

Virno's Philosophical Anthropology

Review-Essay

Paolo Virno, *Saggio sulla negazione: Per una antropologia linguistica*  
(Turin: Boringhieri, 2013)

*An Essay on Negation: For a Linguistic Anthropology*

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Virno's contribution to philosophy

What is Paolo Virno's contribution to philosophy?

To philosophise is to produce one's own theory of what philosophy *is*, and therefore we could rephrase our question to ask: what is it to be 'philosophical' for Virno?

Let us assume that philosophy is inextricable from a certain metaphysical gesture, even if philosophical thought need not strictly *be* metaphysical. Philosophy would then be defined by its concern with the difference between the metaphysical and the physical, the ideal and the real, the two worlds of the intelligible and the sensible, which Heidegger summarised in all their historical variation under the title of being and beings, the ontological difference – a separation between two senses of the word 'being' (*ousia*) which the philosophical tradition had left unthought. The particular form in which Virno takes up this difference is the mediaeval and, in truth, Kantian distinction between the transcendental and the empirical.

Virno's contribution to philosophy is to provide us with a thinking of the relation between the transcendental and the empirical, in which the transcendental, the supposedly ahistorical and non-empirical conditions for the possibility of things which *are* historical and empirical, *itself* appears in an empirical form; but not only this, the guise in which it shows itself varies *historically*.

But this would not be enough to ensure Virno's originality. What perhaps does is the idea that these transcendental conditions are nothing besides *human nature*, specified in a *biological* manner. We shall see that this notion of the human being is, as has almost always been the case, tightly bound up with *language* (Aristotle's *zōon logon echon* or *animal rationale* supplied one of the founding

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tenets of philosophical anthropology). But Virno's originality here will be to think this linguistic human nature with the assistance of at least three disciplines: biology, linguistics, and philosophy. This will allow him both to treat language as a *biological* faculty *and* to rethink it according to the *philosophical* notion of potentiality (*dynamis*).

By means of this deployment of anthropology, Virno is able to conceptualise the transcendental-empirical relation in the following way: the transcendental understood as the putatively *ahistorical* character of human nature is first specified *empirically*, by means of a selection of scientific facts gathered from anthropology and zoology, and is then interpreted *philosophically* in terms not of actuality but of potential: 'The concept of potentiality sums up and *clarifies anew* some remarkable biological (Bolk, Portmann, Gould), paleontological (Leroi-Gourhan), and anthropological (Gehlen, but already Herder) discoveries' (WW195-6/163, emphasis added). Perhaps it will turn out that these scientists and thinkers are even chosen precisely *because* their data are susceptible to modification in terms of potentiality.

In any case, of all the features which Virno will attribute to human nature, from neoteny to bipedality and an environmental lack that is transformed into an infinity of world, the most fundamental trait of man seems nevertheless to be language. By reading Virno's recent work on 'linguistic anthropology', the *Essay on Negation* (2013), we shall attempt to demonstrate that language seems to be an important *empirical* fact about the human precisely because it is the origin of potentiality as such, in its infinitude. Indeed, we shall venture the hypothesis that language is (thereby) the source of all of the other characteristic features of humankind, which seem otherwise to derive from the fact of neoteny. The potential stemming from language modifies all of the other facts of human nature to render them potential in their turn, at the same time unifying them. Thus, Virno's empirical anthropology becomes philosophical and linguistic in the same moment.

We shall expand on these schematic points by examining and bringing to light the joints which articulate together three of Virno's most philosophical (and anthropological) texts: *When the Word Becomes Flesh* (2003), *E così via, all'infinito (And So On, Ad Infinitum)* (2010), and the *Essay on Negation* (2013). The connection between these three books is manifest even at the level of their subtitles (*Language and Human Nature*, *Logica e antropologia*, and *For A Linguistic Anthropology*, respectively). They comprise a grand trilogy of anthropological works, the resources of which we shall marshal here in order to illuminate Virno's contribution to philosophy by way of philosophical anthropology.

## Nature and history: Biolinguistic capitalism

First, let us focus on the fundamental matrix of Virno's philosophical contribution: the supposedly impossible overlapping of the transcendental and the empirical.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Virno speaks of 'an endless circularity between the transcendental and the empirical' (ID134).

On a certain reading of the Kantian moment, the transcendental was supposed to be kept rigorously distinct from the natural or the empirical (for Kant, 'nature' simply is that which can be experienced, and so the two are indissociable).

'Transcendental philosophy prides itself on affirming that the presupposition of human praxis, which determine facts and states of affairs, never appear as facts of states of affairs themselves' (WW214/179). This is summarised in the following way: '[w]hat founds or allows all appearance does not appear' (WW214/179).

The transcendental field, the transcendental subject together with its faculties and processes, makes all experience possible, but remains radically distinct from that experience, supernatural, and hence unknowable in a certain sense. This is why Kant would never have described the transcendental subject as 'human nature'. In such a gesture cannot but bring to mind the English empiricists of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and in particular Kant's description of John Locke as attempting a 'physiology of the human understanding' (CPR, Aix), an empiricism which has not yet learnt to separate causation and conditioning. Yet, flagrantly, Virno speaks of the empirical, material basis of transcendental conditions, as anthropology does.

The deconstruction of the transcendental-empirical divides seems to begin with Hegel (but perhaps earlier, with J. G. Hamann, and even before that – perhaps always, Derrida would avow). Hegel espied a 'bad infinite' in the Kantian picture, a radical distinction between an absolutely inapparent structure and its empirico-sensible apparition, and thus the opposition between the transcendental and the empirical began to deconstruct itself, as if the absolute precedence of the transcendental could never have been so straightforward, so distinct from that which was supposed to follow (from) it.

In the twentieth century, apart from Heidegger's monumental attempt to insist on the inherence of 'facticity' within the instantiation of transcendental structures (Virno speaks of 'the visibility (or facticity) of the transcendental' [WW218/182, translation modified]): 'life' and eventually 'Dasein' in its irreducible potential for singularity, perhaps most prominent in the twentieth century refusal of a radical separateness on the part of the transcendental are the deconstructions of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. Each theorises the elevation of a certain empirical element to the level of the transcendental, and either think this inevitable (Derrida) or use it as a spur to rethink the transcendental beyond its 'resemblance' to the empirical (Deleuze).

But it seems likely that, for different reason, none of these thinkers would be happy straightforwardly to invoke such an apparently defunct and so *empirical* a notion as 'human nature', having had done with man each in their own way.

But following in the wake of such attempts, Virno can say that his philosophy 'dethrones [*destituisce di fondamento*] transcendental philosophy' (WW213/178). And this leads him, up to a point tendentiously, to describe his own project as an 'empiricism' of a certain kind: 'atheism coincides with the affirmed empirical appearance of transcendence: it coincides with an empiricism to the n<sup>th</sup> power [*un empirismo all'ennesima potenza*] able to reclaim even the presuppositions of experience' (WW216/181). Virno also speaks of the 'integral [*integrale*, i.e. inherent] empiricism [...] of natural history' (WW217/181).

(N.b. Throughout this essay, in quoting Virno, I have invoked the original Italian more frequently than might be decent or decorous, but certain of Virno's translations have suffered from a lack of standardisation, to say the least. In general, I cite the original when a potentially important ambiguity is elided, as when different words are translated by single English equivalent – this frequently happens with words relating to lack and poverty, and since these are important

We shall return to the curious matter of transforming an empirically specified *nature* into a *transcendental* condition of manifestation. But for the moment, let us examine the way in which these transcendental conditions (human nature) manifest themselves in history, in a bid to specify Virno's originality and to clarify certain of his choices, particularly when it comes to the way in which he specifies human nature.

Virno's gesture here is not to 'historicise the transcendental', nor is it to 'transcendentalise history', which is to say, respectively, to demonstrate the conditions for the possibility of manifestation to be historically variable (Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault), or to include history itself among the conditions for the possibility of experience (Wilhelm Dilthey, and his progeny; perhaps originally, Hegel).

In Virno's theory of the transcendental, despite its contact with history, the transcendental remains ahistorical, or as Virno will put it '*metahistorical*' (in a Latinate version we are more familiar with, 'tranhistorical').<sup>3</sup> The transcendental is not historically changeable, nor is history straightforwardly a part of the conditions which govern appearance. Rather, the transcendental, while remaining constant, proves itself capable of *manifesting* itself in an empirical form. But, tellingly, it reveals itself in a different guise in each historical epoch. Thus, the transcendental, understood as human nature and its faculties, will make itself available empirically for certain deployments – malign or benign – in a manner that depends upon the historical phase in question. Today, at the very end of history, we find a historical configuration which Virno describes as standing at the mercy of 'biolinguistic capitalism' (to mix the Greek and Latin languages in a Babelic hybrid perhaps forgivable given the state of as yet unactualised potential which it represents).

It is our contemporary moment that might be taken to justify the particular way in which Virno interprets human nature as such, and indeed the very manner in which his entire philosophical anthropology unfolds – retrospectivity is rampant.<sup>4</sup> Virno's anthropology would be a genealogy of our present, therefore,

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to our consideration of philosophical anthropology, we shall frequently interject them. I also recall the Italian when the same word in the original is translated by a number of different words in the target language, which risks suggesting an ambiguity when there is none.)

<sup>3</sup> In *Déjà vu and the End of History (Il ricordo del presente)*, Virno will deploy the cognate term 'pre-history' (*preistoria*) in a very similar manner (DV117/93). The only difference is that the prehistoric should be invoked when speaking of the *beginning* of history, while the metahistorical speaks intra-historically, of different epochs *within* a history that has already begun. That said, the difference is not clear, since Virno speaks precisely about the way in which the anthropogenic assumption of historicity is repeated in a different way throughout history – the manifestation of the transcendental is nothing besides such a repetition of the very first moment in the ascent of man.

<sup>4</sup> '[I]t is because of this superposition [of eternity and contingency, of the biological invariant and socio-political change] that the notion of "human nature" has been enjoying a new prestige in

and be based, as such genealogies necessarily are, on a certain diagnosis of our present moment. Virno's account reads our historical moment as one in which our biological linguistic faculty – in all its potentiality, its 'power' – has become the most valuable commodity on the 'job market'. This will mean that capitalism today has fastened not just on one potentiality among others, but on the very root of all potentiality.

This allows us to propose the following: it is not simply that the transcendental is revealed differently over history, but that the very difference between historical epochs is most fundamentally *defined* by the different manner in which these conditions are allowed to show through it (although this way of putting it risks drawing a little nearer than might be desirable to the Foucauldian position). Fundamentally, it also becomes clear that Virno's philosophy of history – basically presupposed rather than proven – is Marxist: history is the history of technology understood in the guise of the means of production, together with the history of its ownership and the manner of extracting profit with respect to labour that derives from this arrangement – a history of 'political economy'. Adopting this vision of history entails the definition of our current epoch as that of the thoroughgoing sway of the capitalistic mode of production (while rendering 'capitalism' as such more than just one facet among the many that would characterise our current epoch) and this capitalism is understood as employing the labour-power of the human being in such a way as to manifest the 'metahistorical' nature of this human being's zoological life in a certain historical way.<sup>5</sup>

Virno's genealogy of this situation is motivated and directed precisely by the need to resist this exploitation of human nature, and the necessity to reveal the possibility of *another* way in which our nature might be made manifest within history and mobilised politically. Any attempt to overcome the present moment in history would need to insist that this history is not in fact at an end, and that to understand how to supersede it, practically, we must, theoretically, comprehend with precision the overlapping of transcendental and empirical, nature and history, life and power, that it involves.<sup>6</sup>

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the last few decades' (WW204/171), 'because the biological properties of the human animal have acquired an unexpected role in today's productive processes' (WW205/171).

<sup>5</sup> Virno will describe the account of this form of history as a 'natural history', and since we have given our preliminary definition of 'philosophy', it is only fair to present Virno's own: 'the preeminent task of philosophy is to come to terms with the unprecedented superposition of eternity and contingency, of the biological invariant and socio-political change that uniquely characterises [*connota*] our time' (WW204/170, translation modified).

<sup>6</sup> In a word, but one which Virno is for the most part reluctant to use, 'biopower' or 'biopolitics'. He comes closest to explaining this reticence when he describes biopolitics as a *derivative* of 'labour power', a more original instance which nevertheless it is perhaps the distinguishing mark of the philosopher to ignore (DV159/121). Indeed, perhaps this particular declination of 'potential' is avoided precisely by speaking about 'biopolitics'.

In the *Grammar of the Multitude*, Virno expands on this point and tells us that '[o]ne should not believe, then, that biopolitics includes within itself, as its own distinct articulation, the

Given this political motivation, while we shall confine ourselves as absolutely as we can to Virno's most explicitly anthropological works, we shall, once or twice, cast our gaze towards Virno's more directly political works. By indicating the articulation between these two strands, whilst also picking out the intertwining of the fibres that constitute each thread, and most of all the first, we should be able to clarify the connection between philosophy, anthropology, and politics, in Virno's work, and above all the political motivation for this philosophy and anthropology, which in certain ways explains the very nature of the latter.

### Naturalism, natural science, and human nature

All of which leads us to think again about the invocation of *natural scientific* data in the definition of this human nature, for Virno might to an unsympathetic reader seem guilty of a certain naïve naturalism in his definition of the 'human animal'.<sup>7</sup> In truth, as we shall come to see, the retrospective character of Virno's philosophy is what allows him to decide upon the particular empirical facts which he deploys in his definition of man's nature. In fact, Virno will end up almost equidistant from a naïve naturalism and its opposite, a purely philosophical transcendentalism, locating himself somewhere between a purely empirical anthropology and a philosophical anthropology which would ignore the empirical sciences altogether.<sup>8</sup>

Let us therefore examine just what Virno means by 'human nature', and we shall discover that the apparent 'ahistoricity' and 'empiricism' of Virno's approach are not so straightforward as they might have seemed.

In *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, Virno speaks of human nature as the 'biological invariant' or the 'meta-historical' invariant; elsewhere he will speak of the 'bioanthropological constants' (M12/ECV Part II 1). What are these, and whence does Virno draw them?

Two things should strike us first of all regarding Virno's anthropology:

- 1) The fact that it does indeed have a very pronounced empirical moment;
- 2) Apart from Stephen Jay Gould, and perhaps one might cite Noam Chomsky, Virno rarely employs *contemporary* empirical data.

Both of these points are philosophically significant.

Let us deal with the second. In general, Virno borrows his determination of human nature from the early to mid-twentieth century ethologists and philosophical

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management of labour-power [*forza-lavoro*]. On the contrary: biopolitics is merely an effect, a reverberation, or, in fact, one articulation of that primary fact – both historical and philosophical – which consists of the commerce of potential as potential [*potenza in quanto potenza*, the buying and selling of labour power *as power*] (GM83-4/79).

<sup>7</sup> At least one recent book has come close to suggesting Virno is guilty of a certain naturalist naivety, from an historicising Foucauldian point of view, which remains difficult to reconcile with the account of the Foucault-Chomsky debate that Virno himself provides, and which we are distantly preparing to recite, together with the account of Virno's 'empiricism' that we are here developing (cf. Murphy 2017, 129-34).

<sup>8</sup> Virno speaks of 'an anthropology *inspired by naturalism*' (2011, 68/ECV Part I 1.3, emphasis added).

anthropologists, Jakob von Uexküll, Helmuth Plessner, Konrad Lorenz, and, above all, Arnold Gehlen. Less explicitly and perhaps only indirectly in all but a handful of cases, Virno also makes reference to the eighteenth century and one of fathers of this particular strain of anthropology, J. G. Herder. He also invokes André Leroi-Gourhan and the biologists Louis Bolk and Adolf Portmann, as we have already seen.

Slowly to approach the significance of this selection, let us first note that one feature of all these writers is that they avow human nature to be radically distinct from animal nature, just as human language (our prime distinguishing trait, for Virno) is radically distinct from animal language.<sup>9</sup> But to leave language aside for a moment, in general, the features of human nature which Virno gleans from his predecessors remain fairly constant, with only minor fluctuations. In *Multitude*,<sup>10</sup> it is said that man has no defined environment, and therefore no determinate and limited set of behaviours with biological purposes that would be triggered instinctually by signals emanating from that environment. Thus, our instincts, not standing in a biunivocal relation with a finite set of elements that would constitute our environment, may be said to be ‘unspecialised’, not necessarily developed or deployed for particular tasks relating to our vital survival needs.

