

Gaston, A Little Known Successor of Daedalus*

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There is no better way to think about the essence of a technique than through a simple example — at least, that is our bias as empirical philosophers. And so as not to intimidate the reader with cutting edge technology, let's consider the invention of a door by that master of invention, Gaston Lagaffe, Franquin's cartoon hero. In one cartoon strip, everything is said : the essence of a technique is the mediation of the relations between people on the one hand and things and animals on the other.

* Translated by Charis Cussins.

1. Cat : Miaow ! Miaow !
Prunelle : Coming, coming, phew !
2. Prunelle : ...this happens more than twenty times a day... I've become a doorman for cats !...
3. Cat : Miaow ! Miaow !
4. Gaston : Come on !! Don't you know that a cat can't bear shut doors ?!... and that it needs to feel free ?!
Prunelle : Is that right ?! Oooh, the poor dear !!
5. Prunelle : Well, what I can't stand is draughts, and I'm telling you that these doors will be closed, ROGNTUDJ...
SCHLAM
6. Gaston : Each time Prunelle pesters me, I've found a trick to stop him being the strongest...
7. Prunelle : Ah ! Bravo ! All the doors on this floor, ruined !!!
Gaston : But you have to admit that there are no draughts !
8. Seagull : IAAHHR !
Gaston : Oh no ! Its jealous...
9. Prunelle : RAAAH !
Seagull : HiHiHi HIAAHR !
Gaston : “come on, don't be unfair : the door's closed ; right or wrong ?”

FIGURE 1-1

”Miaow !” There's a cat mewling in the office of the *Spirou* paper. What's a cat doing in a Belgian office ? We won't linger over this question. Whatever the reason, the cat is mewling and demanding that Prunelle, Gaston's boss in the office, open the door.

”I've become a door man for cats” exclaims Prunelle, indignant at having been mechanized, instrumentalized, coopted by a door, by a cat, and by Gaston. Just like existing dedicated door closers — human or mechanical {Latour, 1992 #1324} — Prunelle has become a human open-and-shut-door mechanism. His stiff, furious posture (2nd picture) indicates sufficiently that he is imitating a machine, acting like a robot.

Crisis point is quickly reached, triggered by the cat's incessant mewling. It wants the door to be open all the time so that it can come and go freely.

Prunelle ought to know this about cats. His ignorance annoys Gaston “Don't you know that a cat can't bear shut doors ?!... and that it needs to feel free ?!” Gaston — speaking for the rights of cats — and the cat — worthily represented by Gaston and also capable of expressing itself by its soul wrenching miaows — thus want the open-and-shut-door-mechanism to be on guard at all times to respect the rights of animals. Walls and doors are meaningless to felines, and while they want to take advantage of the comforts of the hearth, they don't want to be prisoners to it. Perfect parasites, they want to take everything and give nothing. Domesticated but wild ; such is the cat.

But this ignores human rights, and in particular those of Prunelle, to protect himself from draughts. Draughts ! How many disputes they provoke in buses, trains, offices ! People will kill for an open or shut window. And yet it seems that draughts only kill the French and the Belgians. The British, for example, don't claim that draughts badly threaten their health. But the Belgian Prunelle has to weigh in the balance the psychology of this “poor dear” of a cat, and his health. The first demands that doors be open, the second that they be shut. If felines remain wild, the journalists are civilized, and stay warm. Prunelle's manner shows that he hasn't the slightest hesitation on this point. “These doors will be closed”, he proclaims, using the future tense of commands, and he underlines his categorical imperative with the growl “rogntudj” a comic strip contraction of “scrogneugneu” the symbol of authority, and by the “schlam” of the doors that he slams shut in fury. There is nothing more to be said. Cats and subordinates must obey.

That's to reckon without the technical gesture, however : the ruse, the detour, the *daedalion*, the *metis*, the subtle stratagems; to reckon without the patched together bricolage, in which, since the dawn of time, the ingenuity of Daedalus, Vulcan, or Gaston Lagaffe has been found {Frontisi-Ducroux, 1975 #340}. “Each time Prunelle pesters me, I've found a trick to stop him being the strongest”, mutters Gaston, now equipped with a saw and toolbox. It's the millenary wisdom of the engineer that our new Archimedes is invoking. Take a boss with authority and power. Oppose him with an engineer who has nothing to him but a handful of tricks. Who alters the power relations ? The engineer, of course, as we've known since Plutarch (see chapter xx). “King Hieron” wrote Plutarch, “*sunnoesas tes tecnes ten dunamin* (amazed by the power of techniques), ordered war machines from Archimedes for the defense of Syracuse” after having seen him pull a trireme full of men all alone, with the help of the little trick of his composite pulleys¹. Archimedes redefined the whole impedimenta of power : an old man, a rope, and some pulleys become stronger than a team of trireme and a sovereign who talks loud and strong.

