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Contents

Articles

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

Pier Aldo Rovatti & Andrea Muni, 'Deconstructing the Capital Letters. Weak Thought, Italian Theory, and Politics. A Conversation with Pier Aldo Rovatti'

Carlo Sini, 'Enzo Paci: dall'esistenzialismo alle cose stesse'

Carlo Sini, 'Enzo Paci: From Existentialism to the Things Themselves'

Forgotten Traditions in Italian Thought: Benedetto Croce & Norberto Bobbio

Franco Manni, 'The Difference between Liberalism and Democracy: A Forgotten Italian Tradition'

The Elusive Third: Giorgio Agamben

Roberto Mosciatti, 'Franciscan Cynicism: *Bare Life* as a Transformative Cosmopolitics'

Ido Govrin, 'Paradisiacal Knowledge (or, Falling from the Epistemological Constellation)'

Damiano Sacco, 'Majorana's Sacrifice: On Agamben's *What is Real?*'

Angela Arsena, 'Agamben, or, the Philosophy of Shipwrecking Waves'

On Applause: Davide Tarizzo

Davide Tarizzo, 'Applause: The Empire of Assent'

Reviews

Rita Fulco, Review of Roberto Esposito, *The Origin of the Political: Hannah Arendt or Simone Weil?*

Iwona Janicka, Review of Elettra Stimilli, *The Debt of the Living: Asceticism and Capitalism*

Arthur Willemse, Review of Roberto Calasso, *The Unnamable Present*

Biographies

Links

Call for Papers

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Address for Correspondence
Journal of Italian Philosophy
Philosophical Studies
University of Newcastle upon Tyne
Tyne and Wear
NE1 7RU
United Kingdom

E-mail: michael.lewis@newcastle.ac.uk

Website: <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/italianphilosophy/>

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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

Deconstructing the Capital Letters. Weak Thought, Italian Theory, and Politics. A Conversation with Pier Aldo Rovatti

Interview by Andrea Muni¹

Translated by Julia Corsunov

This conversation focuses on the social and political role of the philosopher today. Pier Aldo Rovatti discusses the growing philosophical movement named ‘Italian Theory’ while revisiting his own recent intellectual path. The Italian philosopher retraces the cultural experience of ‘Weak thought’ (*Pensiero debole*), of which he was one of the two promoters, and underlines the intellectual and political fight against all of the so-called universal truths (and ideological violence) inspired by this philosophical trend at the beginning of the Eighties. The interview ends with a discussion about the dawning perspectives of political-philosophical action in the post-modern age.

Italian theory: an enigmatic subject. Is it the first step of a new, revitalising chapter in Italian philosophy and philosophy worldwide? Is it a fresh ‘philosophical trend’ able to lend philosophy and political commitment a real contact with the primary human and social needs of everyday life? Or is it just a further, dry philosophy-marketing operation based on a strange mixture of old-fashioned Marxist militancy and rhetorical academic exercises?

Although I kept a certain distance from it, I was interested in this newborn ‘cultural phenomenon’. I particularly share the idea that seems to convey the following message: ‘In Italy we think too, and we do it in a way which is capable of producing effects. In my opinion there is no such thing as a national peculiarity of Italian thought, although it may be true that in Italy there is, and always has been, a unique and independent reaction to some significant French authors, simplistically labelled as ‘Post-structuralists’. Antonio Negri himself draws upon the ideas of two key post-structuralist authors (Foucault and Deleuze), and Roberto Esposito also works on French authors (Bataille, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze himself), recasting their conceptual tools in an original fashion. Moreover, it is no accident that many leading

¹ A version of this interview was published in *Lo Sguardo – Rivista di filosofia* 15 (2014) (II) – *La Differenza Italiana* Interviste 2, pp. 25–31 (ISSN 2036-6558). The authors have slightly modified the original text on the occasion of this translation.

French Foucauldian authors consider Italy to be a privileged place for the exchange of views, dialogues, and critical developments. I think this is due to the fact that here, more than elsewhere, we have managed to avoid those easy labels and stereotypes that usually tone down the radical nature of Foucault's approach.

What I do not sympathise with is the historiographical attempt to conceive the whole Italian philosophy as an *essentially* political and conflictual experience, whose noble origins would be rooted even in pre-modern age.

In his book, Italian theory. Dall'operaismo alla biopolitica [Italian Theory: From Workerism to Biopolitics] Dario Gentili reconstructs the genealogy of this new and developing philosophical trend. He singles out many 'politically committed' [impegnati] Italian intellectuals of the second half of the 20th century and associates them with this enigmatic newborn philosophical entity we call Italian Theory. The (special) focus on politics (and sometimes even on militant struggle) is the key-element which seems to link the diverse positions of these different authors together. What do you think about the way in which the notions of politics and political commitment are used not only in Gentili's book but also in everyday language? Do you find it appropriate?

This way of posing the question disorients me. Do you allow me to call on some Socratic spirit and confess to you that when I hear the word 'politics' I can't completely figure out what we are talking about? Every moment of our everyday practices contains a peculiar degree of *politics*. Every second and every gesture of our everyday life is political, although not necessarily ideological: there is a significantly *political* way of teaching, educating our children, living, and even of being *friends*.

When we talk about 'politics', we generally refer to its first, 'Grand', and most obvious meaning, and we maybe forget its other, microphysical, everyday sense. I'm not saying that I have no interest in the first, 'grand' meaning of politics; on the contrary. But I fear that the main focus of *Italian Theory* could be limited to Politics with a capital 'P' (*à la* Negri). It seems that the basic 'political' question, which Italian Theory (*à la* Negri) addresses to people is 'so, you, are you a leftist or not?' This reminds me of a film about Enrico Berlinguer, by Walter Veltroni, that perplexed me: it was all focused on the empathic and emotional aspects of being a leftist, whereas a genuinely political analysis should not avoid a more historical-critical approach.

Nowadays, if we desire to think anew the traditional forms of political struggle, we should connect the concept of struggle with the concept of game, in order to face the most unpleasant and ignored aspects of our social reality. This approach ensures a full immersion in the everyday microphysical relations of power that we're involved with. This is the *other side* of politics, its most invisible side, the one we refuse to face. We so often talk about 'conflict'... but, actually, we are totally unprepared for conflicts,

we have never been trained for them, and even when they happen among us and our loved ones, within our walls, we don't know how to deal with them. We should pay more attention to the capillary action of the *politics of truth* in our daily lives, in so far as it is what brings us to reproduce, in the microscopic dimension, that ideological battle of 'Grand' Politics by which we violently prove each other wrong by arguing, 'I'm telling the truth' because 'I know it', 'because I know what is good'.

Weakening the truth means fighting against the inner theoretical violence of the hegemonic *policy of truth*. This is an ethical-political task we should pursue and experience in our daily habits, which are silently getting more petty-bourgeois before our very eyes day by day...

In my view, the concepts of *game* and *play* are fundamental ethical-political tools. They are strategic operators [*operatori strategici*] which can enable us to reinvent a new struggle and a new ethics capable of representing a real alternative to the capitalist discourse. The concept of game allows us to think about politics in a different perspective, and points us towards a whole range of philosophers who have never compromised with any pre-established ideology: Lacan, Foucault, Bataille, and especially Nietzsche.

Yes, I think that, nowadays, Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as Marx, is the indispensable author for every thought that claims to be *political*. This is because to constantly call into question the historicity and political character [*politicità*] of those truths (apparently a-historical) which dominate our society is a fundamental element of political struggle, and not a marginal one. It is not a matter of replacing *bad* absolute truths with a *good* absolute one: it is a matter of changing the way we play at the game of truth. To do so, a struggle is necessary as well, a struggle which is essentially political, and probably more genuinely political than any other.

The concept of game can open up a space of freedom, both ironic and painful, anything but defeatist or pacified, in which to practise the critical (or self-critical) experience of the historicisation of every truth's value: both those of our 'political enemies' and our own. I would say then that, if this newborn Italian Theory does not want to become part and parcel of the structure it wants to fight, it should constantly, critically (and self-critically) address the question of the subject by examining its historicity and political character [*politicità*]. It is necessary to never stop questioning the sense of subjectivity, especially when the effects of this operation take us far from our fixed theoretical-ideological ideas. Subjectivity, as well as truth and the game, is a political issue.

In this regard, although I don't like to quote myself at all, I have to mention the critical experience of *weak thought*. I think that, despite the disapproval, the misunderstandings, and the impasses it has encountered, this experience is still an important and valuable critical tool available for Italian thought.

As the co-editor of the famous anthology Weak Thought [Il pensiero debole]² and as the director of the established philosophical journal aut aut, you have been accused of having become (since the early eighties) impolitical, disengaged, and of adopting an excessively sceptical and understated style (too much concerned with the problems of everyday life). This is what can be read in Gentili's book and in Negri's pamphlet The Italian Difference.³ In the latter, weak thought is described as 'the most cowardly moment of the 20th century's political decline'. Besides these accusations, you have also been called a 'relativist' and a 'nihilist' by a more traditional and moralistic critique. I don't want you to respond to these accusations once again; instead I would like you to explain to us the real stake of your weak thought. Moreover, it would be interesting to understand the evolution, over the last thirty years, of your own way to weak thought, and to discover what are the main differences between your interpretation and Gianni Vattimo's.

I think that besides important philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben, Umberto Eco or Roberto Esposito, *weak thought* has been the only real, international 'movement of ideas' in Italy *in the last thirty years*. I don't know whether Gianni Vattimo attributes the same importance that I do to the concept of play, thinking rather that *weak thought* should play a key, emancipatory role in society in order to create a new cultural *koinè*. I agree with him as to the fact that weak thought is emancipatory; however we have to carefully analyse what 'emancipatory' means.

Ever since the sixties, I have always considered the notion of subject and subjectivity as a question essentially political. In the seventies, *aut aut* was considered a 'red journal', close to the post-operaist movement. Negri himself wrote on *aut aut*, criticising *Krisis* by Massimo Cacciari and sympathising with my positions on the question of radical needs (a militant issue, proposed by Enzo Paci in the early sixties and which I found it important to keep developing). Toni Negri – this is the first time I am telling this story publicly and with the right dose of humour – after my turn towards *weak thought*, sent me a telegram from the prison of Rebibbia, defining me as a 'traitor to the proletariat'. I don't find it difficult to believe that my old friend Toni has always laughed at 'weak thought', because his philosophical style is completely different: he prefers a 'strong' thought and believes that criticism should never become self-criticism. But in this way, he, perhaps, even ends up indirectly reinforcing that *discourse of the master* against which he imagines himself to be fighting. *Weak thought*, in contrast, denounces the *theoretical* violence, the political and practical repercussions from the micro to the macro, justified by that sharp political weapon

² Translated as Gianni Vattimo & Pier Aldo Rovatti (eds.), *Weak Thought*. Trans. Peter Carravetta. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012. – ed.

³ Translated as Antonio Negri, 'The Italian Difference' in Lorenzo Chiesa & Alberto Toscano (eds.), *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*. Melbourne: re.press, 2009. – ed.

which is Truth, it doesn't matter what truth, be it the objective, moral, scientific, utilitarian, revolutionary or counter-revolutionary truth. *Weak thought* is a way to fight against (first of all against oneself) the implicit violence and flattery of all truths that present themselves as absolute. *Weak thought*, as an ethical-political exercise, opposes every ideology. Nowadays everybody claims to be anti-ideological, but a self-certification is not enough: in order to be anti-ideological, in fact, one must question, demolish and criticise the certainties one has. This is the fundamental task, and the ethical-political struggle of *weak thought*: deconstructing the certainties (even our own) and the capital letters (in philosophy as much as in politics).

Now you may ask what gives me the right to take such an *outsider's* position. Although I have never belonged to any party, I have sympathised with the *Manifesto* group and with other leftist movements. Yet I didn't tolerate either the Gramscian position of an intellectual in some way committed to the party, nor the pseudo-Husserlian image of the philosopher seen as the 'servant of mankind'. If *mankind* is conceived as a universalistic category, if it is written with one of those capital letters which entails a peculiar ideological value, then I have no problem telling you that it is not something I would like to 'serve', but rather to face critically. Nor do I see the intellectual as a moral hero or heroine, who speaks out against society, nor as a servant (or counsellor) offering their knowledge to mighty politicians. On the contrary, when I think about the philosopher, I see an individual who is humbly committed to an everyday self-transformation that is intended as an exercise on themselves that exposes them to others. An exercise whose political and philosophical repercussions should be – if I am allowed to use such a word – *incidental*.

In my own modest way, I identify my political commitment with the experience of *aut aut*, of which I have been the editor-in-chief since 1976: *aut aut* proposes a precise 'politics of philosophy' [*politica della filosofia*], critical and plural, 'of contestation' [*di battaglia*], which has never sheltered behind or been beholden to any ideology.

What has *aut aut* been? Was it a post-workerist journal? Maybe, maybe not, certainly it has changed...Why should things never change? Of course, it takes a long time and a great effort to analyse forty years of the political and cultural work proposed by *aut aut*; it is easier to dumb down an entire life-long critical activity, labelling it as 'impolitical' [*impolitico*]. I don't make a big fuss about it.

There is another point somehow related to this: the delicate issue of the public and media exposure of the so called 'intellectual'. Toni Negri, from the more militant side of Italian Theory, mostly rejects media exposure, but is at the same time still engaged with political demonstrations that could create a new political subject. Roberto Esposito, by contrast, from the deconstructivist side, is more open to media exposure, although he clearly states, for instance in his introduction to Bios, that he doesn't want

his 'affirmative biopolitics' to become a political manifesto. Is there an alternative or a mediation between these two positions? What 'subject', collective or individual, should be addressed? How can a so-called 'philosopher' be critical, not only towards society, but also towards himself, nowadays? Isn't it true, as Marx pointed out, that the intellectual himself is in some way nothing but a superstructural effect of that society he would like to judge and criticise? Should we include the 'I' for 'Intellectual', along with the 'P' for 'Politics' and 'T' for 'Truth', in the list of capital letters we should deconstruct?

Along with Esposito and contrary to Negri, during the eighties, I realised that media exposure was crucial. I am aware of the fact that we don't anymore live in the age of messages in bottles, so it's no good keeping on directing our political/cultural commitment solely towards 'comrades'. I therefore agreed to expose myself to the media, although the media exposure has swallowed many intellectuals and friends of mine, such as Umberto Galimberti (in the past) and could do the same even to my good friend Massimo Recalcati (in the present). The great trap consists in flattering the intellectuals, attributing to them the role of moral compasses in our society. Honestly, I think the exposure is important and we have to put up with the theatricality of philosophy.

My *daimon* sometimes tells me: 'stop it, you are only talking like that because, you know, you didn't pass muster, you just haven't been successful enough, you didn't achieve the intellectual authority to be the host of a chat show'... It may be, I don't know. The issue of visibility shouldn't be trivialised or even demonised *a priori*, especially in Italy since Berlusconi and private television channels have spread to the pseudo-intellectual world. Italian television has been an important political propaganda tool for a long time. But today Italy is also the country of big festivals dedicated to philosophy... this visibility thing is really complicated. It is not the time of the 'double society' [*doppia società*] any more (the society of which Alberto Asor Rosa used to speak).⁴ Our society is the *crafted* society of the *anthropological mutation* that Pasolini denounced. We have to reinvent new battles and strategies of thought starting from here. For example, my semi-journalistic work at the little, local press association *Il Piccolo* has been very important for me for the last few years, more than

⁴ The reference is to the book *Le due società. Ipotesi sulla crisi italiana* (Einaudi, 1977) by the renowned Italianist (and then *Workerist*) Alberto Asor Rosa. In this collection of essays, the author identified in the fracture and tension between *two societies* one of the main reasons for the crisis affecting Italy in the late Seventies. The intellectual placed, on the one hand, the 'guaranteed', "*i garantiti*", namely all of those people with a permanent job, and on the other, the social workers "*operai sociali*", the new proletariat produced by the collapse of a Keynesian industrial model and the rise of more precarious forms of work.

my long relationship with the cultural section of *La Repubblica*. In this work, on which in addition my latest books are based, I found a tolerable dimension of visibility. I have been living this experience as a precious exercise, through which I could practise the critical (and self-critical) activity I dedicated my intellectual life to, far away from any moral stance and the desire to be a prophet (or a failed politician).

Enzo Paci: dall'esistenzialismo alle cose stesse

Carlo Sini¹

Il cammino filosofico di Paci ha notoriamente attraversato tre grandi fasi: l'esistenzialismo, il relazionismo e infine la rinascita della fenomenologia di Husserl dopo l'esistenzialismo e la sua relazione col marxismo.

Da giovanissimo Paci era stato uno dei protagonisti della diffusione dell'esistenzialismo in Italia. Già nelle conclusioni della sua tesi di laurea (*Il significato del 'Parmenide' nella filosofia di Platone*), discussa a Milano nel novembre del 1934 con Antonio Banfi e Luigi Castiglioni, Paci invitava a una meditazione sui problemi del nulla e del non essere, sulla crisi, diceva, che invade la filosofia europea e sulla necessità di attraversare questa crisi di civiltà e di vita senza chiudere gli occhi, anzi lasciandosene investire anche al fine di trasformarla. Nel 1940, con *Pensiero, esistenza e valore*, e nel 1943 con *L'esistenzialismo*, Paci è sulle barricate della filosofia dell'esistenza con Abbagnano e Pareyson. Nel 1950 la sua filosofia esistenzialistica culmina nel libro *Il nulla e il problema dell'uomo*, uno dei suoi capolavori, e trova grande diffusione nella creazione della rivista "Aut Aut", che già nel nome si richiama palesemente a Kierkegaard.

Il riferimento a Kierkegaard è il primo punto che è necessario mettere debitamente in chiaro per intendere, credo, l'intero cammino speculativo di Paci, anche al di là del suo riferimento storico alla scuola degli esistenzialisti. Paci infatti fece proprio il motto di Kierkegaard "accentuare l'esistenza" e in sostanza gli restò fedele sino alla fine. Accentuare l'esistenza significa tenerla sempre presente, non cancellarla dallo sguardo e non sminuirne l'importanza; ma significa altresì non ignorarne o lasciare nel silenzio il paradosso. L'esistenza nomina il fatto insormontabile per cui ognuno è esistente nella singolarità irripetibile della sua situazione materiale e morale, sicché ogni sguardo esterno sul mondo e sulla esistenza medesima è di fatto impossibile: il filosofo esistenzialista, e con lui ogni essere umano, è così posto in questione dalla questione stessa che egli solleva: l'esistenza, una questione irrisolvibile.

Di questo smacco Paci fece il tema centrale dello sviluppo relazionistico del suo pensiero, incentrato sul grande problema del tempo. Lo schematismo kantiano, la concezione organicistica degli spessori temporali in Alfred North Whitehead, ma anche Proust, Joyce e lo Eliot della *Terra desolata* furono i luoghi di una riflessione straordinaria il cui punto essenziale concerneva la relazione fra tempo e consumo: l'esistenza è iscritta nella struttura della

¹ Many thanks to Carlo Sini for composing this text, originally for *The Bloomsbury Italian Philosophy Reader* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), and for allowing us to publish it here, along with its translation.

irreversibilità temporale (*Il significato dell'irreversibile*, in *Tempo e relazione*, 1954). Qui rivive il paradosso esistenzialistico in un luogo di altissima meditazione. Ogni riflessione sul tempo è nel tempo, osservava Paci, ma questo significa anche che essa è contrassegnata dalla esperienza del ritmo, come ha inteso Whitehead. Proprio il ritmo testimonia che in ogni esperienza sono in gioco sia il riconoscimento e la memoria ("Eccolo di nuovo", diceva Whitehead), sia la perdita irrecuperabile, poiché ciò che ritorna è insieme il segno di un oblio: ciò che ritorna non ritorna, come indica il suo essere appunto "nuovo", mai visto prima, e nel contempo impossibile da trattenere.

Questo complesso cammino tocca un punto fondamentale che caratterizza tutto l'itinerario di pensiero di Paci, cioè il tema della possibilità in opposizione alla necessità. Quindi la recisa opposizione a tutte quelle filosofie o concezioni del mondo che pongono a base della verità l'essere, l'ontologia, la metafisica, la rivelazione assoluta, l'ordine geometrico, la legge matematica. Questa opposizione tenace alla riduzione della verità a sintassi logica o a deduzione metafisica troverà proprio in Husserl il suo momento di massimo sviluppo; sin d'ora si delinea però quella visione della verità che è appunto propria di Paci: non la verità della vita e del mondo, espressa in formule matematiche o in giudizi logici, ma la *vita della verità*. La verità infatti non è una cosa o il contenuto di un pensiero, ma è l'evento stesso della esistenza, il cui carattere è la sua irresolubilità, intesa come apertura sempre reiterata alla possibilità di essere. Quindi la verità, non come un fatto formale, ma come la domanda di senso dell'esistenza umana; una domanda che non può mai essere definitiva nella sua formulazione e nella sua risposta, perché ciò equivarrebbe appunto alla negazione della vita e alla condizione intrascendibile della morte.

Questo insieme di problemi fece da ponte al grande progetto della ripresa della fenomenologia husserliana dopo l'esistenzialismo di Heidegger. In un appunto dell'agosto del 1958 Paci scrive: «La fenomenologia è visione della verità, ma la verità è infinita. [...] Posto tra due infinità, l'esistenzialismo tende a spezzare la sintesi relazionale tra natura e verità, tra esistenza e idea, tra sensibilità ed essenza: il relazionismo ritrova la sintesi, rifacendo da capo l'esperienza della fenomenologia e rinnovando lo schematismo kantiano. Nato dalla fenomenologia, l'esistenzialismo "positivo" riprende la fenomenologia secondo l'intenzionalità razionale. Era necessario per me ritrovare l'intenzionalità razionale nella realtà corporea e storica dell'uomo. Per questo, già nel '50 ho dovuto dire che il trascendentale è l'uomo (*Il nulla e il problema dell'uomo*). La fenomenologia è anche un modo di sentire, di vivere, e di scoprire, nella vita, la verità».

Ma ecco, nel settembre dello stesso anno, il progetto pienamente consapevole e chiaro, annotato sulle stesse pagine del *Diario fenomenologico* (1961), uno dei libri più fortunati e affascinanti di Paci: «Il mio tentativo è quello di influenzare la filosofia e la cultura italiane con la fenomenologia. La mia è una fenomenologia relazionistica che vorrebbe tener conto di tutta la storia del

pensiero fenomenologico e superare l'esistenzialismo. I punti centrali sono: il *tempo*, com'è inteso da Husserl fin dal 1904-05, e la *relazione* come appare nella *Quinta meditazione* e nella *Krisis*. Alcuni inediti di Husserl sul tempo sono una risposta a *Sein und Zeit*. Ormai non possiamo più fare a meno di questa risposta. L'esistenzialismo positivo si trasforma nella fenomenologia come relazionismo».

Iniziò allora la battaglia per la fenomenologia husserliana, che ebbe la rivista "Aut Aut" come strumento primo e la casa editrice Il Saggiatore come ampia occasione di traduzioni, ristampe, saggi individuali e collettanei; e bisogna ricordare anche la giovane casa editrice Lampugnani Nigri, nata espressamente per sostenere l'azione culturale di Paci e dei suoi allievi, cresciuti prima nella università di Pavia e poi nella università statale di Milano, sempre più numerosi, laboriosi e motivati. L'avvento della fenomenologia si diffuse in tutta Italia e durò per circa un quindicennio, coinvolgendo non soltanto la filosofia, ma l'intera cultura, dalla letteratura e dall'estetica alla architettura, alla musica, e infine alle scienze naturali e sociali, alla cibernetica e all'economia. Questo era del resto l'indirizzo profondo di "Aut Aut", in quegli anni di grande novità e audacia: far dialogare la filosofia con l'intero orizzonte dei saperi e con il mondo vivo della società e della politica. Naturalmente l'impresa portò con sé una gran quantità di reazioni, positive e negative, di prese di posizione e di polemiche. Il bilancio finale è ancora in attesa di uno sguardo storiografico adeguato e soprattutto complessivo, certamente non facile da realizzare, per la complessità e il numero molto grande dei materiali da studiare e da interpretare, a cominciare dai rapporti profondi che Paci e la scuola di Milano ebbero in quegli anni con Ricoeur, con Sartre, con Merleau-Ponty, per non dire di molti altri: rapporti per il coinvolgimento in un cammino parallelo e comune, fatto di incontri, di collaborazioni, di discussioni, di prese di distanza ecc. Un panorama che esce dai confini italiani per investire la cultura europea e anche nord americana nel suo insieme.

Il testo capitale nel quale Paci riassunse la sua interpretazione di Husserl e della rinascita della fenomenologia è *Funzione delle scienze e significato dell'uomo*, apparso nel 1963, due anni dopo la *Critica della ragione dialettica di Sartre*: in entrambe queste opere si delinea la grande svolta culturale che associa la fenomenologia al marxismo. Il libro di Paci ottenne una diffusione del tutto insolita per un severo testo di filosofia. In esso Paci riprendeva il discorso nei confronti delle scienze, facendo propria la critica al "naturalismo" di Husserl.

All'inizio del secondo capitolo ("L'oblio del mondo della vita e il significato del trascendentale") Paci scrive: «Con Galileo per Husserl la dimensione categoriale della matematica si sostituisce al mondo veramente esperito ed esperibile, al nostro mondo reale e quotidiano della *Lebenswelt*: la natura idealizzata si sovrappone alla natura intuitiva prescientifica. Ogni categoria nasce dall'ambiente, dal mondo circostante in cui tutti viviamo, dalla *Umwelt* precategoriale. Ogni categoria ha un fine che rientra nel mondo della vita e si riferisce al mondo della vita. Solo il nostro mondo vivente, nel quale vive lo

scienziato come uomo, è interrogabile nell'orizzonte aperto e infinito di ciò che in esso rimane ancora inindagato».

L'invito a tematizzare il mondo della vita e le operazioni precategoriali come il fondamento "trascendentale" di ogni categoria scientifica e mondana si pone in equilibrata antitesi sia verso il soggetto trascendentale kantiano e idealistico (un soggetto "mitologico", dice Husserl), sia verso l'ontologismo heideggeriano, che pone ente, essere e la loro differenza come il risultato di mere astrazioni intellettualistiche, ignare delle operazioni in base alle quali si sono costituite. Questa critica alla "oggettività" superstiziosa, in particolare della mentalità logicista, trova espressione emblematica nella Prefazione che Paci scrisse per la traduzione italiana di *Logica formale e trascendentale* di Husserl presso Laterza (1966): «Una logica delle forme ideali di significato, costruita come qualcosa di a sé stante, è altrettanto *nulla* filosoficamente quanto lo sono le scienze positive in generale; essa rinuncia a quella autenticità di fondo mediante cui potrebbe conseguire un'autocomprensione e un'autogiustificazione; non ha perciò alcuna norma per aiutare le scienze positive a superare la loro positività. L'elemento *non-filosofico* di questa non positività sta propriamente in ciò: che le scienze, a causa della incompienza delle loro proprie operazioni, come risultati di una intenzionalità operante che resta per loro non tematica, non sono in grado di chiarire il vero senso d'essere del loro campo e dei concetti che lo abbracciano, e perciò di dire in senso vero ed ultimo quale senso ha l'essente di cui parlano, e quali orizzonti di senso esso presuppone, orizzonti di cui le scienze non parlano, e che tuttavia partecipa alla determinazione del senso. In connessione con la dogmatica ingenuità di una logica formale che si presume autosufficiente e riposa su un'evidenza paga di sé, sta l'ingenuità di una teoria della conoscenza aggiunta dall'esterno, "sopraggiunta". [...] La vera teoria del conoscere è il chiarimento del senso "autentico" dei concetti logici e della stessa logica». Mi sembra evidente l'attualità di una simile presa di posizione, che meriterebbe di essere tuttora quanto meno discussa e valutata. Ne riprenderemo del resto tra breve il tratto relativo alla "positività" delle scienze criticato da Paci.

Tutta la questione può essere ricondotta all'inizio della Conferenza tenuta da Husserl nel maggio del 1935 a Vienna, che è, come si sa (con la Conferenza di Praga di poco successiva), uno dei principali spunti ispiratori de *La crisi delle scienze europee e la fenomenologia trascendentale*, l'ultima opera di Husserl rimasta incompiuta per la morte dell'autore. Nella edizione postuma a cura di Walter Biemel la Conferenza di Vienna compare nelle Dissertazioni. Paci ricordava sovente a lezione quell'inizio esemplare, che di fatto metteva in crisi l'atteggiamento "obiettivistico" e "naturalistico" delle scienze moderne. Husserl partiva dalla annosa questione del dualismo tra scienze della natura e scienze dello spirito: un dualismo in realtà già gravato da pregiudizi, perché non esiste e non può esistere una comparazione tra due sfere di enti reali quali sarebbero quelli della natura e quelli dello spirito. Scrive Husserl: «Soltanto la natura può essere considerata un mondo per sé concluso, soltanto le scienze naturali

possono astrarre conseguentemente da tutti gli elementi spirituali e indagare la natura puramente come tale» (p.330 della trad. it., Il Saggiatore, Milano 1961). Se un corpo precipita da una finestra, la scienza naturale può calcolarne la velocità ecc., senza interessarsi alla sua natura “sociale”, facendo astrazione cioè dal fatto che esso sia, per esempio, un corpo “umano” e che ci sia motivo di indagare sul piano delle responsabilità “sociali”, individuali, “penali” e simili. Lo scienziato dello spirito non può invece operare la medesima “astrazione” dal mondo della natura, grazie alla quale si dispieghi di fronte al suo sguardo un autonomo mondo dello spirito, parallelo a quello naturale. La spiritualità “animale”, la spiritualità delle “anime umane e animali”, dice Husserl, si fonda sulla corporeità precategoriale e materiale. Lo scienziato dello spirito non può indagare il suo oggetto altrimenti che in maniera descrittiva (e non normativa), cioè tenendo conto della natura fisica in cui i soggetti del suo studio vivono e sono vissuti. Per esempio uno storico dei Greci antichi non può non tener conto della geografia greca, dell'architettura, dell'economia ecc.

Tutto ciò conduce però a un paradosso, sul quale Paci era solito insistere. Da un lato lo studioso dello spirito, per esempio lo storico della cultura greca, ha tra i suoi fenomeni di studio la natura fisica dei Greci; «ma questa natura, scriveva Husserl, non è la natura nel senso delle scienze; è bensì ciò che per gli antichi Greci valeva come natura, quella che si apriva di fronte ai loro occhi, la realtà naturale nella dimensione del mondo della vita. Più precisamente: il mondo storico circostante dei Greci non è il mondo obiettivo nel senso delle scienze; è bensì la loro “rappresentazione del mondo”, è cioè la validità soggettiva del mondo, con tutte le realtà incluse in questa validità, tra l'altro gli dèi, i dèmoni ecc.». Ora, è evidente che la nozione di “mondo circostante” vissuto in modo “storico” (il mondo circostante così come era vissuto dagli antichi Greci ecc.) può essere oggetto di considerazione solo da parte delle scienze dello spirito. «Il nostro mondo circostante, scrive Husserl, è un formazione storica in noi e nella nostra vita storica, a esso vanno tutte le nostre preoccupazioni e i nostri sforzi e non c'è alcun motivo per cui chi tematizza lo spirito puramente come tale debba perseguire una spiegazione che vada al di là della sua sfera. In generale: considerare la natura che vale nella prospettiva del mondo della vita come un che di estraneo allo spirito e fondare le scienze dello spirito sulle scienze naturali, presumendo di renderle esatte, è un controsenso.»

