

The Cradle of Humanity
Prehistoric Art and Culture

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other Paleolithic men, are characterized by a stupefying negation of man. Far from seeking to affirm humanity against nature, man, born of nature, here voluntarily appears as a kind of waste. The paintings conserved by the Frobenius expedition develop this primitive theme through the most varied forms, in such a way that a mechanism that can still only be deduced with difficulty (by means of the published iconographic documents and with our understanding of totemism) appeared alive before our eyes in the exhibition hall. Man's first movement amid animals and trees had been to conceive of the existence of these animals and trees and to negate his own. The human body appears as a Cartesian diver, like a toy of the wind and the grass, like a cluster of dust charged with an activity that decomposes it. The blatant heterogeneity of our being in relation to the world that gave birth to it, which we have become so incapable of proving through tangible experience, seems to have been, for *those among us* who have lived in nature, the basis of all representation.

The elephants and zebras around these human beings seem to have played the same eminent role as houses, churches, and administrative buildings do around us. But the unhappy waste passed his life not to submit to these buildings, these churches, but to kill them, to eat their meat. This is the rupture, the heterogeneity beneath all its forms, the capacity to ever restore that which has been separated by an inconceivable violence, which seems to have engendered not only man but his rapport with nature.

NOTE: The exhibit catalog was published by Leo Frobenius and Abbé Breuil as *L'Afrique in Cahiers d'art*, nos. 8-9 (1930). It includes written documentation and abundant illustrations.

CHAPTER THREE

A Visit to Lascaux

*A Lecture at the Société d'Agriculture,
Sciences, Belles-Lettres et Arts d'Orléans*

My lecture tonight will be of a philosophical nature. Of course, it considers a historical subject; he who says "prehistory" says "history." Yet, the essential point of what I have to say will go further than what you might find in various books that discuss prehistoric man. All I can say now, to reassure you a little, is that I will avoid falling into the sort of technical language that makes philosophy such an off-putting discipline. Likewise, I must specify what kind of philosopher I would like to be, and this will not be easy for me. In effect, if it is true that I am a philosopher, I am an unusual philosopher, and my philosophy has little to do with academic philosophy. I should also issue a warning against mentioning on a test what I will say and show to you this evening. Fortunately, in our day and age, this is no longer of too much importance. I'm not saying that no one in the academic milieu would take my considerations seriously, but they are still not exactly part of the official curriculum. If you will, so that I don't remain too vague, and so that I can *situate* the philosophy you are about to glimpse, I might venture to say that in a sense my philosophy is not so different from Sartre's, for example. Of course, I am not an existentialist, but if I am not, in the end, it is surely because I have rejected that label. This, however, does not stop people from

occasionally considering me an existentialist, as, for example, in the small volume on existentialism in the *Que sais-je?* series.¹ In order to bring this overlong opening statement to a close, I will say that I have distanced myself from existentialism especially insofar as it has become what I consider an academic philosophy. I will also say that on a personal level, I don't get along with Sartre, and if I wouldn't say that we have our daggers drawn, it is because philosophers don't have daggers. In any case, in his writing Sartre rarely misses an opportunity to talk about me in a snippy way.² This has gone on for about ten years and I'm used to it.³

Now it is time to leave the existentialists aside so we can move on to the prehistoric human beings and the animals among which they lived. The question of the relationship between human beings and animals throughout prehistory certainly risks seeming to be outside the scope of philosophy. But it is nothing of the sort.⁴ On the contrary, it is a truly fundamental question. In fact, when we say that we are human beings, what sense, in the first place, can this have if not that we are radically distinct from animals? This means, for example, that humans are always, in our eyes, endowed with an eminent dignity. Humans count for something. In principle, an animal does not. We send animals to slaughterhouses, and we hardly blink an eye. True, our own kind did as much with other human beings in Germany not so long ago, but in the end this was an enormous scandal, and then, despite everything — I apologize for such an offensive example — in Germany no one thought about pulling human bodies apart as if they were animals. I will allow myself to use a philosophical term here — you'll see I won't abuse this privilege — it means that humans see themselves as transcendent in relation to animals. For a human being, there is a discontinuity, a fundamental difference between an animal and himself. An animal is nothing, or, if you prefer, it is

only a *thing*, whereas we are minds,⁵ and when one has a mind, one necessarily counts for something.

Except — there is an exception — what is true for us was not true for prehistoric man. For the men of prehistory — even if we're talking about the beings that anthropologists call *Homo sapiens*, our truly complete brethren, like Cro-Magnon man, who made not only tools but also art proper — insofar as we are able to judge them, animals were in principle no less like them than other human beings. Of course, nothing proves that this is completely and absolutely true, but it is certain that prehistoric man's similarity with animals served an important function for him. We are certain that he confronted the animal not as though he were confronting an inferior being or a thing, a negligible reality, but as if he were confronting a mind similar to his own.

In a moment, I will clearly and distinctly enumerate the perceptible aspects of the equality between prehistoric humanity and animals. Then you will see the extent to which things are clear. But first I would like to make these aspects *tangible*, to make them tangible for you through images that I feel it is safe to say are moving.⁶

These images, insofar as we can summarize them, have a magical character in relation to the hunt. Here lies the most plausible idea that we can assert of the significance they had for these men who previously populated the Dordogne region of France, as no doubt for all the men of that distant era. They were painted in a deep and mysterious sanctuary, one might say at the deepest point in the bowels of the earth that it was then possible to reach. It is not certain if these images were thought to be lasting representations, analogous to the images later situated on the walls of temples and churches; even less can we believe that our ancestors intended these images as decorations for the cave sanctuaries. It is much less improbable to suppose that drawing them was for the hunters

a ritual preparation for big expeditions, upon which the fate of their entire society depended (figure 2a). Raymond Lantier, who offers us this hypothesis, draws it from practices that are still found among modern Pygmies, whose living conditions are apparently similar to those of the Magdalenian hunters. What I find certain, in any case, is that this hypothesis accounts for the obvious indifference of the men of the Paleolithic to the final outcome; in other words, they were indifferent to the state of the cave wall after a drawing. The condition of the cave wall was so unimportant to them that they would not erase or cover the older images, generally resulting in a muddle, contrary to every principle of composition.

In my opinion, this hypothesis equally accounts for a paradoxical fact that I would now like to consider in greater depth.⁷ The fact is well known. Whereas the Upper Paleolithic painters left us admirable representations of the animals they hunted, they used childish techniques to represent men. This negligence does not illustrate an essential intention in relation to which the representation of a man did not have any importance in *itself*; the representation of man only mattered in relation to the animal. It was effectively necessary to give the evocation of the animal not only the central value but a *tangible* characteristic that the naturalistic image alone allowed them to attain. The animal had to be, in a sense, *rendered present* in the ritual, rendered present through a direct and very powerful appeal to the imagination, through the tangible representation. It was, on the contrary, useless to try to make man's presence tangible. In fact, man was already present; he was there in the depths of the cave when the ritual was taking place.

