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# Betrayal: A Philosophy

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## Abstract

This essay imagines the shape a phenomenology of betrayal would assume at the limits of phenomenology. With Caravaggio's 1602 painting *Cattura di Cristo* for an aesthetic backdrop, I consider the paradoxical structure of betrayal with its interwoven strands of a surplus disclosure and a breach of trust. I go on to elaborate the relation of this complex term, at once positive and negative, to time, conceptuality, and truth. Ultimately, I am interested in how betrayal as a limit of phenomenology, where the coherence of intentionality and its correlations or of intuition and its fulfillments break down, underwrites the very possibility of phenomenological endeavor.

## Keywords

trust – betrayal – time – concept – truth

Betrayal is an exceptionally slippery subject. The first question it raises is: if thinking is meant to be faithful to what is thought, and if, moreover, such fidelity is vital to truth, then how does this apply to betrayal? This initial question is not just epistemic; it is phenomenological, in that it points at a singular breakdown of the noetic-noematic correlation. To live up to the task of thinking betrayal, we would need to allow our subject matter to pervert, to internally displace and turn inside out the dynamic structures of thinking. To be faithful to betrayal (that is to say, to *how* it is or may be thought), it will be necessary to let it unleash its unfaithfulness, above all, its unfaithfulness to itself, to the sense of its strong semantic, thematic, and ideational identity. Now, the experiment I am proposing on these pages is not self-contained: once the floodgates open, the work of thinking and saying, phenomenological acts and the very notion of truth, will change beyond recognition. But, just as betrayal is a

highly contorted, convoluted subject, so a sustained philosophical approach to it ought to be indirect. I will begin, then, by betraying philosophy and turning to a work of art—a certain painting that, through its figures and scenography, conveys much more on the nature of betrayal than do thousands of written pages.

## 1 Hands

Hands are all over Caravaggio's 1602 painting *Cattura di Cristo* ("The Taking of Christ") also titled *Presa di Cristo nell'orto* ("The Arrest of Christ in a Garden": let it be stated already that the image itself betrays the promise of this second title, in that it substitutes an abstract black background for the vegetal elements of a garden). Some are flung in horror, others are clasped together; one holds a lantern, another captures its prey. Then, there are the anonymous hands responsible for the disappearance of the masterpiece and those that recovered it two centuries later, in 1990. Hands uncontrollably conveying an emotional state, pointing out and concealing, apprehending, manipulating, refraining from all doing ...



FIGURE 1 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Cattura di Cristo*, 1602.

Not by chance these exemplary organs of human action are so distinctive here, in a depiction of Christ *handed over* to his executioners and, through them, to his destiny of suffering and redemption. Handing over is the business of hands, of a passage between hands, from one to another. It points out their commerce still before an object is relinquished into the hand or hands of the other and even before the difference between one's own hand and that of the other comes to matter. A generic hand, then, neither yours nor mine and both yours and mine, accomplishes the handover at the heart of betrayal. This is how I want to read—indeed, to inherit—the phenomenological motif of givenness.

The exquisite hand choreography in *Cattura di Cristo* deserves meticulous attention. The hand of Judas embraces Christ's shoulder immediately after the traitor has kissed him, thus identifying him as the person to be arrested. But the Roman official clad in heavy black armour does not grab Jesus alone. His punishing hand stretches out to clutch both the intended target and the "snitch" who has led the authorities to the right spot. The metallic arch of the armoured hand makes up the lower part of the frame that circumscribes the space where the faces of the betrayer and the betrayed meet. The upper portion of this inner frame is thrown into relief by John's red tunic, which flutters in the air in an inverted arch as its owner flees, terrified, from the sordid spectacle. Hemmed in from below and from above, between a detaining arm and an escaping piece of clothing, Jesus and Judas are in a perverse togetherness of betrayal, betrothed to each other with the perfidious kiss. ('Betrothal' is a deliberate word choice: it points at a close relation of betrayal to the question of truth.)

Note that Christ is less encompassed by the figurative frame than the double-crossing apostle. In the moment of his capture, while looking down at Judas' hand, he is already elsewhere, his head moving in the direction John is indicating above. So, an apt title for the painting would have been *The Taking of Judas*. It appears, for all intents and purposes, that the heads of Jesus and Judas, discordant as their positions are, belong to one and the same being, who is contemplating itself and turning away from itself. They are, after all, united by betrayal.

A deep wound, betrayal also forges a bond: that is one of its many paradoxes. Despite the damage it causes to trust, confidence, or solidarity, it remains a relation in the interpersonal and in a strictly phenomenological sense. The perverse coupling of the betraying and the betrayed is a nexus of the intending and the intended, consummated in the act of betrayal, as social as it is phenomenological. Logically and destinally, the agent and the patient of betrayal are tied in a single knot.

To make things worse, the act's effects boomerang to the person who has initiated it: the traitor is, likewise, betrayed in betrayal. At a bare minimum, as a traitor. The surplus of sense in every such act is that, whatever else it achieves, it results in a self-betrayal. Judas betrays himself in handing Christ over to the Roman authorities. He reneges on his commitment, gives up on his desire, exposes the target he indicates to the captors and also, unwittingly, himself as the traitor to his teacher. Destruction and expression, intentional delivery and unintentional insight, will henceforth form the double-stitched seams that hold the handiwork of betrayal together.