Ma ora viene il punto più delicato e decisivo. In tutto questo distinguere e polemizzare sulla differenza costitutiva che separa scienze della natura e scienze dello spirito, le prime “nomotetiche”, le seconde “idiografiche”, «è stato completamente dimenticato che le scienze naturali (come tutte le scienze in generale) sono costituite da una serie di operazioni spirituali, quelle compiute dagli scienziati attraverso la loro collaborazione. Come tali esse rientrano, come tutti gli altri eventi spirituali, in un ambito che deve essere spiegato dal punto di vista delle scienze dello spirito. Non è forse un controsenso, un circolo vizioso, spiegare l'evento storico “scienza naturale” dal punto di vista delle scienze

naturali, ricorrendo alla scienza della natura o alle leggi della natura, le quali, in quanto operazione spirituale, rientrano esse stesse nel problema?»

Sulla base di questi e di altri passi della *Krisis* Paci ha più volte affrancato la fenomenologia husserliana dalle ripetute accuse (mossele anche da Heidegger) di scarsa o nessuna comprensione della originaria storicità del fenomeno reso oggetto di descrizione tematica, della storicità delle “cose stesse”. Di qui l'avvicinamento tentato da Paci tra la scienza del mondo della vita di Husserl e la scienza nuova di Vico, uno degli autori che Paci ha studiato nella sua fase giovanile (si veda *Ingen sylv* del 1949). La fenomenologia “rinata” è, a suo modo per Paci, una “scienza nuova”, conscia della sua natura temporale e storica, cioè legata a operazioni storiche concrete, vale a dire materiali ed economiche. È questo il tramite grazie al quale si pose a un certo punto per Paci l'imprescindibile necessità di un confronto tra fenomenologia e marxismo: tema al quale è dedicata la parte terza di *Funzione delle scienze e significato dell'uomo*, con riferimenti anche a Labriola e a Gramsci.

Ma per tornare alla battaglia di Paci contro le superstizioni dell'obiettivismo scientifico, ovvero del “naturalismo”, come diceva Husserl, è importante riprendere la già citata Prefazione che Paci scrisse per la traduzione di *Logica formale e trascendentale* di Husserl. Come abbiamo visto, in quel testo Paci parla di “positività” delle scienze; intende così riferirsi alla dogmatica riduzione positivista del sapere scientifico alla mera constatazione dei “fatti”: una scienza “positiva” è un sapere che ha occhi solo per i “fatti”, senza porre il problema della loro emergenza entro la storicità dell'esperire umano ed entro le condizioni trascendentali dell'atto stesso del conoscere. Una scienza di fatti produce, disse Husserl nella *Krisis*, solo “uomini di fatto”, ciechi alla intenzionalità della verità e al senso della vita sia scientifica sia prescientifica. Questo stesso rilievo critico Paci rivolse al marxismo nella sua versione politica, ispiratrice di una pretesa scienza della storia ridotta a meccanica riduzione “fattuale” del rapporto fra struttura economica e sovrastruttura culturale o spirituale. In questa battaglia contro il marxismo ufficiale Paci fu interamente concorde con Sartre: entrambi entrarono in conflitto con gli intellettuali organici del Partito Comunista italiano e francese; entrambi, negli incontri organizzati a Mosca dall'URSS in occasione delle feste per la pace, contrastarono con coraggio la banalizzazione positivista del marxismo e la sua riduzione a strumento di propaganda politica.

Il culmine di questo cammino critico fu segnato per Paci, nel 1962, dall'invito dell'Accademia Filosofica di Praga a tenere una conferenza. Dietro l'invito c'era Karel Kosik (1926-2003), che pubblicò l'anno successivo il suo libro più noto: *Dialettica del concreto*. Il cammino di Kosik conteneva affinità profonde con quello di Paci: entrambi erano critici verso il dogmatismo marxista, in favore di una rilettura “umanistica” di Marx (soprattutto del giovane Marx). Kosik vedeva nella prassi la differenza essenziale tra la vita umana e quella animale e leggeva la prassi come un tema già profondamente al centro della

filosofia idealistica tedesca da Fichte a Hegel. Questo suo hegelismo non piacque allo Stato comunista, dal quale Kosik ebbe a subire notevoli persecuzioni, ma neppure lo protesse dalle successive politiche liberali, che non gli perdonavano di essere stato un comunista, sia pure critico.

Quando Paci arrivò a Praga, il clima era assai agitato: erano in pieno svolgimento le premesse della rivoluzione della cosiddetta primavera di Praga e del comunismo dal volto umano. Paci parlò il 24 ottobre "Sul significato dell'uomo in Marx e in Husserl". Il testo della conferenza venne poi stampato sul numero 73 (1963) di "Aut Aut". Nel suo esordio Paci ricorda alcuni temi tipici del Marx dei *Manoscritti economico-filosofici*: la riduzione della forza lavoro a merce che si vende e si compra al mercato; la riduzione dell'operaio a lavoratore astratto, il cui "valore" si riduce agli effetti "oggettivi" serialmente prodotti. Questi effetti, astratti dal concreto della operazione lavorativa, vengono fatti valere come il reale concreto: la merce prende appunto il posto della vita, nella dimenticanza che le merci, come diceva Marx, sono «cristalli di lavoro umano, cristalli di sostanza sociale». Osserva Paci: «Questa cristallizzazione ignora gli individui concreti, e quindi non rende possibile una società concreta. Le *categorie astratte* della scienza economica, il cattivo uso di tale scienza, fanno sì che il valore del lavoro sia nascosto dalla merce. Per questa ragione è molto difficile analizzare la merce».

Nel contempo proprio questo scambio, questa sostituzione del fantasma della merce alla concretezza della vita del lavoro, suggerisce a Paci un riferimento audace, ma anche profondo, alla fenomenologia: anche per Husserl si trattava di "sospendere" l'ingenua fiducia del senso comune nei confronti dei fenomeni dell'esperienza quotidiana; si trattava di ravvisare, dietro le apparenze fenomeniche, la realtà vera dell'esperienza, dietro le categorie scientifiche astratte le "cose stesse". Tutto il progetto della fenomenologia (tornare alle cose stesse, dietro le apparenze e dietro l'intellettualismo scientifico, ignaro del senso vero delle sue operazioni, così come dei suoi innegabili successi) si declina per Paci in analogia col cammino di Marx. Il mero rapporto tra cose, cioè la merce e il lavoratore astratto, non è la realtà, come pensa la scienza economica, ma è il nascondimento ideologico del reale rapporto tra persone concrete; quelle persone che la scienza economica costantemente presuppone, senza mai tematizzarne il fondamento operante. Da un lato Paci intende correggere il pericolo del "naturalismo" in Marx col riferimento a Husserl, ma nel contempo, e a Praga in modo particolare, intende anche riconsiderare il cammino di Husserl alla luce di Marx.

Per esempio Paci scrive: «Come Marx rivela la realtà del lavoro vivente, così Husserl rivela la realtà del soggetto vivente e di tutte le sue operazioni. Il cattivo uso della scienza non capisce che tutte le operazioni scientifiche, come le operazioni del lavoratore in Marx, sono operazioni del soggetto concreto. [...] Il compito di Husserl è rimasto interrotto. D'altra parte egli ha posto il problema di tutte le scienze, ma non si è posto il problema dell'economia, il problema che è al

centro delle analisi di Marx in quanto il *Capitale* è una critica dell'economia. La critica dell'economia può farci vedere sotto una nuova luce il compito che Husserl si era posto con la critica di tutte le scienze e la ricerca del loro fondamento. [...] La fenomenologia non è una filosofia nel senso tradizionale. È una filosofia che non deve liberare soltanto il filosofo ma tutta l'umanità e come tale diventa *praxis*».

Il lavoro di Paci culmina nella proposta di una nuova enciclopedia del sapere, dopo l'antefatto storico dei progetti illuministici e della grande enciclopedia hegeliana: ritorno critico alla ragione in un senso fenomenologico rinnovato. Nelle *Idee per una enciclopedia fenomenologica* (1973) Paci riparte infatti da Vico e da Hegel per affrontare il tema della fondazione delle scienze, in particolare antropologia, psicologia, psicoanalisi, economia politica, scienze naturali e cibernetica: un grande percorso e un grande affresco storico.

All'inizio del cammino ("Problemi di unificazione del sapere") così Paci scrive: «La tendenza alla unificazione del sapere è sempre stata presente nella storia della cultura delle civiltà umane. I problemi che implica acquistano però un rilievo particolare nell'attuale situazione storica, una situazione che sembra imporre come inevitabile l'unificazione di tutti i popoli del pianeta Terra. In ambedue i casi, sia per l'unificazione del sapere, sia per l'unificazione dei gruppi e dei popoli, si tratta di parti che tendono ad una totalizzazione aperta e l'unificazione entra in crisi, sia nel caso che le parti si assolutizzino e vogliano ognuna per sé imporsi alle altre come un tutto, sia nel caso che la totalizzazione venga concepita come definitiva e senza articolazioni, in forma tale, cioè, da non comprendere in sé le parti costitutive come parti specifiche. Certo ogni parte contiene una potenzialità di sviluppo e una totalità implicita, così come ogni uomo ha in sé l'umanità, ma non appena la parte si pone come totalità già realizzata e conclusa, assolutizzando se stessa, il movimento di unificazione tende all'autodistruzione. Il problema dell'unificazione è per sua natura un problema dialettico, ma è la dialettica della situazione storica attuale che ci fa comprendere in modo del tutto particolare il carattere negativo e distruttivo dell'assolutizzazione di un aspetto parziale del sapere, di una data cultura, di una data civiltà. Nessuna forma parziale può assumersi il compito esclusivo dell'unificazione mentre, nello stesso tempo, ogni forma parziale può contribuire ad una totalizzazione del sapere e dell'operare guidato dal sapere, in quanto in ogni parte è potenzialmente implicita una totalità aperta, anzi una totalità infinita. Ogni parte, dunque, secondo un paradosso che ovunque si presenti ha la stessa struttura, ha in sé una totalità infinita pur essendo parte di questa totalità infinita. [...] Il tema dell'unificazione ha un carattere universale e può facilmente scadere nella genericità. Tuttavia il problema di come una parte possa contenere in sé una totalità è un problema preciso che riguarda tutte le discipline. Aforisticamente si può dire: una parte può avere in sé il tutto di cui è parte, e può essere quindi un insieme, in quanto è organizzata secondo una "essenza" e secondo una "struttura". In base a ciò che abbiamo finora osservato possiamo

dunque riconoscere il fatto assai semplice che l'unificazione del sapere è sempre in corso».

Questi pensieri dell'ultimo Paci, dai quali ci dividono quasi cinquant'anni, sono palesemente profetici, sia per quanto riguarda l'unificazione della politica e dell'economia planetarie, sia per la crescente problematicità di questo processo, destinato a sempre nuovi conflitti e niente affatto orientato a una soluzione dialetticamente unitaria. Alla fine della vita Paci apprese con estrema angoscia la rivelazione degli orrori dello stalinismo e il fallimento politico del marxismo in Russia. Davvero, scrisse allora Paci in un appunto personale, l'esistenza dell'uomo sembra iscritta in un male incoercibile. Anche l'attiva partecipazione, l'appoggio di Paci al movimento studentesco e alle sue lotte dentro e fuori dell'università si concluse sostanzialmente con una sconfitta. Negli ultimi suoi giorni Paci era per molti aspetti un isolato e un sopravvissuto. Ma la sua opera, profonda e lungimirante, continua a rivelare per noi tratti di una feconda ispirazione, così come fu vitale e imprescindibile per tutta la seconda metà del '900 italiano ed europeo.

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Enzo Paci: From Existentialism to the Things Themselves¹ Carlo Sini

Translated by Katherine Langley
with Michael Lewis

Paci's philosophical path has, notoriously, been divided into three main stages: existentialism, relationism [*relazionismo*],² and finally, the rebirth of Husserl's phenomenology in the wake of existentialism and the relationship it entered into with Marxism.

From a young age, Paci was one of the protagonists in the dissemination of existentialism in Italy. Already in the conclusions of his dissertation (*Il significato del 'Parmenide' nella filosofia di Platone [The Significance of Parmenides for Plato's Philosophy]*), examined in Milan in November 1934 by Antonio Banfi and Luigi Castiglioni, Paci called for a meditation on the problem of the nothing and non-being [*non essere*], on the crisis which, he tells us, invades European philosophy, and on the need to traverse this crisis of civilisation and life with eyes wide open, and indeed, to let ourselves explore this crisis in order to transform it. In 1940, with *Pensiero, esistenza e valore [Thought, Existence, and Value]* and in 1943 with *L'esistenzialismo [Existentialism]*, Paci manned the barricades of the philosophy of existence with Abbagnano and Pareyson. In 1950, his existentialist philosophy culminated in the book, *Il nulla e il problema dell'uomo [The Nothing and the Problem of Man]*, one of his masterpieces, which found itself widely disseminated with the creation of the journal, *aut aut [either...or]*, the name of which already clearly harks back to Kierkegaard.

The reference to Kierkegaard is the first point that I believe needs to be made clear in order to understand Paci's speculative path in its entirety, even beyond its historical reference to the school of the existentialists. In fact, Paci made his own the motto of Kierkegaard, to 'accentuate existence', and, in essence, he

¹ Thanks to Carlo Sini for allowing us to reprint here an essay composed especially for the *Bloomsbury Italian Philosophy Reader* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2019). Thanks also to Francesco Tava for securing the text and for offering many helpful suggestions as to its translation. — Ed.

² Paci himself defines this notion as follows: 'By the philosophy of relation I mean that philosophy which does not consider as creative centre of reality an Identity, a first unsurpassable cause, but which, on the contrary, thinks of reality as a relation among many elements, of which none is identical to itself and of which none is such as to have the others depend in an absolute fashion on itself' (Paci 1972a, 221). — Ed.

remained faithful to it to the end.³ Accentuating existence means keeping existence always in mind, and not blocking it from view or demeaning its importance; but the motto also means not ignoring or leaving unspoken the paradox. Existence names the insurmountable fact according to which each of us exists in the unrepeatability of their material and moral situation, which makes every external view upon the world and upon existence *de facto* impossible: the existentialist philosopher, and every human being along with them, is in this way put in question by the very question that he raises: existence, an irresolvable question.

From this imbroglio, Paci wrought the central theme of the relational [*relazionistico*] development within his thought, which centred on the immense problem of time. The Kantian schematism, the organicist conception of temporal duration in Alfred North Whitehead, but also Proust, Joyce and the Eliot of *The Waste Land* formed the site of an extraordinary reflection whose essential point concerned the relation between time and consumption: existence is inscribed in the structure of temporal irreversibility ('Il significato dell'irreversibile', in *Tempo e relazione*, 1954). Here the existentialist paradox is given new life in the midst of a most elevated meditation. Paci observed that every reflection on time is itself temporal: but this signifies, as Whitehead had insisted, that time is marked by the experience of rhythm. Rhythm testifies to the fact that in every experience both recognition and memory are at play ('There it is again' [*Eccolo di nuovo*]), as Whitehead put it⁴), but also an irrecoverable loss, because what returns is at the same time the sign of a forgetting: that which returns does not return, since it signals the fact that it is 'new', hitherto unseen and at the same time insuppressible.

This complex route touches on a fundamental point, which characterises the whole itinerary of Paci's thought, and that is the theme of possibility in opposition to necessity. Hence the firm opposition to all of those philosophies or conceptions of the world which posit being, ontology, metaphysics, absolute revelation, geometrical order, and mathematical law as the foundation of truth. This tenacious opposition to the reduction of truth to logical syntax or metaphysical deduction attains its highest development in Husserl's work; but from this moment forth, the vision of truth which is in fact Paci's own, is outlined: not the truth of life and the truth of the world, expressed in mathematical formulae or logical judgments, but the *life of truth*. In fact, the truth is not a thing [*cosa*] or the content of a thought, but the very event of existence, whose character is its irresolubility, understood as an always repeated opening to the possibility of being [*essere*]. Therefore, truth does not resemble a formal fact but is rather akin to the inquiry into the sense of

³ Cf. 'Existence can never be more sharply accentuated than here. The fraud of speculation in wanting to recollect itself out of existence is made impossible', Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 176 – Ed.

⁴ 'We are comparing objects in events whenever we can say, "There it is again". Objects are the elements in nature which can "be again"', Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Philosophy Press, 2015), p. 92 – Ed.

human existence, an inquiry which can never be definitive in its formulation or in its answer, because that would be tantamount to the negation of life and of the inescapable [*intrascendibile*] mortal condition.

This set of problems spanned the great project of the recommencement of the Husserlian phenomenology after Heidegger's existentialism. In a note written in August 1958, Paci writes:

Phenomenology is a vision of truth but the truth is infinite [...]. Situated between two infinities, existentialism tends to break the relational synthesis between nature and truth, between existence and idea, between sensibility and essence: relationism recovers the synthesis, reconstructing from the ground up the experience of phenomenology and renewing the Kantian schematism. Born from phenomenology, 'positive' existentialism resumes phenomenology on the basis of rational intentionality. It was necessary for me to rediscover the rational intentionality of the corporeal and historical reality of man. For this reason, as early as the 1950's, I was obliged to say that the transcendental is man (*The Nothing and the Problem of Man*). Phenomenology is also a way of feeling, of living, and of discovering, in life, the truth.

This philosophical project became fully transparent in a note that Paci wrote in September 1958 in his fascinating *Phenomenological Diary* (later published in 1961), one of the most favoured and bewitching of Paci's books:

My aim is to influence philosophy and Italian culture with phenomenology. Mine is a relationistic phenomenology which attempts to take into account the entire history of phenomenological thought and to overcome existentialism. Its principal elements are *time*, as understood by Husserl since 1904-5, and *relation* as it appears in the *Fifth Meditation* and in the *Crisis*. Some of the unpublished works of Husserl on time are a response to [Martin Heidegger's] *Being and Time*. At this point, we can no longer do without this response. Positive existentialism is transformed into phenomenology as relationism.

Thus was the struggle for Husserlian phenomenology begun, with the journal, *aut aut* as its primary means, and the publishing house, Il Saggiatore offering ample opportunities for translations, reprints, together with individual and collective essays; it is also necessary to recall the newly opened publishing house, Lampugnani Nigri, launched with the express intention of supporting Paci and his students' cultural actions, which were first developed at the University of Pavia and then at the University of Milan — students who were increasingly numerous, hard-working and motivated. The advent of phenomenology announced itself progressively throughout Italy and remained in force for approximately fifteen

years: it came to involve not only philosophy but the entire culture, from its literature and aesthetics to architecture, music, and finally the natural and social sciences, cybernetics and economics. During these years of great innovation and audacity, the journal, *aut aut* addressed in depth the question of how to make philosophy engage with the entire horizon of knowledge and with the living world of society and politics. Naturally, the journal received a great deal of reaction, positive and negative, a taking of positions and polemics. The final outcome is still awaiting an adequate and above all complex historiographical investigation, which is certainly not easy to bring about due to the complexity and very large quantity of material to be studied and interpreted, starting with the profound connections that Paci and the Milan School in those years entertained with Ricoeur, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, not to mention many others, relationships that evolved thanks to their travelling along parallel and common pathways, a journey marked by encounters, collaborations, discussions, falling-outs, and so on and so forth. This is a panorama which extends beyond the Italian borders to include European and even North American culture as a whole.

The main text in which Paci summarises his interpretation of Husserl and the rebirth of phenomenology is the book, *Funzione delle scienze e significato dell'uomo* (*The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man*), which was published in 1963, two years after Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*: both works highlight the great cultural change which associated phenomenology with Marxism. Paci's book enjoyed a uniquely wide distribution for a stringent work of philosophy. In this book, Paci recommenced his discourse in confrontation with the sciences, making Husserl's criticism of 'naturalism' his own.

At the beginning of the second chapter ('The Occlusion of the Life-World and the Meaning of the Transcendental'), Paci writes:

According to Husserl, Galileo substitutes the categorial dimension of mathematics for the truly experienced and experienceable world, i.e., for our real daily world, the *Lebenswelt*. Idealised nature becomes superimposed on prescientific, intuitive nature [...]. Every category arises from the environment, from the surrounding world in which each of us lives, from the precategory *Umwelt*. Every category has a goal which is part of the life-world and refers to it. However, only the world where the scientist lives as a man, our living world, is questionable within the infinite and open horizon of what has yet to be investigated.⁵

The invitation to thematise the lifeworld and the precategory operations as the 'transcendental' foundation of all scientific and worldly categories is placed in a balanced antithesis with both the Kantian and idealist transcendental subject (a 'mythological' subject, says Husserl) and Heideggerian ontology, which establishes

⁵ Enzo Paci, *The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man*. Trans. Paul Piccone & James E. Hansen. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1972, p. 19. – Ed.

entities, being, and their difference as the result of mere intellectualistic abstractions, ignorant of the operations on the basis of which they were constituted. This critique of superstitious ‘objectivity’, in particular of the logicist mindset, finds its emblematic expression in the Preface that Paci wrote for the Italian translation of [Husserl’s] *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, published by Laterza (1966):

A logic of the ideal forms of signification, constructed as something in its own right, is *just as* philosophical as the positive sciences in general, as logic renounces the authenticity of the ground through which it could achieve self-understanding and self-justification; therefore it has no norm with which to help the positive sciences overcome their positivity. The *non-philosophical* element of this non-positivity lies precisely in this: that the sciences, because they fail to comprehend their own operations, as a result of an operative intentionality remaining unthematized for them, are not capable of clarifying the true sense of being in their field and of the concepts with which it is grasped. Consequently, they are not able clearly to determine the sense of the essence of which they speak or which horizons of sense it presupposes, horizons of which the sciences do not speak; and yet these horizons nonetheless participate in the determination of sense. In connection with the dogmatic ingenuousness of a formal logic that is supposedly self-sufficient and which rests upon a self-valorized evidence, stands the ingenuousness of a theory of knowledge tacked on from the outside, ‘superadded’ [*sopraggiunta*]. [...] The true theory of knowledge is the clarification of the ‘authentic’ sense of logical concepts and of logic itself.

The relevance [*attualità*] of such a taking of positions seems clear to me and it should continue to be debated and evaluated. We shall briefly resume the rest of the treatise as it relates to the ‘positivity’ of the sciences, criticised by Paci.

The question can be traced back to the beginning of the Vienna lecture given by Husserl in May 1935, which is, as we know (along with the Prague lecture shortly afterwards), a principal source of inspiration behind *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl’s final work, which was left unfinished with the author’s death. In the posthumous edition edited by Walter Biemel, the Vienna lecture appears in the appendices. Paci often recalled in his lessons that exemplary beginning, which in fact threw the ‘objectivistic’ and ‘naturalistic’ attitude of the modern sciences into crisis. Husserl started from the perennial question of the dualism between the sciences of nature and the sciences of the spirit:⁶ a dualism in reality already burdened with prejudices, because there is not and cannot be a comparison between two spheres of real entities such as

⁶ The English translation of the *Crisis* gives ‘natural science’ and ‘humanistic science’ (cf. *Crisis*, p. 271). We occasionally revert to this latter, although it remains a little further from the Italian and the German, particularly in those passages where Paci (or Sini) very closely paraphrases Husserl himself. – Ed.

those of nature and spirit. Husserl writes: ‘only nature can be treated by itself as a closed world; only natural science can abstract with unbroken consistency from everything spiritual and investigate nature purely as nature’ (‘The Vienna Lecture’ in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Trans. David Carr. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970, p. 271). If a body falls from a window, natural science can calculate the speed etc., without interesting itself in its ‘social’ nature, which is to say, abstracting from the fact that it is, for example, a ‘human’ body and that there are motives behind the action which could be investigated at the level of ‘social’, individual, and ‘criminal’ responsibility, and suchlike. The human-scientist cannot operate the same ‘abstraction’ of the natural world thanks to which an autonomous world of the spirit, parallel to the natural one, would unfold before the scientist’s eyes. The ‘animal’ spirituality, the spirituality of ‘human and animal souls’, says Husserl, is based on pre-categorical and material corporeity. The human-scientist cannot investigate his object otherwise than in a descriptive (and not normative) manner, which is to say, taking into account the physical nature in which the subjects being studied live and have lived. For example, an historian of Greek antiquity cannot fail to take into account Greek [physical] geography, architecture [‘the corporeity of its buildings’ – Husserl], economics, and so on.

However, all of this leads to a paradox on which Paci used to insist. On the one hand, the human scientist, for example the historian of Greek culture, has among the phenomena which they study, physical nature:

but this nature, wrote Husserl, is not nature in the sense of natural science but rather that which counted as nature for the ancient Greeks, that which opened up before their gaze, natural reality in the dimension of the lifeworld. More precisely: the historical surrounding world of the Greeks is not the objective world in our sense but rather their ‘world-representation’ [*“rappresentazione del mondo”*], i.e., their own subjective validity, and, within it, all the actualities which are valid for them, including, for example, gods, demons, etc.

Now it is evident that the notion of ‘surrounding world’ that is lived in a ‘historical’ mode (the surrounding world as it was lived in ancient Greece and so on) can only be an object of consideration for the sciences of the spirit.

Our surrounding world, wrote Husserl, is an historical formation [in fact Husserl writes ‘a spiritual structure’ – Ed.] in us and in our historical life. Thus there is no reason for the one who makes spirit *qua* spirit his subject matter to demand anything other than a purely spiritual explanation for it. And so generally: to look upon the nature of the surrounding world as something alien to the spirit, and consequently to want to bolster humanistic

science with natural science, rendering it supposedly exact, is absurd [cf. *Crisis*, p. 272].

But now comes the most delicate and decisive point. In all of this, distinguishing and arguing over the constitutive difference that separates the sciences of nature and the sciences of spirit, the first ‘nomothetic’ and the second ‘idiographic’,

has completely forgotten that the natural sciences (like all science generally) are constituted from a series of spiritual accomplishments: namely, those of natural scientists working together; as such they belong, after all, like all spiritual occurrences, to the region of what is to be explained by humanistic disciplines. Now is it not absurd and circular to wish to explain the historical event of ‘natural science’ in a natural-scientific way, to explain it by bringing in natural science and its natural laws, which, as spiritual accomplishments, are themselves a part of the problem? [cf. *Crisis*, pp. 272–3]

Based on these and other passages in the *Crisis*, Paci repeatedly exonerated Husserlian phenomenology of repeated accusations (also stemming from Heidegger) of limited or even no understanding of the original historicity of the phenomenon which it took as the object of thematic description, no understanding of the historicity of the ‘things themselves’. Hence Paci’s approach, which fell in between the science of Husserl’s lifeworld and the New Science of Vico, one of the authors Paci studied in his youth (cf. *Ingens Sylva [The Great Forest]* from 1949). This phenomenology ‘reborn’ is, in its own way, for Paci, a ‘New Science’, conscious of its temporal and historical nature, which is linked to concrete historical operations: otherwise put, material and economic. These are the means by which Paci at a certain point posited the unavoidable necessity for a confrontation between phenomenology and Marxism, the theme to which the third part of *The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man* is dedicated, also with reference to Labriola and Gramsci.

However, to return to Paci’s struggle against the superstitions of scientific objectivism, or rather of ‘naturalism’, as Husserl said, it is important to take up once again the Preface already cited, which Paci wrote for the translation of Husserl’s *Formal and Transcendental Logic*. As we have seen, in this text, Paci speaks of the ‘positivity’ of the sciences, intending thereby to refer to the dogmatic positivistic reduction of scientific knowledge to a mere statement of ‘facts’: a ‘positive’ science is a knowledge which has eyes only for ‘facts’ and fails to pose the problem of how these facts emerged within the historicity of human experience or the transcendental conditions of the very act of cognition. As Husserl said in the *Crisis*, a science of facts produces ‘merely fact-minded people’, blind to the intentionality of truth and to the meaning of life, be it scientific or prescientific [cf. *Crisis*, p. 6]. Paci applied the same critical remark to Marxism in its political guise, which inspired a supposed science of history that is reduced to a mechanical

‘factual’ reduction of the relationship between economic structure and cultural or spiritual superstructure. In the struggle against official Marxism, Paci was entirely in agreement with Sartre: both came into conflict with the organic intellectuals of the Italian and French Communist Parties; both, in the encounters organised in Moscow in the USSR on the occasion of the peace celebrations, courageously resisted the positivistic trivialisation of Marxism and its reduction to an instrument of political propaganda.

Paci signalled the culmination of this critical path in 1962 upon the occasion of a lecture he was invited to give by the Philosophical Academy of Prague. It was Karel Kosík (1926–2003) who chose to invite Paci and who was to publish his best known book, *Dialectics of the Concrete*, the following year. The path of Kosík shared a profound affinity with that of Paci: both were critical of Marxist dogmatism and in favour of a ‘humanistic’ rereading of Marx (above all, of the young Marx). Kosík saw the essential difference between human and animal life in praxis and read praxis as a theme already deep in the heart of German idealist philosophy from Fichte to Hegel. This Hegelianism did not please the communist State, from which Kosík suffered considerable persecution, but neither did it afford him any protection from the liberal politics which followed, which refused to pardon him for being a communist, however critical.

When Paci arrived in Prague, the climate was one of immense agitation: the principles of the revolution of the so-called Prague Spring and of communism with a human face were in full swing. Paci spoke on October 24th, ‘On the Meaning of Man in Marx and Husserl’. The text of the lecture was published in Volume 73 (1963) of *aut aut*. In his exordium, Paci recalls certain themes characteristic of Marx from the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*: the reduction of labour-power to commodities that are bought and sold on the market; the reduction of the worker to abstract labour in which ‘value’ is reduced to the ‘objective’ effects serially produced. These effects, abstracted from the concreteness of working operations [*operazione lavorativa*], are asserted to be the concrete real: commodities take the place of life, oblivious to the fact that commodities are, as Marx had it, ‘crystallisations of human labour, crystallisations of social substance’. Paci observed that,

these crystallisations ignore concrete individuals, and thus fail to make a concrete society possible. The *abstract categories* of economic science, the misuse of such science, means that the value of labour is concealed within the commodity. For this reason, it is very difficult to analyse the commodity.

At the same time, this exchange, this substitution of the fantasy of the commodity for the concreteness of labouring life, suggests to Paci an audacious yet profound reference to phenomenology: even for Husserl it was a question of ‘suspending’ the naïve trust in common sense when confronted with the phenomena of everyday experience; it was a question of recognising, behind phenomenal appearances, the

true reality of experience, behind abstract scientific categories, the ‘things themselves’. The entire project of phenomenology (returning to the things themselves, behind appearances and behind scientific intellectualism which remained ignorant of the true meaning of its own operations despite its undeniable successes) is redirected by Paci so as to accord with Marx’s path. The mere relationship between things, that is, the commodity and abstract labour, is not the reality, as economic science thinks; it is rather the ideological concealment of the real relationship between concrete persons, those persons which economic science constantly presupposes, without ever thematising their operative foundation [*il fondamento operante*]. On the one hand, Paci intends to ward off the danger of ‘naturalism’ in Marx by referring to Husserl, but at the same time, as demonstrated in Prague in particular, he also intends to reconsider Husserl’s path in light of Marx.

