

SOCIETY, WORLD-BUILDING

AND THING-MAKING:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE SOCIAL PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTING A FAMILIAR WORLD

An animal enters the world with a set of highly specialized and firmly directed instincts which are correlated with pre-typified situations in the environment. Consequently it lives in a surrounding world, structured by its instinctual inheritance, which is specific to its own particular species and admitting only a limited range of variations within which life for it is possible. Man at birth is, compared to the non-human animal, an unfinished being, and his surrounding world partakes of his unfinished character. It is a world that must be fashioned then by man's own activity; he must make a human world for himself.¹

However, I am in essential agreement with the views of those such as M. Eliade and P. Berger and T. Luckmann insofar as they hold that the "world" is initially apprehensible by men as "world" only in terms of their participation in a religious form of society. Nevertheless, before such a view can become useful in the interpretation of human world-building, there must be an

¹ P. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1966, pp. 5-6.

explication of the elementary elements and organization of society as these relate to the form and order of the "world," as well as of the social meanings which are bestowed upon things by some men and are something handed down historically to still other men of later generations. The descriptive analysis below is intended to do just that. Such an analysis involves an eidetic consideration not of the essential structure of man's thought about things but rather of the ways men have thought of them. The former would be the concern of a transcendental phenomenology, but the latter and our present concern belongs to the development of a phenomenology of culture.

A person recognizes his own distinction and isolation from others, initially experienced as independent powers, and at the same time, their connection with the effective actualization of his determinations of his conduct. A feeling of the strange accompanies a person's initial experience of these others, followed by a particular feeling (such as hope or fear) according as he chooses to view these powerful others as for or against him, since they may favor or impede, aid or oppose his decisions. For ancient and primitive man the limits of one's own area of manipulation were the boundaries of the world—beyond lay either chaos, where nature and men are still "wild," or the gods.

These powerful, strange and dangerously ambiguous others, the objects of hope and fear, can be described as "gods," and whatsoever is connected with these feelings can be seen as belonging to the sacred realm in contrast to one's own profane life.² But then every other can be a "god," and, indeed each and every other very nearly has been interpreted at first as an object of religious significance by men, that is, by ancient man and by our primitive contemporaries.³ Contrary to the opinions of some earlier anthropologists such as Durkheim, the religious object thus may be given as such to man on a personal, pre-social level of experience, that is to say, before he has a "religion."

A person, as he seeks a state of adequacy between the demands of his circumstance and his determinations of himself, attempts

² M. Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, New York, Harper, 1959, p. 12. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Cleveland, Meridian, 1965, pp. 13-15, 459; G. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, New York, Harper, 1963, Vol. I, Chapter I.

³ M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 11.

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with other men to bring the patterns of his conduct into accord with the functioning of these powerful, strange, and dangerously ambiguous others—first of all, in fact, into accord with the functioning of these other men—by the repetition of commonly ordered performances.⁴ With these other persons a person utilizes in and through the repetition of other commonly ordered performances his and their own power which he and they have come to recognize in this accord, and to express—or impress on still other persons—the importance of entrance into such an accord. For ancient men and among our primitive contemporaries today, these commonly ordered performances appear in the form of religious ceremonies such as rites of incorporation or union, magical rites, and rites of passage, and in the recitation of myths and the ritual re-enactment of these.

These commonly ordered performances are experienced as binding on him and other persons too, and so as socially preferred patterns of conduct or usages the expected performances are added to his own practice. The fact is that those patterns of conduct which “one,” that is to say, anyone in general, does in relation to “someone,” that is, to no one in particular, appear to one, in the light of his possibly not following them, as obligatory, for their neglect is accompanied by the threat of coercion—however informal or indirect that may be—which other people may exercise against one.⁵

Through a person’s participation in these usages, he begins to have a social life.⁶ In and by these usages both persons and others (which may in fact, be still other persons) are invested with a degree of familiarity. Society indeed is a human group comprised of one’s familiars. This fact derives from the prevalence of society’s usages in terms of which one is familiar with his fellow man. As society exists in and by its historically acquired usages it necessarily then involves also reciprocity, that is, the mutual anticipation

⁴ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1956, p. 151; cf. E. Erickson, “Development of Ritualization,” in *Religious Situation 1968*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1968. *Vide* especially pp. 714-715.