It would be imprudent to dismiss as trifling the fact that, now and again, the two hands belonging to a human organism or organization do not cooperate, are not synchronized ("the left hand does not know what the right is doing" [Matt. 6:3]), and undo each other's work. Betrayal stems from two hands, from their varying degrees of dexterity and mastery, from all the inconsistent transactions and slippages between these imperfectly duplicated organs of action. Deconstructive analyses have revelled in such non-coordination. One invariably betrays oneself, even when the two hands are brought together and, their fingers intertwined, signal fidelity to oneself at the price of acting. Holding himself, Jesus is literally "hands off" with regard to the dramatic climax of the scene. In the face of betrayal, his body language suggests, it is futile to act, or, more precisely, the sole meaningful act in response to betrayal is its acceptance, a welcome, however sorrowful.

The traitor's deed feeds off and reiterates past betrayals, some of them co-terminous with life, the material manifestations of which support and subvert, express and suppress vitality. This deed is reactive through and through—hence, the impossibility of acting upon it. That said, betrayal also has a revelatory function: it sheds light on the obstacles and difficulties of translation, transfer, crossing- or handing-over. Betrayal is not an accident that befalls various systems of transmission; it is their normal *modus operandi*, truer than the truth these systems traffic in, imagined as the correspondence of presences and their representations.

To return to *Cattura di Cristo*, the figure holding a lantern on the far right of the painting is a self-portrait of Caravaggio himself. The artist disperses faint light, which incidentally makes his own face and hand visible, behind the traitor's back. He is the betrayer of the betrayer, a role easy to ascribe, in the spirit of metaphysics, to the artistic endeavour as a whole. His hand, raised higher than all the others and at the same angle as John's supplicating limbs, challenges the powerful and seemingly transcendent source of luminosity that emanates from beyond the frame on the upper left. Caravaggio calls upon the viewers to

see betrayal in the light of betrayal, instead of relegating it to the thick shadows of faithfulness and truth—or the Truth irradiating from the opposite corner of *Cattura di Cristo*. I propose that we heed the artist's call philosophically.

The dim glow of the lantern brings Judas' nape out of obscurity; transcendent brightness illuminates his face, especially the forehead. In general terms, betrayal happens behind the back (including that of the traitor) and is experienced as "a stab in the back." Its dorsal light is pitch dark, the other side of the moon, as far as the gaze transfixed by the solar blaze of traditional veracity is concerned, just as, for this same gaze, art is equivalent to the fog of deception. That is why the traitor's nape is lit up by a lantern that also shines on the artist's visage and hand: the artist and the traitor share the light source, with Caravaggio moving the significations of the treacherous sheen back-to-front, to the forefront of art and meaning-making.

Tradition is a mode of transmission, of handover, of passing things and ideas from hand to hand, indistinguishable from betrayal. *La tradition, c'est la trahison*, we might say in French. Modernity's disgust with tradition is a high form of perversion and betrayal, the pretence of handing things over only from oneself to oneself, undistorted, neither receiving anything from the outside nor dispensing anything back to exteriority. But doesn't betrayal already operate between the two hands belonging to the same body? Does handing something over from oneself to oneself not betray the handed over as it traverses the distance between hands? And that is not to mention the tradition *of* modernity, the scene of its ownmost betrayal.

*Cattura di Cristo* portrays a staple figure of betrayal in Western cultures, Judas. As such, he is figured but not figuring, made sense of, while losing the right to make sense, to constitute a world of meanings around himself. To be sure, the figure of betrayal is the kiss that bears his name, with the action and the supreme inaction in *Cattura di Cristo* for its aftermath. In a kiss, the lips, those hands of the mouth, touch the skin of the other, brushing on its surface in silence, giving up on the anatomical articulations saying requires. A sign of love, it is pregnant with betrayal—of speech, above all. The muteness of traitors languishing in Dante's hell is a distorted echo of love's silence.

*Cattura di Cristo* depicts, then, a figure of betrayal. But the arrow points in the other direction, too: betrayal is the figuration of every figure, which it hands over to perception and cognition, to sight and sense. Thinking, including the thinking that animates the reflections you are now reading, is a distant reverberation of betrayal. Political and philosophical modernity condemns figuration—the quintessence of synthetic, imagistic, or imaginative thought—for disturbing pure abstraction and impersonal governance with

what it views as capricious particularity. At the extreme, modernity may be understood as disfiguration of existence in a frantic attempt to do away with the entwinement of expression and betrayal.

Nevertheless, like perceptual and conceptual figures, betrayal is ineliminable. One can do no more than sublimate it, complicating the possibility of recognizing it—and recognizing anything else for that matter—because this sublimation strikes at the discernible outlines of being. Sublimated betrayal stimulates the acceleration of movement along the double-stitched seams that, no longer running in straight parallel lines, wildly diverge and converge again. An organic model is more appropriate to understanding its effects than that drawn from handcraft, once the hand and its work have been consummately disfigured.

## 2 A Double Helix

Represented in spatial terms, the organic model for the operations of betrayal is a double helix. In molecular biology, double helix is the structure of entwined DNA strands, in which nucleic acids are arranged in the so-called anti-parallel manner, running alongside one another, albeit in opposite directions. The molecular genetics of betrayal is reminiscent of this biological structure, with the two twisted strands making a complete turn about their axis every so often. Double-crossing, indeed.