Let's take a closer look at the only clear representation of a man found in the Lascaux cave (figure 2b). You see that it is crudely schematic. It appeals to our intellect, not our senses. It is an intelligible sign. I don't mean that it entails a kind of writing, but mov-

ing from the image to writing, we would only have to multiply the signs; we would also have to simplify them and render them conventionally systematic, yet it is clearly a question, for figurative art, of a completely different direction, of another open path.

Let's turn our attention back to the image of the bison, still in Lascaux (figure 2c). Now let's imagine before the hunt, on which life and death will depend, the ritual: an attentively executed drawing, extraordinarily true to life, though seen in the flickering light of the lamps, completed in a short time, the ritual, the drawing that provokes the apparition of this bison. This sudden creation had to have produced in the impassioned minds of the hunters an intense feeling of the proximity of the inaccessible monster, a feeling of proximity, of profound harmony. Definitely a more powerful and disturbing feeling than if it were a question of a previously completed, known painting. As if men, obscurely and suddenly, had the power to make the animal, though essentially out of range, respond to the extreme intensity of their desire. This time it is a question not of rendering it intelligible — as with the human figuration — but of making it tangible. This time it is a question of manifesting the animal and letting it loose to live out one of the roles in the drama of the hunt.

I will now call upon the feelings of the hunters, of those among you who have or had a passion for the hunt. First I will ask you if the moment the animal is seen is not a capital moment in the game of the hunt, a passionate moment, a moment that even has — it goes without saying, insofar as it is not necessary to immediately respond with an action, with gunfire — something that constrains, that catches the breath. Next I will ask you an even stranger question. I will ask you if you have a slight hostility toward your prey. It seems that you don't. There is hostility in war, but I believe that in the hunt, the hunter never hates the animal he kills. It even seems that there is often a sort of sympathy

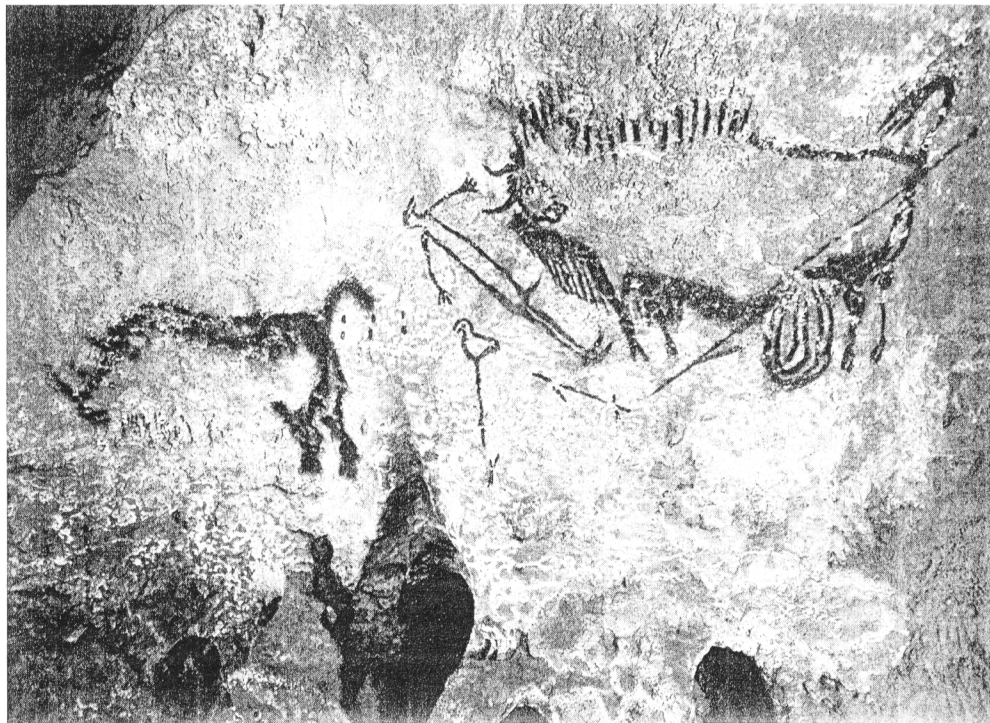
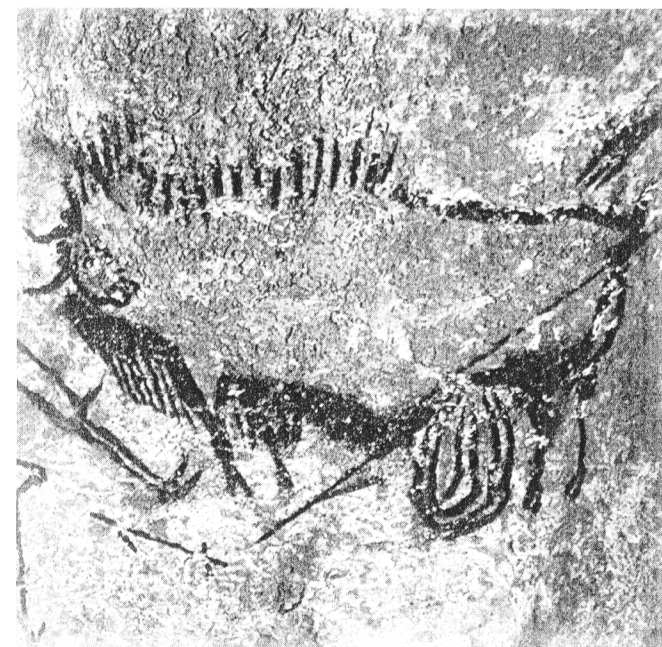


Figure 2a. Images from the pit in Lascaux: the group as a whole (Georges Bataille, *Lascaux, or the Birth of Cave Art* [New York: Skira, 1955], fig. 52a) (photo: Hans Hinz).

Figure 2b. Detail: the man.

Figure 2c. Detail: the bison.



on the hunter's part. And I wonder, if this sympathy did not exist, if hunting would still hold the same interest. There is nobility in the wild animal, in the hunted animal. I have no idea what hunting would be if we had substituted chicken for partridge, or bunny rabbits for hares, or even fat pigs for wild boars. This would not be hunting; instead, it would be a rather comical endeavor, perhaps even a bit repugnant. Additionally, I think that in general, hunting has archaic traits. I don't have the time today to go into more detail on this point, but it wasn't by chance that I called upon the hunter's sensibility. It is a sensibility that doesn't seem in the least bit foreign to primitive humanity, and you understand completely in what sense I mean. In fact, nothing would be more uncalled for than to scorn the humanity to whom we owe the admirable paintings of Lascaux. I will even say that for me the feelings that we call noble — in the medieval sense of nobility, referring to the habits of the so-called noble class — are all archaic feelings, feelings that connect us to the earliest humanity. In any case, everyone knows that hunting is a game, not a job, despite its productive nature, and that this game was formally reserved for nobles, as work was reserved for serfs, for slaves.