⁵ E. Durkheim, *Rules of Sociological Method*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1938, pp. 11-13.

⁶ P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*, Garden City, N. Y., Doubleday, 1967, pp. 54-55.

of each other's conduct by its individual members, and this reciprocity in turn involves a shared familiarity with the objects of such common practice.⁷

Society, as it determines in its historical development its usages, also determines to an immeasurable extent the manner in which a person understands these familiar others as "things" which must be reckoned with in the world. For in fact, the very "things" with which persons become familiar are not already existing parts of reality. By the term "things" I refer here, of course, not to reality itself but to a meaning which we give to reality.

At the point where experienced reality is a "thing," it has already been made into a "thing."⁸ The original social artifact is the "thing." "Thing" is man's interpretation through which experienced reality is given recognition and status, is delimited and its parts given meaning and being.⁹ Its meaning is a necessary part of the "thing" without which it is not a "thing," and conversely, its meaning cannot be separated from it as a self-contained element.

Not "things" but our fellow men are the primary reality.¹⁰ Perhaps the tendency towards personification in the child's or primitive man's attitudes toward the world is due to the fact that "things" are known only after persons are known. We don't first as infants form our own interpretation of the "thing" and then later substitute another, common interpretation of it, but we originally learn the social meaning. This meaning is incorporated in social tradition and inculcated not so much by verbal percepts as by society's usages. We therefore have access to "things," at least until we have left childhood behind, only through other persons from whom we inherit a view of what constitutes a "thing" for us. It is owing to their social origin that the nature of a "thing" and the natures of the various kinds of "things" appear to be *a priori*, necessary and eternal.

⁷ R. Kwant, *Encounter*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1965, pp. 10-12.

⁸ Cf., D. Lee, *Freedom and Culture*, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice-Hall, 1959, pp. 80, 83.

⁹ J. Ortega, *Some Lessons in Metaphysics*, New York, Norton, 1969, p. 111; cf., *Man and Crisis*, N. Y., Norton, 1958, p. 107.

¹⁰ R. Kwant, *Encounter, Passem; Phenomenology of Social Existence*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1965 pp. 83, 85.

The making of a "thing," of what we regard as needing to be reckoned with in the world, and the determinations of what kinds those "things" are, makes possible the emphasis and stabilization of those properties of experienced reality which are relevant to socially preferred patterns of co-operative action. At the same time it excludes other organizations of reality which would lend support to different practices. The "thing" and the different kinds of "things" are then simplifying and unifying interpretations of experienced reality for the sake of common practices.¹¹ In a similar way, but on a different level of action, money is another such simplifying interpretation that allows for the establishment of common relations of exchange.

The world interpreted as the possible field of action for us all is the first and most primitive principle of organization of experienced reality,¹² which carries with it then open horizons of anticipated similar experiences. "Things" were created by society to help in the anticipatory reproduction in the life of each of the members of that society of a world that was to be the theatre of cooperative action, and thereby to guarantee that the reproduction be essentially the same for all.¹³ "Things" were modeled on the sorts of actions persons preferred to do; they outline behavior patterns, in fact. In general, "things" only exist for us when we have some purpose for calling something a "thing," and that purpose is crucial in determining what constitutes a "thing."

One should note here the closeness between being meaningful and being purposeful. It is this correlation between using a certain kind of "thing" and the particular anticipations of persons deriving from their preferred patterns of co-operative action which allows a person to see a "thing" as a better or worse example of "things" of that kind. It is in terms of this "teleology" that specific evaluations of things become possible. Of course one "thing" may be many different "things" to the extent that it becomes the focus of a number of such purposes, and hence the object of a number of different valuing. Similarly other signifi-

¹¹ Cf. K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1936, p. 22.