Let us refresh our memory of betrayal's two filaments:

- making manifest, usually despite oneself (e.g., one may be betrayed by one's facial expression, body language, etc. that contradict the overt message conveyed by means of verbal communication)
- renegeing on past commitments to others or to oneself (e.g., by going against one's own principles); letting down; breaching trust.

The first filament reveals something that was supposed to remain hidden; the second is an assault on the relational openness of trust, confidence, or loyalty. The first is Ariadne's thread meandering toward buried, unconscious intentions; the second is an abrupt cut in the tissue of human relationality. The first inadvertently arrives at the truth of a matter; the second gives the lie to behaviour and expectations based on stated principles and patterns of past conduct. These are the instances of divergence, where the grooves between the two strands of betrayal are wide.

Though distant at times, the filaments intersect at crucial points, thanks to their base pairing, and establish communication channels across the grooves. For instance, they have exposure in common, be it the exposure of the betrayed

to unexpected peril or the exposure integral to truth: endangerment or revelation. It is also possible to express a welter of things in letting down and let down in expressing them. René Magritte's series *La trahison des images* ("The Betrayal of Images"), to which his famous "This Is Not a Pipe" belongs, explores this convergence of manifestation and a breach of trust. Viewers must decide whether they believe the image or the caption, or, alternatively, whether the combined textual-imagistic manifestation necessarily lets their interpretative cognitive-perceptual faculties down. If the culprit is the text-image composite, then, at the site of their base pairing, the filaments of betrayal testify to something or someone other than the explicitly identified at present or in the past.

The convergence of strands in the double helix of betrayal puts it on par with signification in general. The sign, after all, points beyond itself. Regardless of what it signifies, it indicates the other, its sense stemming from a complementary relation with other signs in the chain of significations. Signs betray the world as they hand it over to us; they manifest the world and violate our trust in the transparency of its manifestations. Betrayal is the prism through which the world hands itself over to practical interpretations, just as genetic transcription and translation by means of RNA strands dictate the sequences of amino acids within proteins.

Lest we continue believing in the fiction of a "real world" that persists underneath the distorting prism of signification, we ought to come to terms with the idea that the world *is* this prism and that the world's givenness is nothing but its self-betrayal. Genetically, prismatic betrayal mirrors the Kantian *I think*, which implicitly accompanies every subjective representation. Signifying acts are bookended on two sides by *I think* and *it betrays*. Along similar lines, every manifestation has a plurality of the more or less recondite unintended, or unconsciously intended, layers that tether the revelatory workings of betrayal to the sense of letting down. We are betrayed by language, which empowers us to express ourselves and frustrates the very expression it warrants. Like a DNA coil, it consists of sense and antisense, a meaningful sequence and its reverse. This entwinement, the coiling of betrayal's filaments around each other, is the genetic structure of signification, inconspicuously programmed into being and saying. It is only when the ambivalent genetic core of language rises to the surface, entering into direct conflict with the contents it manifests, that betrayal overturns the assumptions and trust at the foundations of truth.

The hand of betrayal makes a considerable contribution to the twisting of its double helix. The Latin *tradere* at the root of betrayal (the composite of the prefix *trans-*, across, and the verb *dare*, to give) is gifting and punishing, the hand extending and retracting in a single gesture. To betray is to dis-close: to open the hand and to close it, to hand something or someone over to sight and

touch, hearing and olfaction, taste and thinking, as well as to scrutiny and, finally, to the enemy. There are no hard and fast boundaries between, on the one hand, the ontological givenness of a world betrayed by its manifestations or of a body betrayed by its dynamic shape and other marks of finitude, and, on the other, an opportunistic, treacherous giving up a person, a secret, or one's own principles. The two "hands," referring to the dominant transmission lines along which phenomena travel, form the double coil of disclosure where leading to ... is a misleading (leading elsewhere than the intended destination) and where, consequently, the manifest does not present itself as what it is, while the nonmanifest (a "change of heart," for instance) presents itself as what it is.

The basic DNA program guiding cells to a preordained outcome is not merely flawed, because it misses its target. Instead, the molecular architecture for strands of nucleic acid is already a glitch, a mutation in itself. This observation applies to the structure of language and to the grammar of betrayal. Philosophies of language that seek to hew meaning into translucent and self-contained units are sorely misguided, led astray, seduced by their desire for logical and definitional clarity. Their idea of truth is the very thing that betrays them. No one appreciated better than Hegel how the mutually exclusive significations of a word—e.g., *to bolt*, *to ravel*, *to sanction*, *to cleave*, and, naturally, *to betray*—that are in the same breath said and unsaid (contra-dicted) itself reflected the dialectical essence of language. The molecular architecture of linguistic expression is the double helix of *X* and *not-X*, its sense and antisense. Attempts to dispose of any one of these strands will mangle the genetics of expression and destroy the communication pathways that exist between the winding filaments in their very divergence.