I went into detail on this point before talking about the close connections, the connections of sympathy, that united the men of the caves with animals. For primitive man, as for the hunters of today, sympathy by no means excluded the will to kill. Further, more specifically, for the men of primitive times, as for men of the modern day whom we rightly or wrongly call primitives, the act of killing could also be shameful. Many primitive men ask for forgiveness beforehand for the evil that they are about to do to the animal they are pursuing. This seems outrageous to us, but it seems necessary to a consciousness less intricately confined by human pride. We cannot be sure that the men who lived in Lascaux, for example, asked the bovine that they killed for forgive-

ness, but we don't have much reason to doubt a feeling on their part that corresponded to this behavior. In fact, what is certain is that the images they left us amply testify to a humanity that did not clearly and distinctly distinguish itself from animality, a humanity that had not transcended animality. Earlier I emphasized the schematic nature of the representation of the man we find in Lascaux. But this representation is not only schematic, and therefore negligible for the sensibility. There is another aspect that I have not discussed: the man on the wall in Lascaux has the head of a bird; that is, he is *disguised* as an animal, that he is wearing a mask. Thus one might say not only that the Lascaux man affirmed his humanity, the way the most cultivated man does, the man defined himself as the king of animals, but also that he concealed this humanity behind an animal mask. Now, the Lascaux man is by no means an exception. While generally the representation of humans is rare in Upper Paleolithic art, it is unremarkable that man be depicted with a portion of his features borrowed from an animal.

I will show some examples of this.⁸

There is something truly unique here. For primitive human beings, the animal is not a thing. And this characterizes very broadly all of primitive humanity, for whom ordinary animality is rather divine. The thing is obviously not human. But the thing is on the side of humanity; it is a tool, which in the time of Lascaux is all that separated human beings from animals. In addition, if man is not a thing, he will become one when slaves appear, that is, men subjugated to work. Herein lies something that deeply underlines the meaning of the discovery of Lascaux.

not only is unique to man but of which man is the unique object, is evidently implicated in the strange appearance of the first human reactions that the art of the caves permit us to understand. It even seems to me that the meaning of laughter cannot be understood independently from the information I have emphasized in this essay. But I cannot dwell on this any longer. I would just like to say that I would not be surprised if someone had trouble seeing what is solid and basic about the considerations I have introduced. Significantly, I have spoken, sometimes in a difficult way, only about the most evident facts.

So as not to be informal, within the limits of the representations of the scholarly world, the opposition between what is a thing and what is not a thing cannot be dismissed. This is truly the level on which the specific characteristics of humanity are constituted.

For at least two million years, man, rather bizarrely, has yielded to an elevation of the mind linked to the feeling that durable things offered him. But I wanted to show that he was heading in a very different direction when he was "born." In fact, when he was "born," he did not prefer what he would eventually become, *that which he is*: the creator of a world of durable things. On the contrary, he effaced the aspects of this world of which his face is the sign.

He had not yet prevailed, but he apologized.

He is succeeding today, but he deeply senses the reasons that the first man had for apologizing for already being *what he would be*.

Today's man suspects the inanity of the edifice he has founded, he knows that he knows nothing, and, as his ancestors concealed their features with animal masks, he summons the night of truth wherein the world that has ordained his pretension will cease being *clear* and *distinct*.

A Meeting in Lascaux

Civilized Man Rediscovered the Man of Desire

After more than ten years, we are still far from having fully recognized the magnitude of the discovery of Lascaux. It goes without saying that these paintings are beautiful, they enchant everyone who sees them, and they allow us to feel closer to the earliest men. But, understandably, we find these expressions daunting. They are cold, and it may seem pretentious to discuss these cave paintings more passionately.

They are within the provinces of both science and desire. Would it be possible to discuss them the way Proust discussed Vermeer or Breton discussed Marcel Duchamp? Not only is it inappropriate to fall under their spell when near them, in the disorder of a visit, lacking the time to collect ourselves, but prehistorians also bid us to keep in mind what these apparitions meant to the men who animated them and who, unintentionally, bestowed them on us.

The anticipation and desire of these hunters, these carnivores who arranged these images on these rocks, and their unsophisticated magic ordained these beautiful animals to carry the promise of carnage and quarry. An appetite for meat? Undoubtedly. We cannot think that the prehistorians have misled us. It is their duty to define the abyss that separates us from these men living at the

dawn of time. It was up to them to determine the meaning of these figures and to tell us how they differ from the paintings we love. The images before us are the mirrors of a long-standing dream that passion pursues within us.

In vain we sought our dreams in these figures, which were a response, as the dreams of children often are, to the cravings of hunger. In Lascaux, we are unable to feel that which makes us dissolve when we look at a painting by Leonardo da Vinci, that which dictates that we have only one, rather vapid and ungraspable, notion — similar to the dispersed diversity of the universe — of the painter and the landscape, of the painted face, and of this gaze that drinks it in.¹ These hunters of the Dordogne would better understand a housewife from Sarlat buying meat for lunch from a butcher shop than they would Leonardo da Vinci, or those drowned eyes intoxicated by his painting. They skillfully simplified their representations of animals, and the world is no less rich for the large appetizing beasts that populate these walls. The cave paintings of Lascaux are beautiful, and we marvel at their state of preservation, but they only announce their author's desire to eat. Prehistoric man painted them before hunting, believing that the possession of the painted figure would ensure the possession of the actual animal represented.

What can oppose the cry of joy which alone has the power to correspond to the sight that has been waiting for us for a million years in Lascaux?

What shatters this is the illusion that across such a long period of time — the mind cannot imagine anything more distant — I recognize someone who resembles me. It is myself in fact that I think I recognize, myself and the marvelous world linked to the power to dream, a power common to myself and the earliest man. I may be wary of a feeling that runs counter to the conclusions of scholars. Yet could I abandon it before science, which has the burden of

proving its assertions, which has clearly demonstrated its inanity?

The opinion according to which the first men, close to the animals and burdened by the difficulties of material life, would have been on the level of the most primitive men of today often passes as a response to the objectivity of history. For a long time, science has seemed linked to the idea of continuous progress, passing from wild animals to primitive man, who was himself still savage, and then finally to the fully civilized man, which we are.

In any case, we can know nothing essential about Leonardo da Vinci if we are not familiar with his paintings. This said, it is not necessarily easier to know his paintings than the paintings of Lascaux; at minimum, we can distinguish but a question of degree from one case to the other. I am not saying the communication coming to us from so profoundly distant a place as Lascaux has the same force as if it came from a time nearer to our own. But this is not clear. The cave paintings would have great power if we were not intimidated by the summons to reduce them to a work of magic, to a practical, utilitarian meaning, to the flat meaning of this poetic term. The most cautious prehistorians agree on this: the meaning that prehistoric man gave his figures does not mean that the Lascaux paintings are not, unintentionally, works of art. But *for us*, what does a work of art mean when it, not being destined for our eyes, was not intended as a work of art by those who made it?

