Laurens ten Kate

Strange Freedom

Liberal Religion and the Play of Imaginaries[1]

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

Without an external giver, like God, the Nation, or an ideological system, the sense of the world has to be formulated and enacted by humanity itself. This is typical of the modern era, and one of the difficult challenges imposed on the modern self. In this study, the starting point is the hypothesis that liberal religion, as a non-dogmatic and non-universalist undercurrent in the plurality of modern religious traditions, can be seen as a possible response to this challenge. The author states that this undercurrent represents not only a specific spiritual community, but a condition in which every modern human partakes: he formulates this as the condition of *sensus liberalis*.

In order to analyze this condition, a theoretical lens is developed that works with a new concept of freedom: a 'strange' freedom already addressed by Albert Camus in the 1950s, which engages a new insight into creation as imagination. The author makes use of the current theories of social imaginaries, like in Charles Taylor's work, of axial theory, of Hannah Arendt's theory of action, and of the deconstructions of the relation between secular modernity and religion by Jean-Luc Nancy and Peter Sloterdijk.

Imaginaries are the spaces or 'worlds' created by people, but these spaces create their creators in return. In this interplay, freedom appears beyond negative or positive liberty. Nietzsche's hymn on the "Three metamorphoses" of humanity in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is used to clarify this complex dynamic of playful imagination.

DEUTSCH

Ohne einen äußeren Geber, wie Gott, die Nation oder ein ideologisches System, muss der Sinn der Welt von der Menschheit selbst formuliert und in Kraft gesetzt werden. Das ist typisch für die Moderne und stellt eine der schwierigen Herausforderungen für das moderne Selbst dar. Ausgangspunkt dieses Beitrags ist die Hypothese, dass eine freisinnige Religion, verstanden als nicht-dogmatische und nicht-universalistische Unterströmung in den pluralen religiösen Traditionen der Moderne, als eine mögliche Antwort auf diese Herausforderung betrachtet werden kann. Es wird dargelegt, dass diese Unterströmung keine spezifische spirituelle Gemeinschaft repräsentiert, sondern eine Bedingung, an der jeder moderne Mensch teilhat, formuliert als die Bedingung des sensus liberalis*. Für deren Analyse wird eine theoretische Sichtweise entwickelt, die mit einem neuen Konzept von Freiheit arbeitet: einer ‚fremden' Freiheit, wie sie bereits in den 1950er Jahren von Albert Camus thematisiert wurde, die eine neue Perspektive auf die Schöpfung als Imagination entwirft. Der Autor bedient sich dabei der aktuellen Theorien sozialer* Imaginaries*, wie im Werk Charles Taylors, der Axialtheorie, der Theorie des tätigen Lebens von Hannah Arendt und der Analysen der Dekonstrukion der Beziehung zwischen säkularer Moderne und Religion von Jean-Luc Nancy und Peter Sloterdijk.*
Imaginaries *sind vom Menschen geschaffene ‚Welten', doch diese Räume erschaffen im Gegenzug auch ihre Schöpfer. In diesem Zusammenspiel entsteht eine Freiheit [*freedom*] jenseits von negativer oder positiver Freiheit [*liberty*]. Zur Verdeutlichung der komplexen Dynamik des Spiels der* Imaginaries *wird die Rede „Von den drei Verwandlungen" in Friedrich Nietzsches* Also sprach Zarathustra *herangezogen.*

BIOGRAPHY

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KEY WORDS

Hannah Arendt; Albert Camus; creation; freedom; liberal religion; Jean-Luc Nancy; Friedrich Nietzsche; play; social imaginaries

1 Opening: From Camus to Neoliberalist Freedom

In 1954, the French writer and philosopher Albert Camus gave a lecture in the Remonstrant Church in The Hague. The church was rented for the jubilee anniversary of the Booksellers Association of The Hague, and it was packed, fuller than during most services. The lecture, entitled "De kunstenaar en zijn tijd" ["The Artist and His Time"], has a fascinating history. The text was never found in Camus' estate and had been long forgotten. But when the booksellers celebrated their next 50-year anniversary in 2004, a copy of Camus' lecture was unexpectedly discovered in the dusty archives and then translated into Dutch and published in the literary journal *Raster*.[2]

Camus was the odd man out in the fashionable existentialism of that time. His book *The Rebel* (1951) got trashed in *Les Temps modernes*, the existentialists' home journal, and Sartre's attacks on Camus' philosophy were devastating. In his lecture in The Hague, Camus diagnoses the role of art in post-war European societies. But his argument is primarily a concentrated treatment of freedom, in which he tries to position himself over against his existentialist critics. For Camus, freedom is not so much the freedom to engage with the "project" we call history – a history in which Sartre had willingly assigned himself a leading role. Instead, freedom is first and foremost an activity of creation, and this creating activity has something strange about it: it requires engagement in the world precisely by means of disengagement.