For example, Paci writes:

Marx reveals the reality of living labour just as Husserl reveals the reality of the living subject and its operations. The misuse of science fails to grasp that all scientific operations, like the operations of labouring in Marx, are carried out by the concrete subject. [...] Husserl’s task remained interrupted. On the other hand, he has posed the problem of the sciences as a whole, but not the problem of the economy, which is at the centre of Marx’s analysis inasmuch as *Capital* is a critique of the economy. The critique of the economy can lead us to view the task that Husserl had set himself in criticising the sciences and the search for their foundation in a new light. [...] Phenomenology is not a philosophy in the traditional sense. It is a philosophy which should liberate not only the philosopher but all of humanity, and as such it becomes *praxis*.

The work of Paci culminates in the proposal of a new encyclopaedia of knowledge, against the historical backdrop of the Enlightenment project and the great Hegelian Encyclopaedia: the critical return to reason in a renewed phenomenological sense. In the *Ideas for a Phenomenological Encyclopaedia* (1973), Paci, in fact, took his mark from Vico and from Hegel in order to address the theme of the foundation of the sciences: in particular, anthropology, psychology, psychoanalysis, political economy, the natural sciences and cybernetics: a great journey and a grand historical vista.

At the outset of his path (‘Problems with the Unification of Knowledge’), Paci wrote the following:

the tendency towards unification on the part of knowledge has always remained present in the history of culture and human civilisation. However, the problems that it implies acquire a particular relief in the current historical situation, a situation which appears to make the unification of every people on planet Earth inevitable. In each case, both the unification of knowledge

and the unification of groups and peoples, involve parts that tend towards an open totalisation, and the unification enters a crisis, both in the case where the parts are absolutised and each wishes to impose itself on the others as a whole, and in the case where the totalisation is conceived as definitive and without articulation, in such a form, that is, as not to include within itself the constituent parts as specific parts [*non comprendere in sé le parti costitutive come parti specifiche*]. Of course, every part contains a potentiality for development and an implicit totality, just as every man has humanity within himself, but as soon as the part is posited as a totality which has already been realised and concluded, absolutising itself, the movement of unification tends towards self-destruction. The problem of unification is by its very nature a dialectical problem, but it is the dialectic of the current historical situation that enables us to understand, in an absolutely peculiar way, the negative and destructive character of the absolutisation of a partial aspect of knowledge, of a given culture, of a given civilisation. No partial form can alone take on the task of unification while, at the same time, every partial form can contribute to a totalisation of knowledge and of an operation guided by knowledge, inasmuch as in all parts an open totality, indeed an infinite totality, is implicit as a potential. Therefore, every part, according to a paradox which has the same structure wherever it presents itself, has an infinite totality in itself, even though it is part of this infinite totality. [...] The theme of unification has a universal character and can easily descend into generality. However, the problem of how one part can contain a totality in itself is a problem which concerns all disciplines. Aphoristically one could say: a part can have in itself the whole of which it is a part, and it can therefore be a set, inasmuch as it is organised according to an 'essence' [*essenza*] and according to a 'structure'. On the basis of what we have seen so far, we can recognise the very simple fact that the unification of knowledge is always a work in progress.

These thoughts from the late Paci, which have been around for almost fifty years now, are clearly prophetic, both in regard to the unification of politics and the global economy, and in regard to the increasingly problematic nature of this process, destined to ever new conflicts and oriented not at all towards a dialectically unitary solution. At the end of Paci's life, he learned with great anguish of the revelation of the horrors of Stalinism and the political failure of Marxism in Russia. Consequently, Paci wrote in a personal note that the existence of man seems to be inscribed in an insuppressible evil. This is in addition to Paci's active participation in and support of the student movement together with the struggles inside and outside the university, which concluded essentially in defeat. In Paci's last days, he was in many respects isolated and a survivor. But his works, both profound and far-sighted, continue to reveal to us the fecundity of their inspiration, just as they were

vital and indispensable throughout the second half of the twentieth century in Italy and in Europe.

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The Difference between Liberalism and Democracy: A Forgotten Italian Tradition¹

Franco Manni

Without Liberty you cannot fulfil any of your
duties. Where Liberty is missing, Justice,
Morality, Equality no longer have meaning
— Giuseppe Mazzini

This essay is a response to the return of the far right to government in Italy.

Its central contention is that Italy has traditionally lacked a liberal culture, with Fascism and Marxist communism always having been the prevailing currents of thought.

I will subsequently argue that the Italian political tradition must start anew from the minority of Italian liberal thinkers who have been fought against, marginalised, and eventually forgotten throughout its history: most notably, Benedetto Croce and Norberto Bobbio.

Commonplaces

Almost all laypeople, when — say on television — they hear the words ‘liberal’, ‘democratic’, ‘liberal democrat’, from politicians or journalists, cannot distinguish between them, or maybe even try, as if saying to themselves: ‘they are technical and cabalistic terms, the usual abracadabra used by the Experts! And if journalists and politicians — even them! — use these words with such ease and arbitrariness, what should I do myself? Should I improvise as a political philosopher ?!’

And so almost everyone confuses these words and takes them resignedly for synonyms, so that confusion becomes the norm, the norm becomes unconscious, unawareness spreads through contagion, and here we have what is called a commonplace.

Relying mainly on Norberto Bobbio’s book *Liberalismo and Democrazia*,² I want to present and distinguish clearly these old and ever-current concepts.

As we see in Bobbio’s texts, democracy is one of the three answers to the question, ‘who has sovereign power? That is, who commands in the state?’ ‘The Monarchy replies, “Only one!” Oligarchy answers, “Only some, only a few!” Democracy responds, “The majority, ‘the people’”!’

Liberalism, on the other hand, is one of two answers to another and different question, which is: ‘How is sovereignty exercised? That is: in what way do those who command in the state, command?’ ‘Absolutism³ answers: “Who commands, commands

¹ This article is in large part the English translation of the ‘Introduction’ to the new edition of Norberto Bobbio’s book, *Liberalismo e Democrazia (Liberalism and Democracy)* (Milano: Simonelli, 2006). I have shortened and modified that essay in several places.

² 2nd edition, Milano: Simonelli Editore, 2006.

³ Variations: Tyranny, Despotism, Authoritarianism, Dictatorship, Totalitarianism.

over everything, they have unlimited power!” Liberalism responds: “Who commands, commands only something and not everything, and has limited power!”

Liberalism is in fact a theory and a practice of the limitation of sovereign power, whoever the sovereign is: one, several, or the majority. Whoever is the sovereign, in a liberal state they cannot prevent the individual from professing the religion he wants, criticising the work of the government, demonstrating in the streets against the government, associating in parties that carry out a policy of opposition to the government and moving freely within the territory of the state or outside it. Neither, in a liberal state, can the government command its police to arrest a citizen: arrest and prosecution is the responsibility of a group of people – the Magistracy – independent of the government, because if the government were to arrest and prosecute the citizens, according to liberals it is always possible that the victims of this prosecution would be the political opponents of the government, rather than murderers, thieves or rapists.⁴

These two questions – ‘who is the sovereign?’ and ‘how do they rule?’ – are thus heterogeneous, and at the same time their answers have a long history as independent variables: for example, before the seventeenth century no states were either liberal or democratic (in fact, in ancient Athens, at the peak of its ‘democratic’ phase, the citizens entitled to vote ‘were probably no more than 30 percent of the total adult population’⁵). In the nineteenth century in Western Europe there were liberal but not democratic states, and today, in the same area, there are states both liberal and democratic. More disturbing – also because it more directly conflicts with the commonplace that confuses liberalism and democracy – from the nineteenth century onwards, across the world, including Europe, there existed and still exist states that are democratic but not liberal.⁶

This last phenomenon had been predicted by the liberal thinker Alexis de Tocqueville as early as 1840 and he had called it ‘the despotism of the majority’. Large and crushing majorities of citizens of a state can elect a despot who abrogates freedom of the press and dissolves the opposition parties, ordering the arrest and execution of opponents, and not only do they elect him in the first place but they continue to vote for him and support him in many ways with increasing enthusiasm. It is not easy to see such facts if the mind is clouded by the powerful commonplace according to which: ‘if an idea or an action is approved by the majority (of my family members, classmates, co-religionists, my national group, the “people”) then it is right’. And so, given that tyranny has for millennia been considered unjust, it seems impossible that there could be anything like a ‘tyranny of the majority’.

⁴ The fundamental liberties of Liberalism have been called by Bobbio, ‘the four great liberties of the moderns’: personal freedom (which includes guarantees during the penal process, the habeas corpus), freedom of expression of thought, freedom of movement, freedom of association.

⁵ J. Thorley, *Athenian Democracy*, London: Routledge, 2005, p. 74.

⁶ Which explains, among other things, how there could be a gap between a pure liberal state and a pure democratic state: a state in which the main civil rights were recognised, but suffrage was restricted, as happened for example in Italy until 1912, could be called liberal but not democratic; on the other hand, a state with universal suffrage can, using the same mechanisms of democracy, establish an illiberal regime, as happened in Germany in 1933, when Nazism seized power through democratic elections.

It is true that every individual is born and formed within and thanks to many affective, religious, political, and cultural communities: it is certainly not this undoubted fact that the liberal calls into question! The problem is that, for the liberal, the individual must not dismiss the freedom of judgement of his individual mind in the face of any community.⁷

We must also discuss the economic-social issue, that of so-called ‘class’. Regarding the Soviet Union, Bobbio – back in 1954 – recalled a phrase by Lenin (‘proletarian democracy is a thousand times more democratic than any bourgeois democracy’) and commented:

the problem is if, by affirming that the Soviet state is a democracy, one escapes the objection that it is a dictatorship [...] in the specific sense in which the dictatorship as a form of government distinguishes itself from a liberal regime. [...] And the contrast between the Soviet regime and the Western regimes is not a contrast between democracy and non-democracy, or between major and minor democracy, but between a dictatorial regime and a liberal regime. [...] One proof of this is the fact that the polemical phrase of Lenin, ‘Proletarian democracy is a thousand times more democratic than any bourgeois democracy’, which may sound excessive but is not contradictory, would sound false if we changed it to this: ‘proletarian democracy is a thousand times more liberal than any bourgeois democracy’.⁸

The commonplace according to which the majority cannot be wrong is always impregnated with moralism and emotional blackmail: is it not morally much more ‘noble’ to abandon one’s own ‘selfish’ individual judgment and give oneself over to the will of one’s own Family, Church, Motherland? Let’s listen to Saint Just, Robespierre’s right-hand man, the leader of the revolutionaries during the French Revolution:

The children belong to the mother up to five years, provided she has raised them; and then to the republic until death. One who declares that he does not believe in friendship must be banned. Every man of twenty-one must declare in the temple who his friends are; this declaration must be renewed every year, in the month of Ventose. If a man commits a crime, his friends are banned. If a man has no friends, he is banished.⁹

⁷ See Ermanno Vitale (preface by Michelangelo Bovero), *Liberalismo e multiculturalismo. Una sfida per il pensiero democratico (Liberalism and Multiculturalism. A Challenge for Democratic Thought)*, Bari: Laterza, 2000, pp. VII, VIII, 5, 97.

⁸ Norberto Bobbio, *Politica e Cultura (Politics and Culture)* (1955) (with an introduction by Franco Sbarberi), Torino: Einaudi, 2005, pp. 130–31.

⁹ Louis de Saint Just, *Frammenti sulle istituzioni repubblicane (Short Writings on Republican Institutions)*, Torino: Einaudi, 1975, pp. 213–16, cited in Ermanno Vitale, *Liberalismo...*, op. cit, p. 104.

Beyond these appeals to identitarian comradeship, classic liberals (like John Locke, Benjamin Constant, and John Stuart Mill) have always been suspicious of power and have therefore indicated how it should be controlled and limited. On the other hand, the various communitarian theories (religious, nationalist, fascist or communist) based on the central principle of democracy (the majority is right) did not have this suspicion. As Bobbio wrote: ‘The liberal doctrine makes the problem of the abuse of power the centre of its reflection, the communist doctrine generally ignores it’.¹⁰

Yes, power. As the famous sentence of a nineteenth-century liberal, Lord Acton claims: ‘Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely’.¹¹ And, at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, never have so many people realised this. Never as today have intellectuals studied and criticised, with a finally achieved disenchantment, all kinds of authoritarianism (fascist, communist, religious, populist), never before today have there been so many associations aimed at the defence of civil rights and the denunciation of their violation, never before today in defence of these civil rights have mass demonstrations and marches been so mobilised.

However, did *many* people really understand this? Certainly, those who do, remain a tiny minority, at least in my country, Italy, but certainly they are more than in previous historical periods.

Someone like Michael Mann even thinks that the ethnic cleansing and genocide of the twentieth century are direct effects of democracy and constitute its ‘dark side’.¹² Someone like Norberto Bobbio, however, even if he thought that he could not accept a democracy that had none of the inviolable rights proposed by liberalism, nonetheless he thought it ‘unlikely that an undemocratic state can guarantee fundamental freedoms’.¹³ It is true that nineteenth-century Britain was certainly oligarchic (in that only a small percentage of citizens had the right to vote), and it is true that it defended these fundamental rights very well and better than those states that were contemporaries and already had universal male suffrage (for instance, France). But it is also true that the dynamic process of this nineteenth-century Britain was constantly moving towards the enlargement of suffrage, as if to demonstrate – at least in the eyes of those who are inclined to support this thesis – that to continue to maintain and broaden the defence of

¹⁰ Appendix to *Politica and Cultura*, cit, p. 262, and on this point cf. the Introduction by Franco Sbarberi on pp. XL–XLI.

¹¹ Karl Popper wrote: ‘excessive political power leads to situations in which political errors can no longer be investigated. Even if we assume that those who have power are inspired by pure altruism (rather than by the intention to remain in power), their power will tend to prevent the search and critical correction of the error until it is no longer possible to do so’, ‘Introduzione all’edizione italiana’, *Miseria dello storicismo* (*The Poverty of Historicism*, 1944), Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997, p. 10.

¹² Michael Mann, *Il lato oscuro della democrazia* (*The Dark Side of Democracy*), Milan: Università Bocconi Editore, 2005, pp. IX, 2–4, 294, 584, 621.

¹³ Norberto Bobbio, *Il futuro della democrazia* (*The Future of Democracy*) (1984), Torino: Einaudi, 1995. pp. 6–7. See Ron Terchek, *Whose Realism? Whose Reality?* (essay on ‘democratic realism’ and Norberto Bobbio, prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Association, San Francisco, 2001, online, p. 20).

rights of freedom in an increasingly mass society (industrialised, urbanised and literate) it was necessary to control the actions of oligarchies by increasingly large layers of citizens.

In fact, if all the classical liberals of the last two centuries have understood the danger of the ‘tyranny of the majority’ in a ‘pure’ democracy, that is without liberalism, and therefore have escaped the idealisation of the ‘good people’, however, some of them, such as Mill, Croce, Popper and Bobbio, do not, as a consequence of this, weave a praise of Oligarchy, of the Illuminated Élites, of a New Aristocracy, perhaps no longer founded on blood and property but on culture. Indeed Bobbio notes how, after the lesson of Karl Popper, the liberal no longer used the metaphor – deriving from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment – of the ‘light’ that illuminates the ‘darkness’, but has used the metaphor of ‘openness’ as a situation opposed to ‘closure’: openness (towards a broader pluralism of ideas, people, decisions, situations) which, at least as a potentiality, appears to be greater in a democratic society than in an oligarchy.

That is, these liberal thinkers have recorded – as a negative example – the twentieth-century theoretical-rhetorical experiences and practices of those ‘racist aristocracies’, those ‘economic elites’, those ‘intellectual happy few’, those ‘avant-garde leaders of the revolution’, which, as the facts attested, were so bad for everyone.

For example: the aristocratism of the ‘intellectual happy few’! How many foolish mental myopias and moral distortions are derived from this idea and from this practice throughout the twentieth century! Martin Green and John Carey have written well-documented books about these topics,¹⁴ but how many more books should be written and disseminated so that we can finally get rid of this particular nineteenth-century topic! The case, recalled by Carey, of certain communist intellectuals is eloquent: their explicit elitism and their veiled contempt for ‘common people’ seem to highlight how any closed oligarchy degenerates, whatever the ideology professed.

A liberal, therefore, to escape from the widespread commonplace that idealises ‘the people’, must not fall into the – more hidden, but not so hidden – commonplace that idealises ‘the elite’. To be wary of the ‘tyranny of the majority’ does not at all mean defending and advising a ‘tyranny of the minority’.

However, we have experiences, a story to be pondered

As a political practice, liberalism was born out of the two English revolutions of the seventeenth century and thereafter spread steadily to other Western countries. This diffusion was punctuated by dramatic setbacks and reactions. For example, Benedetto Croce set down in his *History as the Story of Liberty* (1938) a moving and powerful account of the triumphs of nineteenth century liberalism, at a time when the reaction of fascism and communism against liberal institutions seemed, in the eyes of most Europeans, to decree the ignominious death of the liberal tradition in many of the countries where it had so thrived in the previous century. Croce nevertheless exhibited a strong faith that, despite the events of his own time, Liberty would not interrupt its steady

¹⁴ Martin Green, *Children of the Sun: a Narrative of ‘Decadence’ in England after 1918*, London: Constable, 1977; John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992), Chicago: Academy Chicago, 2002.

march forward throughout time, because it is the very engine of history. The nobility of this act of faith still moves and leaves in astonished admiration many who subscribe to the supreme value of political, religious and cultural freedom.

As Croce and Popper continually repeated, freedom does not exist without conflict: if the Conservative would like a society in which there was an idyllic concord of opinions and faiths, the Liberal knows that freedom exists only in plurality, in confrontation and contraposition of different and opposing ideas. This free confrontation and opposition is freedom itself. Another great European intellectual, the French Jew Marc Bloch, wrote just after the crushing defeat that the French nation suffered in 1940 that, '[i]t is right that in a free country adverse social philosophies can fight freely [...]. The misfortune of the homeland begins when one does not understand the legitimacy of these conflicts'.¹⁵

The legacy of English constitutional development is that the rights of citizens had been sought and obtained beforehand, and only afterwards had electoral suffrage been gradually enlarged in order to better defend these rights. In other national histories, such as that of France, matters have been rather more confused, and the 'broader' majorities of democracy have often been seen as sources of rights and justice, and not just as a method for the effective control of these rights, perhaps a better method than the one which gave control to the monarch and to the hereditary oligarchy, as in the Middle Ages, or to an oligarchy elected by restricted suffrage, as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it is ultimately only a control method and not a source of liberty itself.

In the history of the United States this confusion – which may be called 'populist' – was less pronounced than in France, but more so than in England. Such ideas were entrenched in American political culture from before independence: an interesting book by Claes Ryn, *America the Virtuous* (2004), shows how the Jacobin idea of the 'virtuous people' as a source of justice was already present in Thomas Jefferson's thought, and indeed, this idea has traversed the centuries, colouring even the events of our own times, a revolutionary and Jacobin idea that today, perhaps ironically, is passed over by certain liberals as a conservative or 'neo-conservative' contention.¹⁶

It must be added, however, that the role played by the United States in the establishment and defence of freedom in the West has been great and irreplaceable. The Americans Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt – despite strong illiberal and even anti-liberal strains in American political discourse – virtually saved freedom in Europe through their interventions in the two World Wars. Moreover, if we read Roosevelt's speeches at the crucial moments of the war, those Marxists who are used to confusing the concept of 'liberalism' with the concept of 'capitalism' may be surprised at

¹⁵ Marc Bloch, *Una strana sconfitta (A Strange Defeat)* (1940), Torino: Einaudi, 1995, p. 147.

¹⁶ Claes Ryn, *America the Virtuous*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2004, especially pp. 1–5, 8, 20–23, 32–34, 50, 56, 65–67, 71–74, 77–79, 91, 106, 123–28, 137, 140, 157, 189, 201–207. Claes Ryn remains one of the world's leading scholars of Benedetto Croce.

how closely the struggle against Nazi-fascist tyranny was for Roosevelt connected with the social promotion of the most disadvantaged classes among his fellow citizens.¹⁷

In Italy the populist confusion was more severe than in France, which in the end did not succumb to government by either the extreme left or the far-right, as Italy did, coming under a regime that, in the name of the 'will of the people', crushed most legal rights and individual freedoms, all the while maintaining universal suffrage.

A large majority of the Italian intellectuals of the same period had been more or less enthusiastic supporters of the late fascist regime.¹⁸ It must be noted that within Italian fascism there existed a 'right' and a 'left': for example, the publicist Giovanni Preziosi and the staff of his magazine *La Vita Italiana* represented the fascist right insofar as they shunned a liberal approach to rights and social freedoms while in turn embracing economic liberalism (or 'liberism'; in Italian there exist two distinct terms: '*liberalismo*' – analogous to political liberalism, and '*liberismo*' – analogous to free-market ideology); while the philosopher Giovanni Gentile and his followers represented the fascist left because, in their opposition to liberalism they also rejected free markets as the alleged cause of unequal social conditions among the Italian citizenry.¹⁹

This 'left' ideology was both anti-liberal and anti-liberist and in some ways continued in the post-Marxist-inspired left, not only in the 1950s Italian Communist Party, but also in a significant part of the 1968 movement: anti-liberalism and anti-liberism (for which read: anti-capitalism) were associated or even synonymous in the thought of those generations who supported Stalin, Mao, Lenin, Fidel Castro and Chavez.²⁰

Benedetto Croce and Norberto Bobbio

Diametrically opposed to the position of the anti-liberal and fascist right was Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) who in the 1930s attempted to prove to Luigi Einaudi, a liberal and 'liberist' (which is to say a supporter of free-market theory) that a liberal state could adopt an economic policy contrary to the free-market's dogmas in certain periods, and indeed

¹⁷ See, for example, Roosevelt's speeches, Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 6th 1941, Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 11th 1944, Campaign Address at Soldiers' Field, Chicago, Illinois, October 28th 1944 (online at the Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt Institute website).

¹⁸ See the recent book by Mirella Serri, *I Redenti (The Redeemed)*, Milano: Il Corbaccio, 2005.

¹⁹ Giovanni Preziosi, Ugo Spirito, in *La Vita Italiana*, 1932, n° 5; See Franco Manni, *I presupposti filosofici della 'Vita Italiana' di Giovanni Preziosi (The Philosophical Assumptions in 'La Vita Italiana' by Giovanni Preziosi)*, in Aa. Vv. (edited by Luigi Parente and Fabio Gentile), *Giovanni Preziosi e la questione della razza in Italia (Giovanni Preziosi and the Issue of Race in Italy)*, Cosenza: Rubbettino, 2005.

²⁰ In 1981, Bobbio wrote in *The Future of Democracy*, pp. 116–19 that he was 'surprised' that in a series on the Left, the classic *On Liberty* by J.S. Mill had been reprinted, even if this publication had unleashed leftist comments that were 'annoyed, perplexed, even strongly critical'. Fifteen years later, Bobbio wrote: 'I found myself in this phrase of Améry: "When the old man realises that the Marxist, certainly and not wrongly by him considered a champion of the rationalist army, now recognised in some ways in Heidegger, the spirit of the era must appear to him misguided, indeed authentically dissociated: the philosophical mathematics of his era is transformed into a magic square"', Norberto Bobbio, *De senectute (On Old Age)*, Torino: Einaudi, 1996, pp. 21–22.

must do so in order to remain liberal.²¹ But Croce was also opposed to the position – let us call it the ‘social right’ – of Gentile, who despised both liberalism and ‘liberism’ as anti-fascist ideas.

Benedetto Croce was a giant of the Italian intellectual landscape: for long decades, with persuasive force, he showed both the Italian and the European public the theoretical and practical errors of Marxism, communism, racialism, nationalism, fascism, decadence, positivism and Catholic fundamentalism. Towards the end of his life – when Italy was ‘split in two’ between the Kingdom aligned with the Allies in the South and the Italian Social Republic in the Centre-North – he also took on a direct and central political role; for some months he was the most influential Italian politician, more so than De Gasperi, more than Togliatti, more than Badoglio, more than the Lieutenant of the Kingdom, more even than the King himself.²²

But Croce died in 1952, practically ignored and allegedly overtaken by a gradually increasing number of supposedly more progressive intellectuals. First he was fought against, and then simply forgotten.²³ Paradoxically, the best scholars of Croce from recent times are two non-Italians: the Americans David D. Roberts and Claes G. Ryn.²⁴

But Croce had an heir, at least in the field of political and ethical studies, namely Norberto Bobbio.²⁵ Bobbio has written many books and articles, often for specialists, but his first influential and successful book, aimed at a cultured but non-specialist audience, was *Politics and Culture* (1955): the very date of the book marks a willingness to resume the discourse of the Neapolitan philosopher now deceased. The content, in addition to

²¹ Benedetto Croce and Luigi Einaudi, *Liberalism and Liberism* (1952), Napoli: Ricciardi, 1988. For an intelligent, informed, clear and updated study on this topic see Daniele Besomi and Giorgio Rampa, *Dal liberalismo al liberismo. Stato e mercato nella storia delle idee e nella analisi degli economisti (From Liberalism to Liberism. State and Market in the History of Ideas and in the Analysis of Economists)*, Torino: Giappichelli, 2000.

²² This story has always been known by few. His *Taccuini di Guerra 1943-1945 (War Notebooks 1943-1945)*, Milano: Adelphi, 2004, show in great detail the following astounding thing: that a scholar, unwillingly and purely out of civic duty, found himself – with concrete results – at the centre of the political scene in a State of not inconsiderable size, and – even more amazingly, especially on our shores – with modesty and an absolute personal disinterest. But these notebooks, at least up until now, have been practically ignored by our cultural debate and have by no means begun to enter into the shared ‘canon’ of our collective memory, neither among people of average culture nor among intellectuals.

²³ I was born in 1959 and in my youth – at the end of the seventies and during the eighties – I realised that I could not find any peers who had read Croce; perhaps they spoke of him by hearsay and then only briefly, and exclusively in order to pass devaluing judgements upon him and his work.

²⁴ David D. Roberts: *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987; and also *Nothing But History: Reconstruction and Extremity After Metaphysics*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995. Claes G. Ryn: *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*, New Brunswick: Transaction, 1997; and also *A Common Human Ground. Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World*, Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003.

²⁵ Norberto Bobbio, from Turin (1909–2004), was for a long time an inspiration for university students, as a lecturer, first in the philosophy of law and then in political philosophy. And he enjoyed an even longer period of indirect teaching as the author of books, essays for journals, articles and interviews for newspapers. His works have been translated into nineteen languages.

explicitly dedicating two of the chapters to Croce, incorporates Croce's themes of liberalism and non-enslavement of culture to party politics. Bobbio takes up Croce's standard not so much in his penultimate intellectual battle against fascism, but against the communist thought which became so influential in Italy following the War. This book by Bobbio splendidly contends for liberalism against the Italian Communists who then opposed it.

Of all Croce's theoretical and practical battles, only one has not been carried forward by Bobbio: Croce's opposition to Positivism (this fact explains – together with others – the much more analytical approach that Bobbio takes in comparison with Croce in the treatment of philosophical problems).

Both thinkers, having each enjoyed a long and industrious life, have been able, almost as 'watchmen of Israel',²⁶ to observe and watch over a multiplicity of phases in Italian cultural and political history. Bobbio began to publish in 1934 and continued for seventy years! One a Senator of the Kingdom of Italy and the other a Senator for life of the Italian Republic, both awarded many academic and civil honours, with their works appreciated by many scholars abroad, both Croce and Bobbio built and then maintained for their entire lives a 'democratic', which is to say 'easy-going' character: non-narcissistic, sociable, approachable and welcoming to anyone who wanted to meet them: even if their interlocutor was a comparative 'nobody', they treated him as an equal.²⁷

Bobbio recalled that as a child he had felt a strong feeling of injustice when he went on holiday in the countryside and, scion of the 'good' Turin bourgeoisie, used to play with peasant children: these playmates, however, had behind them a life without any of the privileges of class accorded to him. They were poor, shabbily dressed, and undernourished; every summer he discovered that one of them had died during the winter of tuberculosis. Hence, for Bobbio, 'the fundamental reason' for his addressing political questions was 'the discomfort of the spectacle of enormous inequalities, as disproportionate as they were unjustified, between rich and poor, between those who are at the top and those who are at the bottom of the social ladder'.²⁸

The opinion of the two philosophers when it came to democracy was in certain respects different: Croce was somewhat distrustful towards it, whilst Bobbio held it in higher esteem. But both of them saw a theoretical error – fraught with negative practical consequences – in so-called 'egalitarianism'. Croce wrote in *History as the Story of Liberty* (1932):

Liberalism had detached itself from democracy, which, in its extreme form of Jacobism, blindly pursuing its abstractions, had not only destroyed the living and

²⁶ Ezek 3:17, 'Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore hear a word from My mouth, and give them warning from Me'.

²⁷ When it comes to Croce I have only read the testimonies of others, whereas with Bobbio I have read the testimonies of others but also – for twenty years – I was able to experience his character in person.

²⁸ Norberto Bobbio, *Destra e sinistra (Right and Left)*, Roma: Donzelli Editore, 1995, pp. 128–29.

physiological tissues of the social body, but, exchanging the people for a part and with a single manifestation (that is, the less civilised of the people, the unstructured, shouting and impulsive crowd), and exercising tyranny in the name of the People, had gone to the other extreme, and, in place of equality and freedom, had opened the way to equal servitude and dictatorship.²⁹

And Bobbio, in one of his last interviews, said:

Egalitarianism is a philosophical conception that leads to the world of bees, to the emptying of individuality [...]. This level and this depersonalisation are then the appropriate terrain for the birth of political totalitarianism. [...] It is necessary to distinguish egalitarianism from equalisation. Egalitarianism is a philosophical conception and it is also an attempt carried out in the states where communism has attained power, a conception and attempt which counteract the independence and peculiarities of the individual within the society. [...] Equalisation on the other hand is a tendency and a movement towards the reduction of economic differences between individuals and social groups.³⁰

The opposition of Croce and Bobbio to illiberal conceptions of all kinds, even though they were often over-subtle and cloaked in pseudo-morality, their insensitivity to intellectual fashions, political winds, the ‘forces of Destiny’ and the ‘inescapable urgencies of History’, led them to oppose both Marxism and fascist ideology, and this in a country like Italy where a typical attitude of many intellectuals throughout the twentieth century was to swing between opposing extremisms, whilst always remaining illiberal. Thus, both philosophers were attacked vituperatively for many years from both the extreme left and the extreme right.³¹

The two thinkers had come into contact – at different points in history – with both theoretical Marxism and the multifaceted movement of political socialism. Croce and Bobbio had sharply criticised both of them, but they had also grasped the good aspects of both the theory and the political practice. Croce reproached Einaudi for not seeing that liberalism could very well agree with a socialist economic policy, and, when he found himself president of the Italian Liberal Party, after a meeting with the socialist

²⁹ Benedetto Croce, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono (History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century)*, Bari: Laterza, 1932, p. 32.