Even the most inept figurations would have been effective as a work of magic — at least if the intention to go further were not implied. An extremely powerful communicative quality, beyond the end point of pure magic, was nonetheless able to fulfill the shared passion of the painter and of all those anticipating the work. There was nothing more mysterious in such qualities than in the unrest that emanates from the violence of a tom-tom, which even affects whites. Nothing more unintelligible. On this level (but only within these limitations), science ultimately has nothing

to say. It can still talk about the figures that represent our feelings and impressions, about the conditions or circumstances related to the creation of the image. The impression itself, on the other hand, is beyond its grasp. We are reduced to explaining that impression by directly reproducing its cause (the painting) or, however awkwardly, searching within the order of words, or sounds, for the sources that suggest it.

The uneasiness that paralyzes us as we stand before and consider the figures of Lascaux ultimately leaves us with a weak and disappointed feeling and seems to be in opposition to the force of the impression actually felt. What pushes us, past the initial moment, to see in these paintings a world of only an unfortunate sense of need — impenetrable to us — is linked to our inability to find a complete response to our desire in an animal world. In our eyes, it is just an incomplete world. The conditions and circumstances linked to our strongest impressions and feelings never imprison us within this animal depth. At a very young age, we learned to see *what is lacking* in the animal and to designate with the word “beast” those among us whose lack of reason made us ashamed.² This meeting in a Dordogne cave, given to us unintentionally from the depths of time by these hunters, could be disappointing if very quickly we did not see, in the tests it imposes on us, a way to set ourselves free. We have to free ourselves from all the human foolishness that prevents us from rediscovering ourselves and from establishing the most seductive contact between the simplest and the most complex beings — from the earliest humans to the most contemporary. Ultimately, since a deep similarity brings us closer to our forefathers, it would be enough to detach ourselves through the most complete and focused thought from this careful construction that distances us from these men who seemed to be related to animals, and who — science teaches us — felt remorse when they killed the animals that would give

them nourishment. Lascaux asks us to no longer deny *what we are*. We denigrate the animality that, through the men of these obscure caves, who hid their humanity beneath animal masks, we have not ceased to prolong. We cannot stop being human, and we cannot forgo a rationality that only knows the limits of reason. Yet just as our forefathers felt remorse for killing the animals they loved — and had to kill — we could, in Lascaux, feel shame for being, through reason, slaves to the work that we must pursue at any price. Thus the cry of joy I mentioned becomes more strange and straggled, more gay.

OPTIONAL

CHAPTER EIGHT

Prehistoric Religion

Understanding is a defining characteristic of humanity, but even though we usually do not pay attention to it, humanity's understanding of itself and of the world presents a significant lacuna.¹ In principle, no one perceives this lacuna; yet if understanding has a decisive value for man, it is the same as this lacuna. No one perceives it, yet the world is disappointing on this matter: the world is a trap for man, man is himself a trap for man.

The difficulty of conceiving this lacuna demonstrates the extent to which it is disturbing. At the very heart of existence, we find a kind of chaos, a gaping void perhaps, which conceals a chaotic delirium. At the heart of existence, we find art, and we find poetry, and we find a multitude of religions. Yet no one knows what art is. Or poetry, for that matter. No one, in the end, knows what religion is.

I would like to emphasize, in the first place, that men do not know what religion is.

We all think we know what it is, but now is the time to say it simply, that is to say, at once, tragically and comically: we know nothing, **ABSOLUTELY NOTHING**. We know trees, laws, and work. And not only can we recognize trees, laws, and work, but, what matters most, we can define them: *we can say exactly what they are.*

It is equally true to say that we know how to *recognize* religion: we can distinguish it from science, politics, and art, but when saying *what it is*, we resort to some questionable definition.

A moment ago, I said: it is time to stop, time to mark the astonishment of he who wants to define religion. Unless he simply admits that insofar as religion is indefinable, it can only be defined rigorously through the impossibility of defining it.

In other words — and this is the least that we must assert — the world of understanding is to religion as the clarity of day is to the horror of the night.

In principle, this assertion changes nothing: despite this inability to define religion, if, abandoning the clarity that founds science and setting out from an indefinite feeling, even from darkness, from the horror inspired by the night, we envision as religious these *facts* that we understand crudely, if wisely, we can discuss them generally and even define them in isolation. If, however, we are able to define “burial” or “sacrifice” in this way, it does not follow that we are able to say how burial is religious or how sacrifice is one of the major aspects of religion. On the contrary, from the moment burial seems essentially religious to us, we abandon the idea of knowing what burial essentially is. We stop explaining *what it is* insofar as we say that it is religious: in fact, this means that it is not what it appears to be but *something else*, which we can only talk about by opposing “what it appears to be” to a meaning given “from beyond,” the apparent meaning that allows us to discuss it. Further, this meaning “from beyond” excludes these explanations, which in their entirety, differing from each other, are given by those who observe the ritual. It is a question of a meaning referring to “the horror of the night,” to what understanding does not grasp, to what we only know through violent feelings (violent feelings, like horror, which respond to nothing rational, which we simply endure).

Yet if it may eventually be possible to discuss religious matters, it is only insofar as we admit this ignorance, insofar as we straightforwardly confess it.

I spoke of “the horror of the night.” Some authors think they are advancing on the path of knowledge when they use terms of this type. In particular, I’m referring to Rudolf Otto’s terminology in his book *The Idea of the Holy*.² As far as *understanding* is concerned, these terms are of a negative value: they have no other kind of value. If they connote night, it is in the most negative way. There is a facility in the act of imagining Otto’s book as a positive description of the *sacred*. Essentially, the *sacred*, like religion, can only be described through circumlocution: from the moment we admit that it is indescribable. Despite all this, the characteristics it is possible to offer touch on aspects through which we are occasionally able to perceive its presence. It would be pointless to think of these aspects and what Otto says about them as corresponding to what the sacred is. We can experience the sacred. We cannot, however, offer a positive description of the *sacred* without aberrations. If I speak of religion — and if I speak of the sacred — it is not from the outside, as it would be when I speak of what I can *understand* accurately. I insist on the insulated nature of my language. It is through a brutal, *aggressive* negation that I designate *an experience that in itself is a negation of understanding*.

This is evidently debatable when reviewing a work on the history of religions and when questioning principles that are usually taken for granted. Questioning these principles does indeed, so it seems, lead us outside the domain in which, hidden from the turmoil of thought, the “history of religions” has to be limited. This is particularly true when discussing prehistoric times and the origin of religion.