"How can this strange freedom of creation survive in the midst of so many ideological police forces?" (Camus 2004, 156) This is the question Camus raises at the beginning of his lecture. He argues that freedom is an activity of creation because it "creates its own order." (Camus 2004, 167) Freedom does not engage *a priori* with the existing order in order to change or improve it. Freedom creates something completely new and unexpected *within* the existing order, and this requires both detachment and discipline. The freedom Camus seeks is thus not estranged *from* the world; rather, it brings the strange *into* the world. Camus here touches on a point that has become increasingly important in contemporary theory of art, such as in the work of the Austrian philosopher Konrad-Paul Liessmann. For Liessmann, freedom points to the "asocial" and "ruthless" nature of modern art (Liessmann 1991). Art should not be socially relevant or economically profitable, an idea that is completely foreign to today's art policy.

1 Parts of sections 1 and 2 of this article are adapted and translated from my inaugural lecture in 2016, *De vreemde vrijheid. Nieuwe betekenissen van vrijzinnigheid en humanisme in de 21ste eeuw* [*Strange Freedom: New Meanings of Liberal Religion and Humanism in the 21st Century*], Amsterdam: Sjibbolet 2016. Parts of sections 3 and 4 are adapted and translated from my "Sacraliteit en seculariteit. Over de complexe relatie tussen humanisme en religie" ["Sacrality and Secularity: On the Complex Relation between Humanism and Religion"], in: Coene, Gily / Van den Bossche, Marc (eds.), *Vrij(heid) van religie* [*Free(dom) from Religion*], Brussels: VUB Press 2015, 45–82; and from my "The Play of the World: Social Imaginaries as Transcending Spaces – from Taylor to Nietzsche," in: Alma, Hans / Vanheeswijck, Guido (eds.), *Social Imaginaries in a Globalizing World*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2017, 119–139.
I am very grateful to Paul Rasor for his contribution to the translation.

2 Camus 2004. All translations P. Rasor.

But perhaps we can trace Camus' humanist vision back to the ancient mysterious Christian idea: "be in the world but not of the world."[3] We see this paradox in Camus' poetic plea to understand freedom as:

> *"[an] eternal tension between beauty and pain, between love for people and the absurdity of creation, between unbearable loneliness and the deadly tiresome masses, between rebellion and consent. And on this narrow level [...] every step is an adventure, an extreme risk. [...] But in that risk [...] lies the freedom of art. A difficult freedom, one that seems rather like the discipline of an ascetic? So it is."* (Camus 2004, 167)

"How can this strange freedom of creation survive in the midst of so many ideological police forces?"

Such a strange concept of freedom was met with fierce contempt in 1950s Paris. The "police forces" Camus speaks about are not only the politico-economic powers of capitalism and communism, but certainly also those of the existentialist movement itself. The arrows of all these powers are aimed at both detached art and detached philosophy.

The ideologies Camus refers to have long since disappeared, or at least have been transformed. The Cold War leading to an Iron Curtain between ideologies and their political embodiment in diametrically opposed state economic structures; the ever-pervasive role of the churches in social life, at least in Western Europe; the energy and discipline of the post-War reconstruction period—this was the ideological world of my parents, driven by a forward-looking spirit. After the repression and terror that had colored the lives of those who had lived through the war, their experience of a new freedom involved speaking as little as possible about freedom. Theirs was a negative freedom: to be freed from absolute lack of freedom and make a fragile new start in history; you had to accept your freedom and – most importantly – not stir up problems by asking questions. But that is precisely what Camus did in his lecture.

Strange Freedom and the Market

Today, more than sixty years later, a large number of Europeans are freer than ever, and we smile at the narrow-mindedness of the 1950s. But have we really become less ideological in the 21st century? If so, how? And are we freer? That is one of the central questions of this article.

3 See, for example, John 18:36, where Christ presents his preaching in the world as a 'kingdom' that is not of the world.

Despite the "end of the grand narratives," the large-scale stories and interpretive frameworks that help us navigate our lives,[4] our continent seemingly becomes more and more like a fort. The freedoms of post-War Europe are under pressure. And the blame cannot be placed on refugees, let alone Muslims. Rather, the cause of this crisis can be found in one of the ideologies Camus referred to, which has survived and has now achieved a complete monopoly: that of the world as a neoliberal market where every person is the entrepreneur of his or her own existence.

The world as a neoliberal market: functionalizing, formalizing, minimalizing and deculturalizing the public space, the public order and public services.

It could well be that this neoliberal view of freedom is precisely what is gradually undermining the quality of life of the public space today, the *res publica*. I am referring to the functionalizing, formalizing, minimalizing and deculturalizing[5] of the public space, of the public order and public services – education, health care and communication, for example – as these are carried out by a retreating government. This is an enormous problem, perhaps the most difficult and dangerous problem of our time. How does this problem relate to the theme of freedom, and to freedom's alleged strangeness?

The call for another sort of freedom is more relevant than ever.

