

## Editorial

### *Philosophy & The Journal*

We said when we launched this journal that we understood ourselves to be carried along by a wave of initiatives in the publication of Italian philosophy in the English speaking world, and spoke of our desire to both borrow and lend momentum to this current, without placing any limitations upon it beyond those that proved absolutely necessary. This ambition of limitlessness meant that the journal more or less had to exist online, rather than on paper – to take up a virtual space rather than an actual one. Thanks to this, we are not subject to any serious constraints of space, or any particular censorship; and we make no binding promises of calendrical regularity which would demand a certain number of issues per year.

One of our interventions in the marketplace of publication in particular, in which we are thankfully by no means alone, is to resist many of those features which make the experience of publishing in academic journals so often frustrating: the cost, for libraries but much more so for individuals, particularly those outside of academia or on its fringes; the eminently questionable demand for standardisation (formatting, punctuation...) even before the article has been accepted for publication... The lengthy response times, partly consequent upon the immense pressure to publish in certain journals which have for the moment been accorded the dubious honour of being dubbed ‘prestigious’, but also upon the fatigue of the contemporary academic... And one could go on.

To this end, we do not even insist on a certain consistent convention of referencing – even though we are beholden to maintain certain standards of grammar and punctuation, out of a duty to safeguard the idiom of our language. This allows us to preserve as much of the individuality and autonomy of the voice of our authors as possible, but it also seems to us a necessity entailed by the curious situation of philosophy within the faculties that partition academia: since it sits so uneasily between the humanities, the social sciences, and even some of what were once singled out by being designated as ‘exact sciences’, it seems natural to us to allow those who write of and within it to flit between the different citational standards that govern these disciplines.

Being published online, in an ‘open-access’ form (which automatically makes it less exclusive and also less prestigious, of course, despite a certain historical shift in this regard, a shift in which we might one day hope to have the ambition to assist), we see no need to impose these templates the function of which is perhaps deliberately to discourage ‘speculative’ contributors, of whom there are – for certain journals – always too many, or to demonstrate a veneer of ‘professionalism’, or promulgate a readily identifiable ‘brand’.

That said, it would be unwise to imagine that we can free ourselves from these desires and necessities altogether; but we can try to minimise so far as possible the limits that they tend to impose, in terms of wasted time and the deleterious effects of such wastage upon authors and the energy that remains to them to devote themselves to what really matters.

### *The Present Volume: A Variegated Tradition*

The present edition teases apart certain of the many fibres which, twined together, compose the richness of Italian thought. Some of these strands have today – and particularly in the Anglophone world – been lost from sight almost altogether.

We begin with a certain set of thinkers who for the most part stand some distance away from the radical left that remains so prominent abroad, or at least in a different region of that most fragmented of territories – ‘the Left’. We expose thereby certain of the contradictions that rive the strata of philosophy on the Italian peninsula.

We see at least a Marxist left, but a phenomenological Marxism, and at times a non-Marxist left, in the form of Pier Aldo Rovatti, Enzo Paci, and Carlo Sini; progressing further along the continuum, we end up with a more liberal and even centrist position, vehemently at odds with communistic thinking: Benedetto Croce and Norberto Bobbio.

We then contrast this with a selection of works on Agamben – wherever he stands in this regard – and conclude with a new translation of a unique work by the contemporary thinker, also – to continue the bloodlines we are here tracing out – a student of both Pier Aldo Rovatti and Gianni Vattimo, Davide Tarizzo, on a topic rather close to Agamben’s heart: acclamation. While our selection of book reviews only enhances the impression of a rich and variegated tradition that is steadily being brought into view.

### *The Outcome of Phenomenological Marxism in Italy: Enzo Paci, Pier Aldo Rovatti & Carlo Sini*

We begin with the work of two of the most illustrious pupils of the great Enzo Paci: Pier Aldo Rovatti and Carlo Sini.

This section opens with a hitherto untranslated interview with **Pier Aldo Rovatti**, known as one of the foremost representatives of ‘debilitated’ or ‘weak’ thought (*pensiero debole*), along with Gianni Vattimo, but whose personal history touches on almost everything of any significance from the past half-century of Italian thought.

Next, **Carlo Sini**, in a fascinating homage to his maestro, **Enzo Paci**, opens to our view another tradition within the Italian philosophical left, which takes the unique

form of an encounter between phenomenology and Marxism: the exceptional communism of Enzo Paci, which attempts an audacious return to Husserl in the wake of both Heidegger and Marx.

