

Foundational Urgency and Institutional Inertia*

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In his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre writes: “man has to struggle not only against nature, and against the social environment which has produced him, and against other men, but also against his own action as it becomes other” (*CDR* 124). In what follows, I will discuss the reality indicated in this last clause, this tendency of human action to work against itself by establishing structures that block access to the ends it aimed at, what Sartre calls “counter-finality.” Many familiar features of contemporary life exhibit this paradoxical character on a grand scale, perhaps most of all the institutions of government and of the market. These are historic accomplishments and have often seemed to be the only means to attain peace and prosperity. But they have also developed into impediments to human flourishing and freedom.

Sartre’s famously recalcitrant text will serve as a guide. It is distinguished by its simultaneous focus on the precise logical shape of social forms and on concrete description of lived social realities “from the inside.” His accounts are unsentimental and unsparing, and it’s difficult to think of anyone who works harder to expose the inherent difficulties of realizing the goals he promotes. In particular, I want to trace out his distinctive account of group action, from the background of inert social formations against which it asserts itself, through its sustaining and diversifying itself into the quasi-vital form of the so-called “organization,” and finally, devolving into its rigid and inert form, which he calls the “institution.” Before these three main parts of the lecture, and by way of introduction, I will discuss some related matters in Plato’s *Republic*. I do this in part because I presume this audience is generally familiar with that book,

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and also because nearly every major theme of Sartre's work is one that any serious student of the *Republic* ought to recognize as relevant and important.

Part 1: Images of the City

Let's begin with three accounts of the basic character of the city from the *Republic*. In Book 1, Thrasymachus portrays cities as defined by exploitation: the rulers make laws that they say are just but that serve them at the expense of the ruled. Later, in Book 5, Socrates presents the city as a single sensitive organism, affected by a pain or harm felt in any part, and concerned as a whole to address it. Later still, in Book 8, Socrates portrays cities as protean, changing shape when a group within the city takes power and remolds the regime around its particular ruling principle. Each of these three images of the city (ruse, organism, shapeshifter) highlights something significant.

As for the first, Thrasymachus presents his account as something obvious. "Don't you know," he asks Socrates incredulously, "that some cities are ruled tyrannically, some democratically, and some aristocratically ... and that the ruling element is the stronger?" (338d-e). Since all types of city alike proclaim the laws to be just, if the ruling or stronger element sets down laws that give it an advantage, what is proclaimed to be just is simply whatever is advantageous to them. Stripped of Thrasymachus' boasting and his abusive language, it's plausible and even accurately describes many Greek cities riven by internal conflict or *stasis*. Thucydides' accounts bear witness to how brutal this factional antagonism became during the war. We'll return to the question of revolution in relation to Socrates' account in Book 8 and later in the lecture. But first, it's worth noting some of Thrasymachus' unstated presuppositions. The main one, on which Socrates' response turns, is of course the unexamined nature of the central term "advantage." This lies somewhat outside our purview, though we'll return to it later in a different context. Of more immediate interest is the fact that the range of possible constitutions—

tyranny, democracy, aristocracy—is taken for granted, as is the unity of the ruling element in each, and these twin presuppositions are related: in effect, Thrasymachus takes the types of ruling groups and regimes for granted because he assumes they are mutually defining. It's not clear that much stands behind his analysis besides the fused ideas of class interest, exploitation, and naïveté: the stronger class exploits the weaker and persuades the naïve among them that their being exploited is justice.

In Book 5, Socrates presents a different picture. After asserting that whatever unifies the city and binds it together as one is its highest good, he makes an analogy. He says: “when one of us wounds a finger, presumably the entire community—that community tying the body together with the soul in a single arrangement under the ruling part within it—is aware of the fact, and all of it is in pain as a whole along with the afflicted part; and it is in this sense we say that this human being has a pain in his finger” (462c). To be a feeling organism is to identify as a whole with any feeling part—to behave, that is, as a community. Socrates suggests that promoting a similar fellow-feeling among citizens could thus realize the city's good by binding it together as one.