Indeed no one studying the religion — or religions — of prehistory questions the necessity of beginning by defining and

describing religious matters from the outside, independent of any reflective, inner consideration. Nothing, by definition, is known about prehistory, except through the material traces that the human beings of these distant times left behind. At most, the possible comparison with the religions of ancient peoples would introduce a less distant element in relation to *inner* experience.³ However, as Johannes Maringer says at the beginning of his book, prehistory is no less defined by the absence of writing at the time it studies. The materials it uses exclude the sort of inner experience that religious texts precisely, if rarely, make us understand.⁴

When studying the religion of prehistoric man, we must set out from evidence that contains only rudimentary, external information. Proceeding in this manner, from the site, the state, or the nature of human remains, scholars have been able to draw conclusions that permit us to discuss the funerary customs of the humanity from which they originated. In this sense, Maringer's book gathers an ensemble of data from the countless inquiries of prehistorians. It goes without saying: no one would know how to discuss the importance of this gathering of information, which is not only correct but the foundation, if not of the beginning of the history of religion, then at least of what we can know about religious matters from the outside. Following those prehistorians who discussed the earliest religious occurrences, Maringer, undoubtedly more perfectly — that is, while taking into account the most recent discussions and interpretations — demonstrated the importance of the discoveries of the skulls and remains of the earliest humans: the discoveries at Zhoukoudianzhen, the closest finding we have to an anthropoid in China, and those at Swanscombe and Fontéchevade in Europe (the latter being very primitive; the former, closer to us than more recent humanity, called Neanderthal, which we will discuss later). The material from these diverse discoveries refers to a temperate period a long time ago. Maringer

rightly emphasizes, in all these human remains, a predominance of skulls and mandibles, which necessarily makes one think of a systematic preservation of the most significant parts of the defunct body: the face, the head, which has not ceased representing the being itself.⁵ The period in question, long ago but warm, is separated from that of the Neanderthal man by an ice age (the third of these glacial periods). Only in the warm period that followed, especially at the beginning of the fourth (and last) ice age, did the Neanderthal man practice the ritual of burial. Maringer's book presents the current state of our knowledge on this subject. It refers to the numerous findings of isolated skulls and mandibles that date back to the same period.

The interpretation of these occurrences as religious is hardly contestable. Even outside of all belief, it is true that, in regard to death, contemporary humanity maintains an attitude comparable to that of these very early prehistoric times, but only a *religious* response was able to determine, originally, the fear or respect for the dead that the discoveries of the prehistorians translate. On a point where agreement is general, it is not necessary to introduce complex considerations.

In addition to refining our understanding of Middle Paleolithic man's attitude toward the death of his counterparts, Maringer's book offers valuable information on prehistoric man's attitude toward the animals he killed, bears in particular. This is a relatively new observation: in fact, the question, already raised, was never considered in a way that made it familiar. In Maringer's book, it is treated extensively on several occasions. And the rituals revealed by the discovered remains, of which some are recent, are very usefully compared with the behavior of modern Siberians.

In caves in diverse places in the Alps, or in neighboring regions, the remains of bears have been found, sometimes gathered together in great numbers and often arranged by human hands in

such a way as to suggest a ritual intention. These are skulls in particular, which were positioned in various ways, sometimes protected by stone coverings, sometimes placed in niche-shaped crevices. They may be associated with long bones (marrow bones). Some prehistorians believe that these were reserves, either of meat or of brains and marrow. Others see them as trophies of the hunt. But only the ritual meaning of these remains is reasonable. Maringer presents both of these possible interpretations. We could see them as offerings made to a divinity, probably a supreme god. But it is equally possible to envision a cult worshipping the bear analogous to that of the Koryak in Siberia. In other words, bear worship as it still exists today — or existed previously — not only among the Koryak but also among other Siberians, or among the Ainu, on a northern island in Japan next to Siberia, would have its origins at the dawn of humanity.

This is not as clear for the Middle Paleolithic, to which the deposits of remains we have been discussing principally belong, remains that are found in and near the Alps but could still be found in other regions. (If the caves in the Alps have preserved their deposits, it is perhaps because the ice age that followed rendered them inaccessible when caves were being used as dwellings almost everywhere else; on the other hand, new discoveries may be made in parts of the world where excavations have not yet been conducted systematically.) Maringer is inclined to see the bones as the remains of offerings to a supreme god rather than as traces of an ancient bear cult. Yet he admits this last origin at least in the case of bear bones from the Upper Paleolithic found in 1936 in Silesia.⁶ The teeth of the fossilized skulls had been cut (filed down) on the young *living* bear by men of the ice age, in nearly the same way that the Ainu and the Giliak tribes now cut them (file them down) in their bear festivals (so that the animal, before being ritually beaten, is unable to wound the participants).

These bear festivals, of which we have detailed descriptions, are not only among the most fascinating rituals that we know; they took on a solemnity and an exceptional importance in the hunting societies that performed them.

For the peoples we have discussed (who file bear teeth down), as for all of those who in our day celebrate the cult of the bear, this animal, which they sacrifice, is the object of a veritable devotion. Maringer writes:

The bear enjoys particular veneration among the adherents of this cult. It must not be called by its animal name, but rather “grandfather,” “old father,” “fur father,” or simply “he.” Often the bear is regarded as a kind of intermediary between man and the spirit of the mountain or forest. The Paleo-Siberian tribes regard the bear as a mythical first man, and venerate it together with their ancestors.

An elaborate ritual has been developed to honour the *captured* bear. As soon as it is trapped, but especially after it has been killed, the hunters offer it their profound apologies. The Koryaks, for instance, welcome the dead bear to their camp with dancing and by swinging torches. One of the women puts the bear’s head on her own head, wraps herself in its skin and dances in this attire, at the same time exhorting the bear not to be angry or sad. Afterwards the skin, with head attached, is displayed in a place of honour. The bear is a guest at the feast where its own flesh is eaten. The banqueters shower it with fine phrases and offer it their choicest dishes. Among other tribes, the women weep lament over the dead bear as for a departed loved one; the bear, meanwhile, is festively adorned, placed upon a mat, and plied with food and drink. The hunters make offerings to it, address speeches to it and become increasingly boisterous. Finally they carve the bear up, drink its blood and share out its flesh. But the high point is always the eating of the flesh of the head, which as a rule includes the brain.

The last act of the ceremony is the deposition of the skull in a hallowed place, or its solemn internment usually along with the rest of the bones. Among the Tungu and Yakut tribes, the banqueters may not break a single bone. All bones are wrapped in birch bark or similar stuff, and then placed on a tree.

In the Bear Songs of the Finnish epic the *Kalevala*, the bear is respectfully requested to give of itself piece by piece. After the bear has divested itself of all its beautiful and useful properties, its skill is invited to take up a secure abode, with a splendid view, in the top-most branches of a fir tree.

The Lapps prepare a grave for the bear, lining it with birch twigs. There they deposit all the bones in anatomic order: the spinal vertebrae are threaded on a rod, the nasal bones, the generative organs and the tail are put into place, and the whole is then covered with twigs and earth.⁷

I have quoted Maringer at length because the comparison of the most recent example of a bear cult with the data that the field of prehistory extracted from documents aims at contesting reservations that I thought necessary before anything else (I wanted to demonstrate the difficulty of broaching the study of religion). In fact, if we compare the prehistoric facts I have reported with these subsisting forms, we see religion in a new light. What we seize upon does not allow us to define religion, to say what it is exactly, but perhaps we are beginning to discern one of its original elements. At the very least, we might ask ourselves if the bear festivals described in recent books did not have their origins in the most ancient times. The bear festival being essentially the putting to death — in sum, the sacrifice — of the animal, we would have a principle from which we assuredly would not be able to grasp what religion is, but upon which we would be able to ground the research from which a definition would appear.