*Forgotten Traditions in Italian Thought: Benedetto Croce & Norberto Bobbio*

We continue with a text devoted to another marginalised tradition, stemming from a more moderate left: **Franco Manni** introduces the reader to the work of **Norberto Bobbio** and that of his teacher, **Benedetto Croce** – both provide an intriguing contrast to the work that follows them. This serves to remind us of the existence of another important strand within the Italian tradition, a liberal one that, according to Manni, the twentieth Century, with all its extremity, will have rather overwhelmed. Curious how provocative – and perhaps understandably strident – a defence of liberalism and an attack on communism can sound in the company it is here asked to keep.

*The Elusive Third: Giorgio Agamben*

The next section of this issue is comprised of four separate engagements with the work of a thinker from a somewhat different tradition of leftist thinking: **Giorgio Agamben**, and each has at least something to say as to the vexed question of his affirmative biopolitics, his positive prognostications regarding our future.

**Roberto Mosciatti's** essay is the one most directly concerned with Agamben's political thought. His text accomplishes an extraordinary amount: it argues for a genealogy of cosmopolitanism that traces its origins back to the Greek Cynics and their contemptuous refusal of a certain civilised political citizenship and governance, before going on to argue that Agamben is the contemporary thinker who most incisively prolongs this cosmopolitical-cynical tradition.

Mosciatti demonstrates how this reading might be adopted in order to solve a number of interpretive conundrums which some have found to dog the *Homo Sacer* project: he begins with the question of the conflict between Agamben's apparent pessimism and his affirmative and indeed utopian moments in which another form of life, neither strictly animal nor strictly human, might emancipate itself from the sovereign power that has reduced it to a bare living, powerless even to take its own life: in other words, a 'third thing' which might positively irrupt from the exhausted and collapsed middle of the binary machines which govern Western culture, and to which we shall obsessively return in this issue.

Mosciatti's essay then goes on to consider the nature of Agamben's apparent 'messianism' (to which Arthur Willemsse will return later on, in a book review which explores the relation between Agamben and Roberto Calasso). It puts an intriguing question to the invocation of monastic orders and practices which seem to be proliferating in Agamben's later work: do these, in their scepticism with regard to

legal property and exceptionalism with respect to the legal and spatial order of the ruling state, exhibit certain traits which might more readily be identified in the ancient Cynic? The unique perspective which Mosciatti's essay opens up on Agamben's work reveals it in a fascinating new light.

Seizing with both hands the burning question of what 'third thing' might issue from the soon to be redundant machines of Western thought, **Ido Govrin** addresses the question of Agamben's attitude towards a putative moment before and after the regime of oppositions or bi-polar devices that define the West.

In *The Signature of All Things*, which forms the focus of Govrin's reading, this 'before' and 'after' take the name of Eden or Paradise. What are we to say of this place? What does Agamben say of it? This amounts to the question of the excluded middle or 'third', and it is perhaps the greatest unresolved enigma of Agamben's thought as a whole: if we are not to adopt a negative theological or deconstructive approach to this moment, then what *can* we say of it?

How are we to understand the testing question of *chronology* in Agamben's genealogies? Govrin's thrilling text carries us some way towards an answer to these questions, not least by allowing us to find a way in which to pose them. It does this in part by examining the non-knowledge of Eden in contrast to the Fall from paradise, after man's tasting the fruit of the forbidden tree, which led him ever after to thirst unsatisfied after knowledge: to become, in other words, Oedipus, or a philosopher.

**Damiano Sacco's** text gives us another hint as to this *tertium datur*, or at least lets us address the question of how far we might go in a very different direction, one which nevertheless allows us to approach the same mysterious centre: effectively this centre is that of the 'real', and in particular at stake here is the question of whether natural science can allow us to speak of it.

This real, for Agamben, perhaps most frequently takes the name of 'potentiality', and his task, as it was Heidegger's and, in another vocabulary, Deleuze's, is to think this potentiality in a way that is at least somewhat removed from the traditional metaphysical opposition of potential and actual, or at least from the traditional *operation* of that opposition. If real is not simply the actuality that is present to us, if being is not simply the same as presence, then how are we to think those potentials which somehow belong to things without being identical to their current, actualised, individuated form? How are we, in other words, to think anew this very particular form of 'absence', which seems to abscond or withdraw from actual entities, without going so far as to vanish altogether.