With respect to this second picture of the city, one might well ask just *why* this mutual sensitivity is necessary. Nothing like it was required in the so-called “healthy city” founded in speech in Book 2. There, mutual benefit and mutual need were evident to all. Harm or pain was not something that needed to be *felt*, since need was perceived directly: all the arts practiced in the city addressed obvious need by obvious means. What changed since that time, presumably, is that the city's very success allowed it to grow. This meant an increase in both the population and the number of sorts of jobs: both of these tend to undermine the possibility of mutual awareness. The larger and more differentiated city needs threads of self-awareness to knit together its self-

alienating parts. And those threads don't grow up naturally in the city, as they do in animals; they must be artificially produced and artfully deployed somehow. This sort of city must make for itself its own "nervous system."

A third picture of the city with respect to the question of its form is offered in Book 8, and it is the most complex by far. I will list only a few of its key features. Having completed the description of the identity and education of the ruling class in the city, Socrates investigates the other forms of constitution as promised back in Book 4. This reopens the question of the variety of constitutions that Thrasymachus introduced earlier as an obvious empirical fact. Socrates' account, by contrast, is pseudo-historical or mythopoetic: the *variety* of forms is presented as a *sequence*, which Socrates calls on the Muses to narrate, in the manner of a poet. It is modeled after the Ages of Man from Hesiod's *Works and Days* and accordingly differs from Thrasymachus' account by distinguishing five instead of three regimes, adding oligarchy and the so-called "timocracy" to what Thrasymachus put under the single name "aristocracy," as well as adding a fourth symbolic metal and an age of heroes. This further differentiation is ultimately due to the identification of a "formal cause" in each case: oligarchy, for example, is not essentially the rule of some or few, but a society organized around the single principle of wealth, like ours today. Socrates' account is also dialectical or tragic, in that each regime is vulnerable to, or even ultimately responsible for, its own destruction. This is true throughout the series, but is made most explicit in the cases of oligarchy and democracy, both of which are said to suffer from an insatiate desire for their defining principle, which is also the cause of that destruction.

Socrates' account of the collapse of the oligarchic regime may be the clearest. For one, the so-called rulers have no interest in ruling, and no aptitude or appetite for it, either, and so he refers to them not as rulers, but simply as "money-makers." Furthermore, the city is no longer

one, but divided into rich and poor, inasmuch as it allows citizens to fall into complete poverty and lack of necessary resource. This is no accident, as the oligarchs actively pursue the project of getting even richer through impoverishing any they can. Socrates presents this characteristic activity of oligarchy as something with a side effect: it tends to produce a class of dangerous potential revolutionaries, people with nothing to lose and everything to gain from a change of regime. And he describes the oligarchs themselves as unconscious of this danger: they individually extract wealth from others “with their heads bent down, not seeming to see those men” (555e).

Through their own action, then, they unwittingly became their own worst enemies, creating the conditions for their destruction. In part, it’s because their desire and its object were both pursued as something limitless: like a pure quantity. But the account also highlights the way that individual acts can have systemic repercussions. Finally, it’s worth considering another thread in the story: in a self-congratulatory mood, the oligarchs would probably describe their signal virtue as *moderation*. In much the same manner as he rudely asks Cephalus about his wealth when the latter prides himself on his character, Socrates doesn’t make much of this talk of moderation, and accurately describes what oligarchy really holds up as the good. Whatever it may say about itself, the real *meaning* of this form of government is limitless wealth for a few and its associated and widespread poverty for the rest.

This picture of the city that emerges from Book 8 is considerably more elaborate than Thrasymachus’ account of exploitation. It doesn’t simple-mindedly deny that obvious reality, as he supposes, but it gives it a different context and a different fate. For one thing, the dominant party in the oligarchy (along with its self-serving self-understanding) is in a way *produced by* the regime; the honor-lovers of the timocracy sought to please themselves and hoarded money

privately, it's true, but the change into a regime explicitly *defined* by a minimum property qualification is a fundamental transformation in the very meaning of being a ruler; if there were any real honor-lovers among them, one imagines they would have felt this as the degradation it was. For another thing, and directly contrary to Thrasymachus' definition, it is the oligarchs' pursuit of their supposed "advantage" that undoes them. Anything like the organism's perception of harm characteristic of the second picture of the city seems to be lacking; the oligarchs seem to enrich themselves almost mechanically, numb to the harm they are doing to their regime and to themselves.