³⁰ *Il filosofo e i comunisti (The Philosopher and the Communists)* (Interview with Norberto Bobbio), *Diario*, 4 May 2001, p. 27. See also Bobbio, *Libertà ed eguaglianza (Freedom and Equality)*, Torino: Einaudi, 1995, pp. 30–41

³¹ As Karl Popper wrote in the epigraph to his book, from the time of the Second World War (*Poverty of Historicism*, p.13): ‘In memory of the countless men, women and children of all beliefs, nations and races that fell victim to the Fascist and Communist faith in the Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny’. A text by Bobbio that summarises with great clarity the theoretical terms of the relationship between liberalism and fascism, on the one hand, and between liberalism and communism on the other, is ‘Augusto del Noce: Fascism, Liberalism, Communism’ (*Il Ponte*, XLIX, n° 6, June 1993).

Giuseppe Saragat he wrote: '[Saragat] wants to preserve for socialism its character and its history, which is essentially liberal'.³²

Bobbio, already a follower of the 'Partito d'Azione' (Action Party), had, over the decades, studied and supported the liberal-socialist idea. If one looks to the classics of liberal thought, Croce and Bobbio were closer to the liberalism of Mill, Keynes and Popper than to that of Locke and Tocqueville in that they were in favour of the intervention of the state in the economy, and also the state's duty to improve the conditions of the more disadvantaged social classes.³³

In fact, even in the midst of all the uncertainties and ambiguities, the various Christian and Social Democrats, Labour, the Gaullists and Liberals of Western Europe after the Second World War have, so far at least, produced regimes in which the 'four great liberties of the moderns' are protected, but in which – along with this – the state also makes extensive legislative interventions into the economy: to defend workers' rights, provide public utility services, defend free competition, preserve the environment, and to subsidise the unemployed and other disadvantaged groups, so that in general in the European Union today we can see much liberalism and very little liberism; a situation in which the liberal state actively takes charge of the 'welfare' of its citizens. Liberalism? Social Democracy? Indeed! In any case, it is something that, in an apparent paradox, is disliked by both a certain radical left and a certain radical right, as Bobbio observed in 1981.³⁴

This situation certainly appeared to Bobbio as paradoxical: he had not previously supported 'left' criticism and afterwards did not support 'right' criticism. Bobbio perceived that Croce had first long been attacked and mocked by the fascists and then – after the fall of fascism – by the Marxists, who 'meanly' or 'ungenerously' labelled him the 'precursor of fascism', 'reactionary', and 'pro-fascist'; he, Benedetto Croce, who was '[t]he moral conscience of Italian anti-Fascism [...]. His defence of liberalism, pursued tirelessly until his last years, was the defence of the ideal of freedom that is identified with the moral conscience'.³⁵

This is not to say that Bobbio was wholly uncritical of the liberalism of Croce; his critique may be found in the detailed and masterly analysis, 'Benedetto Croce and Liberalism', where he writes:

I immediately say that, in spite of the many doubts I feel I should raise about the theory of liberalism advanced by Benedetto Croce, I have no intention

³² B. Croce, *Taccuini*, p. 350

³³ 'I believe that a competitive economy is more efficient than a planned economy, but I did not believe that this was a decisive argument against the central planning of the economy: if such a planning could produce a freer and more human society, or simply a society that was more just than a competitive society, I would patronise it even if planning was less efficient than competition. It is my opinion, in fact, that we should be ready to pay a high price for freedom', Karl Popper, *Poverty of Historicism*, p. 9

³⁴ Norberto Bobbio, *Il futuro della democrazia (The Future of Democracy)*, Torino: Einaudi, 1995, p. 129.

³⁵ See Norberto Bobbio, *Politica e Cultura*, pp. 186, 192, 200, 202.

of diminishing the liberal function that his thought and personality had in the years of Fascist domination. There are some who, out of hatred for liberalism or hatred for Croce, would like to disavow the merits and practical value of the anti-fascist position of the author of the *History as the Story of Liberty*. Anyone who participated in the anxieties and hopes of those years, I am speaking of intellectuals, cannot forget that the main road to converting the uncertain to antifascism was to make the books of Croce read and discussed, that most of the young intellectuals came to antifascism through Croce, and those who had already arrived or had always been there, were drawing comfort from knowing that Croce, the highest and most illustrious representative of Italian culture, had not bowed to dictatorship. Every criticism of Croce's attitude during fascism is acrimonious and malevolent polemics. As such it does not deserve discussion.³⁶

Most of the chapters that make up the book, *Politics and Culture* were written by Bobbio between 1951 and 1954: the years of McCarthyism and the twilight of Stalinism! If this was the atmosphere in which the ideals of liberalism had to flourish within the two victorious superpowers of the Second World War – a war waged by them against Hitler in the name of freedom – we can understand the militant urgency that Bobbio then felt in polemicising against those intellectuals and Italian politicians who attacked liberalism. These were communists, and specifically Italian communists possessing a rigidly Stalinist ideology, not yet softened by the denunciations of Stalin's crimes by Nikita Krushchev at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

We must observe that, while there was only one example of fascism and Nazism, communism had two iterations: the tyrannical and genocidal example of the USSR, China, Cambodia; whereas these dreadful excesses were absent in the communism of Italy, Western Europe and the Anglosphere. Nevertheless, Bobbio – who had certainly not dialogued with Stalin, Beria, Mao or Pol Pot – recognised the importance of cultivating good personal relationships with at least some Italian communists, such as Giorgio Napolitano, Aldo Tortorella, Gian Carlo Pajetta and Pietro Ingrao.³⁷

Croce's attitude was similar: while he had never participated in a fascist government – even if he had been requested to do so – he co-operated in government with the Italian communists during the post-war period, and at a meeting of the Council of Ministers he publicly recalled to Togliatti his regret at the death of the communist Antonio Gramsci, his affection for the communist Giorgio Amendola, and the help he had given at the height of fascist rule to a Neapolitan communist leader to publish a book by Antonio Labriola.³⁸

For Bobbio, communism had indicated real and important problems:

³⁶ *Politica e Cultura*, pp. 177–228, 202: the main message is this: Croce, liberal in ideals and human sensitivity, was however indifferent, on a more directly political level, to concrete legal forms that limit the power of government: for example, the division of powers.

³⁷ *Il filosofo e i comunisti*, p. 26

³⁸ *Taccuini*, pp. 403, 289.

Communism was an ‘inverted utopia’, because it was a liberation utopia that had been inverted into its opposite, namely the constriction and oppression of human beings [...]. That historical communism has failed, I do not dispute. But the problems remain, the very same problems that the communist utopia had pointed out and believed to be soluble. This is the reason why it is foolish to rejoice in their defeat and, rubbing one’s hands with glee, to say: ‘We told you so!’. Oh, you deluded people! Do you really believe that the end of historical communism (I insist on the ‘historical’) has put an end to the need and thirst for justice?³⁹

Much work to be done

The memory of these doctrines of Benedetto Croce and Norberto Bobbio, together with the memory of the profound intellectual legacy that Bobbio inherited from Croce, have been erased from Italian culture by both older communists like Palmiro Togliatti from 1944 onwards and by the Neo-Marxists of 1968 right up to today.⁴⁰

After this ‘*damnatio memoriae*’ this link between Bobbio and Croce was simply forgotten and with it those of their doctrines which could have made Italian democracy more resistant to populism and other forms of mass manipulation.

In fact, the role of ‘*studia humanitatis*’ is essential to any country’s society and politics: humanities must most of all avoid falsification and notably that kind of falsification which is purposeful omission. There is a huge amount of work to be done in this regard in relation to Italian culture and its historical self-representation. In my opinion, the first step should be to become aware that Bobbio affirmed many times that Croce was his most significant mentor and teacher (above all the others, Cattaneo, Kelsen, Hobbes, Hegel, Marx), and to confute the mass of published writings that have denied or ignored this fact for decades.

The second step would then be to provide an overview of the history of Italian culture, to collect data and tell the story of how, for more than a century, the philosophy

³⁹ *Il filosofo e i comunisti*, pp. 26–27.

⁴⁰ Togliatti (head of the Italian Communist Party) launched an appeal to the intellectual community to build an ‘anti-Croce’ culture. He had already started when Croce was still alive, but had partly failed. One should read the story told by Croce himself, of public attacks (along with public and almost forced retractions) by Togliatti who accused him of ‘collaborationism’ with the fascist regime in *Taccuini*, pp. 162–63, 258, 402–404. On Togliatti and his anti-Croce campaign, see Daniela la Penna, ‘The rise and fall of Benedetto Croce. Intellectual positionings in the Italian cultural field, 1944–1947’, *Modern Italy*, Volume 21, Issue 2, May 2016, pp. 139–55. On 1968 Neo-Marxists, see Marco Revelli’s book, *Bobbio e il suo mondo (Bobbio and his World)*, Torino: Aragno, 2006, where the name of Benedetto Croce is never mentioned. On the way in which 1968 intellectuals hid the paramount intellectual connections between Bobbio and Croce, see Franco Manni, ‘Benedetto Croce e Norberto Bobbio’ in Ivan Pozzoni (ed.), *Benedetto Croce. Teoria e Orizzonti (Theory and Horizons)*, Milano: Limina Mentis, 2010, p. 275, and, by the same author, *Il Croce di Norberto Bobbio*, ‘Reset’, March–April 2010, Issue 118, pp. 79–84.

of liberalism, on the one hand, had a consistent and intellectually elevated tradition, but, on the other hand, was repeatedly challenged and defeated by Marxism and fascism.

The third step should be to disseminate such ideas among the Italian public, hoping that the changed circumstances of today will allow a more thoughtful reception of them.

Franciscan Cynicism: *Bare Life* as a Transformative Cosmopolitics

Roberto Mosciatti

Abstract

As part of a wider project which looks at contemporary Italian Thought as a revival of Greek Cynic ideas, this paper identifies, within Giorgio Agamben's post-1990 work, the framework sustaining an innovative cosmo-political discourse. Whereas scholars rarely remark that western cosmopolitanism was founded as an antagonistic mode of thinking by Diogenes of Sinope and his disciples, in recent times authors such as Peter Sloterdijk and Luis Navia have highlighted numerous similarities connecting Greek Cynicism with contemporary European philosophies. Relying on these historical-theoretical presuppositions, this article explains why Agamben's Franciscanism should be seen as one of the most faithful revitalisations of cynic elements that western thought has carried out during the past few decades. Specifically, a 'cynic' interpretation of Agamben's post-1990 work is desirable inasmuch as it solves some of the aporias elicited by the *Homo Sacer* hypothesis, whilst also providing cosmopolitan political theory with effective critical tools.

For the happiness of the animal, that thorough
kynic, is the living proof of the truth of
cynicism.

Nietzsche, *Untimely Observations*, 2, sec.1

Awakening One's Own False Consciousness: the Kynical Turning Point

How cynical have we really become? Does cynicism truly represent the ultimate horizon encompassing all human thoughts? Are lack of empathy, social opportunism, and political resignation all that is left for us? It is indisputable that interpersonal disconnection has exponentially proliferated across the western world during the past four decades. The fading of the new social movements at the end of the 1970s undeniably led a relevant amount of collective feelings and genuine human bonds to an inexorable shipwreck. Those who expected both the expansion of the markets and the internationalisation of labour to enhance reciprocity, compassion, or moral progress are finding themselves largely disappointed. It is evident that globalising processes, narrowly dependent upon technological tools, are increasingly forcing social interactions within a virtual dimension, while confining the human psyche within spaces of estrangement and alienation.

Partly because of this simulated component, communication per se has been taken over by scepticism and mistrustfulness. Whereas political ideologies have surrendered to the rise of populist views and conspiracy theories, mainstream media have to a large degree lost their authority over ultimate ‘truth’, receiving on a daily basis a fair amount of contempt. Social networks, in turn, are progressively becoming the trashcan wherein people discharge their frustrations and dissatisfactions. Meanwhile, an evanescent dialogic exchange between cybernetic subjectivities serves as a counterpart to the indifference we maintain for the actual neighbour sitting next to us. A civilisation of isolated robotic sociopaths? Is this all we have been able to accomplish after all?

Going back to the beginning of the 1980s, one discovers that efforts had been made to escape this cynical labyrinth. German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk addressed some of the aforementioned issues, also stimulating the subsequent work of several other authors. In the provocative *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), Sloterdijk characterises neo-cynicism as a disenchanting and opportunistic demeanour which propagates across contemporary capitalistic societies, infiltrating not only the world of business and media but also numerous intellectual realms. The typical neo-cynic is for Sloterdijk afflicted with an illness that is ironically baptised as *enlightened false consciousness*. This malady distresses those who have lost faith in the great ideologies of modernity – i.e. the ideals of the Enlightenment, the Marxian utopia, the Hegelian τέλος, etc. – but are incapable of converting their disillusion into pioneering values or social change. Due to this incapacity, neo-cynics direct their existential scepticism towards petty minded purposes such as materialistic goods, financial profit, or individual success: ‘The characteristic odour of modern cynicism is of a more fundamental nature – a constitution of consciousness afflicted with enlightenment that, having learned from historical experience, refuses cheap optimism [...]. In the new cynicism, a detached negativity comes through that scarcely allows itself any hope [...]’.¹

Despite these low-spirited postulates, Sloterdijk’s analysis is not completely devoid of hope. The *Critique* alludes to some conceptual and moral tools with which neo-cynical phenomena could presumably be turned against themselves, restoring to health those suffering from the sicknesses previously described. Sloterdijk suggests digging within the history of cynicism so as to unearth its primaevial roots. To defeat the neo-cynical malady, it is imperative that we retrieve the views defended in Ancient Greece by the Cynic school which flourished there. The rebellious principles and lifestyle adopted by Diogenes of Sinope, who is credited with being the most

¹ Sloterdijk (1988), p.6

representative exponent of this philosophical orientation, should serve as a paradigm.² Ideals of poverty, frugality, and self-sufficiency were all invoked by Diogenes as ways in which to condemn the corruption perpetrated around the Hellenistic urban centres, where greed, moral degradation, and injustice of all sorts occurred on a daily basis. Dismissing the cerebral abstractions that had distinguished classical Greek Thought, the Cynics conceived of philosophy as a practical pursuit of virtue. This could be attained exclusively through both the rejection of ordinary societal values such as wealth, fame and power, and the adoption of a minimalistic weekly routine emulating the simplicity of natural life. For this reason, the Cynics refused most superfluous comforts, while incorporating rigorous physical training, meditation, and ascetic rituals within their everyday practice.

The cosmopolitan utopia envisioned by Diogenes for the very first time in western history reflects this radical attitude. The idea of a universal political belonging was conceptually formulated by the Cynics as a virtuous space of *self-exile* from existing dishonoured societies. Freedom was defined mostly in unconstructive terms, as freedom from nation and social conventions, while the kynical³ ‘state’ required the readiness to live at the margins of established communities. In some circumstances this mentality appeared to be the symptom of a distrust in politics, which was a common tendency during the Hellenistic epoch. Nevertheless, in some other cases Cynicism displayed strong political connotations, inasmuch as cosmopolitan arguments were occasionally employed as forms of resistance with respect to the ruling authorities.⁴ This antagonistic standpoint did not prevent Cynic thinkers from embracing democratic and philanthropic values: the ideal Cynic is described as ‘just, lawful, prudent, temperate, brave, and magnanimous [...], gentle, mild, kindly, not only to his friends and allies’ but to all people.⁵

Importantly, because Greek thought and language did not possess a term denoting a universal mankind that would correspond to the Roman *humanitas*, kynical cosmopolitanism could not rely on humanistic presuppositions. Scholars point out that the Greek word *ἄνθρωπος* (*anthropos* = man) denotes in all cases an individual creature exhibiting theriomorphic characteristics.⁶ Therefore, it could not be used as

² A complete illustration of Greek Cynicism, which flourished during the Hellenistic age, is provided by Desmond (2008).

³ Adopting Sloterdijk’s notation, I will employ the adjective ‘kynical’, which stems from the Greek *kyón*, *kynos* (dog), so as to distinguish the ancient usage of the term from the way in which the word ‘cynical’ is conceived of by contemporary common sense.

⁴ In this regard, see Kennedy (1999).

⁵ Desmond (2008), p.198.

⁶ Nybakken is explicit in this regard: ‘From Homer down through the classical Greek writers the word *anthropos* remained a generic term for individuals. It signified a creature that, although having some characteristics of the lower animals, nevertheless possessed faculties and powers above them

a conceptual substrate for either the elaboration of comprehensive ethical systems, or for theorising an ontological separation between humans and other living forms. This means that western cosmopolitanism originated as a mode of thinking that posits an affinity between all living beings by means of a critical distrust of cerebral intellections and universalistic philosophical discourses: ‘Diogenes does not say that he is a “cosmopolitan” or a “citizen of the world”, that is, the *human world*. Rather, he says that he is a “citizen of the cosmos”. The *cosmos is not a human construct*, but exists beyond human control and even conception’.⁷ Such a non-humanistic essence is furthermore fully portrayed in the term ‘Cynicism’, recalling both Diogenes’ nickname *kyôn, kynos* (= dog) and the wild modes of living embraced by his followers.

Sloterdijk is convinced that the combative attitude exhibited by these dog philosophers needs to be retrieved as faithfully as possible in order to contain the squalor that is taking over present-day consumerist societies, wherein commodities turn into spiritual purposes and pathological attachment to material wealth repeatedly converts profit into moral rightness. Partly siding with this viewpoint, Luis Navia has also looked at ancient cynicism as the most efficient weapon to employ for dismantling ‘a system that creates and then panders to unnecessary desires and that increasingly establishes itself as the sole reality [...] [that] harbours terrible violence both to the natural environment whose dwindling resources support it, and to human beings who are progressively dehumanised’.⁸

What is the likelihood for these pleas to be heard? Is there a concrete possibility for a more virtuous type of cynicism to reemerge within western communities? Scholars reassure us of the fact that, from time to time, kynical elements have reappeared throughout history, acquiring a variety of different shapes. For instance, due to the importance that poverty, mysticism, and ascetic rituals acquired during the late Middle Ages, some view the diffusion of spiritual orders such as the Benedictines, Dominicans, and Franciscans, as a kynical reaction with respect to the corruption that had conquered numerous clerical environments around that time.⁹ Moreover, kynical elements have resurfaced during epochs which, similar to the Greek Hellenistic age when Diogenes’ ideas gained popularity, encompass factors such as the expansion of imperialistic powers, urbanisation procedures, economic growth, cultural fusion, and social instability. These features partly apply to the Roman imperial era, when the Stoics explicitly inherited the legacy of the Cynics. Even more significantly, the aforementioned factors distinguish the contemporary age of globalisation, in which a

[...]. The Greeks were familiar with this two-fold nature of man, and yet their word *anthropos* seldom, if ever, signified the ‘noble’ or ‘humane’ aspect of man; it was not used to mean ideal mankind’ (1937), pp. 397–98.

⁷ Desmond (2008), p. 204, emphasis added.

⁸ Ibid. p. 236.

⁹ Ibid. chapter 6.

shortfall of political independence experienced by western nation-states recalls the condition of the Greek *poleis*, which within the Hellenistic scenario were deprived of a large part of their autonomy.¹⁰

This historical association gains a more compelling significance when one delves into the kynical components characterising contemporary ‘post-modern’ and ‘post-human’ doctrines. Whether through a conflation of biological elements with technological devices that trans-humanists invoke, or by way of a system of power collisions that – from Nietzsche to Foucault and Agamben – anti-humanist and post-modern philosophers have identified as explaining the evolution of western knowledge, many of these discourses have contributed significantly to removing ‘man’ from the centre of the narrative space. In turn, this is now more inclined to harbour pre-humanistic kynical perspectives.

Debatably, kynical elements resurface in Giorgio Agamben’s post-humanism more visibly than they do in many other philosophical and literary contexts. Such is the perspective defended in this article, which will explain why the evolution of the *Homo Sacer* project acquires a more eloquent significance when filtered through a kynical lens. The kynical standpoint is desirable because it resolves some of the aporias that the *bare life* assumption elicits: a) the incongruity between the cataclysmic aspects characterising Agamben’s discourse and the antagonistic aims it occasionally evokes; b) the question concerning Agamben’s *messianism*, which seemingly collides with the secular and immanent essence that his analysis embodies, and c) the uncanny appeal to the theme of monastic asceticism, which is discussed in one of the concluding volumes of the *Homo Sacer* series in order to address issues pertaining to globalisation, capitalistic bio-power, and juridical apparatuses. Additionally, the kynical hypothesis is auspicious because it assists in the extrapolation of an innovative and critical cosmo-political discourse which destabilises neoliberal ideological structures and dissociates principles of local autonomy from cultural protectionism and anti-immigration claims.

Anthropocentrism, Sovereignty, Law: An Ontology of Formlessness

Agamben’s post-humanism is commonly considered, on the one hand, as a reformation of Foucault’s bio-politics, and, on the other, as a debt owed to Hannah Arendt’s philosophical reflections. Inheriting from French post-structuralism the genealogical method, Agamben rejects the hypothetical transition between a ‘sovereign’ and a ‘bio-political’ power which, according to Foucault, took place at the

¹⁰ Kennedy (1999), p. 31.

end of the modern age.¹¹ Agamben expresses scepticism with respect to this account due to its perceived failure to explain the connections linking sovereignty, modernity, and the totalitarian shipwrecks that litter the 20th century. The *homo sacer* hypothesis resolves this dilemma by combining the two forms of power posited by Foucault into a single paradigm that nevertheless exhibits a dual essence. Agamben conceives of western sovereignty as a mechanism which, ever since ancient times, has functioned according to an *exclusion-inclusion* mechanism that regulates human life through a potential suspension of juridical rights. From Agamben's perspective, the human condition throughout western history has always coincided with the experience of a *bare life*; namely, a mode of existence which is produced and controlled politically through the possible revocation of legal status and which, consequently, lies in between *βίος* and *ζωή* (*bios* and *zoe*) – i.e. humanity and animality.

Following Hannah Arendt, Agamben believes that both the twofold nature of sovereignty and the related condition of naked 'sacredness' became more visible during the 20th century, mainly in consequence of the atrocities perpetrated by European totalitarianisms. Agamben is convinced that the massacres perpetrated under the Nazi regime in Germany cannot be interpreted as a historical anomaly which drastically deviates from the occidental tradition. Quite the opposite, they reveal a contradiction that has always been inscribed within western politics, and which was ultimately producing the most destructive outcomes. Despite this substantial continuity, Agamben identifies a significant difference that distinguishes the contemporary age from previous epochs. This is the fact that the *homo sacer* condition, representing a state of exception, has been in recent times proclaimed and applied in innumerable circumstances, to the point of becoming the rule. In other words, although bio-political power 'is at least as old as the sovereign exception',¹² it discloses itself more destructively within the contemporary age, when the disconnection between the 'human' and the 'citizen' has grown considerably larger, leading individuals to experience an ongoing state of vulnerability.

Because the *bare life* condition represents an exemplary model for interpreting contemporary sociopolitical phenomena, it goes without saying that Agamben's perspective readily lends itself to being interpreted in a catastrophic manner. As a matter of fact, more than one writer has referred to the *Homo Sacer* project in apocalyptic terms. However, the perspective defended here will rely on the cynical aspects that characterise Agamben's post-humanism so as to rectify the

¹¹ Foucault firmly distinguishes sovereign power from bio-power. Sovereign power discloses itself through readily identifiable rulers whose main authority over citizens is to take their life or let them live, whilst bio-power is characterised as a de-personified type of power, which relies on capitalistic dynamics, is substantially devoid of agency, and produces subjectivity by fostering life or disallowing it to the point of death. For a more comprehensive illustration, see Esposito (2008), chapter 1.

¹² Agamben (1998), p. 11.

aforementioned misreading as follows: 1) despite its cataclysmic connotations, Agamben's *bare life* also functions as an ontologically *transformative* tool that is potentially able to dismantle the violent device that generates the exceptional logic of sovereignty. 2) Such a displacement, which is mainly pursued through a deconstruction of history, does not give rise to implications with a merely religious significance. Rather, Agamben posits a Franciscan *poverty in time* which calls for a cosmo-political antagonism that thrives outside of all juridical domains. The justifications for these claims may be illustrated along the following lines:

Several scholars have evaluated Agamben's doctrine as an essentially pessimistic philosophical discourse. For instance, Alain Badiou disapproves of the fragile aspects which characterise the notion of bare life, which he sees as ultimately 'always sacrificed'.¹³ Even more disastrous are the considerations expressed by Ernesto Laclau, who perceives the Agambenian state of exception as 'the unavoidable advance towards a totalitarian society'¹⁴ and substantially condemns the *Homo Sacer* project as a form of mere 'political nihilism'.¹⁵ Within the Italian philosophical debate, Roberto Esposito may partially be aligned with these interpretations and highlights the destructive message delivered by Agamben's bio-politics, which in all cases produces thanato-political outcomes.

One should certainly accept that these exegetical suggestions are at least somewhat reliable, to the extent that finding optimistic messages within Agamben's texts is not a stress-free mission. And yet it is legitimate to wonder as to the degree to which these hermeneutical perspectives are able to capture the multifaceted nature of the *Homo Sacer* doctrine. Indeed, a closer look at Agamben's work after 1990, which certainly follows from tragic postulates, reveals nonetheless an argument pursuing emancipatory goals. These are explicitly confessed in *The Open* (2004), wherein Agamben identifies a correspondence between the detrimental logic of sovereignty and the anthropocentric aspects characterising western epistemologies which, throughout the centuries, have repeatedly separated man from other forms of life. In this context, Agamben explicitly utilises *bare life* as a post-human tool which has the capacity to neutralise both the *bios-zoe* opposition and the corresponding *inclusion-exclusion* framework:

To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean no longer to seek new – more effective or more authentic – articulations, but *rather to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that – within*

¹³ Alain Badiou, *Logique des Mondes*, quoted in Lorenzo Chiesa (2009), 'Giorgio Agamben's Franciscan Ontology' in Chiesa & Toscano eds. (2009), p. 153.

¹⁴ Ernesto Laclau (2007), 'Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?' in Calarco & DeCaroli ed. by (2007), p.17.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 22.

*man – separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man.*¹⁶

It is an uncanny line of reasoning that leaves open the door for potential redemption after all. Let us then look at this fragment from the perspective defended by Lorenzo Chiesa, who also remarks that ‘what is scarcely investigated, or altogether overlooked, by countless analyses of the notion of *homo sacer* is the very fact that, beginning with the introduction of the first volume of his series, Agamben explicitly relates such a notion to the possibility of a “new politics”’.¹⁷ In view of this more hopeful perspective, what does Agamben mean by ‘Shabbat of both animal and man’? What does the *suspension of the suspension* entail?

The hypothesis that views Agamben’s *Shabbat* as a promotion of Christian religious tones, which is partly endorsed by authors such as Kelly Oliver,¹⁸ appears to be excessively simplistic. As I have clarified elsewhere,¹⁹ this perspective is one-dimensional because it does not take into account the relevant post-Christian and immanent components that characterise contemporary Italian Theory. Research shows that, particularly after 1990, Italian philosophers have displayed in numerous circumstances the propensity to explain religious concepts in secular terms, also relying significantly on Agamben’s thought so as to nourish this political-theological inclination.²⁰ The tension that materialises between Agamben’s mystical rhetoric and the lay personality characterising Italian Theory will not easily find relief if it is not considered as a cynical phenomenon. I will return again to this topic shortly. For now I will clarify that, far from advocating narrowly transcendent motives, what Agamben prioritises in order to accomplish moral and social progress is the necessity to carry out specific ontological shifts: ‘Ontology, or first philosophy, is not an innocuous academic discipline, but in every sense the fundamental operation in which anthropogenesis, the becoming human of the living being, is realised’.²¹

Specifically, Agamben’s discourse calls for the elaboration of an ontology that dismisses the taxonomic divisions perpetrated for centuries within western knowledge, and which describes ‘life’ in more fluid terms, preventing discrimination and stigmatisation of any sort from taking place on the political plane. Nancy Fraser’s thoughtful account of recognition strategies, distinguishing *affirmative* methods from *transformative* approaches, is worth recalling in order to obtain an exhaustive

¹⁶ Agamben (2004), p. 92, emphases added.

¹⁷ Chiesa (2009), p. 152.

¹⁸ See Oliver (2009), chapter 10.

¹⁹ Mosciatti (2017).

²⁰ I am referring in particular to Roberto Esposito (2012), *Living Thought*, chapter 5.

²¹ Agamben (2004), p. 79.

evaluation of the theory in question.²² An ‘affirmative remedy’ for injustice intends to rectify social disparities without modifying the fundamental structure that produces them. For instance, within the political context of the United States, an affirmative remedy for racism can be represented by black-identity strategies, endowing African American citizens with more relevant social weight. On the other hand, a ‘transformative remedy’ aspires to repair inequalities by reshaping their inner ‘generative framework’.²³ In the case of racism, such a method can be exemplified by political modes of thinking which prefer to dismantle the black-white dichotomy as well as ordinary conceptions of race and ethnicity. Fraser rightfully points out that affirmative recognition strategies are ultimately self-contradictory, inasmuch as they privilege one group over another, thus betraying the egalitarian premises from which they move. Concerning affirmative feminism, for instance, Fraser concludes: ‘Read through that lens, the cultural politics of affirming women’s difference appears as an affront to the liberal welfare state’s official commitment to the equal moral worth of persons’.²⁴ On the other hand, transformative approaches, which Fraser mainly associates with deconstructive philosophical manoeuvres, are more self-consistent because their implementation does not betray the universalistic conception of recognition they presuppose.

Conceiving of sociopolitical change as mainly dependent upon radical ontological alterations, Agamben grounds moral activity on a view that characterises life in terms of *potentiality* and *amorphousness*.²⁵ Call this an *ontology of formlessness*. This type of ontology clearly encompasses Fraser’s transformative component as it employs the *suspension of the suspension* with the intention of undermining the violent mechanisms that for centuries have distressed western politics, by modifying the conceptual structure which elicits those mechanisms.

Despite its destructive façade, Agamben’s discourse involves components that visibly restructure relations of recognition and destabilise group differentiation. From this transformative stance, the ultimate significance of the *Shabbat* rests within the comparison that *The Coming Community* (1993) establishes between the notion of a ‘whatever singularity’ and those peculiar spirits that Christian theology confines within Limbo. In this mythical dimension souls are neither blessed nor damned, but thanks to such an uncertain self-perception they represent a fertile terrain for the rise of new and more desirable modes of social life. Whether or not this ‘naked’ singularity offers

²² See Fraser (1997), pp.23–33.

²³ Ibid. p. 23.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 29.