The call for another sort of freedom, one that Camus calls "creating," is more relevant than ever. Can his question help us reach a new understanding of freedom, one that is not completely entangled in the freedom of the market? Why did Camus call the freedom he sought a *strange* freedom? Because freedom brings us face-to-face with the strange in the world, in ourselves? In order to reflect further on the relationship between freedom, strangeness, creativity and the world, I will draw on thinkers that can offer different approaches beyond Camus: Charles Taylor, Peter Sloterdijk, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Hannah Arendt. Their thinking opens up the realm of play and imagination as vital features of freedom, marking freedom's strangeness.

Before we get to this discussion (in sections 3 and 4), I aim to demonstrate to what extent the *liberal-religious traditions* emerging in the modern era shed new light on the problem of freedom sketched out above.

4 On the postmodern collapse of grand narratives, see Rasor 2005, 63–64.

5 See, for example, Groeneweg 2016, 12: "The [neoliberal] belief in a free relationship with culture evokes the illusion that we are independent of cultural conditioning. […] That is the trend that leaves us blindly at the

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2 The Liberal-Religious Condition

The Question of Liberal Religion – The Question of Humanism

What is liberal religion? The unique Dutch word *vrijzinnigheid* (the standard English translation is 'liberal religion') provides the underlying structure for my argument. It is made up of two root words: *vrijheid* [freedom] and *zin* [sense]: *vrij-zin-nigheid*. Before we go into a philosophical analysis of these two words, first a brief historical excursion on liberal religion as part of the colorful landscape of modern worldview trends.

Liberal religion stands for an undogmatic and inclusive Christianity.

Liberal-religious groups and movements have flanked the dominant religious traditions throughout the modern period, and they have a fascinating history. It extends from the Mennonites and Remonstrants, who arose in the early Dutch modern period, to the heyday of liberal religion in the 19th century: the emergence of the free congregations in the Netherlands, and the Unitarian and Universalist churches and religious humanists in the United States. An organized humanist movement also arose in the Netherlands during the 19th century, partly in relation to liberal religion. In the Netherlands today, liberal religion is understood mainly as a progressive variant of Protestantism, although liberal-religious movements are also found in the Catholic church, especially after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Liberal religion and humanism can be understood only in the context of their varied relationships. For example, humanists and liberal-religious Protestants joined each other in the pacifist struggle at the beginning of the 20th century. And after World War II many liberal-religious believers left their small church communities and became members of the Dutch Humanist League.

Liberal religion thus stands for an undogmatic and inclusive Christianity, one that does not present itself as the only true religion. It is sometimes inspired by Eastern forms of spirituality such as Buddhism. Liberal faith emphasizes the creativity and responsibility of the individual believer. Indeed, throughout the modern era, the debate over free will was an important factor in the tensions and breaks with the mainstream orthodox churches. Liberal-religious movements also originated in resistance to feudal and clerical authorities, with their hierarchical organizational structures, and in opposition to the absolute monarchy with which ecclesiastical power

mercy of the complex manipulations of the modern culture industry, in the delusion that we should be the 'free' users of culture." (Translation P. Rasor)
Groeneweg compares the neoliberal marketing of culture with the ways in which radical Islam becomes disconnected from its own cultural foundation, a process that is analyzed in detail by French political scientist Olivier Roy in *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways* (Roy 2013). I endorse not only the possibility but also the necessity of this comparison.

was connected in the premodern period; the 15th and 16th century Anabaptists are the key example here.

However, I do not want to limit myself specifically to organized liberal religion in my exploration of the aspect of *zin* [sense] in the term *vrijzinnigheid* [liberal religion]. I am seeking a broader perspective, one I refer to as the *condition of sensus liberalis*. By this I propose a variation on Kant's concept of *sensus communis.* The condition of *sensus liberalis* is characteristic for late modern culture, and in particular for the era of increasing globalization after the Second World War. It pinpoints the new human 'condition' in which people are basically *free* [*liber/liberalis*] to give *sense* [*sensus*] to their lives. *Sensus liberalis* corresponds with the Dutch term *vrijzinnigheid* explained above. I therefore propose to take the Dutch term literally; a literal meaning that is obviously lost in the English translation of 'liberal religion'. Conceptualized as *sensus liberalis,* liberal religion is not primarily the choice of a particular life philosophy or worldview. Rather, it is a *situation* which everyone is part of to a certain extent, and to which everyone must be in relation to: the situation that the sense of life, the world and history is no longer given to us in advance or provided from beyond the human world – by God, the sovereign ruler, the political leader, or the party. On the contrary, modern humans must search for their own sense and fashion their own identities. An important consequence, and key to my following argument, is that that sense of existence, the sense of being in the world, and ultimately, the sense of the world thus becomes a permanent *question* instead of an answer (Nancy 1997).

The sense of existence becomes a permanent *question* instead of an answer.

This condition of *sensus liberalis* is analyzed and interpreted extensively in current literature. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor calls it the "immanent frame" of "the secular age." This "frame" is not found in the slow disappearance of religion, but rather in the emergence of new and unexpected connections between immanence and transcendence. (See Taylor 2007, esp. part V, "Conditions of Belief.")