Part 2: Fractious Unity as Action's Shadow

Turning now to Sartre, let's study further the phenomena of action's self-sabotage. Let me first identify some of his particular terminology: what we will be studying in general he calls "matter as inverted *praxis*," the social forms we'll next study he calls "collectives," and these are characterized by a structure he calls "seriality." Concerning "matter as inverted *praxis*," he has a couple of striking historical examples ready to hand. The first is the example of agricultural deforestation leading to flooding, which he takes from René Grousset's history of China, the second, the devaluation of Spanish currency due to the importation of precious metals in the 16th century, for which he relies on Fernand Braudel. In both cases, Sartre highlights how deliberate action directed at meeting human need "inscribes" itself, as it were, into the matter it works on. That worked matter can then turn against us, presenting us not with the reflection of our own activity as we understood it, but with the face of an enemy.

As for the first example, each individual peasant in an effort to make use of the land he worked for planting crops cleared trees from it, but the aggregate effect of these individual

actions over centuries was to create a landscape especially vulnerable to destructive flooding.

Sartre indicates the dramatic character of this inversion of *praxis* as follows:

If some enemy of mankind had wanted to persecute the peasants of the Great Plain, he would have ordered mercenary troops to deforest the mountains systematically. The positive system of agriculture was transformed into an infernal machine. But the enemy [fueling the machine] was the peasant himself. Yet, taken in the moment of its living development, his action does not include this rebound, either intentionally or in reality. In *this* particular place, and for *this* particular man cultivating his land, all that existed was an organic connection between the negative (removal of the obstacle) and the positive (enlargement of the arable sector)... [H]uman labour, [then], is enriched with new meanings precisely to the extent that it eludes the labourer through its materiality. (162, 164)

It's worth noting in passing that the correction of this individually produced material self-sabotage necessarily becomes a *common* project. With characteristic brevity, Sartre says this correction entails "large-scale public works, population shifts, the implacable authority of the leaders, *etc.*" (165). The brief "*etcetera*" stands in for the manifold social ramifications of this reorganization, and particularly their ambiguity. The material rebound of a mass of individual actions prompted a collective response, but thereby it also occasioned new tasks, new configurations of cooperation, new centers of organization and power, and these had their own materiality, their own fixity, imposed their own exigencies, and so on.

The second example of matter as inverted *praxis* concerns the effects of Spain's success at extracting gold and silver from the Americas. In the last decades of the 16th century in particular, the discovery and exploitation of silver mines in Peru vastly accelerated this ongoing project, which included perfecting the techniques of extraction, refinement, transport, and minting into currency. The result of this acceleration was an unsuspected disruption and weakening of the Spanish economy, and indeed the economy of the Mediterranean in general. In

broad terms, this kind of monetary phenomenon is now widely understood, but imagine *living* it without that knowledge, bewildered, and as if cursed. The same opposition between individual action and aggregate result that we saw in the case of deforestation is present here, too. Sartre writes:

Here, and for this particular merchant, whatever the circumstances and however prices may fluctuate, it is still true that he will be richer this evening if he gets an extra thousand ducats. But in the process as a whole it is not the case that collectivities are enriched by accumulation.... While for him every new quantity increases his wealth, in the national community it devalues the unit. (171, 173)

In general, then, our involvement and commerce with matter, our *praxis*, tends to reveal a hidden connectedness to our action, one that is in principle unsuspected and can even run directly counter to our aims, with repercussions for social structures. Sartre sums up the principle as follows:

Thus materialised *praxis* (the minted coin, *etc.*) has the effect of uniting men precisely to the extent that it separates them by imposing on everyone a meaningful reality infinitely richer and more contradictory than they anticipated individually. Materialised practices, poured into the exteriority of things, impose a common destiny on men who know nothing of one another, and, at the same time, by their very being, they reflect and reinforce the separation of individuals. (179)

This uniting has been the main theme in these examples of matter as inverted *praxis*, inasmuch as they reveal a common threat calling for a common response, but the aspect of separation has so far been mostly implicit. Let me turn now to Sartre's direct engagement with this latter theme in his discussion of collectives constituted by seriality. He elaborates it by means of a graded sequence of examples. We'll consider only the first and simplest: the gathering of commuters lining up at a bus stop, and the audience of a radio broadcast.