Gaston, more modestly, only redefines doors and invents (or reinvents) the cat-flap : “a practical little opening at the bottom of a door that lets cats come and go” as it says in the dictionary. Gaston's cat-flap is a vertically opening door set in a horizontally opening door. The hinges replace our friend

¹(cite Plutarch)\$\$

Prunelle, who no longer has to act as cat doorman. The mechanized human gave way to an automatic mechanism. The translation through which the human groom became a machine groom hinges on the clever mediation of the hinges. Instead of the continuous presence of Prunelle, Gaston only had to install the hinges once for the function of the groom to be delegated forever to the cat-flap. That's the genius of a technical detour. A little time, a little steel, some screws, some sawing, and a function which threatened to turn Prunelle into a perpetual slave, become the program of action of a being which no longer resembles a human.

But, as for all innovations, there are conflicting interpretations. Prunelle thinks that there has been a destruction and not a new production "Bravo ! All the doors on this floor ruined !" To which the cunning Gaston retorts that at least Prunelle's rights to health have been respected : "but you have to admit that there are no draughts !" The cat-flap is a compromise : the delighted cat has ceased mewling ; Prunelle, furious at first, will soon take satisfaction in the fact that he is no longer catching colds. The engineer's trick has managed to satisfy the mewling cat and the boss with the tender throat at the same time. (The "pest" in the word "pester"). Who paid the price of this negotiation ? Doors. They have been ruined, redesigned, redefined. Gaston, despite his legendary laziness has done a lot of work. And not forgetting the newspaper, *Spirou*, which finances this happy gang. A short detour, a small bill, and the crisis is resolved by technical bricolage which puts an end to the confrontation thanks to a compromise in which more non-humans are engaged. The dispute between cats and bosses is first displaced and then quieted by the adjunction of saws, screws and hinges.

But the seagull has been forgotten ! What's a seagull doing in a journalist's office ? The origin of this Belgian peculiarity matters little to us here. Whatever the reason, the seagull, too, is complaining, and its cries are more piercing than the cat's. Its fury was not anticipated, and it threatens the fragile compromise that is holding together Prunelle, the cat, draughts, and cat flaps. "laahhr", says the seagull. Gaston, a great animal psychologist, interprets the squawks as jealousy. Cats like to be free, and so do seagulls, especially when cats are. What should be done with this new and unforeseen actor crying out his fury and confusion ? Eliminate it ? Impossible : Gaston likes his seagull too much. Ask Prunelle to become a seagull-doorman, after he has refused to be one for the cat ? Impossible. He'd fly off the handle. Offer the seagull the use of the cat-flap ? The cat-flap is too tiny, and the seagull too proud to stoop to that level. Gaston has to take up his tools again, and go back to the doors to redefine them a little. "Try and try again" is the maxim of the inventor who has to bring the full weight of bosses, cats, and birds to bear on his inventions. He remakes them, redefines them. He adds a gap. Whoever invented the cat-flap could have invented the "seagull-gap", "a practical little opening at the top of a door that lets seagulls come and go", as the dictionary will soon say.

"Raah !", is all that Prunelle can manage to say. He was moaning figuratively before, and now he's really moaning, reduced to the mode of expression of cats and seagulls. Gaston, who understands animal language,

takes Prunelle's groanings for a sophisticated objection that he immediately counters with much good heartedness : "Come on, you can't be serious : the door's closed ; right or wrong ?" Closed to draughts and open to cats and seagulls. Who could be unfair enough to pretend to the contrary ? Who could be ass enough not to recognize a door — admittedly a renegotiated one — in the innovation offered by Gaston ? When his apoplectic crisis is over, Prunelle will be forced to realize that the innovation pacifies all the crises and that the rights of cats, of seagulls, of fluy bosses, and of animal lovers journalists are all respected provided the door takes on certain modifications. The door bends itself, complicates itself, to take on the conflicts between people and animals. The cat-flap appeases the cat ; the seagull-gap satisfies the seagull ; the remainder of the door restrains draughts and should pacify Prunelle — as long as he's not really an insincere bastard, who, indifferent to technical invention, forces Gaston and his menagerie back to the door, to relations of subordination, and to inarticulate moanings.