In the liberal condition, everyone participates to a certain extent, whether one is orthodox or heterodox, conservative or progressive. Some scholars, like Jürgen Habermas, have argued that social, economic and cultural life today is characterized by a "new obscurity." (Habermas 1986) With this he means the impossibility to have a clear and well-defined vision of the sense of the world. This obscurity implies that sense becomes synonymous with

search or quest – with a fundamental not-knowing. This openness towards inquiry into the core values of human existence is something liberal religion shares with contemporary humanism. Both articulate and embody the condition of *sensus liberalis.* If liberal religion raises the question of sense, then humanism raises the question of humanity. Both questions are closely intertwined. One who asks what a human being really is unavoidably asks about the sense of human existence. Humanity thus becomes a question to itself. That is to say, modern human beings must invent themselves, and they must do so again and again, differently each time.

How to endure this 'being questionable'?

The fact that many people today no longer have a clear answer to the question of humanity's role, meaning, and purpose is perhaps the greatest challenge for humanism in our time. This fundamental uncertainty, the very complexity of the question of humanity – what do we actually mean when we say human? – in other words, the question of how to endure this 'being questionable', how to accompany it, to provide it with words, images and rituals, and so to maintain a liveable life, this is where the future of humanism *and* liberal religion lies in the 21st century.

Living on a Planetary Scale

The condition of *sensus liberalis* has fairly old roots: recent theories of the 'axial age' claim that it began around the last millennium B.C., in the Greek and Roman world, in Buddhist Asia, in prophetic Judaism, in Zarathustra's Persia, in Confucius's China.[6] In the 'axial turn' from the world of polytheism and myth, from gods manipulating human existence, from fate and givenness towards a world of reason and human emancipation, humanity becomes a question in and to itself (Jaspers 1953, part I, ch. 1–5). In the axial age the *problem* of sense emerges as one of the central subject matters of philosophy, religion and art. I consider that axial theory helps us retrace the birth of *sensus liberalis,* and hence liberal religion.[7]

But *sensus liberalis* has certainly undergone a radicalization in the Post War world. In the last half century, the process of globalization has become overwhelming and almost unstoppable, not least through innovations in media and digital technology. Humanity faces the unprecedented task of creating new forms of coexistence on a planetary scale, while not so long

6 See for a critical survey and treatment of this theory Bellah/Joas 2012.

7 See for a detailed evaluation of axial theory also Kate 2014. The axial age is still treated as a specific period (first millennium B.C.) by Jaspers. However, the majority of scholars nowadays consider it to be a continuous process, running through the emergence of Christianity and Islam, through the Middle Ages, and still at work in (late) modernity.

ago local or national regulations were sufficient. Our 'symbolic cages' are thrown open one by one whether we like it or not, a process that exceeds the reach of human capacities.

Globalization is not something we do; rather, it happens to us – and we have to take it seriously and try to steer it as best we can. That is the message of Sloterdijk's captivating essay *You Must Change your Life* (2013): in a world that has become impossibly large and complex, humanity must continuously recreate itself. Humanity is characterized by an "autoplastic constitution", Sloterdijk states (2013, 110). This is also picked up in the subtitle of his essay *On Anthropotechnics*. Human beings work on themselves, always searching; they are their own "self-technique" or "self-practice," as Michel Foucault called it (1998). Here too, humanity is anything but an answer: Humanity *is* the search for itself – a strange paradox, for such an assignment would mean that humanity 'is' nothing in itself. It lacks essence. Camus would confirm this and draw the conclusion that precisely because of this lack, humanity is free – a strange freedom.

3 Why is Freedom Strange? On Creation and Imagination

The freedom that humanity appropriates since the axial age is a creating freedom, as Camus calls it. Creation appears in a double meaning here: the first is one of objectification, the second of subjectification. Firstly, I create the world and make it into *my* world, and secondly, I create myself *in* this world. In this double movement, sense is shaped, always temporal. The attribution of sense is thus essentially embedded in a creational act. One gives sense to the world, but this world then becomes a place to live – it returns sense to us. Sense is not only a donative gesture (we give sense to...) but also simultaneously a donation, a gift.[8]

Hence, creation is a particular and remarkable type of action: not the making of a product by a producer, or, philosophically put, of a subject remaining external to the object subjected to it, but a strange interplay between subject and object that in the end renders problematic this opposition proper.

Beyond Negative and Positive Liberty

The freedom explored here does not mean the modern liberty to realize the self through self-assertion. Thus, strange freedom is in conflict with

8 This is also the structure of the gift as described by Jacques Derrida in his *Given Time* (Derrida 2017). Jean-Luc Marion adopts a similar schema but rephrases it in the ontological terminology of being (cf. Marion 2002).

the ideal of autonomy. The modern self wants to constitute itself via the other – the world. In other words, it wants to become what or who it always already was. Its identity is pre-existent. This logic is at work in the popular slogan 'become who you are'.[9] The modern project consists of finding your 'proper', 'true' self. Taylor calls this the "buffered self": the self that, by subjecting alterity to its identity, closes itself from any outside (Taylor 2007).