Virno utilises the terms of Gehlen and Uexküll to affirm that the human being’s lack of a (finite) environment (*Umwelt*) gives birth to an (infinite) world (*Welt*). The human being is capable of perceiving a potentially infinite set of signals or stimuli, to none of which is an instinctual response given innately within it. This lack gives rise in turn to a potential infinity of *responses* (and non-responses), and gives us some sense of how these thinkers might allow Virno to propose that, purely on a natural basis, the human being is an animal of quite incomparable potential.

The lack of a natural habitat, together with the infinity of world, necessitates the production of human cultures, which are geographically and historically variable, and contingent in their character. Nature and history find their joint in man. Culture is ambiguous in protecting man from the worst effects of his

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<sup>9</sup> Virno will accept this difference, apparently as straightforwardly as Jacques Lacan at his most seemingly naïve (cf. WW28/20). Following Noam Chomsky and Wilhelm von Humboldt, Virno takes ‘recursion’ to be one of the defining features of a specifically *human* language (cf. Virno 2011, 66f/ECV Introduction 1.2). In the *Essay on Negation*, Virno posits the ability to negate, which he had nevertheless earlier on related to recursion, as if the latter were (merely) one particular species of the former (‘not not not not...’ [with the multiplying parentheses assumed]) (cf. 2011, 66 & 75/ECV Introduction 1.2 & 1.5) (*Negation*, 1.1). One might also consult the typology Virno provides in *Mondanità* (MN3.1) which distinguishes infinite regress into two principal forms: cosmological and linguistic regression, with the latter being characterised in terms of the nesting of meta-languages and their object-languages.

<sup>10</sup> This hybrid does not exist in Italian: it is a partial translation of *E così via, all’infinito: Logica e antropologia* bound together with a full translation of *Motto di spirito e azione innovative*, and an appendix contained in neither (the English translation itself reveals none of this information). This nevertheless has the advantage of allowing the book to juxtapose very starkly the anthropological and the political.

‘plastic[...] and indecis[ive]’ nature, but also *manifesting* this nature and so assisting in its full deployment with all the dangerous aggressivity this implies. Political and cultural life allows for a level of destruction and aggression that man in the state of nature would not have been able to achieve: it allows for a certain peace, but also makes possible an unimaginable war (M18/ECV Part II 1 I.I).<sup>11</sup>

In a way that I think one could ultimately find in Heidegger, to paraphrase Virno rather broadly, this dangerous, unhinged character of the human animal has its promising side, and this is precisely where we move beyond the need for this wild animal to be ‘tamed’ by the state, in authoritarian fashion, an idea which led Gehlen himself (not to speak of Carl Schmitt) into a certain conservatism and worse. The potential character of the human animal means that it has a capacity for infinitely *innovative* actions, the ability to produce events of novelty, to modify customs, norms, laws, in a manner that is absolutely complete and thus absolutely revolutionary (M20/ECV Part II 1.2).<sup>12</sup> Thus the biolinguistic conditions of evil or vice are the same as those of virtue. What decides between them is the different relation we have, politically, with respect to our infinite negativity and potentiality.

Virno links this openness of man and his world with the human being’s neoteny – ‘the permanence of infantile characteristics’ in adults, which is to say that the unspecialised character of instincts persists into adulthood. We never learn. It also implies the persistence of ‘a congenital fragility of inhibitive mechanisms’ which is to say man’s ‘virtually unlimited’ aggressiveness. Unlimited precisely because of the unlimited number of its possible occasions (cf. M17/ECV Part II 1.1).

The precise list of human features Virno provides tends to vary each time he supplies it, and he seems quite content with the fact that his list is only ‘approximate’:

poverty of instinct, undefined nature, and characteristic, constant disorientation. Having faculties is the sign of a lacuna: that is to say, it demonstrates the lack of a pre-given *environment* [*ambiente prefissato*] in

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<sup>11</sup> When it comes to man’s exceptional aggression, Konrad Lorenz’s *On Aggression* remains Virno’s primary reference, one of those texts of the period that Virno appears to refer to absolutely uncritically.

<sup>12</sup> More or less paraphrasing Carl Schmitt, Virno writes: ‘If, however, as everything leads us to believe, Homo Sapiens is dangerous, unstable and (self)destructive animal, then in order to hold his animal in check, the formation of a “united political body” seems inevitable’ (M14/ECV Part II 1). It is Schmitt’s *political* inference that Virno wishes to resist absolutely. For Virno accepts the ‘anthropology of evil’ but *not* the idea that this necessitates a strong state; quite the reverse: an abolition of the state and its capitalist economy. Virno puts it like this: ‘the risky instability of the human animal – so called evil, in sum – does not imply at all the formation and maintenance of that “supreme empire” that is the sovereignty of the state’ (M16/EVC Part II 1). In the current context, for completeness, one might also mention that Noam Chomsky’s notion of a certain innate creativity of the human being, with particular reference to the use of language, may stand in the background of Virno’s thought here.

which we can take an innately secure place once and for all. [...] Language, the intellect, memory, labour-power and the undifferentiated disposition towards pleasure [...]. This list – an approximate, and thus disputable one [*Approssimativo e quindi disputabile*] [...]. (DV87-8/72)<sup>13</sup>

Prospectively, if the cluster of anthropic traits may be said to be unified by a single one, Virno appeals to neoteny. And yet, at other times, for instance in a text translated in *The Italian Difference*, Virno summarises these features in such a way as to make them revolve around not neoteny, but potentiality: ‘The potentiality of *Homo sapiens*: (a) is attested to by the faculty of language; (b) is inseparable from instinctual non-specialisation; (c) originates in neoteny; (d) implies the absence of a univocal environment’ (ID135, translation modified). We shall show in the end that to think of these features in terms of potentially is to think of them in a *retrospective* fashion, and we shall see that this potentiality is introduced – or at least generalised and infinitised – by the ultimate feature of the fully humanised animal: language. This explains why, in other contexts, Virno is quite unequivocal that the unifying trait is language. Defining ‘nature’ and the ‘natural’, Virno could not be more direct: ‘we mean the physiological and biological constitution of our species, the innate dispositions that characterise it phylogenetically (starting, of course, with the linguistic faculty)’ (WW172/144). Later on, he places language emphatically first in order of rank: ‘the language [*linguaggio*] faculty as distinct from historical languages [*lingue*], raw potential [*potenzialità grezza*], non-specialisation, neoteny, and so forth’ (WW202/169). And again, without hesitation: ‘Instinctual unpreparedness and chronic potentiality: these invariant aspects of human nature, *deducible from the linguistic faculty*, imply an unlimited variability of production relations and life forms without, however, suggesting any blueprint for a just society’ (WW189/158, emphasis added).

From the beginning, neoteny, and from the end, language. But perhaps things are not quite so simple, since, as we shall see, language is part of our *biological* heritage too, and not something that is simply *cultural*. We shall therefore need to propose a precise understanding of the relation between neoteny and language. In general, our hypothesis will be that neoteny and language *in conjunction* are responsible for the unprecedented level of potential which the human being has at its disposal, with language constituting something like a necessary supplement to our neoteny and at the same time its passage to infinity...

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<sup>13</sup> An alternative list, this time related directly to Gehlen, who generally inspires everything but remains in the background: ‘the way of being of the multitude has to be qualified with attributes coming from very different, even contradictory contexts. They can be found, for instance, in Gehlen’s philosophical anthropology (biological insufficiency of the human being, lack of a well-defined “environment” [*manca di un “ambiente” definito*], scarce [*povertà*] specialised instincts) [...]’ (WW223/187).

### Eternity enters time: the beginning of man

We are now in a position to substantiate a little more the hypothesis that Virno's assertion of an ahistorical constant of human nature is not as naively realist or as straightforwardly naturalist as it might have seemed.

Let us attend to the way in which Virno speaks of the *eternal* quality of this determination: most remarkably of all, eternal human nature has a *beginning*. That beginning is called 'Cro-Magnon Man' (WW174/145). This determination of the chronological moment of emergence appears to be due to Chomsky, whose debate with Michel Foucault on human nature we are getting ready to rehearse.<sup>14</sup> Such things are, as we shall see, never irrelevant when it comes to deciding upon the time and character of anthropogenesis. In any case, man's ahistorical nature has a date of birth. Does this imply that the supposedly eternal nature of man was never as eternal as all that?

Is it merely the case that there will always have been a human nature, a kind of Platonic idea, and it merely had to await the empirical emergence of the hominid in order to be incarnated? Or is the very essence (for what else is a transcendental 'invariant'?) itself something that has emerged over time, at and as the very origin of history, as it breaks away from 'prehistory'?

But if the transcendental is historicised in this way, then the empirical is automatically historicised too, because what *counts* as an empirical object then changes historically in line with the transformations of the transcendental in the guise of what Foucault called the 'historical a priori'. The human in its nature is the transcendental condition for the manifestation of all objects – and yet this will *include* the human in its empirical aspects. Thus perhaps, the particular empirical details that we attribute to the human will alter depending upon how we understand the transcendental subject. And we have already suggested that, given that this transcendental subject appears within history in various ways, the manner in which this transcendental is understood will depend upon the historical moment which preoccupies us.

We intend finally to clarify this imbroglio of transcendental and empirical when we arrive at the *Essay on Negation* and discover that language itself similarly embodies these two forms, and unveils their relation in a clearer way.

For the moment we shall attempt to clarify these questions in a preliminary way by examining Virno's reading of the debate between Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky that took place in 1971 in Eindhoven. This allows Virno to exposit his own complex conception of the relation between history and human nature, and allows him clearly to exceed the position to which some would wish to confine him, of a simple empiricist affirmation of a natural scientific account of human nature.

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<sup>14</sup> '[T]he nature of human intelligence certainly has not changed in any substantial way, at least since the seventeenth century [a reference to a question from the audience, who is referring to a supposed transformation in human nature affirmed by Foucault], or probably since Cro-Magnon man' (Chomsky in Chomsky & Foucault 2011 [1971], 40, quoted in WW179/150).

### The Foucault-Chomsky debate

This encounter is staged in the crucial sixth chapter of *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, where Virno considers the relation between transcendental and the historical by means of a kind of prosopopoeia (WW175ff/147ff). Foucault and Chomsky represent the Scylla and Charybdis that Virno aims to negotiate – a full historicisation of human nature, and a blunt assertion of a fully natural human nature outside of the vagaries of history (cf. WW175/146–7). This is precisely the question. That Virno describes the debate as a ‘failure’<sup>15</sup> evinces his desire to avoid both horns of this dilemma and to imagine how the debate might have reached a(nother) resolution. To describe such a sublation, Virno is forced if not to invent a new term, then at least to give an entirely novel signification to an old one: ‘natural history’ (*storia naturale*) (WW182/152).<sup>16</sup>

‘Nature’ here means, simply, human nature. Of natural history, Virno says this:

The possibility of natural history hinges on two conditions: one is natural, the other historical. The first one implies that human nature, which in itself is unchanging, does allow for a maximum of variations in experience and praxis, since otherwise there would be no history. The second one implies that the historical variations sometimes concern themselves with the biological invariants and show them as concrete states of affairs, since otherwise nothing would be “natural”. (WW173–4/145)

Virno continues:

The last sentence [just quoted] is decisive, because it is both necessary and sufficient, and it offers us the thread enabling us to define, although still in abstract terms, the concept-oxymoron at the centre of this discussion. Naturalist historiography focuses on the social and political events that confront the human animal with *metahistory*, that is, with the inalterable traits of his species. This kind of historiography collects empirical facts (linguistic, economic, and so forth), that, within a unique cultural conjuncture, manifest what repeats itself since the age of Cro-Magnon. (WW174/145)

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Eindhoven saw the last important attempt at keeping history and biology together as well as its theatrical failure’ (WW177/148).

<sup>16</sup> The terms of the phrase have to ‘remain in perpetual tension’ to give the concept its ‘energy’, its ‘force’: the ‘oxymoron [...] postulates an electric spark resulting from the connection of two clearly contrasting elements [*cortocircuito*, a short-circuit]’ (WW173/145). Perhaps more intuitive is a synonym which Virno sometimes employs: ‘naturalist historiography’ (*storiografia naturalistica*) (WW184/154).

And among these 'metahistorical propertie[s] [*metastorica prerogativa*<sup>17</sup>] of *homo sapiens*', Virno singles out the faculty for *language*, which will, as we have intimated, suggest that retrospectivity is at work.

Virno often describes these moments within 'natural history' as repetitions of this foundational event: if these transcendental conditions – human nature – are capable of manifesting themselves in some form within experience, 'when we experience the transcendental conditions of experience' (WW174/146), then manifest are the very conditions for the possibility of being counted as human: at such moments one relives one's 'anthropogenesis'. So natural history reveals the moments when man once again lives through the process of becoming-man.

On such occasions we witness a certain eruption of eternity into history: 'in the historical sequence, also and maybe especially the *mobile* articulation of eternity and contingency, of biology and politics, of repetition and difference'.<sup>18</sup> And crucially, with respect to the debate between Foucault and Chomsky: 'Rather than dissolving the eternal (the distinctive traits [*proprietà*] of the human species) into the contingent (productive systems, cultural paradigms and so forth) or even worse, reducing the contingent to the eternal, *natural history chronicles meticulously their ever-changing intersection*' (WW175/146, emphasis added).

In other words, one should precisely not cede everything to either, but rather to plough one's own furrow somewhere between them, documenting the moments when history unfolds itself precisely by fastening upon (what it perceives to be or presents as) nature.

To make things more 'sober' when it comes to the grand question of human nature and the relation between nature and history, which is to say, to bring things manifestly 'down to earth', Virno turns to *language* as a test-case of human nature, for language appears to be an ahistorical faculty, condition for the possibility of any human being anywhere at all times, but also to be historically variant in each case: 'The issue of "human nature" can find a sober *experimentum crucis* [decisive experiment or experience] in our understanding of the linguistic faculty [*la facoltà di linguaggio*] and of its relation with definite historical languages [*lingue*]' (WW175/146).

Virno then describes his task in a way that will become very interesting to us, in terms of a difference of methodology – naturalist and historicist. What is so unusual in Virno's way of posing the problem is that we normally think of naturalism as instituting a *continuity* between humans and animals, between history and nature, and yet here, Virno sets himself the stiffest challenge of not just positing an *opposition* between nature and culture, quite brazenly, but also of explaining

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<sup>17</sup> Throughout the translations of Virno's anthropological writings, '*prerogativa*' is rendered simply as 'prerogative', but in this context, it seems like a false friend.

<sup>18</sup> The Christian resonances are evoked deliberately here, though Virno tells himself that one can deploy a theological conceptuality whilst freeing one's self absolutely from any commitments to the divine: '[n]atural history is the materialist, rigorously atheistic version of theological Revelation' (WW212/178).

such an opposition *naturalistically*: ‘we will ask how we can explain *naturalistically* the recurrent opposition between “nature” and “culture”, but also what are the socio-historical conditions for the suturing of this break’ (WW175/146-7).<sup>19</sup> Nature opens up something other than itself, and certain moments in history allow the gap between the two to close once again, in a ‘short-circuit’, or to open up a rent in the historical fabric so as to allow human nature to show through at a certain historical moment in a certain historically mediated form, and sparks begin to fly.

## The question concerning human nature

### a) Chomsky

In a debate that is perhaps less polemical, less oppositional, at the level of its account of human nature, than Virno, for his own purposes, may present it, Chomsky says of human nature: ‘I think that as a matter of biological and anthropological fact, the nature of human intelligence certainly has not changed in any substantial way [...], probably since Cro-Magnon man’ (Chomsky & Foucault 2011 [1971], 40).