¹² A. Schutz, "Studies in Social Theory," *Collected Papers II*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1964, p. 9.

¹³ V. G. Childe, *Society and Knowledge*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1956, p. 94.

cant variations may be found in a “thing,” such as increasing and decreasing, aging, growth, and decay, and so on.

The system of classification, the attribution of an identity (and thus a meaning within a system) to portions of experienced reality, is one of the most basic considerations, for it is by such classification that persons comprehend the world, and are able to pursue specific sorts of common practices.¹⁴ Man has to domesticate reality, he must manage to be at home in his surrounding world before he can cultivate its powers—mineral, animal, vegetable—and bring them into his service. Until then reality would have presented much the same appearance to men as the primordial chaos that man’s oldest myths depict as pre-existing the creative work of the gods. The wildness of natural life and the wilderness—the place where the wild “things” are—are the areas where we even today experience reality’s recalcitrance to our efforts at domestication.

There must be rules, then, governing the identity and classification, that is, the order, the multiplicity of discriminations and connections of “things” persons make in order to deal with their circumstances. The fundamental rules of formation of a society also establish for every person from his entrance at birth into a community of men the empirical orders of “things” with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home.¹⁵

Within early or primitive societies the relations among persons were primarily those deriving not from mere practical usefulness but from the status-roles of persons, status-roles which were supported by religious sanctions.¹⁶ A person’s status-role, and hence his rights and obligations, was largely determined by his position at birth in the network of kinship relations, although his relationship to members of other co-existing generations and his role in society’s provisionary system also had their effects on his position in society.

In ancient times, at least, it is because the relations of persons were regulated that they have been able to order things, for in classifying things men gave them places like those which

¹⁴ M. Harris, *Beliefs in Society*, London, C. A. Watts, 1968, pp. 71, 72.

¹⁵ M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1970, pp. XIX-XXII.

¹⁶ R. Redfield, *The Primitive World and Its Transformations*, Ithaca, N. Y., Cornell University Press, 1953, p. 9.

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persons had in the groups into which they formed themselves.¹⁷ The structure of human society was extended to everything in the world. "Things" and persons alike were members of society; even the very spatial ordering of the objects of perception was subordinated to and incorporated into the social patterns.¹⁸ The divisions of nature, being the same as the divisions of society, were limited by socially derived boundaries. The order of nature was therefore a normative order, a system of preferred patterns of conduct and sanctions which rest on the obligations and taboos of status.¹⁹

In any of the relationships of which the social structure consists there is an expectation that a person will conform to certain rules or preferred patterns of conduct. The established norms of conduct are often referred to as institutions.²⁰ A kinship system is an example of such institutions. In primitive societies, it is the kinship system that gives the network of relations which make up the social structure, and these relations are extended outward into all relations whatsoever.

The institutions of social life including kinship, and so the representation of the world, were, as far as can be determined, originally conditioned by beliefs and practices that were essentially religious. It can thus be said that religion has played a strategic part in the social enterprise of world-building. These institutions—and even more the world with which they were originally conjoined—persist and continue to develop long ages after the specific religious forms of social life out of which they arose have weakened or died.²¹

The surrounding world or milieu of every society corresponds to the "needs" of that society, and so triumphs over all other possible but "useless" milieus. Such "needs" cannot be simply

¹⁷ E. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1926, p. 145.

¹⁸ V. G. Childe, *Society and Knowledge*, pp. 85, 86.

¹⁹ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, p. 130; F. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy*, New York, Harper and Row, 1957, p. 55; R. Redfield, *The Primitive World and Its Transformations*, p. 106.

²⁰ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, pp. 10, 11; *Method in Social Anthropology*, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1956, pp. 174-175.