In the creating freedom sought by Camus, I am not a self; this 'self' still has to be created *in* the realm of freedom.

In the creating freedom sought by Camus, I am not a self; this 'self' still has to be created *in* the realm of freedom. But this presupposes that the self is only free if it loses itself, gives itself away or puts itself at stake. Or rather, since these formulations still presuppose a subject that loses, that gives, that puts at stake: the self is only free if it stops being a self. In Hegel's phenomenology these two modalities of the self – the self-constitutive self and the self that loses itself in estrangement – are both present and thought of in a dialectical complexity.

This freedom escapes the classical debate on negative and positive liberty, which continues from John Stuart Mill via Isaiah Berlin to the young Taylor.[10] Negative liberty is being free *from.* It marks the absence of external obstacles to realize myself. The political side to this is that negative liberty engenders individualism considered as a basic democratic value: to liberate oneself from manipulation and ultimately repression. Positive liberty is being free *to* or *toward.* The self still remains in charge but now enters into relation with the other: the world and the other humans with which that world is filled. The other is no longer seen as an obstacle, but as an entity that only comes to life through my free, positive action, according to my capabilities. It is the liberty to fulfil an ideal, or to bring a project to a successful result. Not the self is the goal here, as in negative liberty (I want to be able to be myself), but the world outside the self.

As stated above, the creating freedom puts these two modes of liberty under pressure. How?

The Meaning of Social Imaginaries

An answer to this question may be found if one realizes how creation coincides with imagination. I will have to leave aside here the immense scholar-

9 Although this slogan is derived from Nietzsche's work, we will see shortly that Nietzsche, e. g. in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, seeks a very different understanding of freedom and humanity.

10 See John Stuart Mill's well-known *On Liberty* (1859), Isaiah Berlin's equally influential *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958), and Charles Taylor's lesser known "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" (Taylor 1985).

ship on contemporary 'visual culture', the domination of image over text, the impact of media and digitality, etcetera. One aspect of this visual culture is that the 'visual' appears as and works as *imaginaries.* The concept of imaginaries points at the fact that images are more than objects the modern self produces: they are active themselves, they 'do' something with us. Our creative act to imagine, to make an image, is always returned *by* the image: by the image that creates something itself. An imaginary is, in this specific sense, an image that becomes active. The freedom of creation as imagination brings about the image that becomes something the self cannot control. The image is mine – I have created it – but at the same time it escapes me. This is the strangeness of freedom.

An imaginary is an image that becomes active.

Taylor (2004; 2007) adopts the theory of *social* imaginaries, following the research of Benedict Anderson and Cornelius Castoriadis.[11] The addition of 'social' does not primarily refer to societal factors, but is to be understood on an existential level: as *shared* imaginaries. Imaginaries are, as active images, best analyzed as *spaces*: as imagined spaces that become temporary *worlds* to dwell in. These image-worlds come to the fore, for instance, in the Facebook pages millions of people create, maintain and... inhabit. In media studies, Facebook is often compared to a country, albeit a virtual one: its number of inhabitants exceeds that of China.

Social imaginaries are shared, hybrid and unstable imaginary spaces in which people give sense to their lives.

Social imaginaries are shared, temporary, hybrid and unstable imaginary spaces in which people give sense to their lives, always in contact with others. They can be spaces of recognition and harmony, but also spaces of contestation (Castoriadis 1987).

The grand ideological systems Camus refers to in 1954, which give sense to the world, have to make way in our time for these countless, finite and contingent spaces of sense and imagination. According to Taylor, if one aims to come to an understanding of the 'secular age' and of the ways in which worldview traditions, whether religious or non-religious, transform themselves in infinite imaginaries – if, in my own terms, one aims to understand the condition of *sensus liberalis* – then the study of social imaginaries becomes a central task.

11 See Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983), who applies his theorization of social imaginaries to forms of nation-building; and Cornelius Castoriadis in his *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Castoriadis 1987), who rather views imaginaries as 'spaces of contestation' in a political but also cultural-psychological meaning. Taylor elaborates on his own contribution to the theory in *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Taylor 2004) and in *A Secular Age* (Taylor 2007), esp. ch. 4.

Within the enormous and multi-faceted research on imaginaries I intend to stress one theme that is relevant for my inquiry into the strangeness of creating freedom. This theme is summed up as follows: the imaginary spaces belong to the immanent world, they are results of human creation... and yet they transcend us in the same dynamic of imagination. They are familiar and strange at the same time.

Acting and Being Acted

Imaginaries are not objects, they are spaces that envelop people. They are worlds to live in. People do not simply *have* imaginaries as if they were the norms, values and truths we hold, shaping our identities. They are not simply the tools with which we determine the sense of the world. People *do* imaginaries, and in this doing something strange occurs: the object of our deed transforms itself into a subject... by enveloping us, by offering us a place to live in. A complex dynamic of acting and 'being acted' reveals itself here. Precisely in this twilight zone between active and passive resides the transcendence of the world; that is to say, not of *another* world that would transcend the *hic et nunc*, but of this world as immanence, in as far as this world consists of a plurality of imaginaries – of worlds in images, symbols, narratives, rites, practices, habits, words, metaphors, etcetera – worlds that we create and that create us in return.