Virno takes such lines as justifying his employment of the figure of Chomsky to represent naturalism, nature, metahistory. Chomsky’s own example – primary, but by no means unique (Virno exaggerates here, too) – of an invariable, necessary feature of human nature is the linguistic faculty: ‘This faculty belongs to [*una proprietà*] the species, is common to all of its members and is essentially unique with respect to the other species<sup>[20]</sup>’ (WW177/148). Perhaps it is from Chomsky that Virno derives the courage to think of language as a *biological* faculty. Chomsky indeed comes very close to thinking language as both biological and transcendental at once: ‘Like a self-developing organ, language is endowed with selective structures and combinatory schemas whose autonomous productivity are independent of the speaker’s empirical experience. Universal grammar, underlying the various historical languages, is part of our genetic patrimony<sup>[21]</sup>’ (WW177/148).

Chomsky’s continuous stress on linguistic ‘creativity’ shows that this ‘nature’ does not in fact keep us bound within certain limits, like a prehistoric community happily stagnating in its backwater, an ox-bow lake cut off from the onward surge of progress. Rather, if this linguistic faculty is creative, and infinitely so, then the

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<sup>19</sup> And perhaps even more strikingly: ‘Those who object that this discontinuity is nothing more than a mediocre cultural convention due to the melancholy anthropocentrism of spiritualist philosophers [*filosofi spiritualisti*] are just trying to make their own lives a bit easier, instead of attending to a far more interesting task: finding the *biological* reasons for the lasting separation [*divaricazione*] between biology and society. Naturalising the mind and language [*linguaggio*] without giving a *naturalistic* explanation of the antinomy “nature” and “culture” reduces the whole issue to a [...] clash of ideas, and ends up in the most shameful incoherence’ (WW201/168, cf. ID138-9).

<sup>20</sup> That this is a literal quotation from Chomsky (1988) is entirely elided by the English translation.

<sup>21</sup> ‘*Patrimonio*’, another false friend; ‘inheritance’ or ‘heritage’ might be more apt, signifying that material which is inherited genetically.

invariance of our nature is in truth the source of an infinity of languages and an infinity of possible actualisations of that language in the form of speech. This is a creativity that is founded in biology, a novelty grounded in eternal sameness: 'Each speaker makes "an infinite use of finite means"' (WW179/149).

## b) Foucault

So far at least, Virno's own position would seem more proximate than we might have imagined to Chomsky's, but the picture will be altered by a brief consideration of what Virno takes to be Foucault's diametrically opposite approach.

How, then, does Foucault depart from Chomsky's supposedly naturalistic position?

In response to Chomsky's assertion that a certain linguistic element of human nature may be susceptible of natural scientific treatment, Foucault responds:

It is true that I mistrust the notion of human nature a little [...]. I would say that the notion of life is not a *scientific concept*; it has been an *epistemological indicator* of which the classifying, delimiting and other functions had an effect on scientific discussions, and not on what they were talking about.

Well, it seems to me that the notion of human nature is of the same type. It was not by studying human nature that linguists [like Chomsky himself?] discovered the laws of consonant mutation, or Freud the principles of the analysis of dreams, or cultural anthropologists the structure of myths. In the history of knowledge, the notion of human nature seems to me mainly to have played the role of an epistemological indicator to designate certain types of discourse in relation to or in opposition to theology or biology or history. I would find it difficult to see in this a scientific concept. (Chomsky & Foucault 2011 [1971], 6-7)<sup>22</sup>

In regard to the rules or regularities (of language) from which, for Chomsky, free creativity takes its departure, Foucault says the following:

Where perhaps I don't completely agree with Mr. Chomsky, is when he places the principle of these regularities, in a way, in the interior of the mind or of human nature.

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<sup>22</sup> In truth, despite the opposition Virno would like to set up, at certain moments Chomsky broadly agrees with Foucault on this point: 'Personally I believe that many of the things we would like to understand [...] such as the nature of man, or the nature of a decent society, or lots of other things, might really fall outside the scope of possible human science' (Chomsky & Foucault 2011 [1971], 33), and Foucault concludes by saying, not without some exaggeration in the opposite direction, 'finally this problem of human nature, when put simply in theoretical terms, hasn't led to an argument between us; ultimately we understand each other very well' (ibid., 69).

[...] [I]t seems to me that one must, before reaching that point [...] replace it [the human mind or its nature] in the field of other human practices, such as economics, technology, politics, sociology, which can serve them [these regularities] as conditions of formation, of models [...]. I would like to know whether one cannot discover the system of regularity, of constraint, which makes science possible, somewhere else, even outside the human mind. (Chomsky & Foucault 2011 [1971], 34)

For Foucault, on Virno's account, human nature is described in different ways, in different discourses, which vary geographically and historically. It would seem then that, if we understand these 'discourses' broadly as languages or as so structured, that no part of language may be considered for Foucault to be a part of nature. Foucault agrees that creativity can only arise from a system of binding rules, but Chomsky is wrong to locate these rules in the individual mind; rather, they 'are born out of economic, social and political practices', which is to say that, 'they originate in history' (WW179/149-50). In Chomsky, 'the socio-historical vicissitudes of the species are reduced to the psychological structures of the individual' (WW179/150). Thus, Foucault's account edges us towards the idea that, '[i]f a *naturalistic* explanation of the autonomy that "culture" maintains in traditional societies is indeed pertinent, so is a *historical* explanation of the essential role that human "nature" has achieved within Post-Fordist capitalism' (WW205/171).

### **The future of the debate, the future of human nature**

But each of Foucault and Chomsky give us only one side of this dual explanation, and so the debate carries on, without resolution. Such a situation – in Virno's reconstruction – has endured ever since:

Chomsky's supporters [cognitive scientists?] affirm that the 1971 conversation inaugurates the decline of a historical relativism guilty of dissolving human nature, just like an aspirin tablet, in a kaleidoscope of cultural differences. Foucault's followers, instead, think that Eindhoven saw the defeat of the last of many attempts – at once pretentious and naïve – to promote the myth of a natural reality immune to the density of historical experience. (WW181/151)

We have not yet escaped its shadow. In an attempt to reopen the debate and to lead it in another direction such that it will not this time peter out, Virno gives the following assessment of Foucault's position: he is both right and wrong. He is *right* to say that all discourse on human nature is socially and politically determined, but *wrong* to use that to justify a denial of the very existence of such a thing as 'human nature':

This is a classic case of excessive, overzealous inference. The fact that phylogenetic meta-history is the object of multiple, historically conditioned and fully contingent representations doesn't imply its own disintegration as meta-history. In other words, it doesn't prevent the persistence of certain species-specific characteristics [*prerogative*] ["from Cro-Magnon onwards"]<sup>[23]</sup>. (WW182/152)

Virno goes on: 'It is true that the biological invariant cannot be separated from a changing historical development, but this is not enough to negate the invariant itself, or to neglect its different modes of appearance – as invariant – on the surface of different social and productive systems [viz. systems of production]' (WW182/152). This phrase, 'as invariant', demands close reading. The invariants of human nature appear in variable ways throughout history, but they appear 'as invariant'. Does this mean that each historical constellation has to present its own vision of human nature, and that each epoch may present something different, but they are nevertheless compelled to present human nature in each case *as if* it were invariant, as if it had always been – and appeared – that way? This would suggest that the nature of the human does indeed change, and that each moment appears to be something like an 'end of history' at which the natural and eternal truth would finally be unveiled, as it was before the beginning. In this case, the invariability of human nature would be a necessary retrospective mirage.

In any case, this passage allows us better to understand Virno's ultimate objection to Foucault, to whom, on such an interpretation, he would remain surprisingly similar: Foucault's position will amount – unwittingly – to a kind of 'idealism' if it refuses to allow that beneath these manifestations of human nature there *could* be an ahistorical, invariant core:

if we don't want to fall into the most unbridled transcendental idealism, we need to recognise that the existence of a priori categories (also called schemata or epistemological indicators) is grounded in a species-specific *empirical* reality: the innate language faculty, the structures of verbal thought, and so on. Human nature fully coincides with the empirical reality that stands behind all 'epistemological indicators', and therefore does not differ from the material conditions underlying the formation of a priori categories. (WW182-3/152, emphasis added)

Not that this should return us to Chomsky's naturalist position, since if Foucault absorbs the invariant into the variant, the natural into the historical, Chomsky remains unsatisfying because he does precisely the reverse, 'he reduces history to meta-history' (WW183/153). And what is wrong with this 'Rousseauian pastiche' (*pasticcio rousseauiano*) (WW184/153) is simply the way it conceives the linguistic

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<sup>23</sup> Once again, the last three words are in Virno's text marked as a quotation (from Chomsky), but not in the translation.

faculty.<sup>24</sup> Virno asks ‘which aspects of Chomsky’s linguistics prevent him from articulating a credible relation between the innate and the acquired, the variable and the invariable, the meta-historical and the historical?’ (WW184/153–54). Crucially, where the linguist fails, and in this he remains close to natural science, is in failing to conceive the faculty of language as a pure *potential*. By assigning to it a universal grammar, the faculty ends up resembling a particular empirical historical language, and this reduces the pure potential to speak to ‘the lowest common denominator of the historical languages’. For Virno, this means that, de facto, the language faculty on Chomsky’s account ceases to be properly meta-historical. Without admitting as much, it becomes historical, or perhaps we have an example of the mistake Deleuze denounces, which involves modelling our understanding of the transcendental faculty on its empirical actualisation. This has the effect of leading Chomsky to conceive history in such a way as to ‘freez[e] historical change’, since the underlying grammar which he identifies does not ultimately vary (WW184/154).

The second mistake on Chomsky’s part is one reiterated by the cognitive scientists who follow in his wake, and that is to conflate the species with the individual. The result of this is to ‘deny [*misconoscere*] or remove’ the ‘*transindividual* character’ of language.

What does it mean to be ‘transindividual’?

[W]e call ‘transindividual’ not the set of specifications shared by all individuals, but only what pertains to the relation *between* individuals, without belonging to any of them in particular. Transindividuality is what articulates, within one single mind, the difference between the species and the individual. It is an empty, *potential space*, and not a set of positive properties [*proprietà*] which [...] would be the exclusive property of a certain I. (WW185/154–55)

For Virno, ‘*the life of the mind is public*’ from the beginning; Chomsky risks privatising it (WW185/155).

In general, the mistake promulgated by the latter and his extremely institutionally successful inheritors in the discipline of cognitive science, is to fail to think the mind in its linguistic capacity as *potential* and *public*, instead conceiving it as an implicitly *actual*, *private* and hence *non-political* place: ‘Having neglected the transindividual dimensions, Chomsky and the cognitive scientists think that the individual mind is self-sufficient and therefore non-political. [...] [S]ocial praxis intervenes only in the second act of the play, when self-sufficient, essentially private minds start to interact’. And crucially, Virno continues, for Chomsky and his progeny, ‘[t]he “linguistic animal” [*L* “*animale che ha linguaggio*”] is not, as such

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<sup>24</sup> In general, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom Claude Lévi-Strauss considered the father of modern anthropology, is not among Virno’s frequent points of references, in his strictly anthropological works, at least. Perhaps this passage gives us some hints as to why.

[*in quanto tale*], a “political” one [*un “animale politico”*]’ (WW185-6/155), and this affects their understanding of the relation between nature and history: ‘The noise [*frastuono*] of history does not take root [*non getta radici*] in human nature’ (WW186/155). They are not natural historians, in other words.

So much are history and human nature distinct for Chomsky that he tasks human nature with alleviating the injustices imposed upon us and our infinite linguistic creativity *by* certain historical configurations. In other words, the very distinction between nature and history *allows* Chomsky to derive a politics directly *from* an anthropology, which Virno warns time and again that, for all the relevance of anthropology for politics, we should *not* do.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Natural history ‘as such doesn’t found or support any politics’ (WW219/183), but it ‘indicates with precision what the terrain of political conflict really is’, which is to say that, ‘it formulates the most important questions for which there might be radical alternatives and violent conflicts’. All political theories have to contend with ‘the empirical revelation of metahistory’, but they do it ‘in the name of contrasting interests’, with ‘antipodal responses, whose realisation depends on power relations’. ‘Politics in general, and today more than ever, finds its raw material in historical-natural phenomena, that is, in the contingent events that reveal the distinctive traits of our species. The raw materials, though, and not a paradigm or an inspiring principle’ (WW219/183).

That human nature is fundamentally a non-actualisable *potential* from which no single determinate politics ensues, implies that political praxis will always be up to a point *contingent*. Politics is, in Gehlenian terms, a ‘compensation’ for our natural disadaptation, a taming or, better, a channelling of the dangerous potential which results from it.

Unlimited potential is the prerogative of an organism which does not have a natural habitat, and so has to constantly adapt itself to (or co-apt with) an indeterminate vital context, constructing a (historical) world for itself: ‘we have a world *only* where there isn’t any habitat [*difetto un ambiente*]’, which is to say a single environment that would be ours, and to which our sensory and motor organs along with our instincts would be bi-univocally adapted (WW201/168). Virno describes that which compensates for the disadaptation of the human race, its relation with no specific environment, as ‘action’, just as Gehlen does. Political praxis builds ‘*pseudo-habitats* [pseudoambienti]’, ‘where indiscriminate and multi-directional stimuli are selected in order to promote useful behaviours’ (WW202/168). This action, which compensates for non-specialisation, is described as ‘social and political praxis’. In other words, the task of *politics* is to respond (historically) to a (natural) anthropic characteristic – a response to ‘its unchanging meta-historical presupposition’ (WW202/168). The way in which one responds to a natural state in this regard is *always* political: ‘the true risk amounts to certain ways of responding to the omnilateral riskiness of the vital context (for example, by relying on the sovereign, or nourishing the nightmare of a racist “little nation” [...]). [...] The unrealisable *dynamis* of the world-context is a source of both threat and protection; however, this ambivalence becomes obvious only in the contrast between different strategies of reassurance; the behaviour meant to provide a shelter turns out to be dangerous *or* redemptive [...] (and this alternative is always articulated anew by political action)’ (MN4.2).

Thus, it is easy to be misled by Virno’s statement against Chomsky according to which, today, ‘the biological invariant is part of the problem, not the solution’ (WW220/184), since the biological invariant clearly *is* part of the solution, unless we were to assume that there was some politics *beyond* ‘biopolitics’, that does not involve the relation between power and life understood as human nature – a non-anthropological politics. Virno says the following of the desired political solution: ‘It is an irreversible fact that the innate potential of the human animal appears in the economic-social field, but that this potential should assume the aspect of marketable labour is

### Virno's natural history

So what may we say of Virno's own positive resolution of the Foucault-Chomsky debate? What is 'natural history'? Virno once again, in defining this discipline implies that its very invention is dependent upon the precise historical and politico-economic conditions in which the author finds himself:

The questions confronting natural history are the following: which socio-political circumstances expose the lack of biological specialisation typical of *Homo sapiens*? When and how does the generic ability-to-speak, different from the historical languages, assume a fundamental role within a certain mode of production? Under which economic or ethical guise does neoteny become visible? (WW201/167)

It is precisely and only at this level of the becoming visible (and indeed being put to work) of a potential as such that nature and history short-circuit, and at this moment they appear in the form of an encounter between anthropology and politics, a politics which puts to work a potential *without* transforming it into an

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not an inescapable destiny. In fact, it is only a transient occurrence that is worth opposing *politically*' (WW220/184).

If biolinguistic capitalism politicises our generic biological features in one way, how may we politicise them otherwise? Such is the question of Virno's political thought. One of the manners in which Virno conceives of this problem is in terms of the opposition between the people and the multitude, as two different ways of organising a plurality, and two disparate operations of power, and this does not fail to involve the linguistic faculty, understood in just the way that Chomsky failed to: 'the people tends towards the One, while the many derive from it. [...] The people gravitate toward the One of the State, of the Sovereign, of the *volonté générale*. The multitude is backed up by the One of language, by the intellect as public [or what Marx called 'general intellect', as Virno describes it elsewhere] or inter-psychological resource, and the generic faculties of the species. If the multitude refuses the unity of the State it is only because it relates to a completely different One' (WW222/186, cf. MN4.6). Speaking of multitude, we need to think of the passage from the generic human animal to the unique singularity, individuation, deriving a 'many' from a universality or unity. Virno speaks of 'the collectivity of the multitude, as individuation of the general intellect and the biological basis of the species' (WW236/197).