²⁵ In this regard, Agamben is unequivocal: ‘This is why the only ethical experience (which, as such, cannot be a task or a subjective decision) is the experience of being (one’s own) *potentiality*, of being (one’s own) *possibility* – exposing, that is, in every form one’s own *amorphousness* and in every act one’s own *inactuality*’ (*The Coming Community*, p. 44).

a solid ground for the theorisation of the kynical cosmopolitanism that was previously postulated will be evaluated by taking into account Agamben's critique of history. This is regarded by Agamben as one of the most fundamental theoretical moves to carry out in order to accomplish the ontological adjustments that *Homo Sacer* summons.

Poverty in Time: Towards a Transformative Cosmo-politics

1.

In agreement with authors who include Walter Mignolo, Homi Bhabha, Boaventura De Sousa Santos, and Sheldon Pollock, who look at cosmopolitan theory from a critical viewpoint,²⁶ Agamben is also strongly convinced that a meticulous assessment of western conceptions of history is needed in order to dismantle euro-anthropocentric systems of thought. Traditional cosmopolitanism, inheriting the legacy of the Enlightenment and the correlated faith in human progress, mainly relies on the Christian-Newtonian representation of temporality as an entity which flows indiscriminately in all parts of the cosmos and is quantifiable in universalistic terms. This humanistic type of model, explaining time as a linear, regular, and cumulative progression of units ultimately leading all societies to develop along the same lines, is nonetheless an exclusively western construction which occasionally conceals imperialistic purposes. The anti-humanistic path that Agamben follows will not be able to reach its ultimate destination without an opportune critique of such a temporal paradigm. From this perspective, the *suspension of the suspension*, portrayed in *The Open* as a form of life 'without time and without world',²⁷ acquires a temporal value which indicates a hypothetical dimension wherein ordinary chronological measurements are inapplicable. Recalling Heidegger's notion of the human's 'world-forming' ability, and the animal's being 'poor in world', to which *The Open* clearly alludes, Agamben's post-human view discloses itself as *poor in time*.

It is important to clarify that Agamben does not envisage a conclusion of temporality as such,²⁸ but rather calls for a *messianic* reformation of the aforementioned western paradigm. Far from coinciding with the definitive dissolution of history, temporal messianism disrupts ordinary chronological sequences by intermittently conflating all temporal planes together; it is 'the time of the end [...], the time that contracts itself and begins to end [...], the time that remains between time

²⁶ For a detailed account see Taraborrelli (2015) and also Chakrabarty D., Bhabha H.K., Pollock S., and Breckenridge C.A. eds. (2002).

²⁷ Agamben (2004), p. 47.

²⁸ As Chiesa thoughtfully points out (2009), p. 157. Interestingly, Agamben's reflections on temporal *messianism* take shape as an interpretation of Saint Paul's doctrines, which were in turn heavily influenced by the Greek Cynics. This aspect should certainly be examined more accurately by considering the work of Gerald F. Downing, see (1992) and (1998).

and its end'.²⁹ Agamben thus relocates time within a suspended dimension wherein 'origin' and 'end', 'beginning' and 'conclusion' occasionally tend to overlap. This model moves away from the one-dimensional representation on which western common sense generally relies. Temporal messianism, signifying neither a progressive accumulation of instants nor a linear series of actions or achievements, spasmodically pulls together sequential openings and closures, and thus undermines both the capitalistic maximisation of production and the technocratic forms of control that the Occident has exhibited since the modern age. From this stance, it is easier to identify the semantic correlation that Agamben establishes between *ontological formlessness*, *temporal suspension*, and *Shabbat*. Because of a deficiency in qualitative and also quantitative attributes, messianic time is hardly conceivable in purely rational terms; nevertheless, one can perceive it as an existential experience on the Saturday (Shabbat) which interrupts work activities and puts on hold the ordinary gestures that people mechanically repeat during the week.

From the sociopolitical standpoint, this unconventional conception of time summons an alternative dimension wherein radical shifts are potentially set free. What Agamben describes is a temporal experience that is able to unravel the un-decidable riddle of sovereignty by suspending the juridical framework that sustains it. Messianic life, enabling human beings to 'carry out good works independently of the law',³⁰ completely disengages from both existing power relations and legal preconditions, thus generating, in Chiesa's terms, 'a new kind of sovereignty diametrically opposed to the sovereignty exercised by the anomic form of law'.³¹ Agamben's *poverty in time*, therefore, ultimately stands for a transformative bio-political discourse that adopts neither *dialectical* nor *affirmative* strategies, but triggers the emergence of alternative forms of political autonomy through both the deactivation of applicable normative provisions and the creation of extra-normative modes of action and interaction.

The kynical spirit that this discourse personifies comes assertively to the fore in one of Agamben's most revealing texts: *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form of Life* (2013) provides a detailed historical-philosophical reconstruction of the phenomenon of western monasticism, focusing in particular on the Franciscan order. The book takes into account the spiritual movements of the 13th century and discusses the lifestyle of the Franciscan friars by examining meticulously their rules, ascetic rituals and daily practices. Why would a philosophical project that explores the conceptual borders separating 'community', 'sovereignty', and 'law', devote its time to such an uncanny topic? What does the theme of monasticism have to do with issues pertaining to temporality, capitalism or sociopolitical transformation? These

²⁹ Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, quoted by Chiesa (2009), p. 157.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 160.

³¹ Chiesa (2009), p. 160.

perplexities can only be alleviated if they are supported by our kynical hypothesis, which is confirmed by the very first pages of the text, describing the ancient monastic orders in rigorously secular terms. Far from placing importance on transcendent entities or theoretical issues regarding the nature of divinity, these religious groups looked upon daily life as their main concern:

in any case what they state and claim does not actually concern theological or dogmatic questions, articles of faith, or problems of scriptural interpretation. Instead, what is at stake is life and the way of living [...]. The claim of poverty, which is present in all movements and which in itself is clearly not new, is only one aspect of this way or form of life.³²

Diogenes' insubordinate demeanour surfaces even more forcefully in the absolute primacy that the Franciscan rule gave to 'the actual exercise of the virtues',³³ which is in all circumstances more valuable than doctrinal abstractions or the 'profession of vows'.³⁴ Moving from the association that the Franciscan literature introduces between 'rule' and 'form of life', Agamben's bio-political perspective prioritises the living incarnation of ethical values over any written text. In particular, Agamben refers to the Franciscan example as an effort to elaborate a set of principles that are able to adhere spontaneously to all their concrete implementations, and which fill in the void that separates the universality of the norm from the particularity of each living being. The *ideal of poverty* is praised in order to reduce such a distance. Relying on the cathartic power that self-dispossessing modes of thinking convey, Franciscanism indicates the way to emancipate oneself from all types of property so as to step out of the sphere of law. Paradoxically, the Franciscan rule epitomises a normative code that dismisses *in toto* its formal structure, and which finds in the kynical actuality of practical virtue the one and only way in which it might be exemplified.

2.

Agamben's appeal to what is probably the most kynical phenomenon characterising Italian history suggests in all probability the effort to redirect western thought towards alternative targets. Of primary importance is the retrieval of critical tools which in some ways undermine the greedy logic of appropriation and materialistic accrual that the West has pursued for centuries. Agamben looks at Franciscanism as a revolutionary phenomenon that had pointed to a different path, which was irresponsibly ignored during subsequent epochs by European rulers and people. It

³² Agamben (2013), p. 92.

³³ Ibid. p.107.

³⁴ Ibid.

goes without saying that the praise of poverty in question has little to do with the invocation of an eternal life or the mere celebration of the Christian monastic tradition. Rather, it indicates an antagonistic instrument which has the capacity to undermine consumerist moral frameworks, whilst also weakening the alliance that capitalistic systems have established with juridical apparatuses:

In one case as in the other, what remained untouched was perhaps the most precious legacy of Franciscanism, to which the West must return ever anew to contend with it as its undeferrable task: how to think a form-of-life, a human life entirely removed from the grasp of the law and a use of bodies and of the world that would never be substantiated into an appropriation. That is to say again: to think life as that which is never given as property but only as common use.³⁵

Bearing in mind this significant paragraph, Lorenzo Chiesa's suggestion to look at the homo sacer as a political hero who carries out a 'silent form of resistance'³⁶ should definitely be welcomed. Additionally, it is important to clarify that the real essence concealed by this rebellious asceticism cannot be justified through the unworldly domain of 'faith' because it is rooted within the kynical atmosphere which has largely animated post-modern thought during the past few decades. Agamben's bio-political cynicism, materialising as 'an individual and solitary flight from the world',³⁷ then gives rise to 'a model of total communitarian life'³⁸ which challenges existing capitalistic and juridical establishments.

All this symbolically merges within Saint Francis' legendary ability to speak with birds and wolves, whilst also mirroring his unconditional love for all other living creatures. Suspended between *bios* and *zoe*, the Franciscans created an alternative ground for the rise of a post-human 'coming community' that dismissed the peculiarity of social-juridical conventions and ultimately is identified with the wholeness of the cosmos. The cosmo-political connotations that characterise Agamben's discourse, which have been neglected by numerous scholars, partly follow from the Arendtian presuppositions that inspire the *Homo Sacer* doctrine. Because in our time all individuals are potentially *homini sacri*, Agamben certainly retrieves Arendt's idea of the Holocaust as 'a civilisational breakdown with global meaning',³⁹ while converting the figure of the Muselmann into an exiled political rebel. Moreover, the Franciscan

³⁵ Ibid. p. xiii.

³⁶ Chiesa (2009), p. 153.

³⁷ Agamben (2013) p. 9.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Lars Rensmann (2012), 'Grounding Cosmopolitics: Rethinking Crimes against Humanity and Global Political Theory with Arendt and Adorno' in Rensmann & Gandesha eds. (2012), p. 130.

communities he envisions display Arendtian characteristics to the extent that they are substantially devoid of specific identities, and yet still rely on concrete bonds as ‘preconditions of meaningful public life’,⁴⁰ urging political theory to ‘think and act within the limits’.⁴¹ In line with Arendt’s view, Agamben would hardly endorse ‘megalomaniac’⁴² cosmopolitan objectives such as the removal of all territorial borders or the idea of a world citizenship. It is no accident that in recent times he has expressed some scepticism with regard to the *Ius Soli* decree discussed within the Italian parliament.

Arguably, Agamben’s kynical departure from Arendt unfolds through a radicalisation of her unclear conception of the juridical. Despite Arendt’s reservations pertaining to the notion of ‘human rights’, which are often declared but rarely concretely enforced, she still acknowledges the importance of international law for protecting individuals from their governments and forestalling crimes against humanity. Because of this ambiguity, Arendt’s notion of a ‘right to have rights’, which emphasises the necessity of a unified humanity providing a reasonable solution to the problems of homelessness, statelessness and political abuses, can be interpreted in two different ways: either as a call for more sensitive juridical responsibilities or as a provocative dismissal of legal norms in general. Rensmann favours the second interpretation, describing Arendt’s work as a philosophical effort which, ‘rather than delegating global challenges primarily to formal legal principles or appealing to abstract morality’,⁴³ focuses on ‘situated political responsibility and particular politics of human dignity in order to realise, and rectify the universal’.⁴⁴ Moving in a similar direction, Balibar takes a step forward and identifies within the ‘right to have rights’ a polemical essence which makes it primarily a ‘right to disobedience’:

The right to have rights is not a moral notion; it is a political one. It describes a process which started with resistance and ends in the actual exercise of a constituent power, whichever particular historical form this may take. It should therefore also be called a right to politics, in the broad sense, meaning that nobody can be properly emancipated from outside or from above, but only by his or her own activity.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 129.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 131.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Étienne Balibar, ‘Ambiguous Universality’, quoted by Patrick Hannafin (2013), ‘A Cosmopolitics of Singularities’ in Braidotti, Hanafin, Blaagaard eds. (2013), p. 42.

Agamben's retrieval of Arendt radicalises this interpretation. The cosmo-political 'coming communities' he theorises are grounded on the *abdicatio omnine iuri* (abdication of all rights) which regulates the Franciscan rule and lifestyle. Relying on this postulate, Agamben converts Arendt's 'right to have rights' into the uncompromising 'right to renounce all rights' that is personified spiritually, practically, and politically by the monastic order. This means that, in the context of *Homo Sacer*, voluntary exile is not conceived of as the momentary space for intellectual reflection that Arendt envisions but, more cynically, as the exclusive domain wherein social transformation can ultimately succeed.

From Agamben's viewpoint, the opportunity for such a cosmo-political redemption is paradoxically offered by the dissemination of capitalistic bio-power, which in the present epoch repeatedly converts rules into exceptions, thus transforming human life into an experience of shared self-exposure. Despite the detrimental consequences brought about by globalisation, this also sets up the conditions for the rise of societies with no identity that challenge the arrogant authority held by local dynasties, interregional aristocracies, and national powers:

But this also means that the petty bourgeoisie represents an opportunity unheard of in the history of humanity that it must at all costs not let slip away. Because if instead of continuing to search for a proper identity in the already improper and senseless form of individuality, humans were to succeed in belonging to this impropriety as such, in making of the proper being-thus not an identity and an individual property but a singularity without identity, a common and absolutely exposed singularity – if humans could, that is, not be thus in this or that particular biography, but be only *the* thus, their singular exteriority and their face, then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable.⁴⁶

The alliance that the neoliberal bourgeoisie establishes with western state apparatuses is what sustains them and corrodes them at the same time. In fact, these apparatuses reproduce through detection, recognition and identification procedures, whereas neoliberal forces tend to nullify all modes of belonging, thus giving birth to a proliferation of unclassifiable communities and, in turn, to an ongoing 'struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity)'.⁴⁷

Concerning the concrete repercussions that such an argumentative thread brings on the political plane, thought-provoking clues materialise when taking into

⁴⁶ Agamben (1993), p. 65.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.85.

consideration the main tendencies expressed by the *Global Justice Movement*.⁴⁸ Disregarding the perspectives represented by *supporters* and *reformists*, who for the most part neglect truly radical transformative purposes, it is worth focusing on both the *isolationist* and the *alternative* orientations. Isolationists include groups such as *Focus on the Global South*, *Global Exchange*, and *50 years is Enough*,⁴⁹ which call for a total dismantling of globalisation and defend values of economic and political autonomy. These collective units align with the belief that all transnational capital flows are detrimental and that a return to an economy administered locally and nationally is the only option. Representatives of this view are generally not interested in building cross-border networks,⁵⁰ and claim that policies should be elaborated in all circumstances according to principles of self-sufficiency. The *alternative* faction, on the other hand, embraces organisations such as *Zapatistas*, *Adbusters*, and *Reclaim the Streets*,⁵¹ which do not necessarily seek to overthrow capitalism as much as they aim at developing unconventional and more desirable ways of life. Those who belong to this school of thought assign primary importance to cultural and environmental themes. Additionally, they refuse ‘the existing institutions and centres of global powers’,⁵² and ‘concentrate on building separate, alternative arrangements and mechanisms whose viability is important in environmental and community issues’.⁵³

The cynical cosmo-political view that has unfolded here appears to identify a complementary area in between these two orientations. Because of both the Franciscan elements and the transformative components characterising the *Homo Sacer* doctrine, this retrieves the claims pertaining to a self-sufficient and subsidiary type of economy advanced by the *isolationists*, while also valuing the international mentality exhibited by the *alternatives*. The resultant line of thinking is valuable to the extent that, as present-day de-territorialised media repeatedly generate connections between events which occur far away from one another, the attainment of a subsidiary and locally organised type of economy requires a significant degree of intercultural awareness, ideological exchange, and transnational cooperation, which cannot be obtained by means of a merely separatist demeanour. Dismissing *in toto* large-scale

⁴⁸ On this subject, I refer the reader to Anheier Helmut, Glasius Marlies, & Kaldor Mary eds. (2001).

⁴⁹ Meghnad Desai and Yahia Said (2001), ‘The New Anti-Capitalist Movement: Money and Global Civil Society’ in Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor eds. (2001), p. 65.

⁵⁰ See Mario Pianta (2001), ‘Parallel Summits of Global Civil Society’ in Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor eds. (2001), p. 189.

⁵¹ Meghnad Desai and Yahia Said (2001), ‘The New Anti-Capitalist Movement: Money and Global Civil Society’ in Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor eds. (2001), p. 69.

⁵² Mario Pianta (2001), ‘Parallel Summits of Global Civil Society’ in Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor eds. (2001), p. 189.

⁵³ Ibid.

networks, purely isolationist perspectives promote a rhetoric that is merely contradictory and oppositional and, at the same time, risks endorsing the regressive view according to which cultural protectionism and anti-immigration claims need to be defended in order to undermine economic exploitation. In so doing, it might ultimately prove both ineffective and violent. Quite differently, the kynical post-human approach relies on the *alternatives*' conviction that 'the resistance will be as transnational as capital',⁵⁴ while also pursuing transformative forms of dissent that replace self-assertive strategies with ideals of creativity, uniqueness and exceptionality.

Conclusion

A kynical interpretation of Agamben's post-1990 work is auspicious to the extent that it solves some of the stalemates elicited by the *Homo Sacer* hypothesis, whilst also providing cosmopolitan theory with valuable critical tools. Despite its catastrophic appearance, Agamben's bio-politics encompasses transformative factors which have the capacity to convert 'exiled' life-spaces and areas of dislocation into forms of collective antagonism. Pivotal is the Franciscan value of 'poverty', which mainly stands for a way to engage with the temporal flow and exhibits the ability to undermine the bridge linking bio-power, consumerist ideologies, and juridical apparatuses. Displaying in numerous circumstances immanent as well as polemical connotations, Agamben's mysticism cannot be merely explained in religious terms, but needs to be understood according to the kynical atmosphere that has enlivened post-modern thought during the past few decades. Above all, the kynical reading is promising because it points towards a cosmo-political model that challenges neoliberal ways of thinking and deprives principles of political self-sufficiency of their regressive and identitarian meanings.

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⁵⁴ One of the mottos adopted by *Reclaim the Streets*, see Meghnad Desai and Yahia Said (2001), in Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor eds. (2001), p. 75.

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Paradisiacal Knowledge (or, Falling from the Epistemological Constellation)

Ido Govrin

I

Chapter 2 of Giorgio Agamben's book *The Signature of All Things: On Method* is dedicated to a thorough discussion of the *Theory of Signatures*. The emphasis, to a large extent, is placed on the theory's epistemological function by showing the various evolutions and transformations it underwent over time and through the different conceptions of the signature proposed by the thinkers Agamben discusses.

Put very briefly, the point of departure in Agamben's historical depiction is the thought of Paracelsus (AD 1493–1541) who positions man himself as the original *signer* who uses originally manmade (linguistic) signatures to expose hidden knowledge.¹ A further important landmark in this genealogy is the thought of Jakob Böhme (AD 1575–1624), who emphasised, on Agamben's reading, the process of revelation whereby signs are known since signatures actively resuscitate them.

Agamben's historical and philosophical study of the theory of signatures concludes with his own interpretation of the signature,² according to which new

¹ The original core of Paracelsus's *episteme*, as outlined in his treatise 'Concerning the Nature of Things' (Paracelsus, *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings*, 171–94), is the idea that 'all things bear a sign that manifests and reveals their invisible qualities' (ibid, 33) and that 'nothing is without a sign since nature does not release anything in which it has not marked what is to be found within that thing' (Paracelsus, *Bücher und Schriften*, 131). Accordingly, if each and every existing thing in the natural world has invisible qualities within itself that nevertheless can potentially be revealed, and if, by means of embedded, marked signs, man can know the deepest essences of things, it follows that the ability of humans to attain knowledge (of things and as such) is conditioned by the deciphering of the particular structure of signs. But in order fully to realise the sign's particular structure and its concealed content, as well as the transformative outcome of its decoding, perhaps (in this instance) a further stage in Agamben's genealogy had to be reached, so as to show how and against the background of which tradition Paracelsus arrives at his ideas and beliefs. Specifically, this means to depart from Augustine (AD 354–430) since his theory of signs (constituting the only elaborate theory of signs before the thirteenth century) substantially prepared the ground for Paracelsus's work, pivoting on the idea that the deciphering of the sign's components leads to knowledge of God. This Augustinian contribution to the theory of signatures, needless to say, did not in principle escape Agamben, as is evident in numerous other places throughout Agamben's oeuvre where this contribution is directly or indirectly discussed.

² Agamben's interpretation builds upon his collected elaborations of the works of others – in this case, linguists such as Émile Benveniste, Nikolai Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson, and thinkers

knowledge of a certain subject matter, in comparison with past understandings of it, is a derivative of the continuous displacements of its signature or epistemological function in contexts yet to be encountered. The signature thus describes a mode of distribution (of paradigms or paradigmatic signs). Understanding the signature's past generates new knowledge or a new understanding of it in the present on the basis of a conceptualisation of the signature as an historical element or index capable of linking together different times and contexts against (or outside of) chronology.

Agamben thus grants signatures an active force; the signature is understood as an operator (a 'bearer of efficacy') that no longer passively represents or illuminates a certain relation between two factors, but has the ability to displace, transform, and reproduce this relation within a new context or a new domain, and in this way to constitute it anew within different hermeneutic constellations.

The signature has a specific structure in the sense of being suspended between signifier and signified, so that rather than being a sign as such, it is 'what makes a sign intelligible'³ by determining its existence through its actual use. It is a sign that shifts locations and yet retains the same semiotic and semantic being. Signatures, for Agamben, must be able to move from one set of discursive practices to another without changing form or meaning, as form and meaning are not relevant to their specific operation. It is not what a sign says but what it allows to be said, not what it means but what meaning structure it allows to operate. The signature's operative and excessive nature is elegantly summarised by Roberto Esposito in his discussion of Agamben's thought in the broad context of Italian philosophy: 'the "signature" [...] is a strategic operator which marks and simultaneously exceeds [...] concepts, referring them back to their [...] origin. This does not mean that in this passage, or excess, no transformation occurs. However, rather than deriving from semantic mutation, it comes from its opposite, namely, from the repercussion caused by retaining the same meaning in different contexts'.⁴

Agamben cites Paracelsus who summarises his *episteme* with the following claim: '*signatura* is the science by which everything that is hidden is found, and without this art nothing of any profundity can be done'.⁵ However, '[t]his science', writes Agamben, 'like all knowledge, is a consequence of sin, insofar as^[6] Adam, in Eden, was absolutely unmarked, and would have remained so had he not "fallen into nature",

such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Thomas Aquinas, Aby Warburg, Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin and others.

³ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 42.

⁴ Esposito, *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*, 251.

⁵ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 33.

⁶ The Italian reads '*perché*' (because; for; since; in this context).

which leaves nothing unmarked'.⁷

What does it mean to be 'unmarked'? What were the consequences, for Adam, in such a situation? What kind of epistemological status does Eden possess in and of itself, as well as for Adam. At the end of his discussion, Agamben claims that, '[i]t is possible [...] to imagine a practice that [...] reaches back beyond the split between signature and sign and between the semiotic and the semantic in order to lead signatures to their historical fulfilment'.⁸ Can one follow this line of thought or assumption? Is a philosophical inquiry (as reasoned and postulated by Agamben) that reaches beyond signatures towards the Non-marked (i.e. towards the paradisiacal state and final perfection, according to Paracelsus) possible?

II

The ability to follow the long shadow cast by the signature in its course constitutes part of what Agamben terms *archaeology*: a research method that designates both travel through time and acts of epistemic disclosure – in other words, a time-based tracing of objects through different discourses. Archaeology, as a 'science' or method of inquiry, could be applied to any subject (including itself) in an attempt to discover its signatory history.⁹ As such the investigation will attempt to reveal not so much its origin in a chronological sense, but rather the numerous operative forces within its history; or a historical field of multi-polar flows that extends between a phenomenon's 'emergence, the moment of arising'¹⁰ and its becoming. But how exactly does it become possible for a historical investigation to renounce the concept of origin?

In his book, *La linea e il circolo*, Enzo Melandri discusses the domain of *analogy* in relation to procedures of knowledge. He proposes the analogy as an epistemological alternative to the dichotomous model that dominates Western logic. Rejecting the drastic alternative 'A or B', which excludes a possible third option, 'analogy imposes its stubborn "neither A nor B"'.¹¹ This model intervenes in the dichotomies of logic (particular/universal, form/content) in order to 'transform them into a force field traversed by polar tensions, where (as in an electro-magnetic field) their substantial identities evaporate'.¹² The third is given here not from the perspective of dichotomy (or else it would still follow the previous logic), but through the dis-identification and neutralisation of the first two, which now become

⁷ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁹ In *The Signature of All Things*, this sort of operation is discussed in the third chapter, entitled 'Philosophical Archaeology'.

¹⁰ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹² *Ibid.*

indiscernible. Thus, '[t]he third is this indiscernibility'¹³ as it is no longer a scalable magnitude, but a vectorial intensity.

In another text that deals with a related topic, that of Foucault's *archaeology*, Melandri opposes the model of the origin – where 'the basic codes and matrices of a culture are explicated by a recourse to a code of a higher order to which a mysterious explicative power is attributed'¹⁴ – to that of the historical *a priori*,¹⁵ thus rejecting (on a different account) the logic of the dichotomy in favour of an alternative epistemology.

In this sense, if we try to look at the entire development of the epistemological function of the theory of signatures, if we try to trace it back in order to reach its presupposed origin, and as a result, the point of the 'emergence' of knowledge (an evolved outcome of the theory of signatures) or its exact historical moment of birth, we risk understanding Agamben's assertion that 'knowledge is a consequence of sin' in literal and diachronic terms. We should not be tempted to understand this supposed consequentiality in terms of direct cause and effect, as if paradisiacal knowledge came into existence due to the actions of sinners or immediately after an approximated split or fall. Paradisiacal knowledge's consequentiality, its time signature, is of a different order.

III

Our abstention from understanding paradisiacal knowledge in binary terms does not merely coincide with Agamben's research methodology and his conception of time and history. It is put forth particularly in order to prevent ourselves from simply or instinctively dichotomising the whole human experience of Eden by formulating a 'before and after' binary schema of knowledge as a consequence of a presupposed, imaginary 'fall'.

Had we based our analysis on such a misleading dichotomisation or consequentiality, we would theoretically formulate a description according to which various elements existed in Eden in opposition to their counterparts that existed in nature, after the fall. It will be as if Eden were the unmarked sphere in which we find unnatural beings, a sphere of revealed character, where unity exists, and a sphere incapable of generating knowledge. Whereas, on the contrary, nature will be the marked sphere inhabited by natural beings, a sphere of hidden things, characterised by fragmentariness, and a sphere capable of generating knowledge by way of the redemptive deciphering of the fractal structure of things. Why is such a binary description not an apt one? Let us take another example, to assist us.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 96.

¹⁵ Melandri, 'Michel Foucault: L'epistemologia delle Scienze Umane', 96.

One of the many interpretations of the fall, and its before and after,¹⁶ seems to adopt a similarly decisive binary logic. Looking at the opening sentence of Genesis, we find the word *Bara* (*Bereshit bara Elohim*, translated in the King James Bible as ‘In the beginning God created...’). *Bara* in Hebrew etymologically derives from the Aramaic word *Bar*, which means a type of creation ‘from the outside’ or ‘externally’ – that is, the world (nature) is external to God.¹⁷ Because the world was created so as to stand outside of God, it is dark and needs the light to fill it.

The purpose of man is to bring back the divine light of God into the dark world with the help of the Torah (‘Torah’ comes from *Or* in Hebrew, meaning ‘Light’). The light was created ‘in the beginning’, but this should not be understood as the first day in the sense of a durational process of creation (that supposedly took six days to complete); rather, at the beginning there was unity and the process of creation is comprised of six ontological stages.

At the second stage (or more literally the second ‘day’ according to the biblical story), we see right away a differentiation between materiality and spirituality, body and soul, earth and heaven, nature and paradise. This differentiation is necessary, according to this common interpretation, since man cannot exist at the same ontological or cosmological level as God; man can only try to name God with as many attributes as he can possibly articulate. But the differentiation creates a theological-cosmological problem, which has long troubled the scholars of the Kabbala, namely, the relation between *En-Sof* (God as simple and infinite being) and the *Sephiroth* (the ten ‘words’ or attributes in which God is manifested): ‘How can multiple attributes and determinations be admitted if God is simple, one, and infinite? If the *Sephiroth* are in God, God’s unity and simplicity is lost; if they are outside of God, they cannot be divine at all.’¹⁸

This example shows us that even though the differentiation was supposedly needed in order to separate man from God (based on scriptural hermeneutics) and to maintain God as the (external) origin of all creation, it entails various problems, such as the above-mentioned paradoxical relation, God’s continuous intervention and governing of the world;¹⁹ but also, it mainly indicates the problematisation of

¹⁶ This is indeed just an example, as there are many other interpretations out of which we cannot create a system of gradation or indicate them in terms of popularity or their ‘truth-adequacy’; nonetheless this interpretation is quite a common reading.

¹⁷ Historically this theological issue of *creation (ex/in nihilo)* was read as an objection to the Pagan conception of the *production* of the world.

¹⁸ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 67.

¹⁹ Various ‘solutions’ were given to this problem. The theory of signatures solves this ‘false alternative,’ according to Agamben, as it shows that the *Sephiroth* are neither God’s essence nor foreign to God’s essence; they are signatures that ‘by barely brushing against the absoluteness and simplicity of the being that is solely its own existing, dispose it towards revelation and knowability’. Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 68.

conceiving the paradisiacal sphere (and knowledge) necessarily in binary terms.

Indeed, a lot of the models, structures, formulations, conceptions, and processes that we have seen so far might be taken to encourage us to understand the paradisiacal sphere in this binary way. Nonetheless, we should refrain from pursuing this approach. Thus, in relation to paradisiacal knowledge, should we encompass it within an overall binary schema, should we naively obligate ourselves to an origin that regulates the emergence of knowledge, should we understand knowledge as necessarily coming to exist only after the fall (and not existing prior to it), it would entail a complete annulment of any form of knowledge before the point identified as the first bite, so to speak.

This, I suggest, will be impossible, for three reasons. First, a literal reading of the biblical story teaches us that Adam already had knowledge of various things before the sin: he had some knowledge or understanding of God and their mutual means of communication; he was cognisant of where he was and the work he was commanded to carry out ('to do work in it and take care of it'); he knew about the prohibition of eating from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; he had to be familiar with the meaning of a death, etc.

Second, even before we get into the question of what exactly paradisiacal knowledge means, literally or metaphorically, we see (though somewhat differently for each thinker Agamben discusses) that the cognitive process of gaining knowledge is historically equated, at the very least, with an act of revelation or some sort of exposure of the hidden. For example, although Adam's naming of the creatures is based on God's predestined knowledge, the mere fact that this revelatory process takes place before the sin indicates that some sort of knowledge is already part of the epistemological structure and life of Eden, and is (at least to a certain degree and in a certain form) man's lot.²⁰

Third, in relation to knowledge specifically as the idiosyncratic outcome of (the epistemological function of) the theory of signatures, if one builds upon Agamben's argumentation (that seemingly, due to its wording, might be naively interpreted in terms of causality or chronology, which is not, on my understanding, his intention), one realises that to speak in terms of a chronological 'emergence' of knowledge, as for any other philosophical or cultural phenomenon, is to speak paradoxically; a phenomenon does not emerge *ex nihilo* and out of a specific origin that decisively splits it, in historical terms, into 'pre' and 'post', but is a consequence of a continuous signatory transformation and incarnations across various diverse contexts.²¹ Thus

²⁰ This claim is supported, for example, by Maimonides' assertion that, prior to eating from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve could not distinguish between good and evil, but *could* distinguish between truth and falsehood. Elijor, *Gan be-'Eden mi-Kedem*, 254-68.