At a Parisian bus stop, commuters gather. Though they have come together in the same place, they mostly ignore one another. Their purpose is the same for each, but not shared. Their isolation from one another might almost seem to be a natural product of the city itself, which concentrates people in a mass, but at the same time tends to diversify and alienate their pursuits and ways of life. The city's unity is present to all of them as something abstract, indifferent to these differences. People at the bus stop may deliberately adopt this indifference, buying a newspaper to read so as not to have to interact with others. In this sense, their "isolation is a project" (258). They are all waiting for the same bus, and are thus united by this single material object, but the bus addresses them, as it were, as interchangeable, and thus addresses each one as *inessential*. Also, there is a limited number of seats available and a real likelihood that there will be no room for some to board the next bus. In Paris in the 1950's, the system was to take a numbered ticket upon arrival at the stop and to board the bus in the order of arrival. This particular system happens to elucidate the social form in question neatly: the commuters gathered at the stop in this way are constituted as a *series*.

In a first take on this notion of series, Sartre refers obliquely to Peano's axiomatic definition of number by means of a successor function rather than through a general definition. If we allow the exception of zero as a starting point, it can be said that *every whole number is the successor of another*. The statement is universal in form, but it doesn't exactly assert a common feature of each, except its difference. Each number, then, is defined, not by itself, but *through all the others*. In the human realm, whatever the mode of ordering, the meaning of being constituted as a member of a series is the same: each is defined not by a common feature, but by being the other of all the others. At the bus stop, this means exclusion: my taking a seat can always mean depriving another of a seat, and every other who is earlier in the series can be the last one

allowed to board, and thereby deprive me. The rule that decides our respective fates—the number on the ticket—is both perfectly clear and perfectly arbitrary, and thus, in following it, we all accept and share the same otherness. In the earlier examples, too, we can see this structure of serial alterity at work. Every deforester is a flood-producer, every spender a devaluer, each is the other of all the others, working against them and himself in his very work, “with his head bent down,” as it were.

Consider, next, the experience of listening to a radio broadcast. Superficially, my behavior resembles the role I take up in turns in normal conversation with others: while they are speaking, I am listening. But there’s a crucial difference: in listening to a broadcast, I am *utterly passive*, even if I am moved to “talk back” or even shout. My speech has no influence over what’s being said, and not just accidentally. A voice on the radio, as such, is something over which I *can* have no influence. Perhaps I can write a letter to the broadcaster or the government complaining about the content. But this has no effect in the moment, and even with sufficient time, it can only have an effect if many, many others also do the same (and if their voices count). I can, of course, turn the radio off or change the station. But this, too, fails to alter what is essentially at issue. Sartre writes:

This purely individual activity changes absolutely nothing in the real work of this voice. It will continue to echo through millions of rooms and to be heard by millions of listeners; I will merely have rushed into the ineffective, abstract isolation of private life, objectively changing nothing. I will not have negated the voice; I will have negated myself as an individual member of the gathering. (272)

What’s really at issue, then, what really makes the bad broadcast unbearable for me as a listener, is this shadowy gathering of other listeners, distant from me, unreachable. I may fear the voice will convince them, and in this, I feel my utter powerlessness. To have the effect I imagine

opposing to that of the powerful voice, I'd have to persuade each of the other listeners *one by one*, in their millions. And I, as another listener, am the same for them. If they are listening to the broadcast that says things I favor, they, too, listen impotently, imagining me, unreachable, in the thrall of the alien voice. Sartre writes: "when ... one listens to the voice in impotent anger, one no longer listens to it *for oneself* ... , but from the *point of view of Others*" (273). Finally, unlike the gathering at the bus stop, this one involves in principle an *indefinite* number of others. Nothing in the voice itself tells me how many are listening or which are convinced; it merely adumbrates a diffuse mass of mutual alterities, a plurality of isolations.

Just as in the case of the bus stop, the radio, as a materialized *praxis* affected by seriality, unites people at the same time that it reflects and reinforces their separation. Each is constituted as the other for all the others and, within the system, within the vast reality that is broadcast media, that is all they can be to one another (indeed, even if they're on the same "side"). In the cases of deforestation leading to flooding, and imports of precious metals leading to devaluation, the counter-finality is clear: both achieved something opposed to what they aimed at and in each case it was clear *what* was to be resisted, even if the *how* of it wasn't. The two cases of collectives, the bus stop and the radio, are more ambiguous. Even in their relative simplicity, they testify to the manifold, ramified, subterranean bonds of our connectedness. That, at least, is not to be undone. But must the mode of our connection be separation and powerlessness? How can these be overcome?