The gap of betrayal, across which something or someone may be handed over and transported elsewhere, unseals the space of givenness, wherein the world is granted to us and we are delivered into the world. Despite the indisputable fact that beings and events do arrive on the other side, this gap remains unbridgeable. They cross it without crossing it, becoming crossed in themselves as a result—becoming entwined, twisted, coiled. In a word, betrayed. The necessity of betrayal is, to put it in Kantian terms, transcendental. The prefix *trans-*, which Romance languages accentuate in the word and which survives in a truncated version in English, betokens the distance, both physical and metaphysical, between the parties to a handover, such as the inner and the outer in expression or past and present commitments in a breach of trust. They traverse the distance on the sole condition that they abandon their self-identity (the inner becomes the outer and, therefore, not-inner; present allegiances supplant the past), which means that they do not make it intact. Traversal does not quite take place. Everything is betrayed and nothing is



betrayed, since that which was to be handed over is transferred in a totally different shape, when not devoid of any shape whatsoever.

The distance factored into *trans-* shrinks to a proximity if a betrayed manifestation expresses the inner on the skin of appearances and if confidence is violated in the intimacy of a close involvement. Approximation is a semantic ripple of the Greek *παράδιδωμι*, a verb with a wide gamut of meanings, ranging from handing over and delivering, through pledging, committing, and commending, to betraying and abandoning. (The speculative dialectical coincidence of commitment and betrayal in this word is self-evident.) The prefix *para-* hints at being-beside, alongside, near, as much as being-against and contrary to ... Extremes meet only to split and go their separate ways again: the Latin *trans-* signifies a divide that unites the parties standing across from one another; the Greek *para-* indicates a proximity that sets each against the other, creating distance. Minuses are converted into pluses and positive meanings morph into the negative, their strands coiling into a double helix.

What is isomorphic in the Greek and Latin renditions of betrayal—even as the distance with which it operates expands and contracts, akin to the breathing lungs or heart chambers pumping blood—is the act of giving (*dídōmi*; *dare*). In this respect, a question arises: what is given in betrayal, from whom and to whom?

In a manifestation, sense and antisense are given by the world to the world and, therefore, handed over from the world to itself. The mutually exposed surfaces of things, which Maurice Merleau-Ponty scrutinizes in his phenomenology, are its initiators, conduits, and recipients. Betrayal comes to pass between the hands of the world. In renegeing on a past commitment, the traitor and the betrayed (who may be one and the same person) are handed over from the illusion of constancy to the order of time. But, since time and the world are themselves entwined in the Roman *saeculum*, the point of departure and destination, as much as the contents of givenness in the two strands of betrayal, similarly coil around each other. Their separation is already their genetic replication, which will grow in complexity once we take into account how something or someone else than the explicitly given is handed over, passed along barely noticed, smuggled or transported through the twisted, double-crossed transmission lines of betrayal.

Within the order of time, the filaments of betrayal overlap with the contours of the event, unless it is the latter that copies the former. Betrayal and the event are, each, the common and the exceptional occurrences, anything that happens and a happening so singular that it juts out of and disrupts the routine. The relentless givenness of the world is paired with the punctuations of trust breached, confidence withdrawn. Moreover, the world's givenness is

rather thin ice to walk on, considering the shadow of death looming over it, just as, on the obverse, breaks in trust do not so much tear as weave the fabric of (modern) human relations. There is the extraordinary aplenty in the ordinary, in the very fact that betrayed manifestations have managed to arrive at our senses and thinking. There is, by the same token, a dose of the common in the exceptional, the jolts of disappointment and “stabs in the back” turning out to be more and more prevalent. At the intersection of these coiled filaments—should one still insist on transposing particular human qualities onto the anonymous givenness of being (*es gibt; il y a*)—one might spot, in place of an incredibly generous dispensation, the figure of a traitor, of being as betrayal.

### 3 Time

Betrayal is a term of comparison. To state this formulaically: compared to situation A, the ensuing situation A' is different enough to warrant the conclusion that it does not live up to the promise of A. The cognitive judgment that underlies betrayal is applicable to drastically changed convictions, sentiments, loyalties, as well as to expression (whether verbal or not) unfolding in time. In the case of allegiances and trust, the abandonment of previously assumed commitments is straightforward: in situation A, a citizen was devoted to her country; in situation A', she delivered its state secrets to the enemy. But what is the fate of expression in these comparisons?

Every expression takes time to be enunciated, be it just a fraction of a second that elapses before a facial muscle twitches or a little more time that passes before a thought is said or written. The intentionality that animates expression is never the same when it is realized, fulfilled in intuitional presence. Factored into the material, externalized process of signification as a function of its duration, these small betrayals mean that phenomenological investigations cannot be carried out now as they were in the first half of the twentieth century. The fulfilment of intentionality in intuition is actually a nonfulfillment. It betrays-frustrates the original intention in the course of accomplishing that which was intended and, further, betrays-expresses the unstated, nonthematic intentions that went along with it. Far from a lie, nonfulfillment is the temporal truth of expression. In addition to handing materials over to interpretation, one's country to an enemy, or one's living commitments to a fossilized past, one hands all these things over to time. Deconstruction is the thinking of betrayal *sub specie temporis*, which automatically deflates philosophical pretensions to ideal being.