²¹ This resonates with Agamben's broader discussion of *Kaiology* (as opposed to *Chronology*) or messianic time ('the time of the now') as exemplified in Agamben's book *The Time that Remains*

knowledge as such, and as a sociopolitical phenomenon, must always have existed one way or the other and was conceived anew with each historical metamorphosis. This, naturally, also holds true for the special case of paradisiacal knowledge.

IV

If we should avoid seeing paradisiacal knowledge in terms of a before-and-after split, as would follow from a literal, consequential understanding of Agamben's assertion that 'knowledge is a consequence of sin'; if we should avoid looking for a diachronic origin and seek rather a synchronic 'moment of arising'; if we should avoid understanding the development of the epistemological function in binary terms and rather see it as existing within (or as) a force-field of multiple historical and even political currents; if we should not identify Adam and Eve's nakedness with a sense of shame and thus understand their ontological nudity as the absence of knowledge, how should it be understood? How should we interpret the idea of being 'unmarked'? How should we conceptualise the epistemological status of Eden and of the human beings within it? In what form precisely did paradisiacal knowledge exist then?

We will try to look at these issues and questions by proposing a different reading, ungoverned by an assumed splitting, ungoverned by a predetermined division that might appear to be implied by certain of Agamben's perhaps somewhat misleading formulations: the 'emergence' of knowledge as a result of sin; the human as a 'non-marked' being (in a relation of dichotomy with the 'marked' being); and the identification of the 'Non-marked' with a paradisiacal sphere and a state of final perfection. Recall Agamben's reflections upon whether a philosophical inquiry that reaches beyond signatures (beyond the split between sign and signature, between semantics and semiotics), towards the Non-marked, is possible.²² The way this statement is articulated or constructed, and its appearance at the end of *The Signature of All Things's* chapter on signatures in particular, might perplex the reader. It seems to stand in contradiction to Agamben's own words regarding, for example, deconstruction's 'false belief in pure signs', and his argument *against* the idea that 'there are pure and unmarked signs'.²³ Thus we shall try to look at these issues and questions through the theory of signatures as it is understood from a contemporary

and the essay 'What Is the Contemporary?' where he writes: 'Not only is this time chronologically indeterminate (the *parousia*, the return of Christ that signals the end is certain and near, though not a calculable point), but it also has the singular capacity of putting every instant of the past in direct relationship with itself, of making every moment or episode of biblical history a prophecy or a prefiguration (Paul prefers the term *typos*, figure) of the present (thus Adam, through whom humanity received death and sin, is a 'type' or figure of the Messiah, who brings about redemption and life to men)'. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, 52–53.

²² Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 80.

²³ Agamben criticises Derrida on this point in various places: cf. *The Time that Remains*, 102–103, & n. 28 of the present work.

philosophical standpoint (as historically outlined by Agamben); we shall try to avoid the binary model and in its place synthesise a non-dichotomous model based on what has been proposed, although somewhat differently and unrelatedly, in philosophies both included in and absent from Agamben's book: Aristotle's theory of privation, Baruch Spinoza's propositions, Nikolai Trubetzkoy's concept of *privative opposition*, and the contemporary thought of Giorgio Colli; we shall try to understand the 'emergence' of knowledge as an epistemological tension held under a(n) ('always-already') unified epistemological constellation that is not characterised negatively, but positively and consecutively. Finally, we shall try to see if a radicalisation of this tension beyond the breaking point of the constellation is possible, and if so, what it entails.

V

One can illuminate a few presuppositions characterising structuralist linguistics in the twentieth century. For instance: that language should be studied as a system (this is inherited from Saussure's work); a tendency towards abstraction (as a complete reversal of nineteenth-century nominalism, which was concerned with the description of facts isolated from one another); the attempt to provide a formal analysis of language; and the presupposition that the structure of language should be described in terms of binary features.²⁴

That which structuralism understood to be 'language universals', such as binary features, the phenomenon expressed in the notion of *markedness* or the related concept of *privative opposition* is widely acknowledged in linguistic research:²⁵ one might consider, for example, the discussion of the semantic differences between various pairs of marked and unmarked elements at the level of 'formal' marking. To this end, let us examine the difference between the pairs *poet/poetess* and *prince/princess*.²⁶ The two pairs (sharing the ending 'ess') differ thanks to the type of semantic opposition they enter into: *poet/poetess* presents us with a *privative opposition* since the marked member of this pair, *poetess*, in its general meaning, includes the property 'female', which is neither included nor excluded from the general meaning of the unmarked term, *poet*. By contrast, the unmarked term of the second pair, *prince*, explicitly excludes the property 'female' carried by the marked term, *princess*. The difference between the pairs is also illustrated by the possible adjectival modification of the unmarked term – *male prince* is redundant whereas *male poet* is not. Thus the two pairs represent different types of opposition: *prince/princess* is a case of polar opposition with contrary terms, while *poet/poetess* is a case of *privative opposition* with the terms standing in the lexical relation of *privative*

²⁴ Maurais, 'The Prague School and Verbal Morphology: A Trend in European Structuralism'.

²⁵ Zuber, 'Privative Opposition as a Semantic Relation', 413.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 414.

opposition.

What we can infer from this is that the meaning of the unmarked term, in some contexts, can have the meaning of its opposite, the marked term, while in other contexts its meaning is opposed, usually by contrariety or antonymy, to the meaning of the marked counterpart. In other words, ‘the unmarked term is in some way “ambiguous”: it can either have a general meaning, in which case the meaning of the marked term is “included” in it, or it can have a particular meaning, in which case its meaning is in some way opposed to the meaning of the marked term [...]. [T]he unmarked term is *privatively* or *pre-suppositionally* ambiguous’.²⁷ Thus the notion of *markedness*, advanced for consideration as a ‘language universal’, depends on the context in which it operates or to which it is applied; in its ambiguousness, the unmarked term forms a special semantic relation with its counterpart, that is rendered differently in each case and is subjected also to historical manifestations.

Consider Nikolai Trubetzkoy’s assertion that, ‘[t]he non-marked term is not opposed to the marked term as an absence is to a presence, but rather that non-presence is somewhat equivalent to a zero degree of presence (that presence is *lacking* in its absence)’.²⁸ This means that, when considered in relation to the epistemological sphere of Eden, the notion of *markedness* entails the rejection of understanding the paradisiacal knowledge necessarily in binary terms or necessarily understanding the paradisiacal sphere as governed by an assumed splitting. The paradisiacal unmarked establishes the semantic relation of *privative opposition* with its counterpart, the paradisiacal marked. Thus being ‘non-marked’ is, in fact, being ‘zero-degree marked’ rather than the absolute dichotomous opposite of ‘marked’.

This also means that a description of Adam and Eve as entities who, prior to their sin, were unmarked and thus possessed of absolutely no knowledge, is misleading. If we follow the logic proposed so far, we understand their ‘un-markedness’ as nonetheless positively marked but in zero-degree; as un-marked beings in which the meaning of their (ambiguous) state of knowledge includes the meaning of (confirmed) marked beings – as un-marked beings that, in their *privatively ambiguous* state, were never completely rendered ‘illiterate’ and, as a result, actually have an infinite potentiality to become entities of absolute knowledge.

The issue of overcoming the dichotomous model through which we might have understood the existence of paradisiacal knowledge was intertwined with Agamben’s idea of consequentiality (the relation between knowledge and sin) as we interpreted it. As we suggested earlier, the research methodology of a philosophical archaeology

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 77.

does not aim to identify ‘a given locatable in chronology [...] but an operative force within history’. Thus, overcoming a conception of splitting, which necessitates an identifiable chronological origin, we understand paradisiacal knowledge as ontologically always existing, as a cognitive force within the epistemological history of Eden and its inhabitants that, although continuously oscillating between actuality and potentiality, is nevertheless unified ontologically. Since paradisiacal knowledge never really emerged, it was always an available epistemological resource to which Adam and Eve clung for its infinite potentiality, and as such guaranteed the feasibility of paradisiacal knowledge in a *privative* state or relation – guaranteed it as an option within a legitimate context.

Thus we can see that the ‘emergence’ of paradisiacal knowledge is, in fact, knowledge in the state of a signature; knowledge in a state that is correlated with Trubetzkoy’s idea of an unmarked term that is *privatively* ambiguous or with what Christian theology named ‘character’²⁹; a form of knowledge under the influence of a unified epistemological sphere; a form of knowledge that, even though it exists in a zero-degree state and is thus perhaps devoid of any actual content, nonetheless operates as a saturated, charged movement.

VI

Our proposed conception of paradisiacal knowledge as ungoverned by splitting, as existing under a non-dichotomous model and as a multi-polar field of forces traversing contexts and terrains, entails another methodological principle that prevails when dealing with dichotomies. That is, how exactly does one need to understand a dichotomy? How does a dichotomy form? What kind of relation keeps a dichotomy intact? And perhaps more importantly, is it possible to understand both elements not as relating, but as connecting, touching one another?

For when we think about two factions, elements or concepts, we create a relation between them, we create a representation of one in the other. We then tend to think

²⁹ The sacrament, for Agamben, is a signature that shows the excess of the sacrament over the sign (the mere act of baptism): ‘something that is inseparable from the sign yet irreducible to it, a character or signature that by insisting on a sign makes it efficacious and capable of action’. Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 50. Baptism without significance can potentially exist, but baptism as a pure sign without a signature is really just a signature that has suffered a removal of meaning (i.e., a zero-degree signature). Thus, says Agamben, it is false to believe in pure signs as such (of the kind that Derrida’s deconstruction advocates for, where in fact zero-degree signatures are mistaken for pure signs). ‘[T]he theory of signatures [...] rectifies the abstract and fallacious idea that there are [...] pure and unmarked signs, that the *signans* neutrally signifies the *signatum*, univocally and once and for all. Instead, the sign signifies because it carries a signature that necessarily predetermines its interpretation and distributes its use and efficacy according to rules, practices, and precepts that it is our task to recognise. In this sense, archaeology is the science of signatures’. Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 64.

that that richer representation amounts to a stronger connection between them as a result of a higher degree of affinity, and the stronger the affinity, the closer they get. But contrary to common opinion, they will ultimately be articulated or joined together, they will be in real contact, only as a result of a complete *absence of representation*.³⁰ This is a definition of infinite proximity quite opposed to the one we usually give. As long as there is a degree of representation between both elements, as long as we find a relation between them, they are related but not yet unified. By absolutely unravelling all their connections, both factions disappear in and of themselves, making space for a third thing to emerge for the first time as a figure of their unification. This is the meaning of the verb ‘to coincide’, from the medieval Latin, *coincidere*, meaning literally ‘to fall-upon-together’.

From this framing of dichotomy a question should immediately arise: if we assume that paradisiacal knowledge exists under a unified framework, but simultaneously assert that it exists and relates *privatively*, does paradisiacal knowledge then establish itself dichotomously? Is it thus a paradox?

VII

In 1677, Baruch Spinoza published a book, relatively marginal to his corpus, about Hebrew grammar. In one chapter he explains that a preposition is a noun that indicates a connection between individuals. Since it is a noun, it can be conjugated from singular to plural even though ‘one may say relationships are not species which have many individuals under them, and for that reason they should, in common with proper nouns, not be able to be in the plural’.³¹ However, prepositions in an absolute state, claims Spinoza, are merely relations/connections of themselves; they are conceived abstractly but cannot be uttered, expressed or charged with an affirmative content. As such, they no longer express the relation between things, but the time or space of a certain matter. Consider, for example, the preposition ‘between’: the Hebrew word *Bein* (between, in the singular) conjugates to form the Hebrew word *Beinot* (between, in the plural). In the case of the latter, the preposition no longer indicates a certain relation between two factions or individuals, but the space in between them. In its absolute state, this preposition apparently collapses in on itself and shifts from the sphere of grammar to that of metaphysics. In this sense it can be seen as resembling a signature displaced in location and context and now expressing a relation of a different order, a relation or connection that is not governed by logic but rather by ontology. In the same way, being an unmarked entity that has paradisiacal knowledge indicates a state of existence. This means that paradisiacal knowledge does not constitute itself dichotomously, as we momentarily suspected, but is still conceived

³⁰ See Giorgio Colli, *Filosofia dell'espressione*.

³¹ Spinoza, *Hebrew Grammar*, 58.

abstractly under a unified framework: as (reiterating Trubetzkoy) ‘presence *lacking* in its absence’.

VIII

Our discussion has led us to realise that being in a paradisiacal stage of un-markedness, which Paracelsus conceived as being the state of final perfection, is, in fact, only infinitesimally remote from its possible existence as such. In order for Adam and Eve’s paradisiacal knowledge to exist beyond a state of zero-degree, it would have to move just one more step, crossing over a threshold, into the final stage beyond complete null meaning. But what kind of ‘final perfection’ stage would it be? What would be the consequence of moving beyond the breaking point of what we previously called the ‘epistemological constellation’?

By taking the final step, it will exist no longer as an almost absolutely meaningless concept, no longer in a state of zero-degree, no longer *privatively* united with God’s infinite wisdom, but for the first time it will exist individually and independently. It will then exist in a relational degree to a former paradisiacal unity, and in relation to another faction, which from that moment on will mutually gain a reciprocal degree of representation. This is, perhaps, the true meaning of the fall from Eden and its epistemological implications, as well as the manner in which we ought to understand Agamben’s assertion that ‘knowledge is a consequence of a sin’: that after the forbidden bite, humans did not suddenly gain knowledge as such, but became for the first time perpetually aware of their own epistemological lacking.

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Majorana's Sacrifice
On Agamben's *What is Real?*
Damiano Sacco

INTRODUCTION

The attempt at directing thinking along a path that is not inaugurated, in the futural sense of 'augury', by a question and by its very form has perhaps of necessity to remain unsuccessful. This is to say neither that one should not *attempt* to direct thinking along other paths, nor that the potential of the form of the question has already been exhausted. The question 'What is Real?', which grounds Agamben's recent enquiry into the conceptual shifts introduced by quantum mechanics, should be heard precisely as the attempt at a transformation of the question itself. For the very asking of this question has immediately two different connotations. First, *what* can in its own right be called real, what complies with the criterion of reality? This chair, this table, this book? Second, what is *the real itself* that is mentioned in the question, what is its element, what is the criterion that delimits its domain and that first allows us to state that this chair, this table and this book are real? At the same time, both of these questions are to exist under the aegis of the 'what is...?' itself, an aegis that has *of necessity* to remain unquestioned – if the questions themselves are to be set forth. Notwithstanding this, the task is not, *once again*, that of addressing the validity of the what-is question, of the foundation of the history of metaphysics itself; nor is the task that of, *once again*, substituting the what-is question with the question of the 'how' or the 'who', the questions of the modes of existence of the entity and of its questioner. The question at stake here, and in *What is Real?* is rather that of *retaining* the form of the question – the question concerning real entities, the element of the real itself, and the what-is itself – in order to assess whether a possibility can arise for this very question to point to a different site, for it to be displaced, but not in its position – for it to be transformed but not by a change of form.

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What is Real? stages the question of the reality of the entity in the context of the conceptual shift brought about by the transition from classical physics to quantum physics. The opportunity is afforded by the mysterious disappearance in 1938 of Ettore Majorana, the brilliant physicist, after boarding a ship in Naples: the *reality* of this disappearance, still unexplained, remains suspended in and by Agamben's text.

Agamben reads this disappearance according to two guidelines, extracted from Majorana's paper, 'The Value of Statistical Laws in Physics and Social Sciences'. At first sight, the two guidelines have nothing to do with Majorana's

vanishing; rather, they represent two important reflections on the theory of quantum mechanics. First: quantum mechanics enacts a fundamental shift from a causal description to a probabilistic and non-deterministic conception of the entity; second: this shift, on a par with the probabilistic turn in the social sciences, 'requires a special art, which is not the least significant support of the art of government' (Agamben 2018, 12). Agamben extends these two claims and raises them to the rank of epochal directives, bearing on the categories and the trajectory of the history of metaphysics itself. Majorana's considerations are then preserved and raised into the following: first, Agamben identifies a *reversal* in the priority granted to the categories of *dynamis* and *energeia*, a sudden end to the subjugation of potentiality to actuality; second, he concludes that this reversal affords us a determinate relation with reality – a relation whose only prospect is no longer that of knowing reality, but that of governing and ruling over the element of the real itself.

It is indeed correct to state that quantum mechanics operates a shift from a description of a physical system in terms of a set of properties (position, velocity, etc.) to an expectation (i.e. a probability) that these very properties will occur upon measurement. Indeed, quantum mechanics entails a lack of determinism that cannot be compared with the statistical considerations taking place in classical physics (e.g. in thermodynamics), in which probabilistic approximations are required by the complexity of the system at hand. It is rather the case that an inherent feature of quantum theory is that one should be able to predict only the probabilities of the outcomes themselves. These statistical predictions are approached asymptotically by means of repeated measurements, but the outcome of each single experiment remains ungrounded. Agamben is therefore correct in associating the shift introduced by quantum mechanics with the completion of a metaphysical trajectory: nature, by its own 'free will', as it is often described, makes a sovereign and autonomous decision in establishing the result of a physical process. The real objectifies itself, no longer simply with respect to the will of a subject that stands over against it, but rather, through its own free will, by establishing a transparent relation of objectification *with itself*. The impersonal notions of a will such as the *conatus*, a will to live or a will to power, give way to the complete projection of a *free* will upon the entity – a free will that enacts the objectification of the entity with respect to itself.

Before confronting the specifics of Agamben's reading, the question might be raised as to why he should have selected these two principal claims from Majorana's text – or better yet, why the present paper should read Agamben as having done so. The aim of this contribution is precisely to assess the claims set forth by Agamben according to a specific reading of the history of metaphysics – to wit, the Heideggerian one – thereby following two guiding directives. The first delineates a trajectory that points to a disclosure of the entity that is marked by a completed horizon of constant presence (*beständige Anwesenheit*). This trajectory finds its inception (*Anfang*) in the Greek experience of being as presence (*ousia* as *parousia*), an experience that leads Aristotle to assign a specific priority to the

notion of *energeia* rather than *dynamis*. Parallel to this trajectory runs another that is directed towards the complete objectification of the entity – an objectification that makes possible the sovereign dominion of the subject which stands opposite this entity. This second directive, which is but the reverse side of the first one, finds its completion in the modern en-framing or *Gestell*, in the primacy of the notion of the will (to live, to power, to will), in that expropriation (*Enteignis*) which is the first form of appropriation (*Ereignis*), and so forth.

The claim put forth here is that the shift introduced by quantum mechanics is questioned in *What is Real?* according to the two-fold directive that enjoins thinking to consider entities in the order of presence and the objectification that ushers in the reign of the subject. At the same time, Agamben's reading is surprising to the extent that it identifies *in the reversal* of the hierarchy between *dynamis* and *energeia*, i.e. in a reversal of the first trajectory, *exactly* the actual completion of the second directive of the history of metaphysics. For at stake, Agamben writes, is the following:

A potency [*potenza*] emancipated from its hierarchical subjection to the act. Insofar as it has secured an existence that is independent of its actual realisation, such a possibility tends *to replace reality* and thus to become the object of a science of the accidental – unthinkable for Aristotle – that considers possibility as such, not as a means of knowing the real, but as a way of intervening in it in order to govern it. (2018, 40, emphasis added)

Put otherwise, a reversal of the priority granted to potentiality and actuality, rather than liberating the entity from the frame of objectification and machination (*Vergegenständlichung, Machenschaft*), provides instead the conditions for the possibility of an ultimate and perhaps *irreversible* government of the real. Irreversible to the extent that only Majorana's disappearance can be said to fulfil the criterion of reality: 'The hypothesis I intend to put forward is that, if quantum mechanics relies on the convention that reality must be eclipsed by probability, then disappearance is the only way in which the real can peremptorily be affirmed as such and avoid the grasp of calculation' (2018, 42-3).

The plan of this essay is as follows: In the first section, the two moments that structure the putative reversal of the *dynamis-energeia* metaphysical machine are set forth. The question of the notion of presence that underlies both potentiality and actuality is addressed. In the second section, it is claimed that this very horizon of presence is transformed by the relation that, according to quantum theory, allows the entity to be disclosed. For the study of this 'pre-supposing' relation it is necessary to turn once again to Agamben's work. The final section confronts the directive of the government of the entity from the standpoint obtained, with the aim of asking once again, upon a displacement of the horizon of presence that grants the disclosure of the entity, the question concerning the reality of the real itself.

OF *DYNAMIS* AND *ENERGEIA*

The question to be addressed is then first one of priority – of the priority of *energeia* over *dynamis*, or, conversely, a priority of the latter over the former. The task is then that of attending to the two moments which, according to the posited reversal enacted by the shift to quantum physics, articulate the functioning of the *dynamis-energeia* metaphysical machine.

I

As Agamben recalls in *What is Real?*, Aristotle asserts the unequivocal priority of actuality over potentiality. He writes in Book Theta of the *Metaphysics*: ‘To all such potentiality, then, actuality is prior both in formula and in substance; and in time it is prior in one sense and in another not’ (1049b 10–12). The ambiguity alluded to here concerns the examples of the seed and the capacity for sight, and the question is whether these are, as potentialities, prior in time to the actualities of corn and sight. This is resolved by giving priority to actuality: every chain of potentiality and actuality has to terminate, for ‘there is always a first mover, and the mover already exists actually’ (*Metaphysics*, 1049b 27). But despite that, the conception of the entity is not exhausted by the dimension of its actuality. Such was, on the contrary, the position of the Megarians, followers of Euclid of Megara and heirs of the teachings of the Eleatic school. Here we do not need to recall the entire confrontation that Aristotle stages with the Megarian thought of potentiality; it is however pertinent to recall that the only mode of existence which the Megarians grant to potentiality is that of its actualised enactment: the potentiality for seeing exists only in the mode of actual sight; an architect is capable of his craft only when practising it, and so forth. In collapsing the notions of potentiality and actuality, the Megarians would have no choice but to renounce the existence of motion itself – thus agreeing with the Eleatic lesson.

Countering this perspective, Aristotle distinctly comprehends how the architect preserves the craft of architecture as a capability even while resting, and, similarly, every man preserves the capability for sight even when his eyes are closed. Potentiality is then to have a mode of presence that is not exhausted in the enactment of a capability. Aristotle calls this mode of existence of potentiality *hexis*, from the verb *echein*: that is, a having, a possession or a disposition. Only then does motion as such become possible – *kinēsis*, as the ‘actuality of what is potentially, as such’ (*Metaphysics*, 201a 11). This is the directive that will have structured not only the unfolding of the history of metaphysics, but also the development of classical physics. The entity is conceived in terms of its own self-presence, its self-identity and the presence of its properties or physical attributes at a certain moment. These attributes (position, mass, density, etc.), as ‘properties’, are ‘owned’ by the system at hand and can be acquired and disposed of. At the

same time, however, the entity is not thought only in terms of its actuality: it ‘has’ or ‘possesses’, as a *hexis*, a dimension of potentiality, a reserve of future actualities. A system in motion is distinguished from a system at rest through a potentiality that individuates it not only in its present state, but also in its potentiality for future states. Classical physics – setting aside the question of its retroactive positing – can then be understood as a general form of phronomy, a science of the movement of substance in space and time.

II

One may therefore claim that with quantum physics a shift takes place that consists in the inversion of the priority granted to *dynamis* and *energeia*. The entity is no longer conceived in terms of its own actuality and that of its properties, but, rather, it is thought of first as a potentiality endowed with an independent existence – or, in Agamben’s words, a ‘potency [*potenza*] emancipated from its hierarchical subjection to the act’. This reversal is mirrored in the shift to a purely probabilistic description of the system under observation. The latter, Agamben argues, never deals with the singular and concrete case at hand, but rather, in suspending its reality, abstracts a pure *ens rationis* in order to assign a number to an ideal case. The turn to a probabilistic description is then part and parcel of the metaphysical reversal which has been claimed to subvert the hierarchy between *dynamis* and *energeia*, and through which the reality of the entity is suspended: ‘[probability] is nothing other than that very world, a world whose reality is suspended in order for us to be able to govern it and take decisions about it’ (Agamben 2018, 32–3).

To confirm this reading, one may turn to Heisenberg himself, one of the most attentive thinkers when it comes to the conceptual implications of quantum mechanics. He writes: ‘The atoms or the elementary particles themselves are not as real; they form a world of potentialities or possibilities rather than one of things or facts’ (Heisenberg 2000, 128). And again: ‘One might perhaps call it an objective tendency or possibility, a “*potentia*” in the sense of Aristotelian philosophy. In fact, I believe that the language actually used by physicists when they speak about atomic events produces in their minds similar notions as the concept “*potentia*” (2000, 124). One should nevertheless be cautious, and ask once again whether at stake is simply a reversal of the *dynamis-energeia* metaphysical machine. Quantum physics effectively thinks the system at hand in terms of a potentiality, in the epistemological form of a probability distribution. But is the situation exactly symmetrical with respect to the one observed in classical physics?’

First, the question arises as to the status of actuality with respect to this notion of potentiality. For reasons of symmetry, one would be led to postulate that potentiality ‘has’ or ‘possesses’ (as a *hexis*) its own actualisation – or better yet, at stake would be a possession that, in being inverted, would be but a dis-possession. Potentiality would in fact dis-possess itself in passing to the act; it would, in being actualised, be dispossessed of all the potentialities it owns, until it would have

nothing potential to dispose of, and as such it would be compelled to pass to the act. This is Aristotle's crucial definition: 'A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realised, there will be nothing impotential' (Agamben 1998, 45).¹ That would mean, however, that this potentiality, when not actualised, is present to itself in the same way in which actuality possesses itself, its properties or the dimension of potentiality: that is, in terms of a *hexis*. But can a potentiality possess anything at all – can potentiality be dispossessed of anything that it 'owns'? That would mean, once again, to think potentiality as being present to itself, through a self-presence that would allow it to dispose of its potentialities – through a dispossession that takes place in a continuous expenditure, whereby a wealth of potentialities comes to be constantly dissipated in order to allow the passage to the act.

But then again, is this the shift introduced by quantum physics? It would appear that one could in principle remain within a classical framework and still operate the inversion of priority between *dynamis* and *energeia*, without introducing anything fundamentally new from a physical point of view. The crucial question is then whether the shift introduced by quantum mechanics simply inverts the priority attributed in turn to *dynamis* and to *energeia*.

Is it possible instead to think of a mode of existence for potentiality that is not simply a projection of the presence of actuality and its determinations? Agamben himself recognises that the mode of actuality *of* potentiality is not simply that of another actuality. He does so in remarking that the fundamental feature of potentiality is the possibility that it has of *not* passing to the act, which is grounded on two of Aristotle's assertions: first, that 'all potentiality is impotentiality (*adynamia*) of the same and with respect to the same' (Agamben 1999, 182), and second, that 'what is potential can both be and not be, for the same is potential both to be and not to be' (ibid.). But if the mode of presence of potentiality cannot simply be borrowed from that of actuality, since a potentiality-not-to (*adynamia*) is in no way simply an impotence or an absence of potentiality, then what is the mode of existence of potentiality itself?

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Heidegger's 1931–32 lecture course on Book Theta of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* represents a fundamental interpretative *archē* both for the discussion of *dynamis* and for Agamben's thinking more broadly. The grounding question of the lecture course is indeed the following: 'how is the essence of *dynamis* actually present when

¹ This is Agamben's translation of Aristotle. Ross's translation is notoriously quite different: 'A thing is capable of doing something if there is nothing impossible in its having the actuality of that of which it is said to have the capacity' (1047a24–25). Cf. Heidegger's translation: 'That which is in actuality capable, however, is that for which nothing more is unattainable once it sets itself to work as that for which it is claimed to be well equipped' (Heidegger 1995, 188).

it actually is?’ (Heidegger 1995, 144).² Laying the ground for Agamben’s interpretation, Heidegger locates the fundamental feature of potentiality’s mode of presence precisely in the fact that *adynamia* is not simply an absence of potentiality. As ‘*dynamis* is in a preeminent sense exposed and bound to *sterēsis* (i.e. privation)’ (1995, 95, emphasis removed), it follows that ‘what is in question is the actuality of *dynastai* qua *dynastai*’ (1995, 152), an actuality that cannot be reduced to that of constant presence (*beständige Anwesenheit*). Heidegger writes:

Because [in the Megarians’ thesis] the presence of a *dynamis* means its enactment (*Vollzug, energein*), non-enactment is equivalent to absence. Aristotle is able to encounter this thesis only in such a way as to show that the non-enactment of a *dynamis* is not already its absence and, vice versa, that enactment is not simply and solely presence. This implies fundamentally that the *essence of presence* [das Wesen der Anwesenheit] must be understood *more fully* and *more variously*. (1995, 157)

The question then is not so much that of the priority granted to either *dynamis* or *energeia* as that of their respective modes of presence – a shift which amounts to preparing for a potential transformation in the notion of presence itself. For what does Heidegger, and according to him, Aristotle, intend by the very notion of presence? Presence, on Heidegger’s reading of Aristotle, is connected to the bringing forth of the entity, pro-duction in the etymological sense of a leading forth, *Her-stellung*. Heidegger writes: ‘This *having been produced* is the actuality of the work; that which reveals itself in such a way “is” [...]. Presence is having been produced’ (1995, 154). One can then understand *dynamis* accordingly: Aristotle defines it as ‘*archē metabolē*’ or ‘*archē kinēseōs*’, namely the origin of change or the origin of movement, the possibility of the bringing forth of presence as such. Heidegger writes: ‘*Archē metabolē* [*dynamis*] means then: being an origin for a transposing pro-ducing, a bringing something forth, bringing something about. This means being an origin for having been produced, having been brought about’ (1995, 75). *Dynamis* is then a potentiality for presence.

The question with respect to quantum physics is then the following: is there a sense in which presence, as ‘having-been-produced’, might come to be shifted? Equivalently, is there a sense in which *kinēsis*, namely the ‘actuality of *dynamis* as such’, could come to be thought differently? Heidegger will repeatedly state that the tradition of metaphysics has always thought motion simply in terms of change of place, as a general phronomy. He writes in ‘On the Essence and Concept of

² The question of potentiality and actuality is indeed not a categorial one – we would today say a transcendental question – for indeed, ‘we do not find *dynamis* and *energeia* in any of Aristotle’s enumerations of the categories’ (Heidegger 1995, 6). *Dynamis* and *energeia* constitute rather one of the four ways of saying the existent and its very existence: ‘*to on, to einai, kata dynamin ē energeian*’ (14).