Part 3: The Group, or Immaterial Matter

Sartre starts his examination of the group with an example that is conceptually simple, if historically very specific, the storming of the Bastille. It's the first of a kind of three-part narrativization of the development of the concept of a group, but it isn't meant to have a

universal or foundational status. Nonetheless, because of its relative simplicity, which I will amplify by further simplification, it's a clear example of how a group can come into being despite, and as a reaction against, dispersed seriality. This group is formed through a kind of *fusion*.

In July of 1789, the people of Paris were already being treated as a hostile entity; the city was surrounded by an army, and though the king insisted its presence was for the purpose of protection against roaming bandits, the situation inevitably led to Parisians themselves being fired on and killed. This led residents to loot arsenals for arms with which to defend themselves. Though retrospectively, this would take on the color of a revolutionary act, Sartre insists it should not at first be understood as an organized common action: "It was a collective action: everyone was forced to arm himself *by* others' attempts to find arms, and everyone tried to get there before the Others" (355, my emphasis). They were not unified, but a few key features of their situation soon occasioned their spontaneously acting as one and *thereby becoming one*.

For one thing, the encirclement of the city by troops on the king's orders and the posting of notices of this action throughout the city served to *designate* them as a unit. Next, the electoral assembly sought to form militias within each district of the city, ostensibly for the purpose of avoiding "disturbances," but actually for disarming people who had previously been arming themselves out of their individual fears; this, too, "helped the gathering to perceive its reality as an organised being" (356). Finally, the apparent misinformation by an official which resulted in an angry crowd opening boxes they were assured would contain arms only to find nothing but rags enraged them; it seemed to imply that they were being treated as a unit, only one worthy of being deceived. A practical result of all this was an atmosphere of real unrest in which Parisians would regularly go out into the streets and constitute gatherings, "anywhere, anyhow" (369),

though without any clearly defined purpose. The most frequent result of such directionless gatherings was a march, followed by panic and flight as they were dispersed and pursued. It is in imaginatively describing the experience of someone caught up such a situation that Sartre finds the ground of the crucial transformation.

If I reside in the Quartier Saint-Antoine and my lived experience of residing there is the alienated urban attitude embodied in slogans such as “every man for himself,” and if also I hear rumors that the militias or the soldiers are planning to enter my district and “flush it out,” putting all its residents in danger, I live between two perspectives. The former is the isolated perspective of *chacun pour soi*, and the latter is a sort of unification of the neighborhood as a single object for what Sartre repeatedly refers to as a “third-party” perspective, mediating between the neighborhood and the government, both of which I’d speak of in the third person. But if I happen to be in the street when some shots are fired, and find myself running for my life, and others are running, too, I find myself *serially* engaged in the very action that I simultaneously perceive from the latter perspective as the *organized* action of my neighbors. It is from the practical fusion of these two perspectives—one within the situation and one without, one immanent and one transcendent—that the so-called “fused group” comes into being. I may at first have been trying to do what the others do out of a kind of panicked imitation, in order not to get left behind and be exposed to the pursuers as a single individual, but I end up doing something we can all construe as a *common* action. On this account, proximity, mutual visibility, mortal urgency, and sufficient numbers conspired to make it possible for a group to spontaneously constitute itself as one, in practice, and to discover a new common aim for its fresh unity: to get to the Bastille, disarm it as a center from which the soldiers might attack the district, and use it as a source of weapons, perhaps even as a stronghold.

Again, those who were caught up in this developing and consequential action were helped to adopt this new perspective by both the inescapability of danger and the prospect of success as the crowds grew more numerous. Previously, in seriality, quantity itself was something as if “bewitched”—more gold flowing in made mine worth less, and more people seizing weapons could mean none left for me. Now, in the group, self-endowed with a common aim, the meaning of quantity is transformed into something positive. Here, when anyone—from their unifying third-party perspective—sees others joining the ranks, they are also seen by the others in the same way. Each adds to the other’s strength, again, giving hope of success.