People *do* imaginaries.

I will give just a short example, hardly surprising and maybe a bit too obvious... We use our smartphones – we design them as our personal digital environment, downloading our preferred apps on it, embellishing it with our symbols, pictures, ringtones, screensavers, etcetera. But in this "doing" the smartphone becomes active too – it "does us," shapes us in becoming a "world" we live in. Many people nowadays, as a result of the digital revolution, more or less permanently live in two worlds: the material world of the house, the couch, the street, the bus, the other people in the public realm, and the virtual world of the phone. A quick look around in a busy shopping mall demonstrates this almost too obvious fact: people are present materially, physically, and at the same time they are absent, elsewhere present, moving around in their second 'I', their I-phone, traveling their imaginary Galaxy... The marketeers of Apple and Samsung are the prime experts of this new human condition.

Sloterdijk suggests that a theory of *autoplastic action* is imminent here. This theory is based on the axiom that "being human means existing in an operatively curved space in which actions return to affect the actor, works the worker, communications the communicator, thoughts the thinker and feelings the feeler." (2013, 110)

Creator Created – Creatio ex Nihilo revisited

Nancy's research, too, is fully involved in the insight that acting and being acted coincide in our being-in-the world. He re-reads Heidegger's *Being and Time* with this perspective: being is never that of a human subject external to the world, but being is always already in the world, as *Dasein.* This world, this *Da* acts on us as *Dasein.* But Nancy also proposes to deconstruct the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the *creatio ex nihilo* along these lines. According to him, the *ex nihilo* does not mean, as Christian theism has it, that a pre-existing creator would suddenly create man and the world out of nothing. The "beginning" that the creation is (Gen. 1:1) is a radical beginning: the creator only becomes someone *in* the act of creating and in the encounter with his creature, humanity, which is imagined to be his partner, his fellow creator. God 'begins' with the creation.

"So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him [...]"

A possible extrapolation of this re-interpretation of the *ex nihilo* – Nancy does not go this far – may be that creation can be defined as imagination, whereby the imagined creature is a creator in return. Is this the meaning of the famous phrase "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him [...]" (Gen. 1:27)? If this is feasible, then the creator was no one before this beginning, he was *nihil*. This strange God only becomes a god when he enters into relation with the world, with humankind, with *adam*. And the creative beginning will begin again and again; this is why the Hebrew text (Gen. 1:1) speaks of "In *a* beginning," not using the definite article. The creator coincides with his act of creating; outside this act "God is nothing," and only in this way, between God and man, something new can happen: a world can be created.

Nancy even considers this counter-interpretation of the *ex nihilo* the starting point for his project of a "deconstruction of monotheism," and in particular of the Christian heritage in the modern world. The death of God is

already announced in the heart of monotheism's doctrine of creation since God "necessarily" has to disappear, to die as a stable entity, as an existing power. Although Nancy develops this rather daring exegesis in quite strong and certain formulations ("decisive", "nothing but…", "most intrinsic and proper…"), I hold that his efforts to re-read the creation story open up a productive new realm of research on the ambiguities of freedom:

> *"The creator necessarily disappears in the very midst of its act, and with this disappearance a decisive episode of the entire movement that I have sometimes named the 'deconstruction of Christianity' occurs, a movement that is nothing but the most intrinsic and proper movement of monotheism as the integral absenting of God […]."* (Nancy 2007, 68)

This deconstruction is not only one of Nancy's research projects over the last twenty years, it is part of a history in which humankind deconstructs and thus reinvents itself: a historical break line in the axial process we briefly discussed above. The *ex nihilo* pinpoints the disappearance of the gods into the distant, invisible, transcendent God of monotheism… the disappearance of God in his act of creation. I will return to this complex connection between creation and beginning in the next section.

4 Freedom and Play: Nietzsche's Genealogy of Humanity

We need to obtain a clearer insight into the value of these theories of creation as theories of the connection between acting and 'being acted' – the paradoxical structure of imaginaries that lies at the basis of our explorations into the strangeness of freedom. In order to do so, I propose to take a closer look at Friedrich Nietzsche's genealogical anthropology, in particular in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* Here, we encounter an idea new to our train of thought so far: imaginaries are of the order of *play.* Hence, we need a theory of play.

The Camel, the Lion, the Child

Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1885) consists of a long series of hymn-like "discourses" [*Reden*]: sermons or reflections, mostly in prose, sometimes in poetic form. Every hymn finishes with the solemn words "Thus Spoke

Zarathustra". In the famous opening hymn, entitled "Of the Three Metamorphoses," Nietzsche introduces three shapes of the human "spirit" that would follow each other in developing metamorphoses [*Verwandlungen*] (Nietzsche 1969, 54–56).