For Virno, 'the multitude is composed of an inextricable texture of "I" and [pre-individual] "one", of unique *singularity* and the *anonymity of the species*.' (WW230/193, emphases added). In *Mondanità*, Virno had understood the genesis of the multitude to follow from the universalisation of the indeterminate concept of the world in all its dangerous potential, following the collapse of traditional societies, that induces a kind of generalised anxiety, which contrary to what Heidegger might seem to think, is not individualising, but rather produces a collective: 'The as yet nameless feeling that results from the complete coincidence of fear and anxiety is characterised by the unavoidable relation with the presence of the other; it is a matter that concerns *many* people [molti]; it even contributes to founding the very concept of *multitude* [moltitudine]. The "many" are effectively such insofar as they *share* the experience of "not-being-at-home". [...] The exacerbated precariousness of the "many" opens the possibility of a *public sphere*' (MN4.2).

actuality. This latter fact may be important when it comes to justifying Virno's own attitude towards potentiality.

Natural history cannot be understood without taking into account Virno's own philosophy of history, which we unfortunately do not have the space to engage with fully, but we can at least proffer the following passage:

the main task of natural history consists in collecting the social and political events that put the human animal in direct relation with metahistory, that is, with the unchangeable biological constitution of the species. The maximally contingent phenomena that show the *unchanging human nature in different ways* but with the same immediacy can be considered historic-natural. (WW200/167, emphasis added)

Virno divides history into just two epochs, which are defined by the way in which human nature is revealed and employed, theorised and transformed into praxis, in each of them: in one case, in 'traditional societies' (Virno will be no more specific than this<sup>26</sup>) this occurs exceptionally, in a rare state of emergency (*stato di eccezione*), while today, the state of exception has become permanent, as the potentials of our nature are routinely employed in our everyday work practices.<sup>27</sup> All of this explains why Virno tells us that, 'natural history mostly coincides with the *history of a state of exception*' (WW202/169).

It is worth noting that today, in liberal democracies, at least, the form in which we most frequently encounter potential as such in the 'workplace' is *flexibility*:

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<sup>26</sup> Earlier on, he had spoken of 'traditional communities in which a network of consolidated habits channels praxis' as 'substantial communities' and even gone so far as to compare their relatively stable and unchanging culture with an animal "environment" (MN4.2), a contrast we have elsewhere seen him greatly to distrust (Virno 2011, 69/ECV Introduction 1.3, but cf. fn. 27 infra). In such contexts, the dangerous excess of perceptions only intrudes when the circular and repetitive (and, as Virno has suggested, quasi-*natural*) order of this society undergoes crisis and breaks down. A glimpse of modernity is then vouchsafed those still living 'traditional' lives, a post-traditional era in which '[t]he permanent variability of forms of life, the uninterrupted undoing of habits that are already in themselves artificial and contingent, and the training aimed at facing a limitless randomness all involve a direct relationship with the *raw* world, that is, an immediate confrontation with the "last condition" of danger' (ibid.).

<sup>27</sup> 'Our amorphous potential, that is, the persistence of infantile traits, does not flash ominously during a crisis, but pervades every aspect of the most banal *routine*' (WW204/170). 'In traditional societies, including – to a certain extent – classic industrial ones, inarticulate potentiality [*la potenzialità inarticolata* – as yet without voice, without reality] gain the visibility of an empirical state of affairs only in emergency situations, that is, during a *crisis*' (WW201/167). 'In ordinary situations, on the other hand, the species-specific biological background is *hidden* [*occultato*], or even contradicted [*contraddetto*], by the organisation of work and solid communicative habits. In other words, there is a sharp discontinuity, or rather an antinomy, between "nature" and "culture"' (WW201/167–68, emphasis added).

the shortage [*carezza*] of specialised instincts and the lack [*penuria*] of a strictly defined ecosystem [*ambiente circostanziato*] from Cro-Magnon until today, are now considered remarkable economic assets [...]. The biological non-specialisation of *Homo sapiens* doesn't remain in the background, but rather acquires the utmost historical visibility as the universal *flexibility* of professional tasks. (WW205-6/171, translation modified)<sup>28</sup>

We need to be able to react to the unusual, to the unknown, which will be thrown at us ever more frequently in an accelerated situation, and in a precarious world. Luckily, one might say, we are naturally well equipped to deal with the unexpected, thanks to our lack of innate specialisation: this precarity 'reflect[s] in historically determined ways the original lack [*mancazza*] of a uniform and predictable *habitat* [habitat]' (WW206/172). And this lack, once again, stems from our prematurity: 'neoteny, that is, chronic infancy and the constant need to train oneself, immediately translates itself, without any mediation, into the social rule of continuing education' (WW206/172). In the contemporary economy one experiences something like a reversal of a deficit into a surplus, a handicap into a benefit, a 'compensation' of the kind Gehlen considered to be ahistorically a part of the human being: 'The deficiencies [*carenze*] related to the "premature birth" of the human animal have become productive assets' (WW206/172).

It does not matter what we learn, but 'what matters is showing the pure ability to learn' (WW206/172). As we know, 'flexibility' is the way the Right describe what the Left would describe as 'precariousness' (*precarietà*), the fragility and temporary character of employment, and the instability of praxical life into which the contemporary economy has precipitated its most vulnerable members (a population that has grown noticeably).

This leads Virno to his 'most important observation' regarding today's economy:

the inarticulate potential [*la potenza inarticolata*] that cannot be reduced to a series of predetermined potential acts acquires an extrinsic, even pragmatic aspect in the definition of labour-power [*forza-lavoro*]. [...] [O]ur labour ability, today, is largely synonymous with our linguistic faculty. [...] Linguistic faculty and labour-power are situated on the border between biology and history, except that today this border has acquired specific historical characteristics. (WW206-7/172)

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<sup>28</sup> Catherine Malabou (2008 [2004], esp. 12/55-7) has understood this coincidence in terms of cerebral plasticity, and not so directly in terms of non-specialisation. It would be worth at this point opening up a long parenthesis which would explain this divergence.

Virno himself is not reluctant to deploy the word, on occasion: 'these faculties oppose the threatening indeterminacy of the world-context with their own indeterminacy or plasticity [*plasticità*]' (DV117/93), and quoting Gehlen, who speaks of man's 'terrifying plasticity [*plasticità*] and indecision [*indeterminatezza*]' (M18/ECVPart II 1 I.I).

Thus, when it comes to the various facets of human nature which manifest themselves historically, Virno unquestionably gives priority to our *linguistic* capability: 'When and how does the generic ability-to-speak, different from the historical languages, assume a fundamental role within a certain mode of production?' (WW201/167)

Not that such an unleashing of capacity goes without the imposition of fetters; rather, in the present regime this power is all the more strictly governed by regulations. The effect of this strict governance of potentiality, in the case of language, for instance, is that the infinite potentiality of action, which animals, in their specialisation, do *not* have, is reduced to a form of biunivocal, automatic – which is to say machine-like, animal-machinic – 'signalling' of the biunivocal kind, that was so often attributed to animals: 'Just when the linguistic *faculty* acquires its utmost socio-political importance, it ends up appearing, rather ironically, as a system of elementary *signals*, aimed at facing a certain situation' (WW207/173).

We witness 'a compulsive recourse to stereotyped formulas and can assume the characteristics, in an apparent paradox, of a *deficiency* [difetto] in semanticity' (WW207/173). Indeterminacy of world, excess, 'needs to be contained and delayed each time anew', for it 'causes stilted behaviours, obsessive tics, the drastic impoverishment of our *ars combinatoria* and the inflation of fleeting but ironclad rules' (WW207/173). Meaningless neurotic tics, like the behaviour of caged animals, save that our behaviour is frequently linguistic. Thus we are reduced to the state of living automata, of the kind which Bergson found so amusing, but which in today's world no longer seem so funny (cf. Bergson 2010 [1900], 5–32). We remain in a permanent state of 'puerility', playing repetitive games, but without the sincerity, seriousness and constant delight of the actual child (MN4.4).

In sum, Virno describes our situation like this: 'today's industry – based on neoteny, the linguistic faculty and potentialities – is the extroverted, empirical, pragmatic image of the human psyche, of its invariant and metahistorical characteristics (including the transindividual traits happily ignored by the cognitive sciences [contra Chomsky])' (WW208/174).

In light of all this, Virno defines his discipline of natural history, which is to say philosophy, in the following way:

Natural history proposes to assess the different forms taken by the biological characteristics of our species on the empirical plane, as they incarnate themselves in fully contingent socio-political phenomena. In particular, it focuses on how the phylogenetic conditions guaranteeing the historicity of the human animal can sometimes take on the *semblance* [*sembianze*] of specific *historical facts* [Virno's emphasis]. It defends, therefore, both the invariability of the invariable and the variability of the variable, excluding all apparently judicious compromise. (WW186/155, emphasis added)

We have underlined ‘semblance’ here: are we to understand Virno to mean that whatever these metahistorical conditions are, they can only be *accessed* in an historically variable form? As we have suggested, this might explain Virno’s often apparently uncritical reliance on certain early twentieth century anthropologists for his own description of human nature in its invariability. This would just be the particular way in which a certain invariance *manifests* itself to a certain moment of twentieth century science and to us today, how these invariants *appear* – *some* invariants will always have been posited by any discourse that is not entirely historicised, and yet they will not necessarily have been *these* invariants. What precisely goes without variation will appear differently at different times and from different perspectives (each with different interests in mind). Human nature, the transcendental, would thus be akin to Heidegger’s ‘being’, or more precisely the ‘event’, the Same which always appears differently, throughout the historical epochs which it nevertheless makes possible while hiding behind them, and indeed the implicit human nature which Heidegger must presuppose as belonging to those mortals who watch over this event.

Does Virno believe there is a single ‘fact of the matter’ as to *what* these invariants are (this would be a strong ‘ontological’ reading of his approach to human nature) or is it rather the case that *something* invariant is posited at each point in history, but no assumption is made by Virno himself that the invariants *he* chooses are in their content timelessly adequate (this would be a weaker ‘epistemological’ reading)?<sup>29</sup>

### Linguistic potential

To draw closer to a decision as to which of these readings is the more appropriate, we need to consider in greater depth the particular manner in which Virno understands human nature. And here it becomes necessary to devote some more time to the concept that is perhaps more closely associated with Virno’s work than any other: *potentiality*.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In *Mondanità*, Virno suggests the latter is, at that point, closer to his heart, as he suggests there can be no prior or unmediated access to the natural beyond the historical and political responses we make *to* that (perceived) natural character: ‘Believing that we first perceive the world-context as an unbearable dangerousness and only subsequently devote ourselves to devising a protective network is an optical illusion. The risk inherent to belonging to a shapeless and always potential context is never perceived as such, in the pure state, or preliminarily. On the contrary, it is manifested only because we are always already busy circumscribing and mitigating it [...]; any further reference to a chronological sequence or a cause-effect relation is misleading. There is no danger-stimulus and shelter-response. Rather, the search for protection constitutes the original and indivisible experience in which, by elaborating an antidote, we manage to glimpse something evil’ (MN4.2).

This does not of course preclude a change in Virno’s position over the subsequent quarter of a century.

<sup>30</sup> ‘I have discussed the category of the possible, at times remaining trapped in it, in all that I have written in the last twenty-five years’ (Virno 2011, 64/ECV Introduction 1).

Let us read what Virno says of that invariant human feature, the linguistic faculty, understood – or rethought – as a kind of potential for language. As we have already seen intimated in his description of Chomsky as having privatised this public affair, individualising the common, Virno considers everything to be at stake in precisely how we conceive the nature of a ‘faculty’ or a ‘function’ in this sense:

Natural history finds its true testing ground in the way it conceives the linguistic faculty. To say it in one breath, I am convinced that the existence of a generic faculty separate from the myriad historical languages, clearly attests to the non-specialised character of the human animal, that is, to its innate familiarity with a *dynamis*, a potentiality, that can never be fully realised. Instinctual unpreparedness and chronic potentiality: these invariant aspects of human nature [... are] deducible from the linguistic faculty [...]. (WW189/158)

What we wish to fasten upon in this last citation is the fact that Virno does not just urge the rethinking of human faculties in terms of potential, but asserts *language* to be the source of all of the other faculties – at least insofar as they are thought in terms of potential: such is our hypothesis. But once again, here an ambiguity opens, as in everything to do with Virno's natural history: either language has an *ontological* priority, and the other features exist only if language does, or it has an *epistemic* priority, and so they may be *known* or properly understood, for instance, in their own character as potential, and perhaps in the unity of their multiplicity, only if language is comprehended first of all.

Language is a vital capacity, as Chomsky will have taught us, but to avoid his mistake of translating it into something resembling an actual determinate language, and a private one at that, we need above all to insist upon the distinction between potential and actual: ‘The linguistic faculty is both biological and potential’ (WW193/161). This compels us to understand the relation between the transcendental (which is nevertheless biological) and the historical or empirical (the manifestations of language as such [*linguaggio*] in various historical languages [*lingue*]) as the relation between the potential and the actual (WW190/158–59).

It is worth dwelling upon the following fact: Virno's account of the language faculty, renders it, in spite of its transcendental status, in a way that is very tangibly material, extremely biological, even empirical. The transcendental invariant beyond history, however much we have been probing the possibility that it remains a kind of negative theological object, is nothing mysterious – it is basically the ability to move our mouth, tongue, and throat: ‘By faculty, we mean the innate physical ability to enunciate articulate sounds, that is, the physiological requirements that allow us to produce an enunciation: a mouth emancipated from prehensile tasks thanks to our erect position, lowering of the epiglottis [... etc.]’ (WW191/159).

This reference to the palaeoanthropological story of the anthropogenic movement from quadrupedality to bipedality could be taken from André Leroi-

Gourhan (whom Virno refers to in passing, but not in any depth at WW195–6/163). The latter attempted to rejuvenate the science of anthropogenesis by stressing the latter’s ultimate dependence upon a change in posture, a freeing up of hand and face for ‘gesture and speech’, and ultimately a space in the skull for a brain, in which *logos* might reside and expand – a material prerequisite of the ideal ‘logical’ features long ascribed by metaphysics and anthropology to the *zōon logon echon* (cf. Leroi-Gourhan 1993 [1964]).

If one were to be a strictly orthodox follower of Leroi-Gourhan, one would be inclined to take this as implying that language itself was *not* primary, but rather derived from at least *certain* other invariant features of human nature, such as the upright stance. This would make linguistic potential dependent upon a prior potentialisation, and we have already hypothesised that Virno does not take this route, and indeed we would pursue this idea and suggest that even in the case of Leroi-Gourhan, Virno would translate his empirical discoveries into the language of potential, and that the *infinite* of potential takes place only thanks to language. Is this infinity what allows Virno to assert a radical *opposition* between potential and actuality, in the case of language, an opposition that in all strictness could not be said to exist in any non-linguistic real? In any case, Virno finds it necessary to affirm an unbridgeable distinction between the faculty of language and its empirical or historical manifestations: that is, an opposition between nature and history. When we earlier broached Virno’s call for a naturalistic understanding of this opposition, we did not then suspect that the most original form of the latter might be internal to language. ‘The faculty and the historical languages show a persistent heterogeneity, which prevents any kind of *reductio ad unum* [reduction to unity]’, and, ‘[t]he linguistic faculty fully coincides with the ancient notion of dynamis, or potentiality [potenza]’ (WW192/160). They are one and the same: language and potency. The distinction between human nature and its historical manifestations will be understood correctly only if we have sufficiently understood the opposition between *potentiality* and *actuality*, and indeed only if we have understood the opposition as such, and that means *language*.