Physis': 'We of today must do two things: first, free ourselves from the notion that movement is *primarily* change of place; and second, learn to see how for the Greeks movement as a mode of *being* has the character of emerging into presence' (Heidegger 1998,19).³ And again, in *Contributions to Philosophy (Beiträge zur Philosophie)*: 'motion (even understood as *metabolē*) is always related to *on* as *ousia* [i.e. metaphysical being-ness, *Seiendheit*]. In this relation also belong *dynamis*, *energeia*, and the later concepts descended from them' (Heidegger 2012, 220). The question is then whether quantum physics can confirm or disprove this notion of coming to presence, whether the relation of disclosure or unconcealment of the entity that has structured the notions of presence, potentiality for presence, motion, and change is to remain the same, or whether a transformation in the notion of presence itself is possible.

THE PRE-SUPPOSING RELATION

The question then is *how* presence as having-been-produced and the origin of this presence — *dynamis* — are to be thought from the standpoint of quantum mechanics. The principal site of difference between a classical account of a physical phenomenon and a quantum mechanical one lies in the accountability — the transparency — of the interaction between the observer and the system at hand. For, in classical physics, the interaction that brings about a measurement can be disregarded as negligible: to this extent one does not assume that the measurement of a property changes the property that is to be measured, or that it does so in a way that can be compensated for. The observer then knows both the measured property *and* the import of the interaction, and is thus able to subtract the latter from the former to reach a property that is autonomously owned by the system before the measurement.

Quantum mechanics, on the other hand, is grounded on the very impossibility of accounting for the import of the measurement interaction. If in classical physics the measurement of a certain property is 'ten' and the measurement interaction has contributed 'two', then the autonomous value of that property is taken to be 'eight'. In quantum mechanics, the contribution of the measurement interaction cannot be evaluated (the 'two' in this example). Since the latter cannot be 'subtracted' to reach an independent property, the measurement as such does not 'measure' any pre-existing property, but rather acquires a relational feature: it states a 'property' of the system at hand *relative* to the instrument or apparatus, *with the automatic proviso* that nothing be said about the system at hand prior to this interaction.

In one and the same gesture, the interaction points to the existence of an autonomous system *and*, in being unaccountable, *bars* the very existence of such

³ For a recent attempt at thinking change or *metabolē* beyond its phronomic component one should turn to Catherine Malabou's work in *The Heidegger Change*.

an independent entity, whose image is left suspended as a retro-active post-supposition. Two reasons underlie this state of affairs: First, it is necessary that every measuring instrument or apparatus should be treated in classical terms, neglecting any quantum contributions and using the language of classical physics (i.e. ordinary language or a technically refined version thereof). This is the condition of possibility for the experiment itself: in the last instance, it is necessary that the measurement experience, the ‘experiment’, be returned to the experience of the observer and to a linguistic form that affords understanding and communicability. One is either to let the system interact in its full quantum mechanical glory and know nothing about it, or one is to perform an experiment that will of necessity have to introduce a classical element. Bohr writes:

It is decisive to recognise that, *however far the phenomena transcend the scope of classical physical explanation, the account of all evidence must be expressed in classical terms.* The argument is simply that by the word ‘experiment’ we refer to a situation where we can tell others what we have done and what we have learned and that, therefore, the account of the experimental arrangement and of the results of the observations must be expressed in unambiguous language with suitable application of the terminology of classical physics. (Bohr 1987, 39)

The second reason that underlies the impossibility of accounting for the measurement interaction follows directly from the first one. To measure the import of the interaction between the apparatus and the system at hand, a second instrument would have to be introduced. But this second instrument would also come with an uncontrollable interaction, and one would need to resort to a third instrument, and so on. Once again, Bohr writes:

Any attempt to control the interaction between objects and measuring instruments will imply that the bodies so far used for fixing the experimental conditions will now themselves become objects under investigation. Additional measuring instruments with new uncontrollable interactions with the objects would therefore be demanded, and all which could be achieved will be the replacement of the original system by a new, more complicated one. (Bohr 1998, 151)

That the import of the measurement interaction be necessarily unaccountable implies that one always and only measures systems *relative to* some (classical) instrument of observation, without ever speaking of any properties that precede the interaction. Therefore, nothing can be said of unrelated being, of any primary quality that is ‘owned’ by the system before it interacts with a measuring instrument. The interaction itself, *in having been established*, creates the presupposition of an unrelated entity with some autonomous physical properties; *at the same time*,

however, in being unaccountable, this very interaction rules out the existence of both an unrelated being and its independent properties.

The principal shift that takes place with the introduction of quantum mechanics is therefore not simply a hierarchical inversion in the functioning of the *dynamis-energeia* metaphysical machine, but rather a transformation of the very presence that underlies the notions of actuality and potentiality themselves. For if one is to identify presence with having-been-produced, in the etymological sense of having been brought forth (pro-duced, *her-gestellt*), it is clear that quantum mechanics brings the entity forth through a relational structure that is inherently irreconcilable with the one that defines the domain of classical physics. In the latter case, a relation is established between two present substances: this relation is but a transparent and self-present medium which affords the reading of an autonomous property that is owned by the system at hand. In quantum mechanics, the relation instituted by the measurement interaction is altogether different: it grants some residual or classical presence to one of the two *relata*, at the price of barring the other pole — while at the same time producing the self-presence of the latter in the form of a retroactive positing. In being ‘un-subtractable’, this relation points to the site of emergence of its own coming to presence — a site that nevertheless can no longer be considered a substratum or a *hypokeimenon*, whose order of self-presence would be preserved by the relation. On the contrary, the relational structure introduced by quantum mechanics points to the origin of its own coming to presence as to a site that signals simply a liability to become present, an *archē metabolē* that in Heidegger’s words is ‘an origin for a transposing pro-ducing, a bringing something forth, bringing something about’. At stake then is not a potentiality for a metaphysical presence, but rather a potentiality for a presupposing relation that, in barring the very order of metaphysical presence, produces it as a retroactive hypostatisation.

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The presupposing relational structure just presented might seem somewhat artificial or *ad hoc*, but to appreciate its relevance, one need only ask whether its appearance is just a contingent occurrence or whether an element of necessity can be discerned. Once again, at stake is a relational structure that brings forth, produces into presence the entity while retroactively granting it an independent imaginary existence; a relation whose unavoidable implication can never itself be implicated in trying to account for its import; and an accountability that is necessarily impossible due to the lack of an external meta-structure that would imply a pure disclosure — that is, the abolition of the relation itself. One may here turn to Agamben, in *The Use of Bodies*, for an account of this relational structure:

The pre-supposing relation is, in this sense, the specific potential [*potenza*] of human language. As soon as there is language, the thing named is

presupposed as the non-linguistic or non-relational with which language has established its relation. This presuppositional power is so strong that we imagine the non-linguistic as something unsayable and non-relational that we seek in some way to grasp as such, without noticing that what we seek to grasp in this way is only the shadow of language. The nonlinguistic, the unsayable is, as should be obvious, a genuinely linguistic category: it is in fact the ‘category’ par excellence. (Agamben 2016, 119)

In light of the above, is the answer to the question of the contingency or necessity of the relational framework introduced by quantum mechanics to be traced back to the structure of language itself? Or could we not claim the converse to be true? Namely, that linguistic predication must *necessarily* establish a presupposing relation with being precisely *because* it is grounded on a material experience that involves an implication of the kind described, i.e. an implication that is excluded from being accountable in its very being included or implicated. Perhaps the issue to be confronted is not simply either ‘linguistic’ or ‘material’, but concerns the *logic* which underlies all producing and bringing forth into presence. A logic of exception, the study of which we once again owe to Agamben.⁴

The guiding statement is then the following: the pre-supposing relation is but part and parcel of the same logic of exception that structures the disclosure of being in language and of language in being. For every making present is always relative to a residue, to an implicated whose implication in this making present is necessarily unaccountable. This residue, unable to make itself fully present to itself – for that would require a mediation, an interaction whose import could be evaluated only if the sought after self-presence had been given to begin with – this residue is never able to recuperate itself due to the transcendental non-coincidence that defines it, or rather that prevents the self-presence of any definition. It then has no choice but to try and project its spectral presence onto an object, hoping to find a confirmation of its self-presence in the mirror image of a self-present object. Language, as *the*

⁴ The case could be made that Agamben approaches the matter at hand from an exclusively linguistic perspective. He writes in *The Use of Bodies*: ‘It is possible, however, that the mechanism of the exception is constitutively connected to the event of language that coincides with anthropogenesis’ (Agamben 2016, 264). Can the logic of exception, however, be reduced to its linguistic instantiation? Human language lacks a completeness that would afford the closure of all signifying chains; it requires the including-exclusion of a sub-posed that is to serve as ground and as a *hypokeimenon* for predication. If there were no ground for the functioning of language through the mechanism of the exception, one could set out to find a complete language, a language which did not necessitate the exception of a pre-sub-posed. But then again, it is always problematic to find a ground for a transcendental necessity. The claim here is rather that the logic of the exception, rather than grounding a specific disclosure of language in being, or of being in language, operates through the creation of a space of indifference for the traditional domains of the ‘linguistic’ and the ‘material’, the ‘epistemological’ and the ‘ontological’.

structure of disclosure into presence, necessarily establishes a presupposing relation with being that is grounded on the logic of exception:

According to the structure of the presupposition that we have already reconstructed above, in happening, language excludes and separates from itself the non-linguistic, and in the same gesture, it includes and captures it as that with which it is always already in relation. That is to say, the *ex-ceptio*, the inclusive exclusion of the real from the *logos* and in the *logos* is the originary structure of the event of language. (Agamben 2016, 264)⁵

The logic of exception is therefore responsible for a shift in the notion of presence itself. The order of the presupposing relation, and that of the potential for this relation to take place, can be related to the order of presence *only if* the latter itself comes to be shifted. For if we take presence as the domain of 'having-been-produced' or brought about, it becomes clear that no substratum or *hypokeimenon* precedes the presupposing relation, other than as a retroactive positing. All the same, *dynamis*, as *archē metabolē*, the 'origin for this having been brought forth', is then not a potentiality for a metaphysical presence to take place; it is rather a potentiality for a presupposing relation that *bars* exactly this order of metaphysical presence. The order of presence comes to be shifted by quantum mechanics to that instituted by the pre-supposing relation, and the order of potential for presence to that of this relation's being liable to take place. *Metaphysical* presence, on the other hand, is in turn promised by this potentiality and barred by the actuality of the relation, but as such is never attained.

The second directive that structures Agamben's reading in *What is Real?* is to be addressed from this standpoint. How is the government of the element of the real to be comprehended in terms of the logic of exception – a logic that grounds the pre-supposing relation between the observer and the physical system, between language and being? If the shift introduced by quantum mechanics is not simply exhausted by an inversion of the priority granted to the notions of *dynamis* and *energeia*; if instead it is the notion of presence itself, which underlies both potentiality and actuality in their mode of existence, that is transformed – then what becomes of the governmental turn that was posited as being grounded upon the inversion in the functioning of the *dynamis-energeia* metaphysical machine?

THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REAL

The question now to be addressed is the one indexed by the two-sided directive that has structured the history of metaphysics – a first trajectory that establishes the

⁵ See also in *Homo Sacer*: 'Language is the sovereign who, in a permanent state of exception, declares that there is nothing outside language and that language is always beyond itself [...]. It expresses the bond of inclusive exclusion to which a thing is subject because of the fact of being in language, of being named' (Agamben 1998, 21).

horizon of actuality and constant presence within which the entity is disclosed, and the reverse side of this trajectory that enacts the concurrent objectification of the real with the prospect of instituting the kingdom of a sovereign subject. Agamben, in reflecting on the import of quantum mechanics for the philosophical categories, puts forth the claim that a reversal takes place in the priority granted to the two poles of the *dynamis-energeia* metaphysical machine. The inversion in the trajectory of this first directive nevertheless preserves the course of the second one: never more so is the entity objectified in order to lay the conditions of possibility for a determinate intervention by the hand of a governing subject. On the contrary, if it is to be claimed that, after having gone through all the figures of presence, it is presence itself that comes to be transformed, one is led to ask the following: is a transformation of the second metaphysical trajectory possible, a transformation that would not be exhausted by a further step in the direction of the objectification of the entity and the establishment of the dominion of the subject?

Agamben claims: ‘Science no longer tried to know reality, but – like the statistics of social sciences – only intervene in it in order to govern it’ (2018, 14). There is then a direct implication that links the *intervention* of the observer with the governing aims that are at stake. However, it has been argued in this contribution that any such intervention takes place only through a pre-supposing relation in which the very presence of the observer is at stake. It then becomes necessary to enquire into the residue of presence that establishes the presupposing relation. One of the two *relata*, it has been claimed, enters the relation only through a pre-supposition *a posteriori* – which would lead to the conclusion that, if any form of presence, however residual it may be, is to be ‘present’ at all, then it will be at the opposite end of the relation.

At once, it is clear that there can be no *self*-presence that is responsible for establishing the relation: the import of any interaction, mediation or self-mediation that is *necessary* to attain such a self-presence cannot be accounted for, unless that very self-presence has been given to begin with. As unaccountable, any self-mediation cannot be subtracted to infer *either* any self-coincidence that presence is supposed to enjoy before the mediation, *or* any property that presence is supposed to be able to (re-)present to itself. In enacting a change whose import can neither be recuperated nor accounted for, any mediation or interaction, while being the condition *of possibility* for the self-presence of the residue (i.e. for the [re-]presentation of its presence to itself) – this mediation is also the condition *of impossibility* for this very self-presence.

But, once again, we are led to state: if the self-presence of a subject that establishes a presupposing relation is also an imaginary post-supposition, one can for this reason be no less exempted from granting *some* presence to the residue that establishes the relation – for otherwise there would never be any possibility for presence to circulate in the presupposing relation: the world would simply be left alone in its presence-less self-interaction.

At stake in the presupposing relation is then a presence that can never be made present to itself, a presence that is at stake only to the extent that it is a *staking of* presence which takes place. For, indeed, every interaction that institutes a presupposing relation, with one and the same gesture enacts the retroactive hypostatisation of an autonomous entity *and* stakes or wagers a presence that can never be made self-present. Presence is included in the presupposing relation *only by* the exclusion of the possibility of its own presentation; stated otherwise, it enters the circulation of the retroactive presentations only by sacrificing its very own. Effectively, in the presupposing relation, presence is not simply staked, but rather *sacrificed* in the etymological sense of *sacrum facere*, which Agamben describes in *Language and Death*:

The fact that man, the animal possessing language, is, as such, ungrounded, the fact that he has no foundation except in his own action (in his own 'violence') [...] [entails that] the essential thing is that in every case, the action of the human community is grounded only in another action; or, as etymology shows, that every *facere* is *sacrum facere*. At the centre of the sacrifice is simply a determinate action that, as such, is separated and marked by exclusion; in this way it becomes *sacer*. (Agamben 1991, 105)

The sacrifice of presence that takes place in the presupposing relation is not an irrecoverable relinquishment or gift, but rather a making *sacer* that includes presence by preventing or excluding its very presentation – that is, according to a logic of the *ex-ceptio*. The intervention of the observer, which has been claimed by Agamben to ground the metaphysical motto 'intervene to govern', takes place according to a logic of the exception. The question which then remains to be asked is the following: what is the connection that links the intervention of the observer and the prospect of a governing relationship to the element of the real?

Agamben invests the dimension of probability with the capacity of effectively suspending the concrete reality of the entity and enabling the governing aims of the observer: 'The principle that supports the calculation is the replacement of the realm of reality with that of probability, or the superimposition of the one upon the other' (Agamben 2018, 32). It is through the calculus of probability, through the suspension of the element of reality itself and the creation of a purely ideal *ens rationis*, that the very horizon of a governing relationship with the real opens up. Agamben writes: '*Probability* is never punctually realised as such, nor does it concern a single real event, but, as Majorana understood, it allows us to *intervene* in reality, as considered from a special perspective, in order to *govern* it' (2018, 35, emphasis added). It is therefore the dimension of *probability* which allows us to make an *intervention* in reality with the prospect of *governing* it. Probability, intervention, government of reality: what is the exact chain of implications linking these three notions, and how is the dimension of probability connected to the

sacrifice of presence that has been argued to characterise the presupposing relation?

The tendency to believe that probability is a property inherent to the observed system is, Agamben continues, a common misconception, known as the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ (2018, 37). On the contrary, probability is to be considered as the degree to which the observer is willing to make a bet according to the information at his or her disposal:⁶

The concept that underlies probability is not so much frequency over a long period of time as the ‘*critical odds for a bet*’, in which frequency is used not to infer a supposedly real property of the system, but – precisely as happens in quantum mechanics – to corroborate or refute a previous conjecture (which is fully comparable to a wager). (2018, 37)

The probabilistic statement is then a form of bet, the promising of an intervention that will entail a sacrifice of presence, an oath in which the connection between words and things is at stake.⁷ For indeed what is a bet but a kind of oath? Agamben writes: ‘The term *sacramentum* did not immediately designate the oath but the sum of money (of fifty or five hundred asses) that was, so to speak, put at stake by means of the oath. The one who did not succeed in proving his right lost the sum’ (Agamben 2011, 64). The probabilistic assertion, as a form of bet, can then be considered a form of oath, a *sacramentum* – and a *sacramentum*, Agamben writes, is always a *devotio* and a *sacratio*, a making *sacer* (‘*sacramentum*, meaning both oath and *sacratio*’ [2011, 31]). Agamben relies on Benveniste to draw the connection between the oath, or *sacramentum*, and the sacrifice: ‘The oath (*sacramentum*) implies the notion of making “*sacer*” [i.e. of *sacrum facere*]. One associates with the oath the quality of the *sacred*, the most formidable thing which can affect a man: here the “oath” appears as *an operation designed to make oneself sacer conditionally*’ (2011, 30, translation modified, emphasis added).⁸ The probabilistic statement, as a bet and an oath, *as a way of making oneself sacer conditionally*, is the structure which must underlie the sacrifice that takes place through the intervention in the physical system: the *sacramentum* and the *sacratio*, the oath and the sacrifice, are indissolubly connected.

Once again, Agamben’s diagnosis reads: *probability* allows an *intervention* within reality that enables its *government*. The horizon of a governing prospect is then seen to be instituted by the two dimensions of the calculation and the intervention: that is to say, by the staking (*sacramentum*) of presence and by its

⁶ This is the ground for an important interpretation of quantum mechanics, known as QBism.

⁷ The study of this connection and the role of the oath in its establishment is carried out by Agamben in *The Sacrament of Language*.

⁸ Benveniste continues: ‘The *sacramentum* is properly the action or object by which one anathematises one’s own person in advance [...]. Once the words are spoken in the set forms, one is potentially in the state of being *sacer*’ (Benveniste 2016, 447).

sacrifice (*sacratio*). The shift in the notion of presence detailed in the previous sections signals a modification of the first metaphysical directive, namely the one indexing the entity according to the presence of its actuality; concurrently, we observe a parallel shift that affects the trajectory along which the entity comes to be objectified with the prospect of establishing the sovereign dominion of the subject that stands over against it. The presence of the latter is in fact sacrificed or made *sacer* every time an intervention takes place, and the presence of the former, of the object whose autonomy was to serve as a model for the independence of the subject, is retained only as a retroactive hypostasis posited by the pre-supposing intervention. Presence indeed circulates in the presupposing relation, but it emerges only in the form of a spectral condensation, a transient sediment or a residual hypostasis: a hypostasis whose 'originary meaning', Agamben reminds us, 'alongside that of "base, foundation" — is "sediment" and refers to the solid remainder of a liquid' (Agamben 2016, 136). Presence is in turn staked and pre-supposed, consecrated by the impossibility of its own presentation, attained only in the residual form of the sedimentation produced by its own circulation.

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The analysis carried out in this contribution has tried not to contest Agamben's reading of the shift introduced by quantum mechanics, but rather to attempt to be, as it were, more Agambenian than Agamben himself — if one may dare to do so. It is beyond the scope of this paper to confront the political dimension that is inherent in a governmental order founded upon the logic of exception. It would involve the question of the violence of the sacrificial set up, namely the question of a violence no longer founded on the presence of the ground, according to the notion that, 'the ground of all violence is the violence of the ground' (Agamben 1991, 106, translation modified) — for the presence of this ground now comes to appear only through its self-sacrifice. Agamben's own thinking stands as *the* attempt to think through the implications, according to a shift dictated by the logic of exception, for the notions of government, sovereignty and violence, or said otherwise, for the notion of the political itself.

As already mentioned, the question 'What is Real?' can quite easily be heard in two ways, namely as the question of what (still or no longer) complies with the criterion of reality, and as such can rightly be called real; or it can be heard as the question concerning the criterion of reality itself, the question of what qualifies *the real* as such.

One can then perhaps refer to a different site in which Agamben asks the question concerning the reality of the real itself. In the context of the exhibition 'Realistas de Madrid' that took place at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid in 2016, Agamben writes: "The word "realism" makes sense, however, only if one specifies what is intended by "reality" — what, in particular, these artists have in mind when they speak of *realidad*' (Agamben 2017, 267). Their aim, Agamben

claims, is not simply that of representing reality on a canvas, by a classical ‘levelling of the painting to a window from which one contemplates reality’ (ibid.). Rather, by making thematic *the window itself* – ‘almost as if the concern were not that of representing reality directly, but first and foremost painting (in) itself’ (ibid.) – they portray the window through a painting that, in turn, is supposed to be but a window from which the contemplation of reality is to be made possible. Through this double operation, the *Realistas de Madrid* have perhaps managed to create a space of indifference that deactivates the oppositions of painting and reality, representation and being, and one might add, intervention and knowledge. So Agamben is able to conclude: ‘Reality – this is their message – is not that which the window of painting represents: real is only the coincidence of painting and reality on the surface of the canvas’ (2017, 269). The claim set forth in the current work is that of a reading of the shift introduced by quantum mechanics that affords a parallel deactivation of the oppositions between knowledge of reality and the intervention that affords it, between pre-supposed and unrelated being: such that *real* comes to be the coincidence that takes place in the liminal space – the canvas – in which our intervention in the world and the representation that it produces touch one another; such that *real* comes to be Majorana’s sacrifice, namely the *sacratio* of presence that alone allows reality to touch itself.

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Agamben,
Or the Philosophy of Shipwrecking Waves
Angela Arsenà

Residual philosophy or what remains

Agamben's method of philosophical inquiry is anti-Baconian in the extreme: *pars costruens* and *pars destruens* in fact neither divide nor articulate his research.

In *Homo Sacer* he refuses and denies their role as tools for subdividing the philosophical orchestration. They are irrelevant (if not clumsy) because in philosophical research, he says, '*pars destruens* coincides at every point with the residues of *pars costruens*'.¹ The residues, in Agamben's reflection, seem to be precisely that which can not be brought within the scope of dialectics and which, therefore, escapes actuality or what Hegel calls the totality of the real (*Wirklichkeit*).² The residue is precisely that remainder, or what remains, or what is left over: the singular, the fragment, the thread, the flotsam bobbing on the waves after a shipwreck, which may however, in its apparent insignificance, keep the Absolute in check.

We could define contemporary Italian philosophy as the outcome (partial and incomplete since man's theoretical work is never fully completed) of a long conceptual tension between Hegel's absolute plasticity of reality and the residue of the ontological difference that will become the philosophical signature of Heidegger or the *différance* of Derrida.

The philosophy of Agamben erupts within the wrestling between signifier and totality, with a dethroning power, and never lets itself be absorbed by orthodoxy or by any attempt at philosophical taxonomy.

It is no coincidence that Roberto Esposito, in his recent analysis of the profile and fate of Italian philosophy,³ describes the latter as everted towards the outer edge, to the limit and the boundary of things, at the precise point at which there is a dense and opaque material, hardly reducible to a formal representation, which is also similar to that form of knowledge which, on encountering the limit, approaches it from both sides and thinks the unthinkable and unspeakable, 'thinks what one

¹ Agamben, Giorgio (2016 [2014]), *The Use of Bodies*. (Homo sacer, IV, 2). Trans. Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford UP. *L'uso dei corpi*. Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2014, p. 10. Here and in the following, the translations of Giorgio Agamben's works are mine.

² Longuenesse, Béatrice (2007), *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, pp. 110–114.

³ Esposito, Roberto (2010), *Pensiero vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana*, Turin: Einaudi.

can not think of⁴: in fact, the limit in the Aristotelian sense, is the closest bound beyond which it is not possible to grasp anything that belongs to that thing and the closest bound within which lies all that belongs to the thing.⁵

Therefore, in order to know, one should straddle both sides of the limit, and the philosophy of Agamben is an encounter with the irremediable character of this condition,⁶ with the awareness that, even when language says something as something and succeeds, what should have been appropriate to think might have been left unthinkable, or irremediably dual, dismembered, split.⁷

Faced with this condition, thought can either travel the path of the unsaid, of silence (as Wittgenstein wanted⁸) or it can renounce saying something qua something in order to bring to the speech the how: thought of thought is spirituality, or not-thingness, which paradoxically means getting lost in things until you conceive them as nothing but things.⁹

It would seem that the great stakes of the philosophical chessboard staged by Agamben with his reflection is the possibility, maybe the hope, of finding, with a hermeneutic and existential effort of excavation, the original structure of the λόγος, which constitutes in some way the foundation of the philosophical assertion, and which remains in some way fully hidden and obstinately exposed.¹⁰ This archaeological dimension of philosophy triggers and roots the hodological dimension, namely the search for an ὁδός, another way.

Spirituality, for example, is an experience of the absolute co-belonging of being and thought, which allows us to conceive and bring out, or to re-emerge, the thing itself, along that treacherous limit which is language.¹¹

But the thing of thought is not the identity of the being with itself, in the manner of Giovanni Gentile, which excluded from the being the possibility of reflecting on itself:¹² the thing of thought is the thing itself, which, in turn is neither something else by which the thing is transcended, nor even simply the same thing.

The wrestling of two castaways

The thing itself transcends itself only in order to find itself, towards its being such as it is: in other words, the thing is the thing itself.¹³

⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1922), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Kegan Paul, p. 26.

⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V, 17, 1022a.

⁶ Agamben, Giorgio (1993 [1990]), *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. *La comunità che viene*. Turin: Einaudi, 1990, p. 68.

⁷ Loc. cit., p. 65.

⁸ Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1922), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, loc., p. 151.

⁹ Agamben, Giorgio (1993 [1990]), *The Coming Community*. loc., p. 65.

¹⁰ Agamben, Giorgio (2016 [2014]), *The Use of Bodies*. (Homo sacer, IV, 2). loc. p. 333.

¹¹ Loc. cit, p. 334.

¹² Gentile, Giovanni (2006), *Il concetto della storia della filosofia*, Florence: Le Lettere, p. 184.

¹³ Loc. cit., p. 68.

Here we see a force, a power, a theoretical triumph of the thing in itself that inevitably, irremediably, puts in the shade the language that signifies the thing and the subject that wants to know the thing; it demonstrates the finitude of the one and the other. Language, explains Agamben with the words of Scotus, is *ens debilissimum*, ontologically feeble because it should name the thing and instead has the urge to disappear in the thing which it denominates, ‘otherwise instead of designating and unveiling it, it would hinder its understanding’.¹⁴

And it is not only language that seems feeble; the subject too, which through language must unravel the world, reality: ‘man is the being who, by running into things and only in this encounter, opens himself to the non-thingness. And inversely: he who, being open to the non-thingness, is, for this reason alone, irreparably delivered over to the things’.¹⁵

The subject, moreover, must also unravel himself, explains Agamben with his work of deconstruction of all the boundary conditions erected as bastions around the western gnoseology. But a subjectivity, he continues, ‘is born whenever the subject encounters language, whenever he says “I”. But precisely because he is generated in it and through it, it is so difficult for the subject to grasp his place [...]. Western philosophy is born from the wrestling of these two very feeble beings that consist and take place in one other, as they incessantly founder, and because of this they try obstinately to grasp and to understand themselves’.¹⁶

A language that wants to fully understand both the thing and the subject, and that yearns for a perfect coincidence between signifier and meaning, is doomed to leave a gap, a margin of uncertainty, of emptiness, of unsaid, of an impossibility of saying, where what Agamben calls the ‘Indo-European scourge’¹⁷ wedges itself in: namely, the possibility, intrinsic in every word, of being false, intentionally false, or the possibility of lying inherent in language.¹⁸

Within grammar we discover anthropology, namely, man’s manner of living in the world since his first appearance as *Homo Sapiens* (denial, contradiction and oxymoron are the harbingers of lying, which is peculiar to man¹⁹) but in grammar, and in its fallibility, we also find politics and its constant search for a unifying centre.

The endless attempt to find a nucleus, not just inceptive, but also static, steady and identical to itself, and able to produce the shift from language to politics,

¹⁴ Agamben, Giorgio (2018 [2016]), *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Lorenzo Chiesa. Stanford: Stanford UP [Marked 2018 but actually published September 2017]. *Che cos’è la filosofia?* Macerata: Quodlibet, 2016, p. 23.

¹⁵ Agamben, Giorgio (1993 [1990]), *The Coming Community*. loc., p. 75.

¹⁶ Loc. cit., p. 24.

¹⁷ Agamben, Giorgio (2011 [2008]), *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*. (Homo sacer II, 3). Trans. Adam Kotsko. Stanford UP. *Il sacramento del linguaggio. Archeologia del giuramento*. Rome: Laterza, 2008, p. 7.

¹⁸ Loc. cit., p. 8.

¹⁹ Virno, Paolo (2018 [2013]), *An Essay on Negation: For a Linguistic Anthropology*. Trans. Lorenzo Chiesa. London; Calcutta: Seagull. *Saggio sulla negazione: Per una antropologia linguistica*. Turin: Boringhieri.

has produced, for instance, the western liturgy of taking oaths, which are the scaffolds that supposedly sustain the language that must be telling the truth and distinguish it from the language that may be false.

Yet, even if authentic, the language remains clumsy, inadequate, unsuitable, lacking, missing.

And, therefore: dangerous (and it is no coincidence that from the oath gushes its opposite: the perjury, ἐπίορκος in Hesiod,²⁰ Thucydides²¹ and also in the New Testament²²).

In fact, although the speaking man immediately and inevitably becomes aware of his inadequacy, nevertheless he also becomes aware that his words, though not divine words (which are the ultimate engine of creation) are nevertheless able either to create appearance (not reality, therefore, but a fictitious and yet habitable condition), and therefore shape a lie, a *fictio*; or, on the other hand, they are able to evoke the reality created by the divine word, and therefore are engines of art and poetry (ποιέω understood as ‘doing’, as ‘to make’ in the highest sense).

Thus, lie or poetry seem to be the only possibilities given to human speech, or rather lie *and* poetry, at least according to Plato, who bound the one indissolubly to the other, condemning both.²³

The knot that tightens around philosophy and poetry

Here, in Agamben, there is the doubt that the question of Plato’s censorship of art and poetry is rooted in two fundamental theoretical questions, one of a psychic nature and the other of a practical nature.

On a practical, methodological ground, the Platonic condemnation focuses on the divine terror of art (an ancestral terror which, Agamben explains, contemporary man, moulded by the normalisation of Kantian aesthetics that invokes disinterest, no longer feels). This terror alone would have put at risk the foundations of the city, as if the artists were themselves capable of incendiary actions.