I will return to this below, since it concerns the subject introduced in the first lines of this essay — and since these last considerations could invalidate it. But for the moment, I would like to finish with the prehistoric relationship between man and bear, as Maringer's work has exposed it for us.

For Maringer, the Silesian skull with the filed teeth would be enough to prove the existence of a ritual sacrifice of a captured animal. But the ritualized sacrifice of the bear corresponds so well to Upper Paleolithic man's religious sentiment that it appears elsewhere in another confirmed form, this time in the south of France, with the clay model of a bear without a head found in the cave at Montespan. The recognizable animal has withers bulging from its paws; the right front paw ends with five well-conserved fingers. It was discovered in 1923 by Norbert Casteret, who found "the fossilized skull of a young bear" on the ground. This skull "had certainly fallen from a statue," and its location suggested that it must have been "stuck there long ago by a wooden dowel" in order to complete the model "with a real head." The dowel had decomposed, but "traces" of it "remained." Prehistoric men not only had to affix this acephalous statue with "the actual head of a bear"; they also had "to wrap it again in the skin of a plantigrade. Then they beat the head angrily with assegai and lances countless times." Its body is "pierced with many round holes at the exact places of the vital organs."⁸

The question raised by the Montespan model follows the ensemble of questions posed by the discoveries of the bear remains we have discussed, because of the skull found between the paws of the depicted animal. On the other hand, it can be linked with those posed in general by the animal figurations — so numerous — left by the men of the Upper Paleolithic during the same period.

Thus the Montespan bear occupies a central position in relation

to an ensemble of questions that are usually posed in isolation, which we will now enumerate one after another:

1. that of the attitude toward the dead, revealed by skeletons or parts of preserved skeletons;
2. that of the attitude toward bears, revealed essentially by discoveries of their bones;
3. that of animal figurations during the Upper Paleolithic.

We have envisioned the first two in isolation. Before broaching the third, it would be helpful to show that the first two, even though they initially appear perfectly distinct from each other, share a profound solidarity. Thus the general solidarity of the three questions will have become obvious when considering the third, and the unity of the different religious facts of the Paleolithic world will be apparent.

Once I have considered this question in this way, in solidarity with the others, the question of the figuration of animals in the Upper Paleolithic, in fact that of the connections of prehistoric art to religion, I will have elaborated in its entirety, from Maringer's work, essentially what we know today about prehistoric religion. Maringer's work being, among works on prehistoric religion, the most recent — and the most complete — I will be able, to conclude, to try to say just how this understanding of the facts brings us closer to the considerations of the first pages of my study.

The solidarity of the bear and human remains found throughout the entire Paleolithic clashes with our current and firmly established sentiment about the difference between humans and animals. This sentiment is in fact founded on definable oppositions. But it is a restricted domain within which the sentiment is not at risk. At least in the interior of this domain, a clear and fundamentally graspable distinction cannot be created. In regard to prehistoric man, we are reduced to conjecture. But these conjec-

tures are derived from inevitable comparisons. Earlier we saw that Siberians perceived the hunted bear as a "primitive man."

Maintaining the Siberian example, I will borrow this significant passage from a relatively recent book by Eveline Lot-Falck:

Among hunting peoples, as among Siberians, man feels the most intimately linked to animals. Between the human species and the animal species, domination would have been unfathomable: they were essentially indistinguishable from each other. The hunter sees the animal, at the very minimum, as his equal. . . . The bear could speak if he wanted, but he prefers not to, and the Yukaghir see this silence as proof of the bear's superiority over man. . . . "Wild game is like man, only more godlike."⁹

Within this assimilation between animal and man, the bear occupies a privileged position, perhaps because his upright posture is similar to man's. Yet this is a very general way of seeing things. The accumulation of proof is useless; it is enough to allege totemism and, especially, the place that animal deities occupy in mythologies. As far as the Paleolithic world is concerned, it is a matter of conjecture, yet so well grounded a conjecture is not much different from certainty. From the earliest times of the Paleolithic era, the ritual practices that centered on the remains of a bear took this assimilation for granted.

The hypothesis according to which these bones are the remains of offerings made to a supreme divinity is not opposed to the notion that animality, among prehistoric human beings, is not opposed to divinity. The bear could even be envisioned as an intercessor between man and this primary divinity, who had to be distinguished from animals and from human beings by its superiority, its supremacy. What matters most is the impossibility of introducing into this primitive world the opposition that characterizes our

modern religions: that between animality and humanity-divinity. (It is precisely after this poorly articulated opposition was formulated that it became so difficult to perceive the essential opposition between understanding and religion; the conclusion of my study will concern this point.)

Now I turn my attention back to the significance of the Montesperan bear, which I said occupied a central position among the religious facts of the Paleolithic era.

Not only must we not forget, in this regard, the prevailing equivalence between man and animal. Considered as possible prey, which the animal represents from the hunter's perspective, the animal is the object of an equivocal attitude: the hunter desires to strike the animal and nourish himself with its flesh, all while venerating the animal. Before killing the animal, the hunter asks for the animal's consent, then he cries, mourning its death; he venerates the animal and can, before its dead body, see himself bound by atonement rituals.

Nevertheless, in the relationship between man and animal, a profound difference remains. On the one hand, a man's death is in principle a passively endured destruction (primitive cannibalism is possible, but it certainly does not negate the fact that, by and large, man hunted animals); on the other hand, the animal's death is an actively provoked destruction. Thus the passive element of religion is introduced by human death, and its principles link it to man; essentially, the *interdictions* (the *taboos*) are human, the primary one among them being the interdiction regarding the corpse (the corpse is not to be touched, or it may only be touched when observing ritual precautions; consequently, murder is forbidden, the corpse introduces a dangerous element). A long time ago, the murder of an animal was the focus of a relative interdiction: if striking the animal could give birth to a feeling of guilt, the animal's death, the death of the being to which the

hunter was linked through these close ties, had the sense of a transgression.

Thus man was at once limited and protected by these interdictions, whereas the animal, which no interdiction limited, provoked transgression, called forth the death that the hunter was ready to offer it.

Keeping in mind the traditional perspectives that prehistorians introduced and continually maintained, we can see that the Montesperan model elicits less complex considerations. The hunters responded to the use of magic: the bear was represented, because through striking its effigy, it seemed possible to attain the real animal. Contagious magic ensured the effect of the fictive act on the real action. These ideas have, for the most part, been accepted; they have scarcely even been contested. The animal figurations of the Upper Paleolithic would have no other meaning: the animal's image assured the hunter possession of the represented animal. Along these lines, a prehistorian, Herbert Kühn, could write: "The prehistoric discoveries clearly show that throughout the Upper Paleolithic period . . . magical concepts were prevalent."¹⁰ It would be more accurate to say that since the development of prehistoric studies, and up to now, ideas on magic have been predominant with regard to the Upper Paleolithic.