The noncoincidence of situations A and A' that gives rise to the judgment of betrayal is the juncture where the past and the present part ways. The difference at the core of this judgment belongs to the order of time, while having a hand in the production of that very order. Thanks to it, the modalities of the present and the past, the present and the future, and the past and the future emerge as distinct from one another. It should be noted, however, that the jarring divergence of A' from A is not an outcome of haphazardly accumulated changes but a consequence of the handover at the core of betrayal. According to its double-helix genetic structure, handing over is a rupture and continuity in the process of surrendering and passing along something or someone. Both expression and a breach of trust let go of the handed over; the discrepancy is in *how*, in the manner of letting go. The shock, consternation, and anger at the noncoincidence of A and A' have to do with the asymmetry of surrender that prevails over passing along, or, worse yet, of passing along nothing but surrender, abandonment, desertion.

I have already mentioned that betrayal may befall—or, rather, be programmed into—the relation between any two modalities of time. That of the past by the present raises no eyebrows; more than that, it serves as our temporal blueprint for betrayal. But what about the past or the present betraying the future? And is the future, in its turn, capable of betraying anything or anyone?

Betraying the future is more serious and preoccupying than betraying the present or the past. Whereas to betray the past is to fail to stand by one's previous commitments and principles, to betray the future is to forsake the promise of what is not yet. In the former instance, I renege on an already accomplished actuality; in the latter, I fail to honour a possibility. (It will come as no surprise that these two instances participate in the double-helix of betrayal, their strands crossed: I would conceivably betray the future of the past, should I give a posthumous blow to past possibilities, many of them—say, the demand for a substantively just society—utterly relevant outside the original contexts of their enunciation.) By betraying the present, I meddle with its ongoing actualization, not allowing things to ripen, at least on the developmental trajectory they have been following. In every one of its modalities, time is the tray of betrayal, the tray on which beings and events are fleetingly arranged and kaleidoscopically displayed.

The logic of betrayal intensifies when it comes to the future. Still without anything manifest in the open, the future, as projected from the past and the present, is a vague expression, a mere presentiment of what's to come. Its presentiment relies on an imaginative extension of salient tendencies, symptomatic more of current fears and desires than of the imagined period itself. The portraits of the future betray, in the sense of unwittingly expressing, the

features of the time when they have been first sketched, something that holds especially for sundry utopian projects.

An exaggerated projection of the dominant tendencies discernible in the present betrays, now in the sense of showing disloyalty to, the minor currents and tributaries that, taken cumulatively, are capable of rerouting the course of history in unexpected ways. If the future is the temporal apotheosis of betrayal, that is because, despite bits of evidence painstakingly garnered in the present, it is but an ideal intention, its fulfilment vastly different from the merely intended vision. Hypothetically speaking, were the faithful fulfilment of a future-oriented intentionality plausible, it would have still resulted in a colossal betrayal, this time of the future *as* future, refashioned into another present.

Constancy is the temporal antithesis of betrayal. It appeals to an immutable stance, the avoidance of changes in how things stand, irrespective of the passage of time. As an ideal, constancy aims to level the differences between the past, the present, and the future, to confine time to a continuous chain of events that, for all their empirical dissimilarities, are so many variations on the same. With regard to expression, it encourages a sort of selective blindness to the implicit and frequently contradictory messages sent indirectly along the crossed transmission lines of betrayal. But even constancy is not a fool-proof defence against betrayal. Instead of betraying a certain position in time, it urges us to choose the metaphysical betrayal of time as such. Formal logic allows no deviations from the principle of non-contradiction. For it, A is A and A' is not-A without any continuity possible between the two. In its very structure, formal logic betrays time and valorises rupture over continuity within the double helix of betrayal's broken articulations.

Though related to constancy, consistency is more flexible and accommodating of change. At issue in the contest between betrayal and a consistent adherence to something or someone is the magnitude of the difference between situations A and A'. Consistency is, like betrayal, a comparative term to the extent that it allows for small vacillations around the initial state. The question is: what is the nature of difference between the differences each of them admits?

While a consistent attitude tolerates minor deviations from a stable mean, betrayal does away with a fixed point of reference altogether. The change that fuels betrayal is a matter neither of slow development and gradual evolution nor of an abruptly flaring conflict and disagreement. It is the ramification of an about-face, whereby, having committed and passionately embraced something or someone, one proceeds no less passionately to disown, to disavow the betrayed, to hand them over to the implacable order of time. And what is true for interpersonal or political breaches of trust is also true for language

and signification. Every faithful expression is a betrayed manifestation, which contains a more or less concealed about-face in the discrepancy between the consciously transmitted and the unconsciously affirmed. Without exception, expressions are symptoms—indirect, twisted, constitutively distorted displays of what was meant to remain “off stage.”

Rivalling paradigms of time emerge from the confrontation of constancy, consistency, and betrayal. From the perspective of constant being, temporality is a product of fluctuations referring back to the atemporal substance that renders them meaningless. Those who value consistency accept fluctuations in behavioural patterns, but, up to a point, they deem empirical discrepancies irrelevant to the cycles of repetition deduced from these patterns. Betrayal shifts the center of gravity in temporal circularity from cyclicity to a revolution. Its about-face is a turnaround, a reversal, sliding to the obverse side of beings and events, which is why one of the slang terms for a traitor is *turncoat*. Betrayal turns in such a way as to nullify a commitment, a declaration of loyalty, an expression, or else to illuminate their self-nullifying underbelly.