Werner Horvath, "Friedrich Nietzsche – The Three Metamorphoses" (2007)
Originally created as poster for the international conference "Nietzsche y la Hermeneutica" at The University of Valencia, November 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

The first stage is that of the "camel." The camel is the stage of morality in human existence. It longs for "the heaviest things," for it is a "weight-bearing spirit." (Nietzsche 1969, 54) It is devoted to the logic of achievement through submission to tasks: it "wants to be laden well." (54) It finds its strength in obeying the "I should" and "I must." The world of the camel-spirit is a world one has to endure through hard work; the world, seen this way, imposes itself on us as our "other." The world is what is *given*. Humans can only carry it, but in this act they "rejoice in their strength" (54):

"The weight-bearing spirit takes upon itself all these heaviest things: like a camel hurrying laden into the desert, thus it hurries into the desert." (54)

Without referring to Nietzsche, Hannah Arendt also distinguishes three modes of human activity in her *The Human Condition*: three "conditions" of how humans appear in and relate to the world. She analyzes what Nietzsche calls the spirit of the camel as *labor*: survival by taking on the world as it is as a burden and a law. Both Arendt and Nietzsche call this the basic dynamic of the life process (Arendt 1958, Part III, 79–135).

Nietzsche introduces three shapes of the human "spirit".

The second stage in the three metamorphoses is that of the "lion." The lion is close to the camel, for both are caught up in a struggle with the world. Where the camel submits to its "weight," the lion, however, "creates freedom for itself" by saying a "sacred No" to all moral duties. (Nietzsche 1969, 55) The lion posits *itself* as the other of or to the world, liberating itself from its givenness. The perspective changes: the world is no longer our other imposing itself on us, but man himself becomes the other of the world. Instead of the logic of the "Thou shalt" it adopts the logic of the "I will." (55)

"But in the loneliest desert the second metamorphosis occurs: the spirit here becomes a lion; it wants to capture freedom and be lord in its own desert." (54)

This stage of the lion metaphorically reflects what Jaspers (1953), and later on many contemporary scholars of the afore-mentioned axial theory, have named the *axial turn* or even *revolution*: a break away from the world dominated by the gods and by fate, towards a world in which humans acquire autonomy and the possibility of self-assertion. This axial turn brings with it the gradual development in which humanity becomes *technical* and *rational*: by means of technique and reason humans free themselves from the world and start to work on and in it. Traditionally, this shift has been addressed as the turn from *mythos* to *logos*.[12] Humans surmount the burden of the world by gradually controlling and mastering it – turning it into their object, or in Nietzsche's metaphorical language, their "prey." Arendt names this second phase of the lion the condition of *work* (Arendt 1958, Part IV, 136–174).

12 Needless to say, the historical assumption that a primitive world of myth would have been succeeded by a more advanced world of reason is much debated. Hans Blumenberg's thinking is only one of many examples here: the idea that myths and mythology would have been overcome is extensively criticized by him. See e.g. Blumenberg 1983; 1985.

The lion-spirit has created for itself the conditions to transform the world, and to transform itself in relation to the world. It corresponds with man as "measure of the value of things, as judge of the world," quoted above, a view on humanity and the world fiercely criticized by Nietzsche. But here, *In Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche does not conceal a certain admiration for the camel and the lion as stages of the human spirit: they are necessary in the history of metamorphoses.
The third stage forms a rupture with the camel-lion relation to the world. It is the last metamorphosis, that of the "child." Instead of a "sacred No" to the world, the child is a "sacred Yes" to it. (Nietzsche 1969, 55).

"But tell me, my brothers, what can the child do that even the lion cannot? Why must the preying lion still become a child?
The child is innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game [Spiel], a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes." (55; Translation modified)

Here the relation to the world is not one of surmounting and conquering, but one of *creating*: "a new beginning" in which one is simultaneously absorbed by that creation with "innocence and forgetfulness," like a child that can be immersed in its game. At this point in Nietzsche's line of thought as set out in this hymn, we are touching upon the paradox of the spaces social imaginaries are, as we have demonstrated in the previous section. The creative relation to the world obliterates the division of "man *and* the world": it is rather an opening toward the world and into the world. Creating a world, that remarkable capacity of children, simultaneously means that one lives in that world.

Bubbles

In his trilogy *Spheres*, Peter Sloterdijk opens the first volume with a beautiful miniature, painting with words a little boy who is blowing bubbles with a small pipe and a bowl of soap and water.

John Everett Millais, "Bubbles" (1886)
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bubbles_by_John_Everett_Millais.jpg

The boy follows a big bubble he has just blown, floating through the air for the few seconds it is meant to last. The child follows the bubble so intensely that the attentive gaze of its eyes mingles with the fragile "sphere" dancing in the air. For a moment, it is absorbed by this microspace, it actually lives in the bubble. Bubble and child become a "breathed commune." (Sloterdijk 2011, 16–20)[13]

Creation as Beginning: Natality

The strange coincidence of acting and 'being acted' we are coming across here is the anthropological *structure of play* Nietzsche is looking for. The remarkable consequence of this is that humanity, in the end and at the apogee of its possibilities, should become like a child – a central theme that runs through the veins of almost all of Nietzsche's works.