Furthermore, and crucially, anyone with the “totalizing” perspective of the third party, that is, the perspective that sees the group as a *whole* with a common aim, is in a position to *direct* the group. This is in a way a view from without, but it’s not a view “from above” in the sense of constituting an external authority. Indeed, every member of the fused group possesses that perspective and is in a position to direct it, and the group depends on this kind of distributed perception and direction. If I see that we are running into a trap, I may shout “Stop!” as I am stopping, and the group stops. This has the grammatical form of an order, but it’s not quite right to say it compels obedience. Sartre writes: “Who would be obeying? And whom? It is simply the common *praxis* becoming regulatory of itself in some third party” (380). In the serial interchangeability of this role, it seems scarcely different from what Aristotle describes in his *Politics* as “ruling and being ruled in turn.”

This felicitous and spontaneous group is not the last word in common action: the urgency with which it came into being is prone to subside, especially if the group is successful at driving back or dissolving the threats that prompted its unification. While the group was originally constituted as a means to survival, if *it itself* is to survive, it must preserve its efficacy beyond the

moment of obvious threat. This it can only do by transforming itself fundamentally, into what Sartre calls a “statutory group,” by means of an essential act. Each member swears a solemn oath, affirming that he will *continue* to act on behalf of the group, and submitting himself to its jurisdiction if he should not, thereby binding not only himself, but all the others to perpetual solidarity. The group thus survives by making itself a potential wielder of the violence with which it was originally threatened, artificially repeating, as it were, the life-and-death urgency of the moment of its foundation and extending it into the future. This, too, is something like a matter of necessity, in that the group is always liable to lapse into one or another mode of failure and nothing guarantees that it won’t: on the one hand, any member might defect, at any time; on the other, anyone who takes up at a given time the role of directing the group may abuse that authority and use the group for his own ends. The oath or pledge faces both these dangers by placing all on the same level of authority and responsibility to one another. By means of the pledge, the group makes itself its own tool and tries to give itself the status of enduring substance. By the very means it uses—that is, the threat of deadly violence for traitors—the group becomes a potential instrument of terror, even when that possibility is concealed by great affection, or, in the republican slogan, “*fraternité*.” While the resurgence of that implicit threat of fraternal terror in a long-established group would be a sign of decay into authoritarianism, for the group that has just formed itself in response to a deadly threat and for which any betrayal could easily revive that threat, it is understandable in its necessity. What can the surviving group become?

Part 4: Two Futures: Organization and Institution

Just as in Book 8 of the *Republic*, the analysis of types of group here follows a logic that is not historical, but is presented nonetheless as a sequence of transformations: the fused group is

simplest and for that reason, it's easy to understand the statutory group formed by means of the pledge as a kind of transformation of it. In this final section, we'll fit two other forms into this story, organization and institution, and present them as two futures made possible by the pledge.

Having survived the moment of urgency and won for itself the leisure of relative stability, the group has made itself capable of a further transformation, into an "organization." The word itself has a telling ambiguity, naming both an activity of structuring, and the thing itself that is structured. With reference to the first, active meaning, the group whose members have pledged to stay in it is no longer defined by the single urgent and common goal of immediate survival; it can diversify its activity, turn to different tasks, and assign them to different members. This division of labor is in a way given by the overall relation of the group to things, and that's as much as to say that its internal complexity is equivalent to the complexity of its dealings with the world. But this is necessarily a developing and ever-incomplete relation, for reasons we've already seen. And it acquires a new, reflexive character as the second, passive sense of the word "organization" comes into play: the organization, as a particular way of distributing tasks, as something *structured*, is thereby something inertial, something like a materialized *praxis*. Like worked matter that can turn against us, the organization's own structure is something it will forever have to grapple with, insofar as that is something it has made itself responsible for. Let's first consider the active, verbal sense of organization, and then point out aspects of its passive structure that leave it vulnerable to transforming into an institution.

First, the pledge gave everyone in the group juridical power over the others, but that power was negative and abstract: "*Don't do anything* that would go against the group," it says; this is *negative* in that it's a prohibition and *abstract* in that it doesn't specify the "anything against the group" any further. The organization, by contrast, gives a regulatory power that is

positive and concrete, through the idea of each member's having or performing a *function*: "*Do this* that the group requires," it says, positively demanding a particular action. One belongs to the group in so far as one carries out a certain task. This is not so different from Socrates' casual discussion of the minimal, "healthy" city of Book 2, which mostly involves listing a variety of jobs.