²¹ D. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, Garden City, N. Y., Doubleday, p. 132.

identified with what serves for the survival of the individual members of society, although they may in fact, do just that, but are correlatives of those values—at first, primarily religious values—in terms of which a person judges that he lives well.²² Just what a person's social "needs" are in order to live well varies, of course, from society to society.

These social "needs" are provided for by labor. "Labor" is here a collective expression indicating all those interrelated acts of provision by persons that involve directly or indirectly the manipulation of familiar kinds of "things." Thus labor is a key term in understanding the relationships between man's classification of his world and his activities within that world. Labor calls for that unity of all "things" which is perceived as world, a whole interpreted as the possible field of action for us all. In archaic and in primitive societies today status, which rests upon a religious interpretation of reality, and in contemporary Western societies utility, which rests upon a technological and hence secular interpretation of reality, provide the basic value hierarchy which governs the organization of labor and so of the world.

I have considered the meaning of "things" and their classification in terms of social structure and their organization in terms of social organization. Since to begin with society was, it seems, always a religious society, religion as a social institution is first among the major factors in the historical process of constructing a familiar world.²³ A clear example of this can be found in the representation in ancient Greece of what was (and still is) called nature. The last part of this paper will deal with the relationships between the Greek family cult, which arose in the earlier if not earliest stages of Greek society, and the Greek interpretation of the world by way of an example of the foregoing analysis.

It would seem that according to the oldest beliefs of the Greeks, the soul continues to exist in association with the body after death. Thus a dead body and a living soul were to be buried together—indeed, it was necessary that the body be properly buried with all the traditional rites observed in order that the soul might have an abiding dwelling. The soul that had

²² D. Lee, *Freedom and Culture*, pp. 72-76.

²³ P. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, Chap. I, especially p. 26; T. Luckmann, *Invisible Religion*, New York, Macmillan Co., 1967, p. 51.

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no tomb was a wandering, usually malevolent spirit. And even after the rites attached to the funeral itself were over, the relatives were by no means released from their duties towards the dead. They were responsible thereafter for tending not only the grave but also the soul of the deceased member of their family, for the rest and happiness of the dead depended on the continued observation of the proper rites. In particular, the son and heir had no more sacred duty to perform than the offerings to the soul of his father.²⁴

There was a perpetual interchange of benefits between the living and the dead of each family. The ancestors received from their descendants the worship which they needed and in turn the descendants received from their forefathers the aid and blessing for which they had need. The dead were held to be gods; the ancestor became a tutelary deity who continued to have an interest in the affairs of the family and to play an important role therein.²⁵ In this primitive religion, each god could be worshipped only by one family. Descendants alone had the right to participate in this worship of the ancestors and everyone else was strictly excluded.²⁶

The father had a son in order that the son would perform the rites due to him and his forefathers after death. From this it follows that the son does not belong to himself but to the family, and that he had been introduced into life to continue a worship. Furthermore, it is the son's duty to perpetuate the family worship by begetting a son in his turn.²⁷ Sometimes it was not possible for the family worship to be passed from father to son, because a man had no sons or because he had disinherited them. Then so that the worship should be perpetuated, the father could adopt a son, for the adopted son is only allowed to keep up the family worship of his adoptive father.²⁸

An illegitimate son, not being born of a woman associated in the husband's religion by the marriage ceremony, could not take

²⁴ E. Rohde, *Psyche*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1925, p. 167; D. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, pp. 15-18.