If betrayal touches upon an essential moment in the givenness of being, then its revolutions are also the revolutions of the world, in which we put our trust and which is always primed for an about-face. The world gives itself to itself, circling, circulating, twisting and turning in a constant betrayal and in betrayed constancy. Time is the ever-growing, and ever-decaying, sum total of these twists and turns.

#### 4 Concept

Of betrayal, there can be no concept. For a whole slew of reasons.

First, the concept is the hand of the mind that grasps, seizes, and detains a thing in understanding. Betrayal is conceptualization's countermovement: its hand unclasps, releases, delivers, hands over. Unless it is the other way around and the concept is what opposes betrayal, which envelops it on all sides. Betrayal is the concept's *before* and *after*, a passage from hand to hand that precedes and succeeds the temporary arrest of what the phantom palm holds.

Second, in contrast to the concept, betrayal has no determinate boundaries, no outer edges or limits, no other. If it names in a shorthand how the world reaches us and how we are delivered to the world (therefore, how the world hands itself over to itself, including through us), then where is the place of nonbetrayal? Is it to be found outside the world, in the static theological and metaphysical realities presumably more real than the changeable realm here-below?

Third, accepting in a hyperbolically non-conceptual key, that betrayal is everything, we must agree that it is the normal state of affairs, the habitual condition of being in the world, the default setting of the world. Confidence and the secure grasp of understanding are set up as its provisional negations. Of course, we cannot live without putting rudimentary trust in the world and in others, the trust that forms (or fails to form) on the basis of the infant's first attachment to the world's representatives who are initially commensurate with it, the parents. The concept transposes this phenomenological necessity onto the realm of thought, as it exchanges biological parents for the authority of reason. At its self-critical best, it is nevertheless aware of the hard-won character and the limited scope of its certainty.

So, the starting point for thinking and existence is betrayal: handing over and being handed over without pausing to linger with that which passes from hand to hand. This starting point has staying power; it persists in its perpetual motion and instability. To be born is to be handed over to life and to hand oneself over to life, to be betrayed by it and by its material supports, while intuitively seeking the compensation of trust. Much of one's life will be spent by inertia doing the same thing, namely passing it nonstop from hand to hand (whether one's own or that of the other) and betraying it in acts of living. Overreacting to the hustle and bustle that masquerades as life, conceptualization aims to freeze the frame, to take thinking and existence in and to hold them tight, to capture them, so that the grasped would cease changing hands (the Sanskrit *kapatī* at the root of *capture* and *concept* means the capacity of the hollows of two hands, joined; containing something in both hands). The concept is an elaborate and protracted dream of a new start, another birth, a renaissance resistant to betrayal and defined, literally and figuratively, by holding one's own.

Regardless of these machinations, there is no real break between betrayal and the concept. What is being handed over to me, if only as a tempting but unrealizable possibility of possession, is what I take, seize, capture. The subject pronoun, I, trails behind the object pronoun, me. Capture reacts to captivity, the initial fascination with the idea of securely held property that surfaces from the depths of initial insecurity. Conceptualization and appropriation transpire in the atmosphere of betrayal.

In more prosaic terms, since the reach of betrayal extends to "everything," it also envelops the concept, which pushes against it. Despite itself, the concept with its clasped hands participates in the game of betrayal, where the hand is both open and closed at the zero point of disclosure, of a manifestation and a slipping away. Conceptual grasp delays betrayal on the playing field of betrayal, not deviating by one iota from the rules of what it rejects. The concept keeps things for itself, maintains them within its narrow confines, in the hollow of

its two hands pretending to be one. It refuses to pass them along, but it has no other choice if it wants to *live*. Its apprehension is a prelude to a handover of the property it has arrested simply by claiming that what it seizes *is* property (of the intellectual variety, belonging to the mind, rather than the body). This handover, this betrayal on the crucible of sense and antisense, will expropriate both the concept, dispossessed of its property, and property itself, rid of its status as an ideal object.

From Plato to Hegel, conceptual thought that prides itself on being dialectical (the word has different inflections in ancient Greece and nineteenth-century Prussia) acknowledges the impossibility of reconciling immutable being with finite existence and goes on, immediately, to transform this undeniable weakness into a sublime strength. Its conclusion is the following: for finite beings to keep themselves, they must let themselves go, entrust themselves to the other, become the other through physical or metaphysical reproduction. Self-negation is the surest path to self-preservation; nonbetrayal is retrieved from the abyss of betrayal.

As it embraces everything, and in embracing passes everything along from itself to itself, betrayal has no other. Still, the result is not a seamless totality: expectations are frustrated, expression impregnated with irreducible ambiguity, and the meaning of the act itself redoubled. Incompatible as it is with conceptualization, betrayal is divided against itself, much like the Hegelian concept, which, through successive self-negations, drives dialectical movement. Betrayal is the energy of the concept, its work and counterwork, the potentiality and actuality of conceptualization that abuses, demeans, and ultimately betrays its own energy supply.