Second, in the organization constituted in this atmosphere of mutual regulation of differentiated tasks, rights and duties are not separate. What counts as "my due" is due to me for the sake of our common objective; it's something I demand both *from* the group and *for* the group. I have a right, as it were, to be made capable of carrying out my duty. A specialized job may require specialized training or support. Whatever the group demands, it must demand in a way that does not make my accomplishing it impossible. In *Republic* Book 1, Socrates distinguishes between arts that serve and what he calls the "wage-earner's art," by which the practitioner of one of the other arts procures something for himself, a fee or wage. The doctor who both treats patients *and* receives a fee, he says, practices two arts. To say that, in the organization, rights and duties are not separate is to say that no such distinction is present here. Socrates' reasons for introducing the wage-earner's art are complex, but I'd argue they mostly have to do with responding to Thrasymachus's claim that all cities are exploitative and that what the city says is just is, for the ruled, only ever "the good of another." The organization, by contrast, is not essentially—or better, it is essentially *not*—a situation of exploitation. The fact that it could ever exist is a fact of great historical significance. In the organization, all are equally rulers and ruled: there is no gap, say, between one who organizes and one who is organized; no one accepts their functional role as fundamentally different from that of an organizer. We both have our jobs.

Third, and finally, the organization depends essentially on individual practice, in a specific sense. As a simple example, take a particular position on a team in a well-defined sport; the individual midfielder, say, makes moves that in one sense have their meaning *elsewhere*, that is, in the way they are taken up by the other players on the team to realize the team's common objective. But in another sense, they represent something like a guess that can only be made by someone who sees the field, her teammates, the opposing team, *etc.*, from *her individual position*. Her move, accordingly, should not be a rote performance of a completely determinate function, but an individual *transformation* of the field of possibilities; that is what is really demanded from her, and that means something like a transcendence of function. The team needs not just a midfielder, a goalkeeper, *etc.*, but *good ones*, not the minimum, but *excellence*. All this by way of saying that organizationally differentiated function can only specify in a *general* way what one's job is. It is a hypothetical necessity, never a categorical one, and the choice of means is surrounded with a kind of halo of indeterminacy. To use Sartre's terms, the work of the organized group is a "totalization" and not a "totality": it's a perpetually renewed project of becoming-whole, not a completed project of being-whole. The goal of the organized group is an essentially *open* project. When all goes well, it harmoniously combines the logical moments of universality (through the common objective), particularity (through the differentiated functions), and singularity (through the role of individual *praxis*).

The simple example of a team sport is useful for bringing out this need for individual practice and the free transformation of roles that can occur from moment to moment, in other words, "organization" as a self-structuring action of the group on itself. But the *result* of this activity carried further is something materialized, something inertial, something potentially counter-final. In a more complex and established organization, there are bound to be

disagreements between sub-groups about what to do, and about who or what department is necessary, or adequately staffed, or overfunded, and so forth. While the issues are fundamentally “objective structures of the practical problem that has to be solved,” they can also become subjective tokens of internal division. The group must produce its own ways of dealing with all this, its own organs of mediation, supervision, inspection, something like the “nervous system” imagined in *Republic* Book 5.

Sartre asks us to imagine a high-level bureaucrat appointed to an *ad hoc* position created to deal with a crisis of city traffic. Many distinct goals are at play and the crisis involves how they conflict with one another in the world: there’s a need for parking, but there’s also a need for streets to be open for driving. The specific knowledge required to succeed here is relatively more logistical and combinatorial than others, and any effective solutions will likely involve consequences for many others, indeed, for everyone in the city (grouped or not). In itself, a mediating or even supervisory role like this is no contradiction to the notion of organization; jobs can be differentiated laterally or vertically. But the meaning of those differentiations, initially neutral, tends as though of itself towards two modes of failure: a concentration of unaccountable power, or a disavowal of the moment of individuality. Ultimately, both are rejections of freedom in favor of what we’re calling “institution.”