### **Potentiality and actuality – language and neoteny – priorities**

Let us first turn to the notions of potentiality and actuality, before returning to the idea that language is the origin of this opposition, and this opposition even more than all of the others. Originally, ‘*dynamis* is synonymous with *mē einai*: non-being, lack, emptiness’ (WW192/161). This is so in the sense that potential results from a certain negation which does not insist upon anything determinate to replace that which has been negated, and hence it leaves the field open for the eruption of an infinite range of possibilities. Here Virno is implicitly quoting from Plato’s dialogue, the *Sophist*, which will be the focus of an extended reading in the *Essay on Negation*, and this in itself, given the content of the dialogue, which we are gradually approaching, suggests that language and *its* negation are the ultimate

provenance of potential. '[Our] condition [of chronic lack and infancy], marked by a *mē einaí*, is nothing besides the indeterminate *potentia loquendi*' (WW194/162).

Virno goes on to tell us that, '[t]he separation between faculty and historical languages [*lingua*] cannot be bridged because the faculty can't manifest itself independently [*autonoma*]' (WW192-3/161). This is crucial because we know that 'natural history' is concerned precisely with those moments at which transcendental conditions *do* manifest themselves. Therefore, to clarify what it might mean that nature could manifest itself in history – linguistic potential in linguistic actuality – we should read the four 'theses' or rather hypotheses which Virno proffers on the nature of the linguistic faculty:

1) The most important thing with respect to a faculty and its actualisation is neither of the two poles of this difference, but the difference itself, that separates and joins.

2) The linguistic faculty coincides with the ancient-philosophical notion of potential.

3) '*[T]he potential-faculty [potenza-facoltà] co-exists with the historical language, and characterises the entire experience of the speaker*' (WW193/161). Potential is not exhausted and does not vanish upon its actualisation. Thus, our task, each time we speak, is to *appropriate* this inexhaustible potential: 'this predisposition ['innate but unrefined, biological but purely potential'] persists as an inalterable background even when we master a certain historical language' (WW195/163).

4) Finally, Virno clarifies the relation between the linguistic faculty and the other facets of human nature. He does not altogether confirm the ontological reading of the priority of this faculty, and in fact seems to suggest that *knowledge* of language may be *secondary* to knowledge of the other aspects of humanity. The linguistic faculty merely 'confirms' what we might already have suspected about the nature of the human animal: '*The linguistic faculty confirms [comprova] the instinctual poverty [la povertà istintuale] of the human animal, its undefined character and the constant disorientation that defines it*' (WW195/163). But standing second in the order of knowledge does not imply being second in the order of being (*ratio cognoscendi* need not correspond with *ratio essendi*): and indeed, Virno almost immediately goes on to say something stronger, and to move resolutely towards an *ontological* priority of language: 'The lack [*penuria*] of specialised instincts characteristic of Homo Sapiens can be *deduced* [*evince*] first and foremost from the linguistic faculty' (WW196/164, emphasis added).

Nevertheless, as if somehow to undercut the idea of such an ontological priority, Virno suggests, in accord with Adolf Portmann in particular, that the *basis* of all anthropic traits is, in fact, *neoteny*: 'Potentialities [*Potenzialità*], lack of specialisation: the phylogenetic basis of both is neoteny' (WW197/164). Borrowing from Portmann, Virno speaks of man's 'premature birth': 'Homo sapiens is "always

born prematurely” (WW197/164).<sup>31</sup> *Because* he is born prematurely, man is always ‘an undefined animal’.

In reading the following, however, and in our pursuit of the question as to whether language is subsequent or prior to neoteny, or indeed contemporary with it, we should bear in mind that the linguistic faculty itself is *not* cultural, but rather *biological*, and that the transition from nature to culture occurs only with the process of individuation or determination (including that of language itself as it passes from potential to actual, natural to historical, the generic potential for language becoming a particular language). This is marked by the fact that language is said here to ‘coincide’ with prematurity, neoteny, or ‘prolonged infancy’: ‘Neoteny explains not only the instability of our species but also its related need for uninterrupted learning. To our *chronic infancy* corresponds a chronic non-adaptation [*inadattamento*] that has to be constantly alleviated through social and cultural processes. A prolonged infancy coincides with the transindividual component of the human mind [which is to say, language?], always unrecognised by the cognitive sciences’ (WW197/165). Thus the persistence of infantile traits into adulthood is in some way related to the persistence of the generic potential of language with historical languages and their empirical deployment, as if childhood were ‘infancy’ in the sense Agamben gives to this word, a permanent potentiality from which the anthropogenesis of maturation must continually be initiated. As Virno has it,

[t]he instability of the human animal never disappears completely. This is why our potentiality [*la potenza*] remains the same, without exhausting itself in certain acts. This is why the generic faculty of language [*linguaggio*], the aphasic ability to speak [*poter-dire*], is not resolved in a language [*lingua*], but is present as such in every enunciation [... ,] the act does not realise the potential [*l’atto non realizza la potenza*], but is opposed to it. (WW200/166-67)

Neoteny and linguistic potential seem to be concomitant, but we shall persist with our hypothesis that the *conception* of potential which we acquire from linguistics allows us to understand the *scientific* data regarding neoteny in a new, more philosophical fashion. In another reference to the *Sophist*, Virno tells us that, ‘the

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<sup>31</sup> The quotation marks and reference are inexplicably elided from the English translation (the reference is to Portmann 1965). The text appears not to have been translated into English, but similar and very accessible accounts of neoteny by Portmann are available (cf. Portmann 1990 [1944/1968], 99): ‘Usually our growth mode has been described as “delayed” in comparison with that of an animal. Correspondingly, retardation and the related concept, fetalisation, have also recently become key words for theories of anthropogenesis and all biologically oriented anthropological research’. We have come to associate this way of speaking of neoteny with Jacques Lacan (cf. Lacan 2006 [1966], 78/96).

only thing that is neotenic is the living being which is continuously faced with the *mē einai* of inactuality and absence' (WW199, translation modified).

If we can finally say that the origin of potential *as such* is language, then we shall be able to understand more precisely the relation between the language faculty and the other features of human nature, for if we imagine that Virno, the linguist, derives the other features from the philosophical anthropologists and zoologists whom he names, then he suggests that these broadly empirical insights may not be altogether grasped *unless* they are brought into connection with the *philosophical* concept of potentiality: 'We can understand neoteny and all the other traits typical of our species only if we fully grasp the concept of *dynamis*, or *potential* [potenza]' (WW198/165).

All of which at least suggests that the *philosophical* gesture in relation to empirical scientific insights into human nature is to describe these 'metahistorical invariants' *as potentials*: 'The biological invariant characterising the human animal since Cro-Magnon is a *dynamis*, or a potential: it is a lack of specialisation, neoteny, and the absence [*mancazza*] of a univocal habitat' (WW200/167). Plausibly, in fact, one might probe the idea that this insight into potentiality and the potentialistic understanding of these invariant features of human nature is not *exclusively* Virno's own, for it might well have been derived from the more philosophical among his influences, Gehlen in particular. Perhaps we might in the latter case say more precisely that what Virno will have contributed is a very particular interpretation of the *nature* of this potentiality, which differs from these other thinkers, and which concerns *language*.

For whence the 'evil' or 'dangerous' character of man? Whence this unlimited, untamed potentiality that either needs containment or channelling, whether to serve the state or to hasten its decline (or some third option)? For Virno, as it is now – finally – our aim conclusively to prove, this power issues from a certain limitlessness introduced into the real by *language*: the contingency of the linguistic 'as not' (*hōs mē*) opens up a multitude of possibilities the multiplication of which is infinite.

An investigation of Virno's *Essay on Negation: For a Linguistic Anthropology* should resolve at least some of the questions we have raised in the course of our interpretation of Virno's project up to this point.

### **The *Essay on Negation*: Two forms of negation**

It is a crucial question in the philosophical anthropological endeavour to explain anthropogenesis, which of the numerous features of human nature has ontological and epistemic priority.

The very second sentence of Virno's *Essay on Negation* reads as follows: 'Explaining the main characteristics and uses of the sign "not" means explaining some of the distinctive traits of our species' (*Negation*, 1.1). Linguists and logicians, who deal with such a sign, thus 'become anthropologists', or rather, they will always have been such. It seems that linguistic negation and the potential which it generates

are prior to any other form of potential, and the former explain the latter's very existence and essence. As Virno puts it with respect to the relation between anthropology and negation, we are speaking of, 'a theory inclined to clarify the *anthropological* range of linguistic negation, that is, the eminent role that the syntactic connective "not" plays in the material and emotional [*sentimentali*] vicissitudes of our species' (*Negation*, 4.6).<sup>32</sup>

But when it comes to linguistic negation, we need to make distinctions. In Virno's *Essay*, the distinction between transcendental and empirical, natural and historical, is revealed in a new light as it assumes the guise of two forms of negation, which Virno calls 'ontological' (or 'original' [*Negation*, 3.1]) and 'empirical' ('negation *stricto sensu*' [*Negation*, 3.1], or even 'contingent negation' [*Negation*, 3.3]).

Following Saussure and others in the tradition of structural linguistics, Virno tells us that language is, ontologically, an infinite system of differences, with no positive terms. In other words, each phonic signifier is defined solely by its difference from all of the other signifiers in the relevant system or chain. It is defined by its opposition to those other things which it is *not*: thus, negation is what produces determination (Spinoza's famous: *omnis determinatio est negatio*, but perhaps reversed). Language has no positivity, only negativity, the only identity it contains is produced by difference. This is what gives it its peculiar ontological status which sets it apart from 'being' in the sense given to that word by a tradition that has almost always taken it to mean presence or substance (*ousia*). Hence the deconstructive power of language for someone like Jacques Derrida, since language, the very means of expression employed by all philosophical treatises, itself fails to fit into the ontological scheme that philosophy attempts to posit as all-pervasive. The philosopher's very language thereby risks undermining their First Philosophy, and there seems no way around this impasse.

Thus, language is constituted by 'ontological negativity'. This basic negativity of the signifier conditions the more familiar type of negativity that we deploy every day in many mundane uses of our *actual* language, in the form of the word 'not', 'non-', 'im-', 'in-', or even '*mē*' – 'empirical negations'. Thus we have a distinction, and a hierarchy, within language, between *primary* and *secondary* negation (*Negation*, 3.3).

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<sup>32</sup> The relation between linguistic negation and human nature in its non-linguistic aspects is described in the following way in the Introduction to *E così via, all'infinito*: 'negation, the modality of possibility, and infinite regress [*regresso all'infinito*] [...] amount to the syntactic equivalent of significant phylogenetic matters of fact (for instance, the retention of infantile characteristics into adulthood and a related poverty [*penuria*] of innate inhibitions)' (Virno 2011, 63–4/ECV Introduction 1).

In the difference between these two forms of negation, we find recapitulated in a new way the relation between human nature and human history, the biological transcendental invariant and the historico-empirical forms it makes possible.<sup>33</sup>

We know that, on Virno's reading of the transcendental, the conditions for the possibility of manifestation are themselves manifest one way or another: in the case of language, this involves precisely the negative definition of every sign as such appearing within particular languages in the form of the particle 'non-' and its kin.

### **Pre-linguistic biological foundations of sociality – negation in language – negation of negation (in language)**

Human language, on Virno's hypothesis, differs from animal codes, 'because it is able to *negate* every kind of representation' (*Negation*, 1.1). In this context, Virno speaks of a potential *double* negation carried out by language, the first poisonous and dangerous, the other curative and rescuing. It is important that we stress this fact because Virno uses it to describe our current social situation, and in order to clear up a misunderstanding – an ideological misunderstanding we might say – which elides the negativity upon which the semblance of positivity rests.

In one particular context, in order to bring out the effects of linguistic negation upon the incipient human animal, Virno considers a certain biological capacity which is *pre-linguistic*. This Virno describes as the 'innate sociality of the mind', an 'original intersubjectivity', preceding the very existence of individual subjects. This does not mean simply ontogenetically prior, but ontologically more basic: 'Intersubjectivity [...] by far precedes the operations carried out by individual self-conscious subjects' (*Negation*, 1.2). Virno is willing to go so far as to attribute this original 'empathy' to something so empirical and biological as the mirror neurons – an innate capacity for mimicry on the part of the brain that functions *as if* what the other were undergoing were actually happening to us (psychoanalysts used to speak of 'childhood transitivity' in such cases). Virno speaks of an 'automatic and non-reflective co-feeling' (*Negation*, 1.2).

This sharing of the feelings of another is understood by Virno to constitute the originally 'public' character of the mind (*Negation*, 1.2). Most intriguing, however, is the fact that this 'field of pre-individual experience' is described as *pre-linguistic* (*Negation*, 1.1): 'It is totally incongruous to ascribe to verbal language that immediate intra-species empathy established by the mirror neurons' (*Negation*, 1.2).

This is a curious usurpation: the mirror neurons seem to have assumed the place of the linguistic faculty as the public and transindividual potential which Virno upbraided Chomsky for neglecting, while at the same time, as we shall see, this has

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<sup>33</sup> Albeit with the caveat that the language system does seem to be distinct from the *biological* faculty for *having* language, and to be precisely *non-natural*, *non-biological* – everything hangs on the question of where the language system lies for Virno: can it be absolutely identical with the linguistic faculty and hence biologically-natural? Or is it entirely uprooted from nature by its very arbitrary, oppositional, supernatural character, or perhaps by its infinity?

the consequence of rendering language a *non*-biological negation of this biological feature. It is not the human animal's natural lack of a finite environment that makes it dangerous, but the non-natural acquisition of linguistic negation. To make things clearer, let us note that these mirror neurons are in truth not enough to distinguish the human from the other animals, and hence *on their own* they are not enough to explain even the beginning of anthropogenesis: 'Human sociality and that of other animal species are *united* by the functioning of mirror neurons. We still need to ask what separates them' (*Negation*, 1.3, emphasis added). To situate retrospectively the mirror neurons in an anthropogenic account, we will need to introduce language.

Language, in the first place, is the apparently (or possibly) *non*-biological capacity able to *negate* this original sympathy. This is the first of language's two negations, on this particular version of Virno's account, and it is the most dangerous, for the linguistic particle 'not' makes possible the refusal to recognise the humanity of the other: 'this is *not* a man'. Virno stresses that the linguistic faculty is unable to *stop* the mirror neurons firing, but rather 'brackets' the sympathy that we neurologically and naturally feel: the verbal negation *retains* what it negates, but suspends its operation.<sup>34</sup> 'It is only thanks to this tendency to repudiate what is nonetheless admitted that the sign "not" can destructively interfere with the "sub-personal" biological apparatus that is our neuronal co-feeling. Negation does not certainly prevent the mirror neurons from being activated, but it makes their sense ambiguous and their effects reversible' (*Negation*, 1.3).

That said, linguistic negativity is remarkable in that it is also capable of, up to a certain point, undoing the damage that it inflicts, for it is possible for language to *recur* with respect to itself, to double back upon itself. In the particular case under consideration, this means to *negate* its original negation. This is the second form of negation that language enables us to carry out, and the social situation which

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<sup>34</sup> Much later, in speaking of the way linguistic disavowal ('that is *not* my mother') undoes the previous non-linguistic 'negation' of repression, Virno can hardly avoid the locution "'repression" of repression', or better, [...] 'negation of "negation"'. He even confesses thereby to '[f]lirting [*civettare*] with Hegelian dialectic' (*Negation*, 5.5) and indeed it is hard to see how one could avoid something even more than trysting at this point.

Virno seems to think that it is enough to say that these are 'two *radically heterogeneous* types of annulment' (*ibid.*, emphasis added) and to speak of a 'non-dialectical understanding of the negative' (M22/ECV Part II 1.2) that he insists it is necessary to create (relating to the terms, 'ambivalence', 'oscillation', and 'perturbation') – one could well imagine that the ontological negativity and its empirical avatar encountered in language could be considered to be the transcendental condition for the possibility of dialectic, which itself escapes and precedes dialectic as such. Such seems to be the implicit thrust of Virno's thought. The indeterminate negativity of the *heteron* might well be interpreted as a third form of negation between determinate and abstract negation (the former being the dialectical replacement for the latter which implies pure destruction), for it does not destroy the entity it negates altogether, but nor does it suggest any determinate result of the negating process. Such we can imagine was the reason why this notion of 'otherness' became so prominent a feature of French philosophy in the 1960's, as part of an informed attempt to elude Hegelianism.

is its result (mutual recognition) is more commonly – and mistakenly – thought to be the more original kind of sociality, that of the discursive public sphere of unrestricted rational communication. Virno's understanding of linguistic negativity is partly designed to undo this ideological misimpression of a somewhat Habermasian stripe:

The public sphere, which is the ecological niche of our actions, is the unstable result of a laceration and of a suture, where the former is no less important than the latter. It therefore resembles a scar, the imperfect negation (the imperfect healing) of a former but also not total negation (the inflicted wound which nevertheless did not altogether obliterate us). In other words: the public sphere originates in a *negation of a negation*. (*Negation*, 1.1)

Virno by no means conceals the fact that the structure he is here outlining bears a striking resemblance to the dialectic. By 'dialectic' here we mean a relational definition which involves negation, and that is to say, a negative differentiation which stands at the root of an identity. Perhaps incautiously, Virno will occasionally speak quite openly of the 'dialectic' of '[m]irror neurons, linguistic negation, [and] the intermittent status of reciprocal recognition' (*Negation*, 1.4).