To begin to make sense of this potential real, Sacco's text presents us with an exceptional reading – informed not only by philosophy but also by physics itself – of Agamben's recently translated book, *What is Real?*, to some extent a treatise on the notion of (ontological) withdrawal, in the form of a remarkable and dramatic meditation on the (ontic) disappearance of the physicist Ettore Majorana in Naples

in 1938. The text provides us with a new way to speak of and think the notion of potentiality in light of the probabilistic interpretation of quantum physics, thus constituting an intriguing engagement between philosophy and natural science.

Sacco investigates the extent to which Agamben's gesture may be seen to incorporate the history of physics into the history of philosophy and whether his interpretation of this history – together with its appropriation of natural science – may be aligned with Heidegger's conception of both history and the relation between philosophy and science. Sacco interprets this hypothetical proximity in terms of the Heideggerian thinking of being as presence (in pre-modern times beginning with Greek Antiquity) and eventually as object (in modern philosophy).

The question is whether and to what extent quantum mechanics of itself implies a different sense of being when compared to classical mechanics, and therefore the extent to which science, even if it might not strictly be said to 'think', would nevertheless impart a certain impetus to thinking, and a novel one at that.

Sacco makes an intriguing connection between the ineffability of the unobserved 'system' on the quantum mechanical picture and the notion of 'ground' (in the sense of the metaphysical vision of the real or being) that Agamben himself proposes, as a ground that is presupposed retrospectively by a metaphysical system of oppositions: for instance, the opposition of private and public life positing private life (*zōē*) as the very foundation of the opposition itself, a notion of grounding that Agamben does not endorse but whose mechanism he wishes to examine with the intention of demonstrating the desuetude of all such machines. And this, once again, with a view to questioning whether a *third* form of life may be conceived, even beyond the 'bare life' that results – or rather universalises itself – *once* this machine has run out of fuel.

It is to this critique of presuppositional grounding that Sacco refers when, on his account, and in what seems to be a departure from Heidegger, Agamben sees the reversal of the hierarchy between potentiality and actuality, – or more precisely the rethinking of the notion of 'presence' which is at play in each of them – which quantum physics testifies to, as not only failing to reverse the modern, epistemological inflection of the history of being in which entities are reduced to representable objects standing before a subject, but, in truth, allowing 'reality' to be all the more 'governed' by something *like* a subject, even if it no longer stands opposed to an object but now dwells immanently within it (as the external disciplinarian gives way to an internalised habit of self-control, a transformation which Iwona Janicka speaks about later in this issue in a reading of Elettra Stimilli).

This remarkably wide-ranging essay then goes so far as to broach the topic that *What is Real?* was always likely to inspire us to pursue, and that is the relation between the linguistic and the material real, together with the question of whether a certain linguistic idealism dwells at the heart of Agamben's work.

Our selection of texts on Agamben concludes with a powerful meditation on the overall gesture of his thought according to the metaphor, which Agamben himself is not reluctant to deploy, of shipwreck or foundering, by **Angela Arsenà**.

Between the dialectical identity of identity with self and difference from self, and the ontological difference that refuses sublation, stands Agamben, on a certain limit between absolute knowledge and the unknowable negativity of its putative other. To know an entity, even the whole universe, thought must grasp both that entity and its beyond, perched precisely on the limit of knowability. Arsenà describes this limit as the place where Agamben has chosen to set up his home. The limit of knowability is also the limit of communicability, and thus the philosopher's territory is not simply language and the speakable but somewhere in between the speakable and the ineffable, the space of the *potential* to say, the pregnancy of the event of a language as yet merely prefigured on the lips.

To return to this site of the potentiality both to speak and to be, it is necessary for the subject who speaks, and the language which is spoken, to 'founder', which also means somehow to sink beneath the surface, into the depths, to fathom and get to the bottom of just what they are, of just what happens at that remarkable moment when man becomes man precisely by beginning to speak: the event of language, or speech, which is really the name of being, and the origin of thought, if thought and being are the same.

In this maelstrom, language struggles with the violence of the nameless and irrational (only marginally worse, as Derrida warned us, than the violence of a language that would absolutise itself and suffocate every thing unlucky enough to find itself ensnared in its mesh), and Agamben is drawn — under the gentle coaxing of Arsenà's language — into the closest proximity with Pasolini and his poetry.

What becomes of the relation between philosophy and poetry in this whirlpool of ideas, images, and words — this siren's song to which both philosophy and poetry might be attuned, each in their own way?