To the extent that our “traffic czar” is appointed as an expert, he can become identified with and wedded to *his own* solution. His individuality is plainly essential for the role, but that is still the very thing that makes this sort of betrayal a real possibility. Through the pledge, paradoxically, what eludes the member is *being-in-the-group*, in the full sense of being; one who was just a “mode of a substance,” in Spinoza’s sense, would not need to swear an oath not to have a separate reality, but a free person must. When that merely implicit tension comes to the

fore, it can happen that freedom—the very thing the group sheltered, nurtured, and developed—becomes afraid of itself. Free individuality can come to be seen as an obstacle, and the group can imagine itself as originally pure and in need of purification. In the vehemence of punishment towards one who has betrayed the group, Sartre claims, we can see a psychological projection of this imagined purity: “In a traitor, everyone finds ... his own permanent possibility of betraying and being betrayed, and believes he is destroying it forever” (589). In our example, a person in a high-level role can end up giving a shape to the group’s “solution” that belongs to him more than to the group, and may even set ineffective practices and structures in stone. Alternatively, the role could be sacrificial, set up in order to fail in such a way as to deflect blame from others who are wedded to structures that would have to change and from which they benefit. An occupant of this latter position who looks to the future of his career may do all he can to disavow responsibility, to dissociate his individuality from it, perhaps by appealing to putatively objective metrics, rubrics, and standards of evaluation that exonerate him, assuring the public or his superiors that no one could solve the problem as it exists.

Both these failure modes are possible anywhere, but the second can also be prompted by having to be a mediator of a different sort, not in an administrative, but in a “public-facing” role. For itself, the organization may be an ongoing project of totalization; for those outside it, it is a totality. For example, the “users” of a service, such as the postal service, see and often treat the individuals who do the job as inessential instruments, if not simply as obstacles to their freedom. Membership in the group is thus experienced in a different way. If you’re a clerk, someone may say to you “do your job!” but not mean it in the same regulatory way as a sworn group member, a colleague, who is equally subject to such an order from you. Being treated by a customer in this way as a sort of “drone” can have an effect: as a mediator between the group and those outside it,

you can become motivated to seek protection behind the public's perception of your inessentiality. Stated like this, it might sound like a matter of individual psychology or self-confidence. Maybe. But the experience of self-alienation described here can result from doing one's job *as it is defined*. The postal service, after all, is meant to handle *everyone's* mail, and in trying to unify disparate domains fraught with their own conflicting material demands, in being faced with a collectivized public, an organized group can respond to this pressure by freezing, asserting its current material configuration as essential. The motto of an employee at this nexus, their saving word, is: "I'm sorry, sir, but that's our policy."

The organization's self-protective response to threats, again, is to freeze its own self-developed organs, functions, and powers—to transform them into "institutions." To save itself, the community tries to recover lost unity through sclerosis. It becomes a "degraded" group, composed of ambiguously situated persons whose safety is meant to come from the rigid definition of their role, or from their role being shielded from external criticism, or at least from criticism from the sides or below. When a position or a practice becomes uncriticizable by any third party without completely disrupting the whole, the group has frozen into an institutional form. The mutuality of regulatory third parties in the statutory group and in the organization has been lost. In this, the meaning of the pledge is completely altered: it is now mere submission to an untranscendable other, violence without reciprocity. Sartre writes: "The moment of common degradation in which the institution emerges is precisely that in which everyone aims to expel freedom from himself in order to realize the endangered unity of the declining group as a *thing*" (606). And a few pages later: "The institutional system presents itself, by a permanent mystification, in its inorganic-being," in its *thinghood*, "as the real unity of the declining group" (608). At many levels, in small and large ways, but especially and most consequentially at the

most authoritative and most mystified levels of the state and civil society, this kind of degraded system is what human *praxis* has made of itself today. We seem to exist for it, rather than it for us. It's the real thing, and we are only its servants, unless we're among the ever-diminishing number of those to whose benefit it has been carefully bent. If this were the only arrangement that is possible, then Thrasymachus might be right about cities, or the account in Book 8, saying that it will all end in tyranny, might be prophetic. But I think we can understand this self-protective myth of thinghood, this disavowal of freedom, this willed isolation and return to seriality, not as fate or a curse, but as freedom's own product: our "own action," as Sartre puts it, "as it becomes other." If we can understand it in that way, if we can struggle against it, it can never have for us anything like the meaning of destiny. A better world is possible.