### **The retroactive relation of the symbolic and the pre-symbolic: culture and biology**

It will perhaps help to clarify the status of the prelinguistic here if we refer to the way in which Virno thinks of the relation between language and what he terms the 'drives'. For here it becomes clear, once again, that language must have a 'retroactive' effect upon everything that precedes it.

In *E così via*, Virno speaks of the relation between human language and sub-human drives in the following way: 'the life of the human animal distinguishes itself from the life of other animals because of the retroaction of the symbolic plane on the sub-symbolic; because of the replacement of the scream of pain with equivalent propositions, and of the compulsion to repeat with infinite regress' (Virno 2011, 68/ECV Introduction 1.3). In other words, while the pre-linguistic, which includes the mirror-neurons, does not differentiate man and animal, nevertheless, with the incursion of language *on* this pre-linguistic substance, anthropogenetic differentiation may begin, and what language introduces into the real or nature is a certain infinite self-duplication, recursion or infinite regress: 'Infinite regress is an exclusively linguistic phenomenon that, however, is able to exhibit the juncture between language and the drives' (Virno 2011, 69/ECV Introduction 1.3).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> An earlier, slightly different account of infinite regress which relates it not just to language but also to world, and hence to the cosmology of Kant in particular, and the Kantian sublimates, leading naturally onto Hegel's critique of the bad infinite, may be found in *Mondanità* (MN1.1-3.6). Here, in this relatively early work, Virno suggests that 'infinite regression is not an original phenomenon' (MN3.1) but is rather derived from two more fundamental experiences of the

The infinite regress made possible by the recursive capacity of language renders the opposition between nature and culture possible but also extremely subtle:

The alternative between novelty and repetition usually prepares and substantiates the dichotomy between culture and biology. According to a traditional opinion [e.g. Hegel], which should not be revered, culture would be innovative and biology conservative. Many authors have claimed the exact opposite [e.g. the philosophical anthropologists, Gehlen in particular]: culture would stabilise and render consistent the behaviours of the human animal, while biological drives would condemn them to unpredictability. These assertions are [both] perfunctory and untrustworthy. However, it is interesting to observe that, independently of which opinion one privileges, in both cases infinite regress – revealing a logical link between novelty and repetition [this is the ‘compulsion to ambivalence’ that Virno speaks of as

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world and of language, which turn out to be an experience of the world as a reservoir of unactualised potential, or what Virno describes as the continuum of ‘raw sensible being’, the unformed matter of our perceptual world, sensibility without concept – a world that is not an environment (MN3.2), and the experience of language as the infantile potential to speak, enunciated in those statements which reflect on the ‘event’ of language, which may always not have happened, ‘completely alien to the interminable backwards flight of meta-languages’ (MN3.4). Indeed, Virno asserts that the bad infinite of the Kantian cosmological regression is due to what he here is happy to describe as ‘metaphysics’, which is defined by its failure to think pure and unactualisable possibility (in world and language) and to replace it instead with a vision of the world and language as pure actuality, a totality which would be fully given. This would be an actuality that only *appears* to be as yet unrealised – which is to say, *possible* – as a consequence of our finite human intellect. ‘The metaphysical idea of the world as totality postulates the surreptitious realisation of what is exclusively possible; once again, for this reason, it generates the interminable cosmological regression’, the interminability of which, ‘Kant and Wittgenstein [otherwise inspirational for Virno here] [...] ascribed to the insufficiency of the human intellect [thus showing themselves, despite themselves to belong to metaphysics, as Virno determines it] (MN3.2). And analogously, with language: ‘The infinite regress of meta-languages [...] in fact emerges from the attempt to represent the faculty of speech [potentiality, *dynamis*] as a *fully given totality*’ (MN3.4).

In a way that perhaps hints at the solution at which, we are arguing, Virno eventually arrives, he goes on to say that in order to understand this pure potential without ‘realisation’, it will be helpful to turn from the experience of the *world* to the experience of *language*, an experience indeed which is only partly vouchsafed us in the case of an infinite regress of metalanguages. And here we arrive at the question of language’s ability to refer to its own taking place. Following Wittgenstein, in such a way as eventually to carry him beyond the metaphysics to which he remains confined by his conception of the possible, Virno tells us that, ‘[t]he event of Creation (the existence of the world) is redoubled to form the event of the Word (the existence of language) [...]. Accounting discursively for the existence of language, that is, for what enables every discourse, would also mean expressing the world as a “limited whole” [according to the metaphysical expression, at least]; a truly successful self-reference would unravel at the same time the cosmological question’ (MN3.3).

the result of a reorganisation by language of the psychoanalytic 'compulsion to repeat' (*Wiederholungszwang*) – constitutes an immediate synthesis of culture and biology. Yet it is insufficient and even misleading to speak of a synthesis. The *compulsion to ambivalence*, which is the true emblem of regress, rather signals [...] the lack of distinction between culture and biology. (Virno 2011, 69/ECV Introduction 1.3)

Virno then attempts to identify, in light of this retroaction of language upon the biological real, the 'naturalistic' basis of infinite regress, speaking of 'the naturalistic foundation of the countless instances in which the solution reproduces the initial problem' (Virno 2011, 72/ECV Introduction 1.5). In this context, he tells us that, '[t]he logical or pragmatic circles that, recursively reiterating themselves, give rise to an infinite regress have their common origin in the relation of the human animal to the environment [*ambiente*]. To be more precise, they have their common origin in the three [bio-anthropological] properties which allow this animal to adapt to a vital context' (ibid.). And these are:

1) Hyper-reflexivity, 'the biological necessity of representing one's own representations'.

2) Transcendence, 'the biological necessity of projecting one's self beyond the here and now'.

3) A twofold or dual aspect, according to a phrase adapted from Plessner (Virno 2011, 74/ECV Introduction 1.5), 'the biological necessity of an artificial or historical-cultural existence, which is, however, extra-biological' (Virno 2011, 72/ECV Introduction 1.5). This duality is expressed in the wonderfully direct contradiction in terms that Virno ventures in the following passage: '[M]an is a *naturally artificial* animal, an organism whose biologically distinctive trait is culture' (Virno 2011, 74/ECV Introduction 1.5).

These features of man's adaptation to his environment 'promote' the infinity of the infinite regress. Virno expands upon this point with reference to Gehlen and the latter's description of the gap between man and animal: the excessive stimuli which flood the human organism without automatically leading to a behaviour that favours self-preservation. The *meaning* of this flood is 'undetermined, or better, only potential' (Virno 2011, 73/ECV Introduction 1.5). 'The permanent gap between stimuli and action induces a certain lack of adherence, or even an actual *distancing*, of the human animal from the states of affairs that surround it', and this gap is the basis of the three conditions that must be in place for the disadapted animal to adapt: hyper-reflexivity, transcendence, and the dual aspect (Virno 2011, 73/ECV Introduction 1.5).

The abyss between stimulus and response, or between the human being's action and its putative environmental occasion is the 'naturalistic basis' of infinite regress, the natural feature in which the unnatural system of language takes root.

'In so far as its perceptual impressions do not dictate univocal behaviours, in order to survive, the human animal needs to control and form them always again

by means of a hypertrophic development of reflexive performances' (Virno 2011, 73/ECV Introduction 1.5). Taking the place of a biunivocal relation between stimulus and response is a doubling of representation:

Meta-representation [a second and more powerful representation *of* a representation] compensates always anew for the discontinuity between environmental stimulus and cognitive response. It retrospectively fills in the void that such discontinuity has inserted into experience. We could say that meta-representation stands for the stimulus, taking on the orientating function that the latter fulfils in other living species. (Virno 2011, 73/ECV Introduction 1.5)

Thus, for the human being, '[r]eflexive performances [...] constitute a primary biological resource' (Virno 2011, 73/ECV Introduction 1.5). In other words, the natural gap between man and environment necessitates an infinite regress of representations, which is to say the first and perhaps most foundational of the three preconditions for human adaptation: hyper-reflexivity.

The gap also produces the second 'bioanthropological property', transcendence: 'The distancing from the environmental context also entails a distancing from one's self as an integral part of that context'. And also, 'the human animal, because of its distancing, senses the limits of the context in which it is situated, and precisely for this reason does not have an ecological niche, that is, an environment in a strict sense, but an historical world' (Virno 2011, 73-4/ECV Introduction 1.5). And beyond the limit, one senses another limit, and so on *ad infinitum*: 'The transcending of the vital context is the kernel of experience that infinite regression articulates in the guise of an ascending hierarchy or of a spiral' (Virno 2011, 74/ECV Introduction 1.5).

As to the third bioanthropological moment, Virno describes the 'twofold aspect' as a *consequence* of the first two moments: 'The distancing from its vital context obliges our species to establish a supplementary relation with it', and 'the unity of the two aspects ['biology and culture, nature and artifice, the individual and the social mind'] only manifests itself in their gap' (Virno 2011, 74/ECV Introduction 1.5).

The historical-cultural actions would have to alleviate the very high degree of contingency, that is, of omnidirectional potentiality [*potenzialità onnidirezionale*] that characterises the 'flood of stimuli'. However, inasmuch as they do not derive from a precise environmental signal, these actions have an unforeseeable outcome, and in their turn increase the contingency and potentiality from which they were meant to protect us. Thus, what we need are new historical-cultural actions that, carrying out a meta-operational task, reorganise the relation [...] between a single human animal [...] and the vital context. (Virno 2011, 74-5/ECV Introduction 1.5)

So all three 'bio-anthropological prerogatives', 'always applying themselves again to the situation they have generated, give rise to infinite regress' (Virno 2011, 75/ECV Introduction 1.5). *Without* this recursion, Virno suggests, these properties might well be found in animals:

It is important to add that only syntactic recursion renders these prerogatives species-specific, that is, properly human. Undoubtedly many other animals are capable of reflexive performances [...]. The authentic discriminating factor lies in the tendency to reiterate meta-representation recursively, [but also the other two prerogatives, as if animals do *not* have this, but only the first, a potential for reflexivity, if not, perhaps *hyper*-reflexivity], the distancing from one's here and now [transcendence], and the construction of a cultural relation with the context [dual aspect]. (Virno 2011, 75/ECV Introduction 1.5)

The symbolic (language) has to retroact upon the pre-symbolic, in order for anthropogenesis to begin. Curiously, then,

[s]yntactic recursion is an intra-linguistic property [...]. And yet it is precisely recursion, and not the denotative vocabulary, that moulds the prerogatives thanks to which the human animal adapts to the world. We witness here a peculiar displacement that, on closer inspection, characterises the union of logic and anthropology as a whole: an immediate pragmatic-existential value pertains only to the functions that govern the inner life of verbal language [...]. The organism's impulse for preservation first and foremost avails itself of those traits of human eloquence which are furthest from (and most independent of) somatic and sensory-motor impulses. (Virno 2011, 75/ECV Introduction 1.5)

Our natural life survives by the most unnatural means: speech.

In any case, we have seen that the infinity of the sign in its self-recursion may be seen retrospectively to have precursors in the pre-linguistic life of the (human) animal, the supernatural in the natural. And it becomes clear from the following passage that recursion should not be taken merely to characterise *empirical* negativity (for instance, in the repeated use of the word 'not' to negate previous negations), but also to define the very differential texture of language's *ontological* negativity: 'Using a concept dear to Chomsky, we could say that the primary negativity of which the texture of language is made is endowed with the prerequisite of *recursion*'. This in the sense that we should not positivise or reify the difference between terms in language, since 'each difference between linguistic terms exists only by virtue of... its negative-differential relation with another difference' (*Negation*, 2.2).

It is as if the property of recursion provides a joint between the non-biological infinity of the system of signs that comprises language in its potency and the other (biological) characteristics of the human animal, and in particular the infinity that is bestowed upon its world by a natural lack of a single environment (perhaps indeed the only thing that allows us to speak, comparatively, of the human animal's environment as 'lacking', as negative or absent, is *language*). Or does the confusion of culture and biology here allow us to speak of the language-system as biological? Is it identical with what Virno elsewhere speaks of as an unequivocally *biological* linguistic faculty? This was the problem we began with in our account of Virno's surprising deployment of the mirror neurons, and we have yet satisfactorily to solve it.

### Language and human nature in *Essay on Negation*

In the exposition we are focussing on, language is taken to negate a primary and biological *sociality*. Here, language seems unnatural. Can we render this compatible with Virno's earlier enunciation according to which language as a faculty is itself part of our biological heritage, our human nature?

Perhaps this question might be resolved if we assume that these initial three 'hypotheses' that comprise the 'dialectic' of prelinguistic sociality, negation of sociality, and negation of negation, refer solely to *empirical* negation. After all, it is to this empirical negation that Virno refers in the following account of anthropogenesis, which takes place precisely in and as this dialectic. And more generally, it seems from this statement that language *makes* the other aspects of human nature *possible*, or at least certain others:

Precisely insofar as it converts the way of (not) being of language into a particular communicative resource, negation is one of the main axes of human nature. Deferring the satisfaction of desire, reshaping drives, contradicting the ruling order, punctuating time as 'not any longer' and 'not yet'; all of this, and many other things, *would not be possible* if the primary negativity of language were not embodied in an independent symbol. (*Negation*, 2.6, emphasis added)

And again: 'In this inclination to *suspend without substituting*, made possible only by the logical operator "not", we should recognise a characteristic trait of human praxis, or even an anthropogenic apparatus [*un dispositivo antropogenico*]' (*Negation*, 3.3).

In any case, Virno clarifies that language is indeed, for him, at this stage, still to be understood as *innate*, a *biological* faculty which does indeed seem to characterise the peculiar sociality of humans in distinction from the rest of the animal kingdom: 'The Nazi officer is able *not* to recognise the old Jew by virtue of a prerequisite of the primate *Homo sapiens* that is entirely *natural* (and hence innate and invariant). That is, he is able not to recognise him because the sociality

of *homo sapiens* is not only forged by mirror neurons, but also by *language*' (*Negation*, 1.3, emphases added). 'The suspension of neural co-feeling is closely linked to the most relevant feature of human discourses: *negation*, the use of "not"' (*Negation*, 1.3).<sup>36</sup>

It is important for our thesis now to establish once and for all that this negativity *must* be linguistic, it cannot occur elsewhere. Virno is indeed emphatic: any other uses of the word 'negation' besides the actual linguistic deployment of the word 'not' and its cognates, together with their 'ontological' correlate, are 'metaphorical or simply senseless' (*Negation*, 1.3).

There are apparent 'contrasts' among 'extra-linguistic perceptions, desires, or events', 'the opposition between physical forces [like attraction and repulsion], the contrast between perceptions, the conflict between drives' (*Negation*, 2.5), 'it has the appearance of opposition and contrariness' (*Negation*, 2.3). But 'a non-verbal fact even when it hinders another fact or annuls it, does not deserve in any way the label of "negative"' (*Negation*, 2.3). These extra-linguistic facts are themselves ultimately 'positive'. Referring to Kant's text on 'negative magnitudes', Virno insists that, 'demerit and error are positive' (*Negation*, 2.3). In extra-linguistic reality, opposites and contraries do not relate to one another in a *dialectical* way, in the sense that the negated force is not *preserved* in this negation as an inherent part of the *identity* of the negating force – the identity of the latter is not manifest as the *result* of the negation of its opponent; whereas this preservation does occur in the sublation of linguistic negation, or more precisely and more fundamentally in the *non*-dialectical preservation of the *indeterminate* negation: 'when repulsion clashes with attraction, being itself a positive force, it does not preserve the "content" of the latter, but annuls it, and, if it overwhelms it, it replaces it with an alternative "content"' (*Negation*, 2.5).