### *On Applause: Davide Tarizzo*

While we are familiar with Žižek's oft-cited account of canned laughter and the vicarious satisfactions which it brings, we have yet to read an analogous account of *applause* and the relation that exists between the audience, listener or viewer and that curious act of approbation, approval or assent. Certainly nothing as subtle and far-reaching as the one that **Davide Tarizzo** offers us in his text, 'Applause: The Empire of Assent'. In the end, this apparently frivolous example comes to involve us in a far-reaching consideration of the political vagaries of the twentieth century, if not the entirety of our history, and the Society of the Spectacle.

Applause is something which today, like canned laughter, submerges us in an anonymous subjectivity, an 'anyone', which seems undecidably neither active nor passive, and this gives Tarizzo his definition of 'spectacle', after and beyond Guy Debord: 'a spectacle is anything that we applaud'. But this spectacle is precisely

the space in which all subjects are caught up, so effectively are we interpellated into this spectacle — coordinated, positioned — precisely by the applause itself. The spectacle laughs at itself in canned laughter, and in this case, it seems that when we are caught up in this somehow pre-planned applause, the spectacle itself is applauding, lauding itself.

But things are not all bad, because the manner in which we relate to others, to the Other, in the experience of somehow being entwined in the (society of the) spectacle by means of applause, gives us, with only a minor adjustment, a new way to think of our political being.

Applause is therefore ultimately a way in to the question of totalitarianism and its beyond, for in this type of regime, we find ourselves playing a game of enforced assent which will always already have begun and with respect to which there is no real way to dissent, where — as in a rally before the dictator — others will always applaud for us and we are compelled either to join them or simply to be left behind, expelled from the city, literally enough. But this allows us to ask whether applause and assent can be rethought in a progressive way, such that the experience of being in an inanely clamorous crowd (which so swiftly can become a baying mob) ceases to be oppressive and fascistic and achieves a certain solidarity, in a kind of ‘fused group’ in Sartre’s sense, but without the fusion of the fascicle.

In this charming and fleet-footed account, the apparent triviality of the gesture of putting one’s hands together is shown to be deceptive, or as Tarizzo puts it, if it is merely a ‘detail’, then this is where the good God after all resides.

## Reviews

Our Review section demonstrates in each case the intense devotion to the real that is one of the most striking characteristics of Italian thought, an intimate attention to the details of our historical moment, in its culture and in its politics.

The first two reviews focus on the nature of contemporary biopolitics and in particular its historical origin, or the historical matrices which render it intelligible. The first in particular sheds new light on the specifically twentieth century notion of totalitarianism, thus complementing and expanding upon the account provided by Tarizzo.

**Rita Fulco** provides us with an exceptionally illuminating reading of an early work of **Roberto Esposito**’s, from 1988 but recently reissued and translated, *The Origin of the Political*, on Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil. The review attempts to demonstrate how the book is at once in a certain sense ‘marginal’ to Esposito’s oeuvre and yet at the same time central to it.

Esposito’s text addresses the manner in which the relation between politics and war, the *polis* and the *polemos* from which it originates (historically speaking in the form of the war waged by the Greeks against Troy), is understood by Arendt and Weil respectively, and the light this sheds on the depths to which the roots of

twentieth century totalitarianism and thanatopolitics reach down. To what extent does this violent primal scene continue to resonate and indeed to what extent does this violence continue to darken the heart of the political throughout its historical unfolding, right up to the outermost limit of violence that the biopolitics of the twentieth century exhibited?

For Arendt, the political is not irremediably tainted and the roots of contemporary violence do not extend quite so deeply into the past, while for Weil the opposite is the case. Thus the latter places less faith in politics, and advises us not to expect from it any lasting solutions to the terrible problems which have manifested themselves in the arena of the *polis* in her – and our – century. Power over life was always *destined* to turn into a power that destroys life.

And yet, *thought*, as Arendt readily agrees, must be mobilised in the struggle against evil, and there is a *loving* thought which wars against war itself, but in a war by means other than aggression and hatred. This ability to think lovingly so as to oppose the violence of war, death, and the thanatopolitics of totalitarianism, is what Arendt came to seek at the very end of her life.

According to Fulco, this thought is the margin in which Esposito reads the real relevance of Arendt and Weil for his project, a thought which thinks the relation between, on the one hand, politics and the potential for a genuine *community* which it would rightly pursue, and, on the other hand, polemics or the war which political power has come violently to wage on the living bodies of its own citizens.