No one has ever seen a technique, and no one has ever seen a human. We only see assemblies, crises, disputes, inventions, compromises, substitutions, translations, and orderings that get more and more complicated and engage more and more elements. Why not replace the impossible opposition between humans and techniques by association (AND) and substitution (OR) ? Endow each being with a program of action and consider everything that interrupts the program as so many anti-programs. Draw up a map of alliances and changes in alliances. Maybe then we could understand not only Lagaffe, but also Vulcan, Prometheus, Archimedes and Daedalus {Latour, 1992 #1158}.

It doesn't matter where you begin — that's what's interesting about this viewpoint — precisely because the assemblies mix things and people. Start, for example, with the cat (figure 2-2). In version 3, everyone is against him, and Prunelle's fury serves him ill. But once the astute Gaston and his hinged cat-flap are counted amongst the cat's alliances the cat's plan of action can be fully realized. The cat doesn't even notice the difference between going through an open door, and going through a catflap. The translation becomes, for the cat, an equivalence : cat-flap=open door=the freedom of the wild. As for Prunelle's anger (or that of the seagull), they no longer affect the cat. The irreversible cat-flap made of wood and hinges, is immune to the mood swings of the cat-doorman. Completely indifferent, Gaston's cat goes all over the place as if nothing were the matter.

The cat's point of view. Program : free circulation.

AND

- 1) cat free cat furious door closed
 - 2) cat free cat happy door open Prunelle doorman Prunelle furious
 - 3) cat free cat furious door closed Gaston furious Prunelle furious
 - 4) cat free cat happy Gaston clever cat-flap open
- Program-----Anti-program

OR

FIGURE 1-2

The story is more complicated from Gaston's point of view because he has to reconcile several interested parties. The cat only looks after itself, and Prunelle only cares about his health and his journal. But Gaston has decided to keep everything around him ; his animals, his work and his bosses. Not wanting to renounce anything, he has to devise compromises between beings, things and people. Not only must he redefine the door so that it incorporates first a cat-flap and then a seagull-gap, but he must also renegotiate Prunelle by offering him qualities that he seems not to possess. This is the big lesson of the philosophy of techniques : things are not stable, but people are much less stable still. Prunelle the journalist becomes a doorman. Prunelle is not a unity but a multiplicity. He is at one and the same time docile and exasperated, and its on this multiplicity that Gaston is playing. From the bossy, grumpy Prunelle, Gaston imagines a Prunelle who will acknowledge that "there are no draughts", as Gaston says somewhat facetiously. Our Daedalus goes even further. He forces the apoplectic Prunelle to divide into one absolutely furious persona, and another pacified, sincere persona that recognizes the door that is open to all the animals as a good old closed door. Each redefinition of the door redesigns Prunelle's psychology and carries in its wake the acquiescence of the animals. There are as many Prunelles as there are doors and Gastons. There are as many doors as there are Gastons, Prunelles and cats.

Gaston's point of view. Program : make everyone happy without having to choose between them.

Program-----Anti-program

AND

- 1) Gaston cat happy door open Prunelle docile Prunelle exasperated
 - 2) Gaston cat furious door closed Gaston indignant Prunelle furious
 - 3) Gaston saw tools invents cat-flap Prunelle pestering
 - 4) Gaston cat happy cat-flap Prunelle acknowledging Prunelle furious
 - 5) Gaston cat happy cat-flap Prunelle appeased ? seagull jealous
 - 6) Gaston cat happy cat-flap seagull happy good-faith Prunelle Prunelle railing
- OR**

FIGURE 1-3

One cannot do the philosophy of techniques without extending existentialism to the practical realm of inert things. Imagine a slightly more resistant Prunelle : solid as a rock, he would remain a pest ; the ruined doors would have to be mended ; he would refuse to accept that there were no draughts ; out of his bad faith he would demand the departure of the farmyard. Imagine slightly more resistant doors : this time it would be Gaston that wouldn't be able to renegotiate them. Imagine more fragile animals : they would die at the first closed door they came across. If there were only essences, there would be no techniques {Simondon, 1989 #1557}. Gaston insinuates himself into all the small existential fissures and tries multiple combinations until he finds one — almost at the cost of Prunelle's apoplexy — which pacifies everyone in the little circle he has assembled around himself. The saw, on the other hand, as well as the toolbox and hinges, are well entrenched essences that can be used as so many handy artefacts. Likewise, the psychology of cats — “they like to feel free” — and of seagulls — “jealous” — which are not renegotiable. Essence is not on the side of things, and existence on the side of humans. The partition is between those who were an existence and provisionally become an essence, a blackbox — the resourcefulness of Gaston, the psychology of cats, the saw — and those who were an essence and provisionally became an existence — the psychology of Prunelle, the idea of a door.