Virno appears to agree with Saussure's assertion that, 'it is reasonable to define a fact as "negative" if it fully obtains its reality from a relation of opposition with other facts; if it does not pre-exist the opposition, but results from it. Language is the only field in which this paradoxical condition is satisfied' (*Negation*, 2.3). *Negation is primarily – and indeed exclusively – linguistic.*

### Plato's *mē on*

That negation is *only* linguistic is one of the primary reasons for Virno's appeal to Plato's *Sophist*, of which his book contains an extremely close reading, for he reads this dialogue as an account of the acquisition of language in infancy, and specifically the language of negation. It tells an ontogenetic story of '[t]he radical change caused in the first years of life by the grafting of verbal language onto previous forms of thought' (*Negation*, 1.3). The *Sophist* is 'perhaps the only philosophical work that takes seriously the traumatic advent of the "not" in human life' (ibid.).

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<sup>36</sup> He also speaks of 'negation as a natural phenomenon' (*Negation*, 1.3), and language as 'naturalistic' (*Negation*, 1.4).

The most absolutely novel possibility which language introduces into life is that of negation. The negation of a predication in a proposition is understood to introduce the *possibility* of a *different* (*heteros*) predicate, which — crucially — is *not specified*. This distinguishes the *different* or the *other* (*heteron*) from the *contrary*, *opposite* or *antithesis* (*enantion*). If one thing is said to be ‘opposed’ to another, then that subject or substance must have a positive and determinate property predicated of it, and this attribute must stand at the farthest limit of the same genus, as beauty stands with respect to ugliness, positively asserting, and yet antithetical: ‘by opposite [*contrario*], I mean the term that is furthest from that in question within the kind [*genere*, genus] they both belong to’ (*Negation*, 3.4). On the use made of the word in the *Sophist*, Virno expands the notion of opposition even further to include, ‘also terms that, unrelated with regard to their kind, radically oppose [*oppongono*] each other even if they do not have points of contact, or better, precisely because of that’ (*Negation*, 4.2). We should contrast contrariety with contradiction (‘not x’ or ‘x & not x’), which, perhaps precipitately, Virno elsewhere identifies with negation, speaking of ‘the difference between contradiction and opposition [*contrarietà*]’ — perhaps here contradiction is intended as a *third* option beside otherness and contrariety (*Negation*, 3.7 Marginal Note I).<sup>37</sup> Perhaps such a confusion explains Virno’s ambiguous presentation of his own relation with the dialectic, which is driven by contradiction and the need to produce a determinate negation in order to resolve it. In general we should prefer to say that both contrariety and contradiction issue in a determinate *actual* outcome, even if contradiction need not and may simply reduce us to absurdity and aporia; while otherness is the *indeterminate* result which takes the form not of actuality but of *potentiality*.

In any case, negation produces a statement of *difference* or an *indeterminate* otherness, not specified but rich in an infinite possibility, and this is what is inflicted upon our biological mirror relation with the other when we acquire the ability to think linguistically:

Nobody can claim that the Jew [...] is located at the antipodes of the attribute ‘human’ [i.e. that he or she is the *contrary* of ‘human’] [...] given that the mirror neurons attest to the fact that the living being in question belongs to our species. Non-recognition is rather grounded on the tendency of the sign ‘not’ to evoke a *difference* [*heteron*] which, being as such potential and undetermined, is at each turn accounted for through some contingent property [...]. When the child says to his mother [in anger] ‘you are *not* my mother’ [the reference to Freud should distantly resonate here, as becomes

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<sup>37</sup> In terms of translation, we shall generally prefer ‘otherness’ to ‘difference’ as a translation of ‘to heteron’ since *to heteron* is opposed to *to auton*, the other and the same, or, chiasmically, the one and the other, an alternative comprised always and only of two. Generally, Virno tends to translate *to heteron* as *differenza*, but occasionally, although much less frequently, as *alterità* and *altro* (cf. *Negation*, 4.2).

clear much later (cf. *Negation*, 3.5)], he in effect says that she *is not* what in another sense she undoubtedly *is*. (*Negation*, 1.3)

Which is to say, human, the predicate suspended, without being either sublated (as in dialectical contradiction) or replaced with another altogether (contrariety), or simply annihilated.

Thus one can translate Virno's former description of the public sphere as a negation of negation by deploying a certain number of Platonic terms in the following way: here Virno starts to speak, as is his wont, not so much of 'verbal (or spoken) *language*' as of 'verbal *thought*' (once 'verbal language' has been 'grafted onto' *pre-linguistic* thought), an internal rather than an external monologue or dialogue, which is precisely tantamount to the famous description of thought that one finds in the *Theaetetus* (189e): 'verbal thought erodes the original certainty of co-feeling. Only this erosion, which is as such lethal, paves the way for a complex and ductile sociality, scattered with pacts, promises, norms, conflicts, institutions that are never stable, collective projects whose outcomes are imponderable' (*Negation*, 1.4).

As we have seen in our earlier account of the quasi-dialectic of sociality, this very same capacity to negate can 'deactivate' the 'partial deactivation' of the original pre-linguistic, pre-negative intersubjectivity, and Virno relates this second, more complex and strategic use of language, a verbal thought that relates only to itself, to its initial negations, dwelling as it were on its past crimes, with *rhetoric*: 'traditional resources of rhetoric linguistically restrain the violent negativity that language itself has inserted into animal life; they regulate the use of the "not" and delimit the [formerly unlimited] range of the *heteron*; all in all, they allow the reciprocal recognition of living beings which could also *dis-avow* each other' (*Negation*, 1.4). Language thus has the same role with respect to the unlimited that politics has been said to, to channel a potentiality which might prove dangerous. Indeed, this rhetorical use of language may be said to provide precisely the matrix of Virno's political response to man's 'dangerousness', one which – contra Schmitt – would not be authoritarian and pro-State, but which – contra the anarchists Schmitt depicts as his enemy – would not presuppose an 'anthropology of meekness' or 'goodness'.

Speaking of the *katēchon* invoked by St. Paul in his Letter to the Thessalonians, the 'restraining force' or 'force that holds back' the arrival of the Antichrist, Virno tells us that 'language is the naturalistic *katēchon* that, favouring the formation of a public sphere (through the application of a "not" to a previous "not"), *holds back* the catastrophe of non-recognition' (*Negation*, 1.4). And the proper use of this language, within a certain public, economic, political sphere, is precisely what constitutes 'anti-capitalist and anti-state political action':

The fragility of the 'we-centric space' [pre-linguistic mirror neuron intersubjectivity] [...] must constitute the realistic background of any political

movement that aims at a drastic transformation of the current state of affairs. [...] An accurate analysis of the social mind allows us to ground ‘radicalism vis-à-vis state’ [Schmitt 2007 {1932}, 61] and vis-à-vis the capitalist mode of production on the dangerousness of human nature (a dangerousness that is fed by the polyvalent use of the ‘not’), rather than on its imaginary mildness [the fantasy that humans are naturally ‘good’]. Anti-capitalist and anti-state political action [...] is dedicated to experimenting with new and more effective ways of negating negation, of appending the ‘not’ before ‘non-man’. (*Negation*, 1.4)<sup>38</sup>

### The transcendental and empirical qualities of language

We must now return to the questions with which we began, as we prepare to draw our long essay to a close.

Our hypothesis is that the relation between the ontological and empirical forms of negation within language will allow us to clarify the relation between the transcendental human nature and its empirico-historical manifestations (which as we have already seen in the previous section, will in turn allow us to render our vision of the future politics more precise, a politics inextricable from the philosophy or natural history that Virno advocates). Virno tells us the following: ‘it seems to me very likely that negation arises from the negative-differential nature of language, i.e. that the sign “not” isolates and concentrates in itself an aspect that pervasively characterises the life of all signs’ (*Negation*, 2.3). This is the difference between ‘what language *is*’ and ‘what language *expresses*’: ‘the philosophical enquiry into negation [Virno instances Plato’s *Sophist*, as we have seen, but also the opening of Hegel’s *Logic*, and later on, what is in its way a response to it, and by far Plato’s most important interlocutor, according to Virno: Heidegger’s ‘What is Metaphysics?’] has always been de facto an enquiry into the way of (not-)being of language’ (*Negation*, 2.4).

All of which is to say that the sign ‘not’ is a reflexive indicator of the very taking place of language itself, or perhaps, to use a less Agambenian idiom, it reflexively indicates the very nature of language, like a rhetorical trick drawing attention to its own verbal dexterity.<sup>39</sup> As Virno puts it, this might be said to be

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<sup>38</sup> Virno refers to his, *E così via*, pp. 148–94, which is translated as pp. 11ff of *Multitude*. Here we find more detail on Virno’s ultimate political position, which we have too little space to expand upon in the present work.

<sup>39</sup> Virno is in truth most indebted to Agamben when it comes to this question of reflexivity, at the very least for the way in which the relation is described in *Mondanità*, where he differentiates a ‘presuppositional’ conception of the relation between word and thing from a conception which is less ‘vulgar’ and that is ultimately to say, ‘metaphysical’ (MN3.4). This latter conception leads Virno to the remarkable statement according to which ‘the fact that humankind has a “world” [...] rather than an “environment” (into which one is [...] irrevocably integrated as in amniotic fluid) is due to the *limits of language*, not to its representational power’, with limits here being understood in a non-metaphysical fashion as the reserve of inactual potential which language will always retain (*ibid.*). We might wonder if this amounts to assigning a priority to linguistic potential

because negation at the level of language, unlike its analogues in reality, leads to 'difference', that which is simply 'otherwise', without its being specified quite how. It is merely 'different' (without further determination). Its sole 'determination' is that it is *not* what it differentiates itself *from*. Thus it is not a contrary, opposition or antithesis (*enantion*), which would posit something determinate (and so nor is it the result of a determinate negation).

This indeterminate negativity, this *potential* to be something determinate without *actually* being it, is precisely the gift of language and its *transcendental* negativity, a transcendental or ontological negation which every *empirical* use of the negative may be said to bring to manifestation: 'When it is negated, "is beautiful" [for instance] does not give way to a new *signifié* [signified – like "is ugly", its opposite]; it rather undergoes an indetermination that takes it back to the negative-differential relations that are responsible for the establishment of all *signifiés*' (*Negation*, 2.5). The 'not' is the empirical manifestation of the transcendental, a transcendental which in this case is just as internal to language as the empirical.

In an analogy with the Marxist analysis of money as both a good and a representative of all goods, Virno suggests that 'it is as if the Platonic idea of "horseness" managed to acquire its own empirical existence alongside individual horses in the flesh. [...] [A] part functions as an image of the whole. Both money and negation reveal the hidden nature of the system of which they are a mere component' (*Negation*, 2.6). In relation to negativity, or more precisely the *heteron* in the *Sophist*, Virno speaks of 'condition of possibility and phenomenon' (*Negation*, 4.5). Language seems to be a remarkable place, in that it comprises the transcendental, the most essential feature of human nature and the condition for the possibility of what is uniquely its own, distinguishing it from the other animals: the (empirical) negation and potential that this opens up, the ability to transform an absence, a lack of adaptation (for instance) into the resource (the potential) for an unheard of domination and creativity. Language, then, is both the transcendental but also the location for the empirical, the actual uses of the word 'not' and its various cognates and translations.

### **When is ontological negativity revealed? The question and the possible**

Since we are precisely interested, philosophically and politically, in the moments at which the transcendental manifests itself, and the precise manner in which it does so at different points in history, let us examine what Virno says about the revelation of ontological negativity in the empirical. It should be instructive.

Virno points to two occasions in particular on which ontological negativity is revealed, or as he puts it, when the disjunction of sense from presence, logic from psychology, the original negation between a representation and what it represents, is brought most glaringly to light:

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as we have suggested Virno does elsewhere, even though Virno immediately proceeds to speak of the relation between language and world as 'chiasmic' (MN3.5).

1) The question – which admits of an affirmative or negative response to the same content. Heidegger will have made much of this, in a very different idiom.

2) The modality of the possible: ‘the independence of verbal thought from facts and psychological drives, which is undeniable, yet only implicit in assertion and in pragmatic statements, fully emerges when this thought is accompanied by the clause “it is possible”. [...] [I]t brings to light a trait shared by all discourses’ (*Negation*, 3.6).

The possible has a certain advantage over the question in that it removes the impression that the neutrality of sense between affirmation and negation – its potential character – is a temporary matter that may eventually be overcome: ‘Possible is synonymous with *untimely* and not-present. [...] [T]he temporal discrepancy constitutes the very theme of the discourse [...]. The waiting is no longer a mere setback, or a parenthesis to be quickly closed, but becomes something permanent. Only the possible, not the question, thus attests to the permanent *untimeliness of sense*’, which is to say its discrepancy with respect to the present or the actual (*Negation*, 3.6).

Thus, Virno is prepared to go so far as to say that, ‘the possible is perfectly coextensive with the “not”’ (*Negation*, 3.6), ‘negation alone is able to trace the watershed [...] between potential being and actual being’ (*Negation*, 3.6). Potentiality may be thought in terms of the ontological negativity that can be introduced into the real by language alone.

As we have been hypothesising all along, this negativity seems to ‘make possible’ all of the other traits which comprise human nature. Of this mutual implication between the possible and the negative, Virno says that, ‘this circular relation [...] is an eminent element of a plainly *naturalistic* anthropology (i.e. one that is able to acknowledge the importance that some logical structures have in defining the nature of the primate *Homo sapiens*)’. This would be a *naturalistic* anthropology which nevertheless did full justice to the idea of a *linguistic* anthropology, with all its complex intertwinings of transcendental with the empirical, and hence to the *natural* production of the *supernatural*, the biological generation of the cultural (*Negation*, 3.6). Language, as both biological and cultural, an intimation of infinity and infinity *stricto sensu*, is responsible for the emergence of a number of human characteristics, once it has acted retrospectively on certain prelinguistic features (including our mirror neurons and our drives): among these human features we have seen numbered hyper-reflexivity, transcendence, and the dual aspect. Of the first, Virno tells us that it emerges with language’s ability not so much to self-refer (*pace* Agamben) as to recur.

Even if there is not always an avowed *ontological* priority of language over man, there is certainly an *epistemological* one, when it comes to the reflexivity that empirical negation and ontological negation form: ‘If we overlook the convergence [...] of [...] empirical plane and ontological plane, we are doomed not to be able to grasp our typically human *reflexivity*’ (*Negation*, 3.7 Marginal Note II). Such reflexivity, which might indeed be identified with the reflexivity of a transcendental

self with respect to an empirical one, is ungraspable without an understanding of the way in which language as such embodies a relation between the transcendental and the empirical. And the unique features of the human produced by a natural genesis of the supernatural and a subsequent (or perhaps contemporary) retroaction of the symbolic upon the real, cannot be understood without an account of language. No anthropology without linguistics.

**The *Sophist* and ‘What is Metaphysics?’: a non-linguistic negation?**

For all its helpfulness as a reading guide to Plato's text, the long section in Chapter 4 which Virno devotes to Plato's *Sophist* assumes its full importance only in conjunction with what follows after it: a reading of Heidegger's ‘What is Metaphysics?’ (1929). In Virno's hands, Heidegger illuminates Plato by offering a contrasting view on the relation between negativity (or nothingness) and language.<sup>40</sup>

At stake is still the most original form of negativity, the *mē on* of the *heteron*, the non-oppositional otherness of that ‘non-being within being’ which is the potential that lies coiled at the heart of actuality. What is in question is precisely whether this original negation is fundamentally linguistic or not. Or, as Virno puts the alternative, ‘on the one hand, a Nothing that is indistinguishable from the way in which our speech is made; on the other, a nothing strongly linked to the non-linguistic experience of the world’, an experience that will paradigmatically for Heidegger take the form of *anxiety* (*Negation*, 4.6).