Maringer casts doubt on Kühn's assertion. But if, intending to show the fragility of all this, I assert perspectives contrary to the usual approach, I have to distance myself a bit from Maringer's account. True, he readily accepts the magical interpretation, and he would love a religious interpretation to counter it, but what he thereby expresses is the pious hope of a Christian, not the argument of someone no longer satisfied by the traditional argument.

His work relies on a definition of religion taken from Wilhelm Schmidt. Religion would be "the knowledge and sentiment of one's dependence upon one or several supernatural powers."¹¹

Maringer, before revealing the prehistoric religious facts supporting this definition, had to have been at a loss more than once. He only emphasized those findings that might be interpreted as offerings to a superhuman power. In fact, this is occasionally possible, even in the Paleolithic era, but we cannot rule out a different interpretation, like that which links some discoveries of bones to the bear cult. Regarding the ritual treatment of human bones, Maringer is reduced to saying that "man venerated the memory of the dead, just as he implored them for their support and protection."¹² This inadequately distinguishes the survivors' dependence on the powers invoked; it even contradicts in principle the superhuman character of these powers. In any case, the religious side of the fear of the dead is obscured here. A slim solution remains: to find the religious nature of prehistoric man every time it is possible to link some trace to offerings that manifest a confession of dependence. In this way, taken together, the innumerable examples of prehistoric art, despite a weak protest, are given over to magic.

And yet, with a self-effacing gesture that suppresses any hint of audacious ambition, Maringer occasionally displays a lucid subtlety. Furthering the hypothesis of Abbé Breuil and Hugo Obermaier on the origin of figurative art, he offers a satisfying formulation to the thought of his illustrious precursors. He writes,

In all likelihood the mural art of the last ice age began as a kind of hand technique. When the hand was dipped in clay or some mineral dye and then pressed against the wall of a cave, it would leave a coloured impression. Or the three middle fingers might be drawn through the clay of the cave wall, forming "macaroni-like" designs. Here ice age man was simply paralleling another cave dweller, the bear, which had scratched the same clay in order to sharpen its claws on the hard underlying rock. But men's fingers, guided by complex patterns — wavy lines, spirals, circles and meanders, intersecting one

another, overlapping and intertwining, *till suddenly, as out of a maze, there would emerge the lifelike head of an animal*. The next step followed shortly after: the hunter turned artist would deliberately make pictures of the animals around him.¹³

Man always had in his hands the power to one day willfully make these animals appear, these animals that were initially the objects of a simultaneously disturbing and passionate attitude. Man had the power to make them appear at will and to make them appear *for fun*.¹⁴

Prehistorians were unable to fathom the difficulty of the passage from this incontestable power to the one that, undoubtedly a long time ago, prepared men to act on the real animal by means of its image. Unquestionably, at some point, men believed in this possibility, but it is strange not to see the long road separating the apparition of the image and its magical purpose. Besides, independent of this difficulty, how do we not first show what the animal image means to those who made it appear? In fact, we have to remember that the image had to have, beyond the relatively meager meaning of game food, with which theorists of magic are content, this rich meaning, which I have by no means discovered, about which Maringer knew how to speak, but which seems necessary to me to accord decisive importance.

Specifically, the apparition of the animal was not, to the man who astonished himself by making it appear, the apparition of a definable object, like the apparition in our day of beef at the butcher that we cut up and weigh. That which appeared had at first a significance that was scarcely accessible, *beyond* what could have been defined. Precisely this equivocal, indefinable meaning was religious.

The equivocality was dominant. On the one hand, the animal was a fellow creature, a friend, and the subject of apprehensive

attention. It is difficult to say if the animal was in some way "divine." In regard to these distant times, the word loses the bit of justifiable meaning it has since assumed. But the animal was, less than man, limited to what it was — to what it was in the domain of definite knowledge. It was possible to define the bison or the stag. But what they were in the depths of a world open to sacred horror, in the depths of the caves where they appeared, could not be reduced to the conceivable definition of a stag or a bison.

The equivocality of this apparition in the darkness, in the flickering light of torches or grease lamps, further doubled the violent reaction that it necessarily sparked: the apparition called out to the hunter's murderous passion, the appearance of the living animal on the cave walls placed it in the perspective of death, the bison or stag appeared only to die.

Death voluntarily offered, deplored as well as desired, placed these animal images in the realm of sacrifice. We have to keep in mind the sacrificial feast to which the beaten bear was invited, where he would see himself being offered pieces of his own flesh.

The path from this point to the magical function of the image may be relatively short, but it passes through the equivocality of the appearance. In the first place, the appearance of the animal, which the figuration called forth, in the instant during which it was created, could not have had any magical significance. Finally, perhaps even rather quickly, the possibility of magical efficacy could appear, but without religious emotion, equivocal, rich with the dramatic intensity of sacrifices, might the image have conveyed a feeling of power superior to that of weapons?

If this way of seeing these images was not imposed from the very beginning, it is because the institution of sacrifice emerged rather late: even today, it is far from certain that sacrifice preceded the birth of art. But it is of no importance if it is true that early on the death of the animal gave rise to the equivocal interest

that conferred on it this dominant position, which it then assumed in the religious sphere. After all, the animal figurations may indeed be at the origin of this institution: their use would have been determined through emotions aroused by the apparition of the beast, followed by a simulacrum of its slaughter. In any case, it is certain that the arrows shown on the animals, or the depiction of the horse falling from a cliff (in the base of a small offshoot of the main passage in Lascaux), initially had, beyond any utilitarian meaning that magical belief would have designated, an emotionally moving sense. From the moment it attracts our attention, not seeing it or ignoring it would be inconceivable.

The caves themselves, we must not forget, had no images of animals while they were inhabited. Their depth and the difficulty of accessing them contributed to the feeling of sacred horror that emanated from these equivocal aspects, these tragic aspects.

In particular, the most moving image is found in Lascaux, in a part of the cave that is so difficult to access that today the public is not admitted, in the bottom of a kind of pit. A dying bison, gutted, losing its intestines, is depicted there in front of a dead man (apparently dead). Other details hardly render this strange composition intelligible. I cannot insist on it: I can only recall the childlike aspect of the image of the man; this aspect is even more striking since the dead man has the head of a bird. I do not claim to explain this celebrated mystery. None of the proposed interpretations appears satisfying to me. However, looking at it from the perspective I have just introduced, situating it in a world of religious equivocality, rich in violent reactions, I can say that this painting buried in the depths of the holiest of holies in the Lascaux cave is a measure of this world; it is even *the* measure of this world. From this moving and unintelligible world from which religion emerged to the inextricable proliferation of religions.