²⁵ D. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, pp. 22-23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54; A. R. Harrison, *Law of Athens*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968, pp. 82-83, 93; A. R. Burn, *World of Hesiod*, New York, Benjamin Blom, 1966, pp. 114-117.

part in the worship, and for the same reason, he did not belong to the family.²⁹ In fact, not even his birth qualified a legitimate son for family membership, for it rested entirely in the father's hands to admit a child or not. The father had no obligation to take this step.³⁰ Furthermore, being accepted into the family was still no guarantee that the son would remain a member, for the father had a continuing right to disinherit the son and so take away the latter's right to participate in the family worship, cutting him out of the family entirely.³¹

Succession to a man's estate involved certain religious obligations, indeed, one could almost say it was principally a matter of religious obligations. A man's heir was looked on as owing him a primary duty to preserve the worship of the ancestors and this aspect of succeeding to the estate of a dead man was in the forefront of consideration in disputes over inheritance which were brought before the courts. Participation in the family religion was advanced as evidence of a relationship supporting the claim to succeed and failure to do so as a reason against a man's being confirmed as heir to the estate.³² Property could not be acquired without the worship, nor worship without the property. As the son or adopted son is the continuator of the religion, he also inherits the estate whether he wants it or not. The continuation of the property within the family, like that of the worship, is an obligation as well as a right.³³

The most general name for a man's estate was "lot," a term which goes back to the period of settlement when the land was divided among the families of the early settlers. Later it came to mean not only a plot of land, but all of the property of the household. The land was not the property of an individual, which he could sell or otherwise dispose of, but the property of a family.³⁴ As the family tomb, or the hearth which was

²⁹ D. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, p. 51.

³⁰ A. R. Harrison, *Law of Athens*, pp. 70-71; cf. Burn, *World of Hesiod*, p. 122.

³¹ A. R. Harrison, *Law of Athens*, p. 75.

³² A. R. Harrison, *Law of Athens*, p. 123-130.

³³ Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, pp. 72-73.

³⁴ V. Ehrenberg, *The Greek State*, London, Methuen, 1969, p. 10; A. R. Harrison, *Law of Athens*, p. 124; D. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, pp. 70-71.

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closely connected with the family cult, were situated on the land, it was a holy place, the fixed center of the family religion into which no other worship could be admitted.³⁵ The idea of private property thus existed in the family religion itself. Indeed, fields and houses were not allowed even to touch. The duty to respect the boundaries of another man's land, of which Plato spoke in his *Laws*,³⁶ was supported, then, by some of the most stringent sanctions of the Greeks' religion.

Generation alone was therefore not the foundation of the ancient family. The members of the ancient family were united by their worship of common ancestors; it was a religious rather than a natural association. The daughter did not bear the same relation to the family as the son, for as soon as she married, she had to adopt the religion of her husband, and so ceased completely to be a member of the family. Likewise the disinherited son had no connections with the family any longer, for he could not thereafter participate in the family religion. On the other hand, the adopted son was a part of the family because he shared the same worship as the others. Religion did not, it is true, create the family, but it provided its rules.³⁷ Kinship is, as Plato said, a community having the same domestic gods.³⁸

All the groups in the Greek social order: clan, phratry, phyle, tribe and state, were religious unions modeled on the pattern of the family, whose members called themselves after a real or eponymous ancestor. One finds everywhere the attempt to establish a genealogical connection. The Greeks evidently found it impossible to conceive of a cohesive group not taking the form of a family.³⁹ At its roots the conviction that the role of primogenitor played by an ancestor in the past is of decisive importance for those who live at present.⁴⁰ He is the bond of their solidarity, and indeed, they owe their very existence to him.

³⁵ V. Ehrenberg, *The Greek State*, pp. 14-15.

³⁶ Plato, *Laws*, VIII, 842.

³⁷ D. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, pp. 41-42.

³⁸ Plato, *Laws*, V, 729.

³⁹ V. Ehrenberg *The Greek State*, pp. 11, 14; A. B. Van Groningen, *In the Grip of the Past*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1953, pp. 56-59; E. Voegelin, *World of the Polis*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, pp. 115-116.

⁴⁰ A. B. Van Groningen, *In the Grip of the Past*, p. 61.

But in his character as originator of the family, he also determines its nature and significance; he gives meaning and value to the whole family, both the dead and those still living.⁴¹

With this background, let us turn now to a consideration of nature, or φύσις as the ancient Greeks named their experience of reality. I will first deal with the significance of "things," then their classification and finally with the principle of their organization.

