential) community. Both propositions, however, entail major problems from the existential and phenomenological point of view, as well as from the subject and the collectivity.

To start with, to say that the individual exists before he is, in any sense, conscious of it, is to say that he occupies a material place, or that he is a fact, but not that he is in a particular way. Even the face does not imply a particular way of being but rather the irreducibility of being, the infinite, the indeterminate: "To manifest oneself as a face [*Se manifester comme visage*] is to *impose oneself* above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form [*c'est s'imposer par-delà la forme, manifestée et purement phénoménale*], to present oneself in a mode irreducible to manifestation [*irréductible à la manifestation*]."⁶⁰ Thus, to present oneself as irreducible is to present oneself as unpredictable, but if the existent is pure exteriority, his irreducibility and unpredictability is also so for himself, that is, he is an unknown to himself, lacking in being and identity. The face does not imply being, only mute existence. Individuals come into being when they become conscious of themselves in the task of giving themselves

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45. In *Totalité et infini*, p. 36.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 200. In *Totalité et infini*, p. 218.

being, imposing it on themselves in (ontological) conversion. The subject is, thus, born only in that self-giving, which also entails acting in the midst of the world. What is characteristic of the individual implies a conversion to a way of being and acting adapted to a specific context and in a particular situation. For, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty had already underlined in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, without the background, no element can appear.⁶¹ All this implies the phenomenological expedient that what is there is there for me, including myself. What is outside me, as a different way of being and acting, questions my being, which is the being that I share with my community, which in turn I need in order to be, not only as posited universality, but as the behaviour that shapes my environment, against Levinas' claim: 'The relation with the other [*la relation avec l'Autre*] is here accomplished only through a third term [*troisième terme*] which I find in myself [*que je trouve en moi*].'⁶² That third term is also out there, for my awareness of it implies my acting in the world and my exposure to the acting of other co-subjects.

Therefore, the consciousness of being is not only of being a particular subject, but also the consciousness of a community with which I share a way of being and acting. My consciousness of being is the consciousness of my form of life. In a world in which everyone is a mere sentient and desiring existent, without being or identity, subjects cannot exist primarily because their potential community, which is posited intersubjectivity—their incarnated universality—does not exist. And if, in such a world, there is justice for the others, it is achieved precisely by sacrificing their freedom, the freedom to give themselves being, as identification with an ontological principle and with a community.

4. Conversion, Subjectivity and the Other

This understanding of conversion has led me to conclude that the ontological freedom of consciousness becomes imperative by postulating a demand to other individuals to effectively realize the universality of the incarnated form of life. The problem is that once the subject has grasped the situation as the demand for a change of form of life, a

61 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1945]), p. 4. See quotation in the Introduction to this book.

62 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 44.

question emerges: can he or she really change the form of life within a group that does not? Furthermore, can there be a totally individual form of life?

There are three possible responses in this regard:

(1) Deny the demand and live in self-deception. This option would be that of those who, even though they have understood the need for change, accept different reasons for not doing so. As said previously, this is what Sartre called living in bad faith. Conversion would not be obtained, although the demand could be held in perpetual procrastination. This could be the phenomenon that St Augustine narrates in his *Confessions* and that has been identified with a non-volitional conversion (associated with an intellectual event), a label that, from the perspective traced in this section, is rejected as conversion proper because it does not give rise to any change in the form of life. Needless to say, such an understanding of the demands can remain in that state indefinitely, and even find socially accepted mechanisms to channel and somehow dissolve them.

(2) The revolution. This second option has to do with the attempt to convert others. It is the attitude of the proselytizer and even of the revolutionary—the phenomenon that has been labelled in recent times, albeit in a derogatory way, as ‘social justice warriors’ may enter this class. From the philosophy of forms of life that is being developed in this work, this attitude finds a coherent explanation, free of derogatory tones, and includes in it many other *revolutionary* groups; that is, groups that seek a social conversion so that they can fully realize the image of the human being with which they identify and to which they have committed themselves. Conversion, let us recall, carries with it that aspiration of universality. It is necessary to clarify that this social conversion does not necessarily involve all the men and women of the planet, but only the individuals who make up the society in which the convert lives. Today, in global and digital capitalism, a single form of life has expanded to practically the entire world, making the postulated universality almost effective. The latter, however, does not cease to be frustrated by communities considered external (i.e., refugees) or internal (i.e., anti-austerity movements).