> *"Yes, a sacred Yes is needed, my brothers, for the play [*Spiel*] of creation: the spirit now wills its own will, the spirit sundered from the world now wins its own world."* (Nietzsche 1969, 55)

We can observe that the child brings aspects of the camel and the lion together. For the child as for the lion, the world is no longer given as a burden; but neither is it an external object to be appropriated, as the camel shows. We create worlds beyond any givenness, as a new beginning that never stops beginning, and in the same movement these worlds create us through the space we live from... and thus are dependent on. It is important to realize that Nietzsche shifts from a discussion of *the* world to a discussion of *a* world, that is, of a plurality of worlds created by man. Every human spirit "wins its own world," in every time and place, always anew. Nietzsche's notion of play concurs with a theory of imaginaries, so it appears.

The stage of the human "spirit" as the playing child resonates in the vocabulary of Arendt's *The Human Condition* as *action*.[14] For her, action is the essence of the political as a particular feature of the human condition, as opposed to labor and work. Political action and speech always form a new beginning, and they open up the space of plurality: the "space of appearance" that the public realm is. Not surprisingly, Arendt baptizes this space of action as *natality* and *plurality.* In a reciprocal event of creation, both man and the world are formed and transformed, are born and reborn *[natus]* here (Arendt 1958, 175–247, especially chapters 28–29).

13 Sloterdijk bases his miniature on a painting by G.H. Every Millais, dating from 1886.

14 Arendt's use of the concept of action does not follow its standard meaning of 'doing', 'making', or 'work'. Indeed, the normal distinction between actor and act is challenged in her use of 'action'. Action refers to a gesture of temporarily abandoning one's control in the appearance to the other in the public space; it is of the order of exposure to the unknown, of a risk, a venture, or in Kierkegaardian terms (Arendt was greatly inspired by Kierkegaard's philosophical/religious vocabulary), a 'leap'.

5 Conclusion

Imaginaries shape our complex world, stamped by the condition of *sensus liberalis.* We have analyzed this condition as one in which activity and passivity are entangled: the structure of creation. Creator and creature enter an unexpected 'commune': the site where the self can no longer buffer itself but has to open itself toward relation: it is nothing but relation. We have attempted to conceptualize this structure as freedom, however strange this freedom may be, because it does not comply with the logic of negative and positive liberty.

It is nothing but relation.

A brief commentary on the opening hymn of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* then showed that Camus' fierce attack on modern subjectivity, which formed the preamble to our analyses, is still not subtle enough. Zarathustra evokes a vision of humanity, of being human, that constantly shifts in metamorphoses in which self-submission and self-assertion are two modalities of modern subjectivity. The third is that of playful, creative loss. How one can be not of the order of the self but of the order of loss: how one can 'be' loss, that is what has been presented and thought as the kernel of freedom – of its radical strangeness.

How one can be not of the order of the self
but of the order of loss: how one can 'be' loss?

The little theory of play in this article paves the ground for presents and thinks play as a mode of human existence, and hence, as a very serious feature of humanity.[15] The loss of self that is involved in play is productive toward its freedom, as has been demonstrated in this study, but that loss is also play's danger; it opens the door to violence. The world as invoked by Nietzsche as a scene of play (*Weltenspiel*, World-Play; see Nietzsche 2001, 249) to which the child in us exposes itself is a difficult place to live in. Play is hardly the opposite of the seriousness of existence.

Maybe one should raise the question whether this loss is a form of self-transcendence. This would involve an investigation of the many ways in which religion and spirituality transform themselves in the 'secular age', introducing an idea of transcendence *in* the world of the here and now – a post-theistic transcendence. That exceeds the scope of this article.[16]

15 Huizinga 1949, 44 and further, already pinpointed the seriousness (the translation from the Dutch uses the word 'earnest') of play.

16 I have made a start with such research in recent years, e. g. in my work on and with Jean-Luc Nancy. See Kate 2011; Kate 2016; and Kate 2019.

Can one take on the experiment of this strange, new idea of humanness, this strange 'we'? Maybe one can enter it like a house that is still empty, that is still to be arranged, set up and equipped... by whom? By nobody else than us. Although we know that in acting like this we have already left the house, obliterated the strength of its emptiness. Maybe. But it is only poetry that can express such improbability and perform it as if it were real:

Carcass

Open the door of the poem.
The house is empty.
You will have to make furniture yourself,
a closet for bed sheets unslept
and some shelves for stories
no one wants to hear.

You will have to dress the view
with your life and draw fire
in holes in the wall.

The hours pass
and hunger grows.
The graphite clock tells you
nobody will lend you days.

Half of your creations
have already disappeared, again.

No front door anymore;
The back door is open.
Do you hear the wind?[17]

17 Hertmans 2016, 5: "Ruwbouw". My translation.

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