The Arendtian-Weilian thought helped Esposito early on to find the path along which he would later discover the key to the transformation of biopolitics into thanatopolitics and – with any luck – back again, into a new and affirmative biopolitics: the very path along which his own thought unfolds from beginning to end.

**Iwona Janicka's** review of **Elettra Stimilli's** *The Debt of the Living: Asceticism and Capitalism* addresses the possibility of understanding our contemporary era by means of the concept of debt, in light of the hypothesis that, in the era of globalisation, power takes the form of economy (or a kind of governmental administration that is given the Greek name of '*oikonomia*') and hence, in order to understand and overcome it, a genealogical investigation of the notion of 'economy' is demanded of us.

By means of a history of the notion of *asceticism* as a way of life, inherent to human nature itself, Stimilli demonstrates that the economic discourse which universalises debt is not originally centred around the notion of *property* (and by extension a certain *poiesis*) but rather issues from a discourse concerning the *praxis* of a certain form of reflexive work upon one's self that originally, in early Christianity, and indeed in Christ himself, took the form of abstinence and refraining from appropriation and the owning of property in the sense of 'external effects'. Thus the matrix which renders intelligible the notion of 'self-



entrepreneurship', the investment in one's self – or perhaps more precisely, the ability to capitalise upon an activity that is praxical rather than poietic, or even further an activity without an end (beyond its own perpetuation, its own potentiation), a gesture that does not find its end and perfection in any *actuality* – that, according to Stimilli, stands at the heart of today's economy (often in the form of 'human capital' or a deployment of the biological life of the human), appears first in the practice of early Christian asceticism.

So begins a consideration of the notion of contemporary capitalism as a new form of religion, or at least religiosity, subtly differentiated from Weber's notion of a Protestant work ethic as the spirit of capitalism by the fact that it replaces his original notion of a labour that *refrains* from enjoyment with a compulsion to enjoy and consume that it postulates as standing at the heart of the production of indebtedness and the accumulation of profit. Following in Foucault's footsteps, Stimilli demonstrates a certain coincidence between neoliberal governmental forms of power and the 'self-control' that an 'indebted ascetic' practises upon themselves, as if the ascetic were already doing power's work for it.

Janicka concludes the review with some penetrating questions as to whether debt should constitute the only framework in which we might attempt to make sense of our world, and in particular she wonders whether there might be another form of self-improvement, a certain disciplined abstemiousness which is *not* simply a gesture of witting or unwitting collusion with the powers that be.

The issue concludes with **Arthur Willemse's** review of **Roberto Calasso's**, *The Unnamable Present*, which, in a rich and allusive manner, identifies two threads at work in the author's text: the relative and the absolute, or perhaps two forms of infinity, a bad or false infinite and a true one. That is to say, the infinite interpretability of phenomena, in which no single, irrelative, absolute meaning is ever settled upon, and we are left in the end only with 'analogies'; and, on the other hand, a single, universal, immovable reference point, towards which all processes would tend. Citing the French philosopher, Quentin Meillassoux, Willemse aligns this opposition with the distinction between scepticism and dogmatism, whilst underlining Meillassoux's suggestion that scepticism seems to contain an inherent tendency towards an excessive moment in which it turns into its opposite, and falls into the arms of 'fanaticism'.

Thus, rightly, Willemse identifies these two tendencies as in a certain sense standing in need of sublation or some form of synthesis so as to avoid this strange quasi-dialectical movement in which one extreme, left on its own, is transformed into its opposite.

This synthesis is shown to take place in the following way: Calasso holds on to the (dying) system of analogy at the level of culture, but at the level of political theology – which is at least to say, in this case, the notion of a *political* utopia as derived from the *theological* notion of messianism, the messiah expectantly awaited

and hoped for — he is prepared if not to accept the absolute then at least to search for a way in which to unite analogy with the absolute itself.

This all takes place in the context of a movement on the level of the manifest image and the latent image, to use terms from the American philosopher, Wilfred Sellars; from a discrete atomic interpretation of quantum reality — harking back to Agamben's *What is Real?* — to a vision of the real as a continuum or wave. Culturally, this is replicated in the transition from, on the one hand, a culture of individuated signs, elements, and texts which are possessed of a certain stable identity even if they stand in intertextual relations of analogy or reference; to, on the other hand, the 'virtual reality' of a non-linguistic experience, a continuum without discretion, a flurry of marks passing before our eyes and beneath the tips of our fingers so rapidly that they blend into one and lose their sense.

Michael Lewis  
Northumberland  
June 2019