(3) Withdraw from society. The last and least common option is to break with the society in which the rejected form of life prevails and where the convert does not feel that it is possible to develop his newly

acquired form of life. This retreat is, as with the option of revolution, an option in which conversion does not achieve fullness precisely because it does not achieve universality. For in both options, the convert has to act according to the form of life of the society in which he lives as well as his own form of life. That is to say, the universality of the actions under the chosen form of life cannot be obtained and neither can the universality of the image of the human being that it incarnates and that the proselytizer/revolutionary struggles to extend to an ever-increasing number of individuals. In this sense, the retreat from society can be phenomenological and physical, or only phenomenological. In the first group would be those hermits and seekers of solitude who, as many accounts tell us, have gone to islands, caves or mountains to live a life of retreat. In the second group, there are those who, within society, lead a different form of life, directed by a different principle to that which drives the lives of the other individuals who make up their society.⁶³ According to what has been said, the aspiration to universality entails in both groups an incompleteness. From the point of view of the philosophy of forms of life, that physical isolation to which conversion can lead is the fullest, because in it universality has no contradiction. And that is why these individuals have the greatest uneasiness when they see a human being appear in their vicinity: the representation of their broken universality. David Balcom informs us of several anecdotes in this regard, in particular the joy that Petrarch experienced as a result of not seeing any human creature in his long retreats to his properties at Vaucluse.⁶⁴

But this leads us to ask ourselves, firstly, whether it is really possible to live as a convert in a society that follows another form of life, and secondly, if it is possible to live an individual form of life. With regard to the first question, the answer is that it is not only possible, but it is also fairly common. This is why converts tend to form homogeneous groups or even social classes (more abrupt in some eras and societies than in others), or sects and secret societies. From the point of view of

63 Sometimes this leads to a conflict between the individual and the predominant form of life embodied by institutions of power, as biopolitical studies relate, for example regarding the hermit Richard Rolle. See Christopher Roman, 'The Counter-Conduct of Medieval Hermits', *Foucault Studies*, 21 (2016), 80–97.

64 David Balcom, *The Great Escape: Adventures in the History of Solitude* (Lincoln NE: iUniverse, 2004), p. 17.

the philosophy of the forms of life, conversion to these groups saves the dissatisfaction of the impossible universality in larger societies. In this way, the convert avoids social practices and behaviours that are not supported by his form of life (and its principle), without this always be possible. And, in this sense, the current global form of life (capitalist, instrumental-technological and consumerist leading by profit maximization) is considered the most natural because it has achieved a purported universality of conduct and of individuals. Many individuals have converted to this form of life and others have simply accepted it. From this same form of capitalist life in the last century, other forms of life have arisen as reaction (agricultural life, projects of collective life, artistic life, intellectual life, and so on), whose conversion leads only to marginalized living in a society where the former prevails. And in the opposite sense, from the periphery or the margins, many have converted phenomenologically to the prevailing form of life, even before being physically present in the societies in which it develops (i.e., immigration and cultural colonization). The difference, then, between the last two types of attitudes, that is, that of the revolutionary and that of the hermit, is that, in the former, there is an annihilation of others as subjects (who self-impose a particular ontological principle) to demand from them (as free beings) that they follow the individual's (or community's) own form of life, while, in the latter, annihilation is a real physical distance, which implies the absence of others and, therefore, also the lack of demand. However, both strategies are deceptive. Because the first reduces the freedom of others to the choice of an imposed image of being human, that is, it jeopardizes the existence of the other as *being-for-itself* (in Sartrean terms), and the second, distancing him from others, jeopardizes the existence of the other as *being-in-itself*—this latter can be carried out even within society by means of self-imposed isolation.

Accordingly, just as Wittgenstein considered a private or individual language possible only as a mode of self-deception,⁶⁵ so it must be insisted that a strictly individual form of life is possible, but always bearing in mind that this would start from the delusion that there is no other human being than oneself—a hard solipsism. However, if every

65 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), § 243–71.

experience of a form of life is individual (*Erlebnis*), as an expression of an image of being human, it is essentially intersubjective, and thus constituted by the claim that all other individuals share it, or are in a position to share it and experience it as part of the natural and exclusive way of being human—which guarantees its universality. Thus, although the isolated subject persists in his being, like a Robinson Crusoe, pretending that anyone would act like him in his place, only when the potential community becomes actual can the subject be fully integrated into his form of life. This means, as a consequence, that I can lead an individual form of life which, in fact, I do not share with anybody in my environment, only under the gaze that I posit it on everybody else as my potential community. This positing is what in Chapter 5 I call assimilation—or attempt at assimilation—regarding the relationship between forms of life.