Abandoning the false clarity of people facing objects needn't lead to chaos. On the contrary, it enables us to put to the test that which is possible and that which is not : the cat won't change its psychology, and Gaston won't abandon his cat ; Prunelle will always be at risk of catching a cold and will always wish doors to be closed. In the place of distinct logics belonging to things of wood, flesh or spirit, one can substitute so many socio-logics, more muddled perhaps, but not less constraining : if the cat is made happy, then the seagull must be as well ; if cat-flaps are installed in one door, then all the doors on the floor must be ruined ; if Prunelle is happy then all the animals are crying out in frustration. Innovation is the test that permits the solidity of all these links to be tested. It's the trials or innovation, and they alone, that allow us to learn if the idea of a door is flexible, and if Prunelle is multiple.

Far from blurring distinctions, this little practical philosophy actually permits one to disentangle the socio-logics. What is a technical innovation ? Modifications in a chain of associations — numbered above from 1) to 6). Where do these modifications come from ?

First, from the addition of new beings : the saw no more than the cat-flap or the jealous seagull were anticipated.

Second, the passage of an actor from the program of action to its anti-program, or vice-versa : the open door conspires with the cat but also with the draughts and so against Prunelle, for whom a breath of air is sufficient for him to catch a cold. An ally in a program of action might defect, in the next version, an become adherent of the anti-program ; something that conspired against the program becomes favourable to it.

Third is the change of state of an actor that finds itself endowed with new properties : the furious cat becomes happy; the jealous gull becomes happy; docile Prunelle becomes a pesterer, then furious, then unfair, then (hopefully for Gaston) honest and sincere; the classic door becomes more complicated first with cat-flaps then with seagulls-gaps, and Gaston finds himself ingenious instead of lazy or indignant.

Fourth, the modifications come from a substitution between beings : Prunelle cat-doorman is replaced by a cat-flap, a new assembly that prolongs the same function but in a different material.

Fifth, from a packaging, a routinization of the actors who have become faithful to each other : for the cat, all Gaston's work and the doors have disappeared, and the cat goes where it wants without noticing and purrs contentedly ; for Prunelle soon (at least we hope so) work will reabsorb him as if nothing had happened with the new doors (open to cats, open to gulls, closed to colds). Fragile existences become stable essences once again, black boxes.

If we manage to follow these five movements and vary the point of view of the actor such that the same story mixes the cat, the door, the gull, the saw, Prunelle and Gaston, then everything will be said. If the description is complete, the explication will soon follow : there exists one and only one door that can hold together the whims of Gaston, of Prunelle, and of their domestic animals. It may not be logically exact, but its socio-logically rigorous. If we had focused simply on the evolution of this one door, as an internalist historian of technology might have isolated it, or if we had followed only the power struggle between Prunelle and Gaston, as a traditionnal sociologist of class relations could have done, we would have understood nothing about innovation, and nothing about conflicts in Belgian offices either. We would be obliged to follow two parallel stories, both meaningless

Technical Evolution

Evolution of the links of subordination

Prunelle		Gaston
master over	becomes	master over
Gaston		Prunelle

FIGURE 1-4

If the object is given to us with the beings that it holds in place and which hold it in place, we can understand the world in which we live. The door evolves by transpositions and substitutions, but Prunelle evolves too, and Gaston, and their animals. They don't evolve "in parallel" as is sometimes said, or by reciprocal influence, or by retroaction, or by dialectics. The door is like a word in a sentence, connected to other words. There is a single grammar for things and for people, and a single semantics.

Point of view of the door. Program : resolve the open/shut contradiction.

Program-----Anti-program

1) door functioning shut cat furious Prunelle hostile 2) door functioning open cat happy Prunelle furious 3) door functioning shut Prunelle happy cat furious Gaston furious 4) door w/ cat-flap cat happy Prunelle acknowledging Prunelle furious 5) door w/ cat flap cat happy Prunelle appeased ? seagull furious 6) door w/ cat-flap seagull-gap cat happy seagull happy Gaston happy Prunelle made happy

OR

FIGURE 1-5

Contrary to the imaginings of the moralists, one cannot cut out the words of this long sentence without cutting out those that make up humanity. One can add actors and substitute certain of them by including others in a routine, but it's impossible to diminish the number : the door gets more complicated, Prunelle's psychology gets more subtle, the number of actors accumulates. Wanting to simplify these groupings by extracting the human actors, simplifying human essence, and placing humans face to face with things equally reduced and isolated, is a barbaric form of torture which, I hope, will no longer be paraded under the beautiful name of humanism.