If I am permitted to resort to a free translation of a popular Russian proverb, conceptualization chops off the branch it is sitting on. That “branch,” however, is nothing stable; it is betrayal, which is inherently self-undermining. The concept repeats the gesture of betrayal against betrayal: it expresses and reneges on that which expresses and reneges on everything. The fantasy of the concept is that its two minuses would yield a plus, that the betrayal of betrayal would culminate in fidelity, above all, to autonomous reason. But it is just that—a fantasy, or, more precisely, wish fulfilment. Whenever a hand is involved, as it is in conceptual grasp, betrayal is well under way; in other words, there is no hand that doesn’t hand something or someone over elsewhere. A few of its operations (say, letting go of what it holds, or being drawn, magnet-like, to the safety zone of possession) may remain unapparent, but this hiddenness only intensifies the workings of betrayal.

The concept of betrayal as such is self-contradictory. How can one grasp that which is defined by slipping away, by handing over the other and itself, the

betraying intimately connected to the betrayed? It is still in the realm of the possible that betrayal would hand something over *to* the concept. Successful conceptualization is, indeed, an outcome of this operation that delivers bits of the betrayed world to an immaterial clasped hand. At the same time, at the apex of its success, conceptual thought fails to realize that it is but a segment in a much longer sequence of betrayal, the segment that, abstracted from the flow of handovers, asserts its independence and presents that which it has separated from as its countermovement. The standpoint of the concept is irremediably partial, decontextualized and dehistoricized. To conceptualize betrayal is to turn a deaf ear to its truth.

## 5 Truth

In its deepest sense, truth is a matter of commitment, of vows and avowals, of devotion and fidelity. It is either a revolutionary betrothal to what is right or an essentially conservative pledge to uphold things as they are. As a result, truth veers closer to faith and faithfulness than to knowledge. It evokes the strength of a ligature, a bond to being akin to the Spinozan *conatus*, not the indifference of a free-standing fact. With this in mind, betrayal always betrays some truth. Its infidelity to a cause, a principle, a person, a group of people, or a country seems to say *no* to truth itself. Betrayal is disloyalty: the betrayer is untrue to what or whom she or he betrays and, above all, to her- or himself.

Several mutually reinforcing and unarticulated premises bring truth and betrayal into sharp contrast. The idea is that, fixed once and for all, truth cannot survive the cataclysmic event of turning things around; that, just like faith, it connects a believer to the believed or a true assertion to the asserted truth with a straight line; that the ensuing relations or correlations are straightforward; that they are straightforwardness itself, frankness, honesty ... Nothing could be further from the truth than this caricature of truth. The unconscious, for example, is a major complication, a bump on the road where assertions that are entirely earnest at the conscious level mask their exact opposite buried in repressed psychic material. Commitments and fidelities may also clash, forcing us to choose among them and, in choosing, to betray those left out. So, the slogan Isaac Newton added to his *Quaestiones quaedam philosophicae* ("Certain Philosophical Questions") reads: *Amicus Plato amicus Aristoteles magis amica veritas* ["Plato is my friend, Aristotle is my friend, but truth is a greater friend"].<sup>1</sup> Given the phrase "Plato is my friend, but truth is a greater friend," attributed to Aristotle in accordance with his *Nicomachean Ethics*, and

<sup>1</sup> Richard S. Westfall, *The Life of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 25.



given Plato's own pronouncement "Socrates, my master, is my friend, but truth is a greater friend,"<sup>2</sup> betrayals of close (intellectual) relations shape the history of philosophy. Fidelity to an impersonal truth flips, inexorably, into a personal infidelity.

The chain of betrayals that ranges through the entire philosophical tradition, at least in the West, is a serious contender for the title of a universal, of what persists in every context and epoch. Philosophers wrangle amongst themselves as to who betrays their predecessors better: who crisply manifests what the thinkers of the past thought *and* reneges on a commitment to them, to their person or personal system? For Plato, Aristotle, and Newton, the betrayal of their friends, whether alive or dead, is not an about-face but the royal road to truth, or, more accurately, it is a controlled about-face that serves as a precondition for truth. No longer the other of truth, betrayal is a change in fidelities, often turning to another cause, person, idea, etc. with the same degree of intensity and passion as those that marked the commitment to the betrayed. Betrayal's being-untrue-to someone or something is, by the same token, its being-true-to something or someone else.

The dis-closure of truth is a moment proper to betrayal, which, despite our conscious intentions, expresses a hidden underlying state. As a making-manifest, betrayal drags truth out into the open, while maintaining its rootedness in concealment: after all, within its semantics, resolute expressiveness is coupled with a breach of trust. That, too, is a metamorphosis of truth that exceeds the bounds of indicative correctness and is faithful to how things are in their unmitigated complexity, notably open and closed, interlaced with and cut off from one another. It turns out that truth is fidelity to the infidelity of things, their temporality and worldliness, *their secularity*.

On its negative side, betrayal is the outcome of broken trust, of frustrated faith. One cannot have been betrayed without first having had confidence in the future agent of betrayal. The thought that this prior confidence has been misplaced breaks one's trust, not to mention one's heart. Isn't faith inherently frustrated, though? Were it not, it would have been not faith but certain, indubitable knowledge. Now, indelible, irreducible frustration means that betrayal is the truth of faith, the truth of truth itself.