5. Ontological Conversion vs. Rites of Passage

Conversion as fundamentally not symbolic but existential, i.e., ontological, which is our particular focus, is to be distinguished at least minimally from the social phenomenon of rites of passage studied by anthropology and cultural phenomenology. The point is that these cultural rites seem to be an instrument to keep the social group in balance. They help individuals to move from one state to another within the same group, as Turner's concepts of 'liminality' (transition) and 'communitas' (the realization of the group's form of life) manifest:

The ritual subject, individual or corporate [in the final stage of the ritual], is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and 'structural' type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.⁶⁶

On the contrary, conversion in the ontological sense I am referring to is the change from one group or community (co-subjects) to another altogether different one (not only a change in social position), as it is about becoming a different subject through a new way of being and

66 Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.

acting, as well as the emergence of a new intersubjectivity rooted in that new being or incarnation of a particular image of being human.

Rites have an organizing and stabilizing purpose, for Van Gennep tells us that 'in such societies [among semicivilized peoples] every change in a person's life involves actions and reactions between sacred and profane—actions and reactions to be regulated and guarded so that society as a whole will suffer no discomfort or injury'.⁶⁷ By contrast, conversion as an ontological change entails a destabilization, as the individuals experience a detachment from their previous group, whose form of life they now see as undesirable, which necessitates a rejection of that previous way of being and acting, as I have shown in the examples above. In fact, from the approach of the cultural phenomenology of rites of passage, the onto-phenomenological stage that I have treated as the affirmation of a new universal image of being human, is significantly called 'reincorporation' or 'reaggregation',⁶⁸ which implies returning to the group from which the individual has been temporarily and symbolically separated, but this time in a higher state, which suggests greater integration in the group as a whole, reaffirming thus the existing social order. This integration in the system is what Catherine Bell remarks by insisting on the function of rituals for the social and political power relations of the group: 'Ritualization is very much concerned with power. Closely involved with the objectification and legitimation of an ordering of power as an assumption of the way things really are, ritualization is a strategic arena for the embodiment of power relations.'⁶⁹ According to this, rites seem to have the function of controlling and channelling social change, i.e., the ritual transition from one state to another is socially and politically imposed (through institutions such as baptism, marriage, school stages, entrance exams for higher education and trades, etc.) and aims at the integration of the individuals into the group as structural power relations. It is therefore far from being an ontological or existential conversion in the sense I have conveyed above, in which the crisis-triggering demand arises from the individuals' own consciousness, who suddenly find a new meaning to their lives by freely

67 Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p. 3.

68 Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 94.

69 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 170.

giving themselves a new way of being and acting—through a constitutive and ontological principle—thus setting aside the previous form of life, be it artistic, religious, dishonest, capitalist, naturalist, intellectual, etc., and embracing a new one with a new structure of power relations. I am not saying that in ritual there cannot be an ontological conversion beyond symbolic behaviour; I am merely pointing out the difference between the two, and that one does not necessarily entail the other. Rituals rather mean a further integration of the subjects into their existing form of life and *communitas*.

6. Conclusion

Having established the premise of the form of life as an ontological unit, in this chapter I have explored the onto-phenomenological structure of conversion in terms of the passage from one form of life to another. In this sense, I have argued that all conversion is first and foremost ontological, beyond the religious, cultural or moral aspects with which it is often associated. I have argued that such an ontological structure consists of three phenomenological moments or stages, namely, the apprehension of a demand for change in a situation of crisis, the rejection of the previous form of life and the affirmation of a new possible form. From this conception of conversion, I have drawn the consequence that the ontological affirmation of the convert can only be authentic insofar as it arises from the demand for change experienced, whereas inauthenticity entails ignoring this demand and continuing to live in a way that has been apprehended as unnecessary, undesirable and unworthy. Moreover, if the latter stage of conversion involves an affirmation of and commitment to a form of life, and this is the expression of an image of being human, I have argued that in conversion the subject becomes universal mediated by that anthropical image, which determines a *potential* community whose way of being and acting is shared. The subject who has thus given himself a new form of life, has in this way also given himself a new identity that makes him a universal singular; that is, someone who without ceasing to be an individual is an incarnation of a universal. This incarnation makes him a subject, whose consciousness is essentially intersubjective, for his way of being and acting is that which is posited as the way of being and acting of every individual and which, in fact,

he shares with his *potential/actual* community, constituted by those co-subjects who incarnate the same form of life. Ontological conversion has been revealed as the origin of subjectivity and the constant source of the authenticity, universality and intersubjectivity of the subject.