"Things" were viewed by the ancient Greeks as distinguished from other, unlike "things" in the same way as property from property. In fact, the very terms which Greek philosophers will later choose to use in talking about the "things" that exist (τὰ ὄντα οὐσία) were terms that in non-philosophical contexts referred to what is one's own, one's property.⁴² For the Greeks, the boundaries of "things" must be clearly marked and immovable and admit of no trespassing, even as the Greeks were to respect the boundaries of land (χώρα) which was the property of another family and the province of another worship. The Greek understanding of "things" was dominated by the concept of spatial domains characterized by discontinuity and discreteness, whose limits are established and maintained by what is within. Just as each "thing" has its place (*chora*) in a lineal organization of space (*chora*) so it has a place also in a lineal sequence in time. The ancient Greeks' experience of change is of a movement in and through distinct extents and their limits, of a traversing by particular "things" of their various stages and the crossing of boundaries from one stage to another, as for instance, in the sequence of seed, sapling and tree.

"Things" that are considered to be similar are related as kindred, each belonging to one and the same class (γένος) of "things," even as in Greek society the offspring of a common ancestor (real or eponymous) are all members of one family (*genos*), united by ties of blood and like to one another by descent. Each Greek had by birth a position in the network of kinship relationships which determined his status-role within the family and so established his rights and obligations, the rules of conduct in terms of which he maintains his identity in relation to other men both

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 48-49, 61.

⁴² E. g., in legal usage. Cf. A. R. Harrison, *Law of Athens*, p. 201.

within and without his family. It is what a man is that constitutes his existence and meaning in the world of the Greek family. Likewise for the Greeks each "thing," being what it is within a class of "things" of that kind, has within itself the basis of the principles of its conduct as well as the principle of its constitution in reality. The reality of a "thing" consists in its being self-identically what it is, and to be itself by virtue of what it is in itself. Put in this way, every "thing" then necessarily is because of what it is in itself. The necessity (*ἀνάγκη*), one may say, lies in the tie of blood.

But what is it in each "thing" which establishes and maintains the limits which separate it from other, unlike "things" and at the same time its bond to other, similar "things," and which is the basis of the principles of its conduct as well as the principle of its constitution in reality? It is what the ancient Greeks called its nature which it shared with other "things" of the same kind. Now that which has a nature (*φύσις*) has in the view of the Greeks received it in a manner that corresponds to the way the Greek man received his status-role in the family, namely, through being begotten (*φύω*) by his father, who in turn had thus received his status-role from his father and so on. But the most important figure of all is the ancestor who was the primogenitor of the family. From this ancestor all the members of the family take their nature and significance, even as they owe their existence to him. From this ancestor, too, came their bond to each other and their distinction from those who worshipped a different ancestor. Each "thing" thus has as its *Arche* (*ἀρχή*) an initial cause, a "primogenitor," from which it receives its nature.

Nature was for the Greek, and even perhaps is for us today, that *Arche* in the remote past, which is at the same time the basic, continuously generative and determinative element or body of elements in every succeeding moment. Likewise each of the different kinds of "things" or genera that comprise the divisions and phyla of nature is interpreted as persisting from its emergence in the order that first and in every succeeding moment still pertains to its own domain. All "things" are interpreted as being moved towards the future in a lineal sequence through more or less well marked boundaries from one discrete and patent unity to the next.

The ancient Greeks contrived to make themselves at home in

the world by filling it with “things” with which they were familiar through the participating of these “things” in the same social form of existence as themselves, namely, the family with its ancestor cult. These “things” later become the objects of Greek philosophy and science. It was not the theories of the Greeks which were religious in origin but the very “things” concerning which they constructed their theories. To the extent that we today still depend on the Greek way of understanding “things,” the same is characteristic of our philosophy and science, too.