I wanted to demonstrate, using a recent treatise on the subject, what the study of prehistoric religion brings to rigorous thought. Maringer's book gathers together the essentials of our understanding. At times, I have had to contest the narrowness of its scope, but the author is, in truth, in solidarity with prehistoric science.

There is, at the same time, one point on which it seems necessary to introduce an emphatic criticism.

In his book, Maringer wrote a sentence that undoubtedly had only a banal significance for him: "The bones and the stone tools that were gathered in the habitations only offer us information about material culture and alimentation."

This is generally true of remains; it is even more true of each successively examined discovery of tools. However, how does one avoid seeing the stone tools, envisioned in their setting, as being of a determinant significance with regard to religion? In fact, the tools carry the proof of *understanding*. The fabrication of tools required the development of understanding. Man had to *understand* what was around him in order to make tools. And in making them, he *understood* what he was making, then generally what he had made with the help of the first tools. There are no tools without understanding, and similarly, without tools no understanding is conceivable.

Moreover, without understanding, no religion is conceivable. Above all, the religious being must possess understanding. In fact, man alone is susceptible to religion. And just as he is man insofar as he has understanding, he is religious to the extent that he understands that he is.

It would be imprudent to say that man's religious attitude is derived from his intelligence. Perhaps it is derived from it, *but negatively*.

In the beginning, I said religion, in the realm of the under-

standing, was the origin of a fundamental lacuna. And in the beginning, I was able to say only one thing about this lacuna: that no one knew what religion was. But — now finishing the proposed examination of prehistoric origins — we can, we must go further. If we envision the origins, even from the few materials we have, we are led to emphasize the opposition between the world of work — and of understanding — which is born, and the world of religion, which is developed through the negation, sometimes through a destructive effort, of this world of understanding and of work. Now I am ready to propose a general definition, essentially, exclusively negative and paradoxical: not only do we not know what religion is, but we must also renounce this attempt to define it; but in accepting this ignorance, in refusing to define religion, paradoxically and profoundly, we are religious. It is in fact the paradoxical significance of this account not to have been made from a point of view that is outside religion *as a whole*. By no measure would I want to characterize in this way adherence to a given religion. Such an adherence has the virtue of changing in a deceptively effective way the sovereign attitude that in the utilitarian world is the religious attitude. But we cannot talk about religion from the outside; we cannot talk about it without turning it into an experience that limits it, that even contradicts it: the allegiance to a particular religion.

I cannot, in concluding this study, go much further. Now I shall simply say that sacrifice is the negation, and the destruction, of the world of understanding. I do not want to introduce any confusion between sacrifice and what — naively, inadequately — someone might call pure religion. But I can offer a glimpse of the point I have reached. I can at the same time link such a description to what is beyond it, orienting it toward *other things*.

I do not believe that until now humanity has fully understood

that it was first a world of work. It could have been summarized by work, and if one excepts life, there is nothing in it that has not resulted from work. Language, thought, and understanding all belong to the being whose essence is to work. However, work introduces a difficulty: its meaning is circumscribed by its product, but the product itself only has meaning if it is not a tool, the first material, or, more generally, the means to other work. It is possible to say that *life is in the end* the meaning of work. But the life in question cannot be the life of an animal, in its limited sense for the butcher in the slaughterhouse. According to modern man, animal life is negligible. The life in question is therefore human life — not the wisely definable human life, but that which only the religious life of man has determined by emphasizing its *sacred* character.

We have seen that in the eyes of archaic man, animal life was not intrinsically different from his own. Forgetting the feeling of the animal would also be difficult for all those modern hunters who probe ethnography before the prehistoric animal figures in the uncertain light of the caves. These moving figurations oppose in a way the figuration of man, what we must consider the inferiority felt by primitive humanity, which worked and spoke, in front of the apparition of the silent animal, which did not work. In principle, the *human* figurations in the caves are of lesser quality, they tend toward caricature, and they are often concealed *beneath an animal mask*. Thus it seems to me that *animality* for the man in the painted caves — as for archaic hunters of our day — was closer to a religious aspect, which later came to correspond to the name “divinity.” It is not *humanity* that constitutes the world of work, language, and understanding. Apparently, man initially disdained the values originating from understanding and work in favor of other, less accessible values; but the other values had the singular merit of offering

an immediate response to what man calls the “sovereign,” through these *means* of satisfaction, which have the secondary quality of work, which cannot respond to desire *immediately*.

If I have been understood, it is easy to perceive how the marvelous apparition of the animal — which until now concealed this desire, which sometimes obeyed the subterranean power of the cave paintings — provoked the sacrificial attitude, which tends, at least at first, to suppress the subsequent interest of an apparition.

This demand for a sovereign value, refusing every subordination to interest, throws itself against so-called insurmountable difficulties, in particular the difficulty of defining, if only negatively, that which is not definable, which I have discussed from the first lines of this essay.

On the subject of the origin of religion in the most ancient times, it seems appropriate to propose this discussion, which introduces a less delicate interpretation than the tradition of the prehistorians.

Should the prehistorians be allowed, without completing the task, to denigrate, without meaning to do so, images that clearly respond not to a need for food but to the possibility of seeing appear *that which seduces*, that which escapes, at least in the instant of its apparition, concerns about utility?

It is not a question of stupidly wanting to escape utility, still less of denying fatality, which always, in the end, has the last word. But it is possible to introduce a discussion, resting on specific facts and on a central point.

What in the development of religious history concealed this movement, which, in the instant I wanted to make tangible, is the passage from the initial opposition between *animality-divinity* and *humanity* to the opposition that still prevails today, that reigns over even minds foreign to all religion, between *animality* devoid of any religious signification and *humanity-divinity*? God making

man in his own image, being consequently the divinity of understanding and of work. (This does not signify the disappearance of religious possibility, but from the moment the older forms lost their initial power, this possibility only survived *in spite of it*: from one end to the other, real religions have carried within themselves the negation and the destruction of what they were.)

The Cradle of Humanity

The Vézère Valley

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin observes that the human species, although it introduced reflection into the world, “upset nothing in Nature when it came to be.” Recent scientific discoveries have emphasized this discreet, which is to say insignificant, characteristic of our birth. Our species came into the world “just like *any* other species.”¹ This observation opposes, without contradicting, the characteristic that we cannot fail to attribute to this coming into the world. The essential element of our birth is truly a characteristic *unique* to humanity. From the outset, humanity has been distinguished from animality by a quality that has placed it at its antipodes. From the very beginning, the difference was in a sense no less clear-cut than it is today. But it did not “upset nothing in Nature,” and humans themselves, when they gained the advantage of thought, did not initially comprehend the significance of their venture. What separated them from animals did not appear to them as a conquest that was to be the foundation of their nobility and dignity. What was essential in their eyes was not reflection. They shared what was essential with the animals. What was essential was *being*; and animals, the strongest ones at least, seemed to be, like them, *beings*.

I will carefully state the facts that allow me to advance these