If we are to substantiate our hypothesis on the precedence of *linguistic* negation for Virno, we shall have to deal with this comparison of Plato and Heidegger.

Crucially important for Virno is the fact that, ‘[f]or Plato, not-being and [linguistic] negation are united by the category of *heteron*’, while ‘Heidegger *separates* the two poles that the polysemy of the *heteron* joined and made commensurable’ (*Negation*, 4.6, emphasis added). Indeed, the original *heteron* is not, it seems, understood by Heidegger as the differentiability of language but rather as,

the *non-linguistic* relation that the human animal has with the world [...].  
Radically heterogeneous with respect to verbal thought, the Heideggerian *mē on* mostly manifests itself in certain characteristic *states of mind* [stati

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<sup>40</sup> Virno points out something which is rarely noticed, although it might have seemed glaringly obvious: four years earlier, Heidegger had lectured on the *Sophist*, and ‘What is Metaphysics?’ should be considered the ‘continuation’ of those lectures, even though it goes its own way with respect to Plato. ‘Heidegger distances himself from the setting of the *Sophist* only to endorse its most conspicuous result: the discovery of a form of life [*una forma di vita*] that is shaped by not-being [as the sophist himself is]. This singular mixture of distance and proximity is very useful for understanding, independently of Heidegger and in open contrast to the hypothesis he promotes, which problems should be taken charge of by a theory inclined to clarify the *anthropological* range of linguistic negation’ (*Negation*, 4.6). Virno, then, as a quasi-dialectical sublation of Plato and Heidegger's positions on negation?

d'animo]. Among them, anxiety is especially important, a feeling [sentimento] of fear and disorientation that [...] signals our permanent maladjustment [disadattamento] to the environment. (*Negation*, 4.6)

Already one can see Virno interpreting and translating Heidegger's notion with his own anthropological – and one might be forgiven for supposing less than Heideggerian – purposes in mind: he speaks, in a way that Heidegger did perhaps only once in his career, in the aberrant 1929–30 course on animals and humans, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, of 'disadaptation' and 'the non-linguistic experience of the world as a vital context that is partly undetermined and unpredictable' (*Negation*, 4.6, cf. MN4.1, where Virno refers to this particular text of Heidegger's). For Heidegger, in any case, '[w]e thus need to recognise the "factual reality of the *mē on*" in the individual who falls prey to an anxiety resistant to words, and not in the loquacious author of negative propositions' (*Negation*, 4.6).

But this is just the aspect of Heidegger's interpretation of negativity that Virno disputes: he criticises Heidegger's understanding of anxiety and other emotions as pre-linguistic, while at the same time, on a generous reading, one should not read Plato's *heteron* in the way that we may presume Heidegger is assumed to, as failing to open up emotional possibilities: '[t]he Platonic not-being [...] is never emotionally inert' (*Negation*, 4.6).<sup>41</sup> So emotion is not pre-linguistic,

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<sup>41</sup> Thus, contrary to the prevailing reading, '[t]he fact that the feeling originates in the negative experience of logos is, after all, also suggested by a cautious, or at least not mesmerised, reading of "What is Metaphysics?"' (*Negation*, 4.6). That said, we should not lose too much time on this reading, since it is erroneous: it rests on the idea that the nothing revealed in anxiety is *akin* to the Platonic nothing, in that the *heteron* introduced by negation is *non-oppositional*, 'Like the Platonic *heteron*, the Nothing supported by Heidegger is itself inseparable from being' (*Negation*, 4.6). And indeed, for Virno, beings themselves are precisely revealed to us in their being, in their 'as such' *in* the experience of anxiety.

So far, Heidegger would broadly agree, but the step Virno goes on to make, Heidegger would at this stage in his career refute absolutely. Virno adds, innocently, as if remaining within the letter of a 'non-mesmerised' reading of Heidegger's text: 'Let us ask on what conditions we can understand a being *as* such, i.e. maintaining a distance from it. The intuitive answer is: on condition of *saying it*. I depict the thunder *as* such because the word "thunder" is *not* the thing it stands for', 'the "as" is in turn indiscernible from the life of language' (*ibid.*).

For the later Heidegger, possibly, but here, as Virno himself has already shown, Heidegger is precisely attempting to think man's transcendence of beings as a whole in the direction of anxiety ultimately in terms of a wordless experience, a voiceless voice, and ultimately the sheer negativity of *death*, which extinguishes all words and all communication. The apophantic 'as' is preceded by a more originary pre-linguistic conceptualisation of the world in the form of a 'hermeneutic' 'as', as Heidegger will say in *Being and Time*, and in the briefest sentence in the text, 'to significations [concepts], words accrue' (Heidegger 1962 [1927], 204/161). There is a certain precedence of thought over language, even before one starts to consider the relation of 'states of mind' or 'moods' to all this.

To defend Virno's reading, one would, I think, have to return to *Being and Time* in a different way, and to its depiction of conscience, which opens us to anxiety and the possibility of

and ontological negativity is not unemotional. This constitutes a charitable reading of Plato that, wittingly or not, Heidegger will have taught us to give. 'The possession of a biological organ characterised by a "complex of eternally negative differences" generates by itself specific states of mind' (ibid.). At stake are 'those passions correlated with the mere *capacity* to enunciate' (ibid., emphasis added). The 'disorientation' in one's environment that Heidegger, according to Virno, takes anxiety to reveal, is said to be 'caused' *by* the linguistic faculty itself, as are the emotions associated with it.

Playing along with something he does not truly believe, and assuming that anxiety does indeed have some absolute priority (he also instances what he demonstrates to be its opposite, Freud's 'uncanny'),<sup>42</sup> Virno describes the anxiety which would be consequent upon the linguistic capacity as 'the state of mind that is born out of a heightened relation with ontological negation, an astounded contemplation of the heterogeneity between logos and being, an abnormal dilation of the voids and pauses caused by the untimeliness of sense. In anxiety, ontological negation is transformed into an existential attitude' (*Negation*, 4.6).

In the end, Virno simply concludes the position he began the book by affirming, that, '[i]f we do not lapse into metaphorical or simply senseless uses of the term (for which even a punch would in a way negate), negation is a function that

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the pure potentiality that is being, as 'primordial discourse' or the 'origin of discourse' (Heidegger 1962 [1927], 342/296), which one might be able to align with the 'faculty for language' in Virno, though not, it seems certain, with the *biological* declination that it receives in the latter's work.

In general, much is at stake here, for the way we are directing our reading of Virno: is it true that negativity is *only* and *always* the negativity that the differentiability of the language-system introduces into nature with the emergence of the human being? At least in the limited context of this reading, at the end of Chapter 4 of the *Essay on Negation*, Virno can hardly be said to *justify* his position, and resorts in the end merely to pitting one position against another: in this case, a simple remark of Wittgenstein's ('Heidegger's explanation [...] can be countered with an exasperated remark Wittgenstein makes [...] [*Negation*, 4.6]), which in truth gives far less justification of its own position than 'What is Metaphysics?' gives of Heidegger's.

The skewing within Virno's reading of Heidegger gives us pause here, and should stimulate us to search all the harder for the justifications of this precedence Virno gives to a linguistic negation, which Heidegger himself manages to do without, early on, at least. But there is nothing to say that the later Heideggerian position is *necessarily* superior to the earlier, or that resources may not be found in the work of the 1920's and 30's which are more productive for contemporary problematics.

<sup>42</sup> 'The familiar-uncanny therefore appears in all its finery [*celebra dunque i suoi fasti*] when words appear to fuse with the objects for which they stand; when the *heteron* that keeps statements and facts separated is eclipsed; when the sign, being entirely juxtaposed with what it designates, abruptly ceases to be a sign. The uncanny obscures for a short period of time ontological negation: the very negation whose effects are instead exasperated by the feeling of anxiety. [...] While the state of mind of anxiety is the climax of the autonomy of the symbol with respect to what is symbolised, the feeling of the uncanny brings us back for a moment to the threshold between symbolic and pre-symbolic life [...]. Anxiety and the uncanny are the two polar versions, one paroxysmal, the other defective — of the same fundamental experience, which never lacks an affective gradient: the experience of *having* language' (*Negation*, 4.6).

belongs exclusively to verbal activity' (*Negation*, 1.3): in the end, 'apart from what the functioning of the sign "not" teaches us, we do not have any notion of negation, or of not-being, and hence we do not even have notions of negative actions or passions' (*Negation*, 4.6). What is therefore somewhat difficult to understand is that in the final chapter, immediately after this introduction of the relation between emotions and negations in the context of Heidegger's work, Virno raises the matter of certain 'pre-linguistic' (*Negation*, 5.2) or 'pre-symbolic' (*Negation*, 5.1) drives and emotions. Here we are clearly in the realm of the retrospective, once again, and Virno tells us that this assertion of a rigorous separation between the pre-linguistic and the linguistic is precisely what allows a retroaction of negation upon the non-negative pre-linguistic. These pre-linguistic emotions do not seem to include anxiety, but at least they comprise such things as 'hunger and fear', and also such similar intimations of negation in the pre-linguistic realm as 'hatred and rancour', 'unsatisfied desires', and 'mockery'. Those 'negative' emotions and states which seem to cry out in advance for a linguistic description that will include a negation.

We investigated the retroaction of language on such states, and its crucial role in anthropogenesis, earlier on, but the stress here is laid more firmly on the priority of drives and emotions with respect to language, and it is not immediately clear how Virno can so simply distinguish his position from that of the Heidegger which he will have criticised in the previous chapter (*Negation*, 5.1). There seems little room for equivocation: in speaking of a repression which can later be mollified by linguistic disavowal, Virno will speak of 'pre-linguistic *negativity*' (*Negation*, 5.5, emphasis added). No longer the simple positivity or neutrality of the mirror neurons, but something which may take another valence. This will not be radically countered by the linguistic capacity for explicit negation that will come later, but rather, in it language will recognise its own kin.

Later still, Virno will speak of negation – in the context of his projected ontogenetic 'phenomenology of the negating consciousness' – in the following way: 'Having settled accounts with what is *similar* prepares it for influencing what is alien' (*Negation*, 5.6, emphasis added).

Whence this similarity? What licenses one to describe as 'similar' two things which, when the mirror neurons and their suspension were at stake and here in terms of the radical opposition between the pre-linguistic and language, seemed so radically opposed? According to what criterion? Can it only be retroactive? Retroaction, after all, does seem to be the order of the day in this fifth chapter of the text (*Negation*, 5.1 especially), where Virno comes to address the question of whether, despite the fact that there is no 'perceptual or affective *genesis* of the "not"', there is nevertheless 'the *retroaction* of the "not" on perception and affects' (*Negation*, 5.1). And perhaps his primary goal in this chapter is 'showing how and why maximum separation paves the way for a lasting interweaving [of linguistic praxis, which really means linguistic negation, and pre-linguistic drives]'. Such retroaction is perhaps suggested in the curious phrase from the last paragraph of

the book: 'both benevolence and hostility are never immediate since they presuppose the paralysis of what could have paralysed them' (*Negation*, 5.6): no immediate state, either 'positive' or 'negative', but only something that can be what it is by means of a refraining, a negation of negation, paralysis of paralysis.

But what is supposed to distinguish an earlier, pre-linguistic state that is (perceived as being) amenable to a negative linguistic description, to being viewed retrospectively as a natural precursor of negativity, from one which is not? Anything can be negated, but some pre-linguistic states seem to necessitate or at least encourage it.

### **To conclude: in retrospect**

How has this journey through the *Essay on Negation* illuminated our initial questions concerning human nature, and the relation between the empirical and the transcendental: Virno's position when it comes to philosophy?

We began with the question of the metaphysical and the physical, transcendental and empirical, and their intertwining. We said that it was no surprise that, at this jointure, one should find the figure of man, and the necessity of considering a philosophical anthropology. We have found in the end one of the oldest of such anthropologies: Aristotle's. Man is the linguistic animal, *zōon logon echon*, which is also to say the political animal, *zōon politikon*. Virno takes this definition of man absolutely seriously and absolutely literally. So much so that our very linguistic capacity is understood to be *part* of our animal nature. Our language is biological. We suggested that the ultimate warrant for such an assumption is *retrospectively* given, on the basis of our contemporary moment and the 'biolinguistic' character of today's capitalistic work. Contemporary capitalism would bring to empirical manifestation this ancient ('transcendental') definition of man. Indeed perhaps this transcendental itself is to be understood so only *because* of the contemporary moment, which it is attempting to make sense of and to revolutionise.

To move beyond this moment, we cannot simply do away with it. Revolution, as all of Hegel, deconstruction, and Lacan have shown us, is not so simple: we often end up simply going round in circles that way, and thus remain within that very (circular) structure we were meant to be doing away with. So we need to take this biolinguistic labourer and to analyse their activity philosophically, which will involve returning to the Aristotelian philosophy and its anthropology, rethinking the labour-power of this worker as potentiality (*dynamis*), and yet bringing this philosophical notion into connection with the natural science of life, to reconceive it as a *biological* capacity.

Such was the merit of those early- to mid-twentieth century ethologists and anthropologists upon whom Virno primarily draws, those *philosophical* anthropologists: to have made such strides in thinking that intersection of language and animality, language as in some way the most essential part *of* our animality, which necessitates the transition from biology to culture and at the same time

ensures the enduring presence of biological nature *within* cultural history. This then to explain the – again retrospective – necessitation of, or at least the justification for, Virno's choice of empirical scientist in his assertions regarding human nature.

The affirmation of this transhistorical invariant of humanity, the linguistic capacity, is founded upon a very deliberately limited range of empirical scientific research, but this eternity of nature is also found to have some sort of beginning, with Cro-Magnon man. Man, whose *essence* is 'eternal', is very much finite as concerns his *existence*. The provenance of this dating is to be found in the work of the linguist, Chomsky, and we might again assume that this decision as to the point of emergence of the 'human' which concerns Virno is determined retroactively by the definition of man which has come to appearance in contemporary labour. To what extent, therefore, must this moment of emergence still be considered in a certain sense 'mythical', as so often such phylogenetic tales of origin seem to be in philosophy? Can a chronological location of an initial moment of genesis *only* be retrospective...?

In any case, what Virno adds to those philosophical (linguistic) anthropologists who preceded him is this: with the benefit of his training in linguistics and the philosophy of language, he is able to provide a more rounded understanding of what the human being's linguistic faculty actually is. Virno himself embodies all the virtues necessary for the task he has undertaken: as a philosopher he can bring to bear on the anthropologists' account an understanding of the faculties that characterise human nature as *potentialities*, and as a linguist, he can give a fuller account of the nature of language than the anthropologists could.

Above all, what the *Essay on Negation* demonstrates is Virno's ability to bring together both of these in producing a theory of language which allows him to explain why potentiality itself originates *in* language. Language itself is ontologically negative, in such a way as to generate an infinity of negations, as are necessary for the delimitation of so much as a single signifier. Recursion begins here, in the very formation of the merest linguistic sign. But thanks to this, language in its empirical form can itself negate empirical entities to infinity, and recursively negate its own negations, eventually giving rise to such a thing as 'dialectic' – our philosophy.

Language is biological human nature, when understood as a potentiality, and it is the source of infinity, and this potential infinity can be expressed *empirically* in actual instances of speech which deploy the particle 'not', perhaps to infinity, recursively, because language has the form of both the transcendental and the empirical, human nature and an empirical-historical manifestation of the same, for 'not' will always have to be spoken in some *particular* historical culture's language. Thus, it is thanks to language and its negativity that human nature can take the form that it does in Virno's account – manifesting itself, in exceptional circumstances, or in normality, empirically within history. It is only because man is *linguistic* that such can be his nature, and his history. In the fracture of *linguaggio* and *lingua*, we find the human being.

In language as such, the transcendental and the empirical meet, in the form of negativity and its infinity, and thus engender the *potential* to say and to do anything, which is our destiny as animals possessed of language. Such a destiny is the topic of a 'linguistic anthropology'.

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Translations have sometimes been amended. This is marked only in the most serious cases, or where the divergence is of philosophical interest.

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