The link between truth and betrothal, for its part, goes a long way toward explaining the fixity (solidity, steadfastness, stability ...) the metaphysical tradition has projected onto its fetish of verity. The question of truth crops up in a monogamous affair of a thinker with a thought. Heidegger formulates the idea in a concise poetic fashion in his *Poetry, Language, Thought*: "To think is to

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2 Paul Shorey, *Platonism: Ancient and Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1938), 239 n16.

confine yourself to a / single thought that one day stands / still like a star in the world's sky."<sup>3</sup> The bond of a thinker and a thought is to be jealously guarded, and this jealous guardianship amounts to truth. Anything short of your confinement to the one thought is betrayal, the betrayal of thinking. But what if betrothal were excised from the social institutions and conceptual structures of monogamy? Would truth not become more playful, flexible and promiscuous, wavering, swerving in multiple directions at once, taking shape in and as this swerve?

Even within conceptual monogamy and monotony, much of truth is actually distributed between a faithful betrayal and a betraying faithfulness. The former refers to the handover of being or knowledge in philosophical, religious, cultural traditions and in translations, be they of languages or concepts. The latter has to do with the often involuntary expressivity, the becoming-manifest of what was meant to remain latent.

Faithful betrayal is the *modus operandi* of traditions and translations. These transmission mechanisms hand materials over and launch them into the future with the pure intention of reproducing things (or meanings and the institutions they sustain) as they are, and so of obliterating the futurity of the future, its radical difference from the present and the past. In doing so, they betray time in time, immanently. Their betrayal is, nonetheless, a priori thwarted: the very act of a handover twists that which is handed over and betrays what is entrusted to it, albeit with the optimistic expectations of maintaining fidelity to the original. The truth that may be distilled from traditions and translations thus consists in a series of faithful betrayals that twist the transmitted content more thoroughly, the more hands and handovers it goes through.

A betraying faithfulness is the truth of a symptom. The intention behind it is, from the get-go, "impure": whether it is a person, a political system, or a set of beliefs, certain desires, fantasies, attitudes, fundamental commitments, and so forth are kept under wraps, in obscurity. These may come to light in a surprising manner, catching us off-guard. Here, faithfulness is equivalent to phenomenalization, to the inscription on an expressive surface (a body—particularly facial expressions or gestures; body language—cultural productions, legal statutes, etc.). The emergence of the concealed, however, is never direct; the symptom that betrays the repressed is its concave or convex mirror image. In expressing forbidden fantasies or desires, it distorts them to such an extent that whatever spurred them is betrayed in the sense of being given

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3 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 4.

up. The symptom keeps the secret while transmitting forbidden materials, disclosing, and, therefore, instantiating the dynamics of truth itself.

The possibilities of faithful betrayal and betraying faithfulness that give room to the swerve of truth unfold between the extremes of faithful faithfulness and betraying betrayal. Faithful faithfulness is the idiotic naïveté of thinking that, so long as I don't lie, I will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. This sentiment belongs to the realm of what Hegel terms "honest consciousness," unable to step outside or behind itself, to separate from and relate to itself as a self-consciousness. In and of itself, such separation would disturb the idyll of honesty: being true to oneself in a self-conscious manner raises the question *to which self?* I am thus called upon to take sides, to choose between "me" and "myself" (that is, between the truth of "me" and the truth of "myself"), and in so choosing, to betray the one or the other.

Amplifying the betrayal factored into acts of self-expression, there is the problem of the word *I*, upon which Hegel also chances in his *Phenomenology*. A vacuously universal and abstract personal pronoun is charged with the task of conveying what is most singular and idiosyncratic about me. In language, the first act of betrayal is saying *I*, manifesting and renegeing on myself, without the luxury of falling back on a better, authentic way to express oneself. Faithful faithfulness knows none of this, which means that it betrays itself without knowing it—unlike self-conscious insight, aware of its self-betrayal.

A betraying betrayal is, not surprisingly, more ambiguous than its naïve counterpart. On the one hand, it seems exceptionally malicious because of the deliberate element the repetition of the word stresses. Stripped of any vestiges of faith, fidelity, or trust, it is a betrayal that is thoroughly cynical and lucidly nihilistic, not holding onto the fetishes of truth, and, in fact, not holding onto anything at all. On the other hand, the imperfect, altered repetition of the word—first as an adjective, then as a noun—suggests that something else is afoot. This *something* is the gathering of two meanings of betrayal into the same expression: a manifestation of the latent sense that breaches trust, or a breach of trust that manifests a latent reality. If so, then a betraying betrayal is infinitely closer to truth than faithful faithfulness.

Consider, finally, a simple pragmatic notion of truth—that of releasing a thing to its multi-functionality, letting it do what it is supposed in myriad ways it can. In keeping with this notion, the truth of betrayal lets things betray themselves, and the many ways of doing it boil down to two primary modes: expressing an underlying condition or bringing the obscure to light, and renegeing on past allegiances or breaching trust. Pragmatic truth is concerned with action and its effects; the effects of betrayal, however, are at loggerheads with one another, bearing in mind that expression is affirmative and a breach

of trust negative. Riven, betrayal fractures truth, such that this fracturing *is* its truth. It is not equal to itself due to the divergence of its meanings and effects. And yet, the non-identity of betrayal sanctions the crossing of its formally contradictory connotations. Manifestation affirms latent contents that have been negated and even repressed; a breach of trust negates the confidence that has been affirmed and even celebrated. For, when betrayal betrays itself, there is no end to the about-faces of pragmatic truth, coiled around its axis.