On a psychic ground, the Platonic condemnation concerns only imitative poetry (that which challenges the reader with the intent of dragging him into the same stormy sea of the author’s passions) and not merely narrative poetry. Here, according to Agamben, we find a fundamental instance of Platonic thought, that is, the relationship established between violence and language: ‘his premise is the

²⁰ Hesiod ([2006]), *Theogony*, Trans. Glenn Most, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library), v.231–232.

²¹ Thucydides ([1910]), *The Peloponnesian War*, Trans. Richard Crawley, London :J.M. Dent, VII, 44, v. 1–7.

²² Paul of Tharsus ([2010]), *First Epistle to Timothy*, 1.1–10. In Coogan, M. D., Brettler, M. Z., Newsom, C. A., & Perkins, P. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocrypha*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²³ Gordon, Jill (1999), *Turning Toward Philosophy: Literary Device and Dramatic Structure in Plato’s Dialogues*, Pennsylvania: UP.

discovery that the principle, which in Greece had been tacitly held for true until the rise of the Sophists, according to which language ruled out of itself any possibility of violence, was no longer valid, and that the use of violence was an integral part of poetic language'.²⁴ If poetry is violence, then it must necessarily be relegated outside the city walls, banned, exiled, but with the aim of preserving it intact and to preserve intact its capacity to accumulate, distil and be wedged into the essence of violence for the purpose of holding it as if it were in Pandora's box, without allowing it to travel the world and degenerate into chatter, into empty, meaningless, superficial, and dangerous words. To banish poetry then becomes an ethical urgency in the name of a utopian design of a perfectly calm and balanced world.

Poetry, therefore, as a container of violence and an exorcism of violence: this is the distortion, the curvature of meanings we are attempting to bring to light in Agamben.

It might be a random coincidence (and yet here we would like to consider it just about intentional), but there appears to be a certain continuity between the Pasolinian experience of poetry, seen as a container of necessary violence and equally necessary sweetness, especially in the use of dialect, and the relationship established and tracked by Agamben, an associate of Pasolini's, appearing in his *Gospel According to St. Matthew*.

In this purely biographical detail (which we would like to consider, at least for a moment, as of theoretical relevance) violence and poetry intertwine not in a socio-political sense (as a petty revolutionary struggle) but in an eminently metaphysical or epic sense whose literary archetype is Homer's Ulysses who, in order not to fall victim to the song of the Sirens, asks his men to bind him with knots that can not be untied.

In order to hear what no mortal has heard without dying, the mixture of shrieks and music produced by the Sirens, perhaps a poetic song of pure, archaic, distilled, compressed violence, which attracts and entices those who listen, Ulysses needs to be bound hand and foot to the mast of the ship: 'you are to tie me up, tight as a splint, erect along the mast, lashed to the mast, and if I shout and beg to be untied, take more turns of rope to muffle me'.²⁵

A node saves Ulysses who, without going mad and without being pierced and annihilated by violence, nevertheless manages to immerse himself in the song of the Sirens, or in a space that circumscribes the encounter between poetry and violence and that, however, like a rock upon which waves break, interrupts the linearity, the purity of navigation and upon which the ship of human life risks coming to ruin.

²⁴ Agamben, Giorgio (1999 [1970]), *The Man Without Content*. Trans. Georgia Albert. Stanford: Stanford UP. *L'uomo senza contenuto*. Macerata: Quodlibet, 1994. First edition, 1970, p. 18.

²⁵ Homer (1998), *The Odyssey*, Trans. Robert Fitzgerald, New York: Straus and Giroux, XII, vv. 195-198.

In the same way perhaps, Pasolini circumscribed the poetic world as a sort of sacred enclosure, where everything is possible, even the most bloody sacrifice, to distinguish this state in a figurative place, which is poetry, from what we might call the politically correct, full of words apparently fertile and innocuous, but really hard as stones and homicidal. He writes: ‘the word tolerance, for example, would be a contradiction in terms: the fact that you tolerate someone, is the same as to have condemned that someone’.²⁶

The conviction that violence can be glimpsed in a speech that has the peaceful characteristics of coherence, rationality, and inclusiveness, highlights the connection, always disguised, removed or disavowed, between language and violence. Paradoxically, the λόγος is always violent precisely when it de-cides: the choice of a rational, reasonable attitude, or the very choice in favour of the λόγος, has its roots in violence in the primary sense of being constantly fuelled by violence. If man had been satisfied, satisfied by his world and in his world, he would never have posed the problem of the λόγος. In order to choose the λόγος, it is necessary that the world be suffered, experienced as no longer satisfactory. That is, one must feel the rip, the laceration, the severity, the violence: in order to have de-cision we need a re-scission.

Therefore, this gap, this painful distance, this chasm (a margin, according to Agamben, or a limit in the most geometric and mathematical sense of the term, as a place which cannot occupy less space than it does) is necessary for man to feel the need of the λόγος. In other words, as the philosopher Eric Weil writes explicitly, it is violence that produces philosophy, and it requires violence for philosophy to be: from dissatisfaction with the world comes the discourse (and therefore also the poetic discourse) which reveals the condition of absolute finitude, shortage, the deprivation on the part of the man who, as long as he were satiated, satisfied, full, spherical, could not perceive. But it is precisely the speech (in an attempt to fill the chasm) that turns into chains what, up to that moment, had not even been recorded, noticed, perceived.²⁷ When the discourse tends to make itself absolute and to claim that only one of its modalities engulfs the scope of all possible meanings, that is, when the discourse forgets the original, irreconcilable division and excision that nourishes it, and wants to become monolithic, then it produces violence: the inherent contradiction in the philosophical discourse, Vattimo writes, is incurable.²⁸

In this seamless dynamics that links violence to language, and language to speech and poetic and philosophical discourse, we grasp both the Platonic reasons dictated by a sacred fear of the philosophical λόγος (once this discovery was made, writes Agamben, it was perfectly consequent for Plato to establish that the genres,

²⁶ Pasolini, Pier Paolo (1976), *Lettere luterane*, Milan: Garzanti, p. 23. Here and in the following the translations of Pasolini's works are mine.

²⁷ Weil, Éric (1950), *Logique de la philosophie*, Paris: Vrin, pp. 96-108.

²⁸ Vattimo, Gianni (2018), *Essere e dintorni*, Milan: La Nave di Teseo, pp. 25-29.

and even the rhythms and the meters of poetry, had to be watched over by the guardians of the State and therefore had to remain confined outside of human assemblies) but also the very close link between poetry and philosophy: the logic of philosophy is based on the awareness of violence as ἀρχή (which philosophy must both tell and uncover), and gazes towards the end of λόγος.

In other words, the purpose of philosophy is to dig for a recapitulative end, an end of ends.

As it encompasses everything, even the violence that constitutes it, the logic of philosophy inevitably arrives at the end of its possibilities, at the end of language.

The link between philosophy and poetry is traced on the edge, at the boundary of an exhausted language, or amidst shipwrecking waves: the relationship poetry-philosophy does not appear in Agamben as linear, hierarchical, pyramidal, Hegelian, that is, as a rational reflection of reality crystallised in thought, nor would poetry be the highest expression of the same rationality.

The philosophy-poetry relationship in Agamben does not concern the *esprit de géométrie* and does not use usual, used and sometimes abused categories: its reasons dwell in a drastic and dramatic dimension – tragic we would dare to say, because philosophical language is the language of contradiction, of permanent aporia, of theses and antitheses that remain distant and irreconcilable, separated, cut off, never a synthesis.

This relationship finds a reason (but this is just our hypothesis) in the metaphysical gaze of Pier Paolo Pasolini, when he explained that poetic language is the only language that allows for the co-presence and divergence of meanings, the coexistence of the identical and the opposite, metric caesura, a parting of significance and wrapping around, leaving an isolated verse, like a castaway, at the mercy of an unattainable reconciliation of meanings.²⁹

The philosophy-poetry link is therefore characterised by a condition in which both share the fate which befell Tantalus, who could only for a fleeting moment delude himself into thinking that he had completed his task, only to realise immediately thereafter that the end was not met at all.

This state of affairs brings to awareness the irreducible plurality of meanings, and that conciliation and pacification of contradictions (in poetry and philosophy) is and will remain unworkable and unrealised because the bond that holds them together, which is wrapped around them, as the remnants of a shipwreck amidst the same waves, is exactly what it remains, the residue which is left over after

²⁹ On the poetic language of Pasolini, see: Zambon, Francesco, 'Introduzione' in Pasolini, Pier Paolo (2015), *Poesie Scelte*, Milan: Guanda, pp. 3-20. The prime examples of co-presence and divergence of meanings, and of the coexistence of the identical and the opposite are to be found in the collections, *Le Ceneri di Gramsci* and *La Religione del mio Tempo*, of which extensive portions are translated in Pasolini (2014), *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini: A Bilingual Edition*. Ed. and trans. Stephen Sartarelli. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

somebody decided to take a risk and took it to its utmost limit, to the point beyond which one can no longer continue and no longer tell.

Applause: The Empire of Assent

Daive Tarizzo¹

Translated by Katherine Langley
with Michael Lewis

If some frail, consumptive equestrienne in the circus were to be urged round and round on an undulating horse for months on end without respite by a ruthless, whip-flourishing ringmaster, before an insatiable public, whizzing along on her horse, throwing kisses, swaying from the waist, and if this performance were likely to continue in the infinite perspective of a drab future to the unceasing roar of the orchestra and hum of the ventilators, accompanied by ebbing and renewed swelling bursts of applause which are really steam hammers — then, perhaps, a young visitor to the gallery might race down the long stairs though all the circles, rush into the ring, and yell: Stop!

Kafka, 'Up in the Gallery'²

I shall skip the preliminaries so as to take my cue without delaying from an experience which has tormented me for many years now. I shall talk about this sensation of annoyance and embarrassment which grips me at the end of a lecture, a concert, a theatrical spectacle [*spettacolo*]³ or some other public event — and even, increasingly frequently, at the end of film screenings — when everybody punctually and without fail starts to applaud. Setting aside personal idiosyncrasies, so far as this is possible, I would simply like to ask myself the following questions: what sense do all of these instances of applause have and why does such punctuality make them by now both predictable and inevitable, almost as if the applause were an 'absolute' of our everyday lives? Is it true that applause — having started out as an occasional gesture and signified appreciation of a very precisely delimited class

¹ *Assenso*, throughout this text, ambiguates between 'assent' and 'approval', as when one applauds to show one's approval after or during a theatrical performance, but also to show one's (somewhat passive) assent to a point of view expressed in a political debate. Readers should bear in mind that the word is translated sometimes one way, sometimes the other. Only where confusion might otherwise reign or when an etymological connection is being drawn has it been deemed necessary to insert the original word in square brackets. All such interventions are the responsibility of the editors.

Thanks to Davide Tarizzo for allowing us to translate and print here a slightly truncated and revised version of the original Italian text, 'Applauso. L'impero dell'assenso', in Massimo Recalcati (ed.), *Forme contemporanee del totalitarismo*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007.

Thanks are due to him, as well as to Marco Piasentier, for checking our translation and making a number of very valuable suggestions. — Trans.

² Franz Kafka, 'Up in the Gallery', translated by Willa and Edwin Muir in Nahum N. Glatzer (ed.), *The Complete Short Stories*. London: Vintage, 2005. — Trans.

³ A crucial — technical — word in the present text, which is why we take the liberty of translating it literally as 'spectacle' throughout, even if something less impressive might sometimes be apt. — Trans.

of performances, which is was until some time ago (but how long ago, in fact?) — is becoming something new, something disoriented and disorientating, something that is truly *unheimlich* [uncanny], something that is increasingly out of place, and which is tending to assume a sense that has come to differ and is perhaps symptomatic?⁴

Let us begin with a little portable phenomenology of applause that can be divided into four points:

- a) A round of applause can be given or received, depending on whether we take the perspective of the agent or the patient, of the actor who gives a certain performance, or of a member of the audience who benefits from the performance in a more or less passive way.
- b) A round of applause is not a linguistic act, in the sense that applause does not entail the use of the spoken word (apart perhaps from shouting the word *bravo*, which is to say acclaiming someone, but in any case, this is slightly different from applause), but nevertheless, it is an act endowed, without doubt, with some linguistic or semiotic value, and it is, therefore, an act of assent [*assenso*] or approbation [*approvazione*].
- c) It is possible to participate in applause in a direct or indirect way, in the sense that if I applaud at the end of a concert, I assist with something in a personal way, whilst if I hear a round of applause on television during a chat-show or a sitcom, that is quite a different matter. Here it is possible to think that, in this case, I am not applauding, but the matter is more complicated than it may appear at first glance. Let's say that, after a joke made by a television presenter, followed by applause, real or fictitious, from the audience, similarly real or fictitious, I smile, amused. In this case, can we really say that I am not applauding, which is to say, that I am not demonstrating my approval [*assenso*] of that which I see and hear, lending assistance to the 'spectacle'?
- d) The final characteristic of applause: its binding force, injunctive, imperative, which places us before a stark alternative: *in or out* [o dentro o fuori] — either within the collectivity which applauds [*la collettività che applaude*] or without, either within *everyone who is applauding* [*il tutti che applaudono*] or without. An alternative which only allows us to choose either the stupidity of the applause or the idiocy of those who exempt themselves from it. In fact, 'stupid', according to its Latin etymology, is someone who is amazed or stupefied [*stupito*], delighted [by something 'stupendous'] [*ammirato*], or struck by something (from *stupeo* are derived both *stupor* and *stupidus*),

⁴ The following reflections are strictly related to Tarizzo, *Homo insipiens. La filosofia e la sfida dell'idiozia (Homo Insipiens: Philosophy and the Challenge of Idiocy)*. Milan: Franco Angeli, 2004.

whilst ‘idiotic’, according to its etymology, which is in this case Greek, is someone who stands apart, the individual [*singolo*] that isolates itself from the community, it is the one who, in the end, even constitutes the figure of the inexperienced [*dell’inesperto*] or of the uncivilised [*dello zotico*] (all of these acceptations being present in the words *idioteia*, *idiotes*, which derive from *idios*). In light of the above, it is not without interest that Roland Barthes remarks: ‘For some years, a unique project, apparently: to explore my own *bêtise*, or better still: to *utter* it, to make it the object of my books. In this way I have already uttered my *bêtise* “*égotiste*” and my *bêtise amoureuse*. There remains a third kind, which I’ll someday have to get down on paper: *bêtise politique*’.⁵

But, what is a round of applause? First of all, we shall try to find an answer in the dictionary. ‘Applause’ is defined in the Zingarelli dictionary as a ‘spontaneous and clamorous expression of both favour and approbation [*approvazione*], expressed by clapping’, from the Latin *applausus* – made up of *ad* and *plausus* – which signifies the same thing. Therefore, to applaud signifies simply putting your hands together in a show [*segno*] of approbation and in a spontaneous manner. And here we straightaway find the first discrepancy between the word and the thing that I would like to highlight. In the age of the technical reproducibility of applause, applause is no longer spontaneous, and is perhaps no longer even clamorous.

As far as I know, a history of applause has not yet been written. It does not even exist, to my knowledge, a history of the audience [*del pubblico, dell’audience*⁶], which retraces its historical and cultural transformations, and which reconstructs, so far as is possible, the attitudes and behaviours displayed by an audience in front of spectacular events (theatrical, musical, the circus, and so on). On the other hand, if a history of the audience were to be written one day, an important chapter should certainly be devoted to applause, namely to the various forms of approval and disapproval [*assenso e dissenso*] expressed by the audience, which always assume a historical and cultural profile.

Now, we should ask ourselves: what would we read about contemporary applause, applause as it is configured in our day, in this hypothetical universal history of the audience. We would probably read a similar observation to that of Günther Anders, thrown almost casually into the middle of some caustic observations on our current inability to take up a position when placed before an image (televisual or cinematic):

⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Richard Howard. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989 [1984], p. 366 (‘Deliberation’, Journal entry of July 22nd 1977). Translation slightly modified.

⁶ ‘*Audience*’ in Italian is an Anglicism which we have elided here and on another later occasion, which we have nevertheless marked. Throughout, we have translated ‘*pubblico*’ as ‘audience’, save in the epigraph from Kafka, where it is translated as ‘public’ to conform with the existing English rendition, and in occasional adjectival forms. – Trans.

We are cheated of the experience and the capacity to take up a position. Since we are not capable of taking cognisance of the vast horizon of the world that today is really ‘our world’ (since ‘real’ refers to something that we can encounter and upon which we depend) in direct sensible vision, but only through images of it, *we encounter precisely that which is more significant in the form of apparition and fantasm*, and therefore, in shrunken form, if not actually in a form altogether devoid of reality. Not as a ‘world’ (a world that can only be appropriated by moving around in it and experimenting) but as an *object of consumption* delivered to our homes. Those who have consumed an atomic explosion from the comfort of their own homes, in the form of an image delivered to one’s home, which is to say in the guise of a mobile picture-postcard, now associate everything that one can happen to hear about any atomic situation with this domestic event of microscopic dimensions, and this entails their being cheated of the capacity to conceive of the thing itself and to take up an adequate position in relation to this thing. That which is delivered in a fluid state, which is to say, in such a way that it can immediately be absorbed, renders impossible, because superfluous, a personal experience. Actually, for the most part, the requisite position is itself kindly provided along with the image, and few things are so characteristic of broadcasting today as the free home-delivery of applause.⁷

Let us pause for a second on this particular feature of contemporary applause: most of the time, it involves indirect applause, which is neither received nor given in the first person. In other words, we assist in the applause of others, which we are called to give our assent to by way of contagion. Televised applause takes this form, yet it is still an invitation or a command – *inside or outside* [o dentro o fuori]. However, given that the only way in which to express disagreement [*dissenso*] or step outside, in a situation like this, would be to immediately turn off the television, we can conclude that for as long as the television remains switched on, we remain inside [*dentro*], we are giving our assent, we are applauding even without moving our hands. The same could be said for the laughter played in the background of jokes on a sit-com or comedy. We laugh without laughing, as long as the television is switched on, we laugh without moving our lips, and at times – indeed often, almost always, if you pay close attention – our fantasmatic laugh does not follow directly after funny jokes, but is instead urged and released by fake, televised, laughter, the task of which is to dictate the timing of the reaction and coordinate our position

⁷ G. Anders, *L'uomo è antiquato II. Sulla distruzione della vita nell'epoca della terza rivoluzione industriale* [The Obsolescence of the Human. On the Destruction of Life in the Age of the Third Industrial Revolution]. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1992, pp 232–33. Original: *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen, Band II: Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution*. Munich: Beck, 1988 [1980].

with respect to the programme. But if the joke is genuinely funny, why resort to such a stratagem, why intersperse witticisms with this laughter that erupts before immediately fading, in so unnatural a manner? Why force us to laugh? And why should we laugh in such a contrived manner? Why should our laughter be wrung from us by this vampiric cackle?

A few years ago, Quentin Skinner gave a memorable lecture at the Sorbonne about laughter and philosophy, reviewing some of the classic theses on the subject.⁸ It is not necessary here to go into too much detail. It is enough simply to recall the importance of this theme for the philosophy, and indeed the politics, of the modern age. It is enough, for example, to remember the overt hostility of Hobbes towards an emotional reaction like laughter: ‘the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly’.⁹ For Hobbes, laughter, in practice, is a source of disequilibrium and disorder in interpersonal relations, and it is always the expression of a suppressed hatred, of man’s natural undying enmity for the other man, which undermines the established order – this is why it is a question of sterilising the disruptive force, condemning without appeal the invisible hostility of laughter. For Spinoza, the great heretic, laughter is on the contrary a benign phenomenon, a passion that should be valued, since it is the key to an increased activity of the mind and body, or of man as such – this is why it is a question of cultivating the experience and strengthening rather than diminishing its affirmative power: ‘Cheerfulness [*hilaritas*] [...] is pleasure which, in so far as it is related to the body, consists in this, that all parts of the body are affected equally; that is [...], the body’s power of activity is increased or assisted’.¹⁰ Now, the historical analysis of the diverse philosophical conceptions of laughter from its origins up until today is of little importance. What is important is that laughter appears in every case to present a subversive face, the face of a man who rejoices in himself, who says ‘yes’ to his own mind and his own body – whether others pay the price for it (Hobbes) or whether nobody pays anything (Spinoza). This is the nomadic power of laughter, laughter’s purely affirmative force, in spite of everything and everyone. The one who laughs, first of all says ‘yes’ to themselves. And from this point of view, the question immediately becomes political. If politics is in fact the art of inducing man to say ‘yes’ to an other man, *homo ridens*, the man who says ‘yes’ to himself, at this point creates a problem. (This explains why philosophy, and indeed politics, have in the past pursued this problem and why it is wise for philosophy and politics today to return to it).

⁸ Of the many other reviews in existence, one could cite as an example – to mention but one – the entry on *Humour and Wit* written by Arthur Koestler for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural And Politic: Part I, Human Nature, Part II, De Corpore Politico*, with *Three Lives*. Ed. J. C. A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 54-5 (Ch. IX, 13).

¹⁰ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics; Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect; and Selected Letters*. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Ed. Seymour Feldman. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992, Part IV, Prop. 42.

Let us return to laughter in the third personal form of today's audience, the laughter track. This in fact provides an elegant way of escaping from our impasse. Because this laughter is not true laughter; it is applause. Those who laugh when sitting in front of a television screen do not say 'yes' to themselves, but to others, who laugh in their place. It would seem that nothing of this kind has ever truly appeared until now. The role of the chorus [*choro*] in ancient tragedies, which also took place between the tragic scene and the audience in the theatre, was certainly not to applaud; and during a comedy [*commedia*], in the past, it is plausible that one laughed differently to how one laughs today, or how one applauds today. Indeed, there was no form of laughter which anticipated our way of laughing. There was nobody who laughed in our place. Even today, given that counterfeit laughter does not belong to anybody, being disembodied and mindless, *anonymous and spectral*, there is *no one* [doing the laughing]. Therefore, responding to their bidding, we too lose body and mind. Here, our laughter becomes applause, which is to say, a modality of assent, no longer to ourselves but to others. Laughter changes its nature, and along with it, the man that laughs and says 'yes' to the *no one* who takes his place. This may appear to be an exaggeration based on a detail that is in the end marginal. However, God, as we know, hides in the details.¹¹ And the God in question, above all, is the last one we can still venerate, or rather applaud, even in those precious moments in which we once adored or said our prayers in rapt recollection (think, for example, of funerals). This God, our God, is the spectacle.

The spectacle laughs at itself. This is the perhaps definitive proof that we are dealing with the last God. Nietzsche had forewarned us of this: 'Gods are fond of mockery: it seems they cannot refrain from laughter even when sacraments are in progress'.¹² The God of the spectacle laughs at himself, eliminating the possibility of laughter in the first person, or rendering it ever more slight. But, where is the spectacle? There are spectacles wherever we applaud, wherever we venerate our God. This means that even the God of the spectacle, like those who preceded him, needs all of us in order to reign. Not only this, it also means that applause determines and generates the spectacle. It signifies, that is to say, that we can at this point give a formal definition of the spectacle. *A spectacle is anything that we applaud.* Not everything is a spectacle in today's world, as Guy Debord believed. If this were indeed the case, if we really lived in the realm of the 'integrated spectacle', in which one could no longer distinguish reality from the spectacle,¹³ we would not be able to see the spectacle, we could no longer grasp its spectacular nature, and we could not give a definite and comprehensible sense to the word 'spectacle'. However, if

¹¹ See also the comments on '[a] meticulous observation of detail, and at the same time a political awareness of these small things, for the control and use of men,' in M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin, 1991, p. 141.

¹² F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin, 1990, §294.

¹³ G. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone, 1994, pp. 8, 13-14

not everything is a spectacle in today's world, this is because everything tends to be transformed into a spectacle. The index of this transformation is applause. Not only the index, but also the driver. Every time that we applaud, in the most disparate of circumstances and in situations that are increasingly unthinkable, we actually create the spectacle.

Let us try to clarify some features of today's applause.

- a) *Applause creates the audience.* If we agree that in the present condition, applause generates the spectacle, or transforms ever more disparate phenomena into spectacular events, then the following is a logical consequence: applause does not just create the spectacle, but it also creates the audience, in the sense that by applauding we qualify as an audience.
- b) *Applause is increasingly invasive.* Today, the audience happens to hear and watch outbursts of applause which come from within the cinema screen, in a play of reflections between the real audience and the fictitious audience which conveys the invisible command to applaud and assent to the scene that both audiences are contemplating at that moment: the scene – for instance, a romantic kiss in the centre of a stadium, perhaps with the crowd giving a *standing ovation* [in English in the original] – becomes a surface for reflecting the real audience into the fictitious audience, or the place where the audience, oscillating at this point between reality and fiction, encounters itself.
- c) *Applause is for everything and nothing [il contrario di tutto].* For example, on the television, when rounds of applause occur almost continuously during a debate, expressing approval [*assenso*] first for one argument then for another, counterposed and contradictory to one another. That which remains, in the background, are not the two arguments, but applause as such, approval *qua* approval [*assenso qua assenso*], which makes these encounters truly 'spectacular'. Prima facie, all of this can seem trivial, and is usually explained in another way. The effects, however, seem to go far beyond the intentions of the actors and moderators of the debate. The effects, with the passing of time and the repetition of the scene, are those of an injunction [*ingiunzione*] to pure and unconditional approval [*assenso*]. It is no longer a matter of an injunction to approve [*assenso*] this or that argument, this or that joke, this or that character. With time, the injunction to approve is purified and evacuated of all content, so as to be transformed into an injunction which enjoins approval as such or the pure form of approval, the functioning of which is the only constant in this staging [*messa in scena*]: the applause of the audience in the room, which transforms the scene

into a spectacle, turns each and every one of us into a member of the audience.

d) *Applause integrates, globalises or totalises that which we call the world.* Applause is an assent, it is a saying-‘yes’. But, in how many languages can we say ‘yes’? In response, we just need to ask ourselves: in how many languages can we applaud? In fact, applause is a universal language, it is the language which we all speak today. But who are we? There is no answer, there are no words, there is no language in which to respond to this, except the language of applause, which crosses over all national, social, cultural, ethnic and religious frontiers. In other words, the only human community which today tends to impose itself, that which we shape globally and worldwide, day in day out, swept away by an unstemmable tide, is the community of the audience [*del pubblico, dell’ audience*], a community that everybody is being included in, *volens nolens*. Applause is the slender thread which holds everyone [*tutti*] together, which makes us ‘all’ [*“tutti”*], which makes us “us” [*“noi”*]. A slender thread but as robust as a chain. Is there any need to remember that the wall, which until a couple of years ago divided the world in two, collapsed, not through violence but beneath volleys of applause? Is there any need to remember that antennas are now spread all over the globe to capture the applause which each day echoes on a planetary scale? A famous American actor recently spoke about his journey to the Amazon, a land in which he hoped to be able to stroll in peace without being immediately surrounded by delirious fans. Vain hope, he said, amused, since even there he had quickly been identified: Aren’t you the one from that ship which capsized? Applause. Installed, in the centre of this village, hidden away in a far-flung corner of the globe, a satellite dish – altar to the new God.

We could and maybe we should continue. After all, these are but fragments of an analysis of applause in its current configuration, which should be completed and perfected. Now, I should like to emphasise the idea that is behind all of this. Applause is a practice [*pratica*]; I would even say that clapping your hands is the simplest thing in the world. For this reason, one cannot think of it as a practice of power [*una pratica di potere*]. Briefly put, the idea, or my idea at any rate, is not that there are certain evil figures who covertly manipulate the society of the spectacle (the State, the multinationals, the secret [masonic] lodges and so on, as in the fantasy of some). The idea is not even that of a microphysics of practices of power (*à la* Michel Foucault) which is often short-sighted in its views when it comes to the properties and specific characteristics of the current means of communication (properties and characteristics without history, which are the random and contingent results of technological fabrication, but which turn history

on its head) or the ‘becoming-spectacle of the world’. The idea, to be completely frank, is that power [*potere*] is not the right concept here, that this category is no longer appropriate, at least not in the guise (or in the guises) which it has assumed until now. (To clarify this affirmation slightly, suffice it to say that in the world of unconditional assent and of the *no one*, even the category and symbolic authority of the Father tend to vanish, as Jacques Lacan noticed years ago: hence the widespread and restless interrogation of fatherhood in all of its aspects and symbolic valences, which have become a recurrent and almost obsessive theme of cinema, for adults and children). Rather, we find ourselves faced with a complex and stratified process of reorganisation of the *frames* [English in the original] within which humans experience and assert their own humanity, reconfiguring their reciprocal relationships in search of new, unpredictable balances. We are dealing with a ‘systemic’ process (but I am not referring to Niklas Luhmann here) in which many factors are interwoven, some old and some new: that is, background historical factors and current factors of technological renewal which are imposing relevant and sometimes dramatic modifications within human ‘forms of life’ [*forme di vita*]. From the spectacularisation of the world to the irruption of biopolitics, we are dealing with processes that are connected to technological innovation, in the face of which philosophy and politics of a traditional type appear to be ever more disorientated. (Whence the insistence on the problem of ‘technology’ [*tecnica*] on the part of some key thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Günther Anders, Gilbert Simondon and Jacques Derrida, to name but a few). The acceleration of technological process is rendering obsolete, at least in part, the old philosophico-political categories, making it urgent and necessary to invent new ones. In fact, the agents of these processes – namely, ourselves – may be said not to be aware of them. Thus it is not that these processes are necessarily a force for evil, just as it is not the case that they are a force for good. In short, it is not a matter of expressing value judgements. If anything, it is a matter of opening our eyes to what is happening around us, of observing, describing and deciphering – employing, if it proves useful, new conceptual tools. This is the sense of the definitions that follow, which are meant to be provocative rather than exhaustive.

THESIS

Applause is today both the index of and the driver for unconditional assent [*assenso*], or assent *qua* assent.

DEFINITIONS

- 1) I propose to define as democratic, or participative, a political regime based on the principle of free consent [*consenso*] and legitimate dissent [*dissenso*].

- 2) I propose to define as a tyranny, or despotic, a political regime based on the principle of forced consent and sanctioned dissent.
- 3) I propose to define as totalitarian a(n) (anti-)political regime based on the principle of unconditional assent [*assenso*], which is neither a free nor a forced consent since it no longer entails an effective alternative to dissent. (It was George Orwell, who in his book *1984*, brought to light the absolute inadmissibility of dissent in a totalitarian regime, which is based quite to the contrary on the principle of unconditional assent).
 - 3.1) Unconditional assent can refer to a precise ideological content or it can be deprived of all ideological content: in the first case, we shall speak of incomplete totalitarianism, while in the second case, we shall speak of complete totalitarianism. (These concepts are coextensive with those of ‘concentrated spectacle’ and ‘diffuse spectacle’, proposed in their day by Debord, though they are not synonyms of the latter).
 - 3.1.1) Unconditional assent [*assenso*], from which it is impossible to dissent in any respect, may be opposed only by dissidence: a totalitarian regime is a political regime which fights against dissidence.
 - 3.1.2) To unconditional assent, which can assume the guise of ideological assent or pure assent, corresponds two forms of dissidence: ideological dissidence and pure dissidence.
 - 3.2) Dissidence is not a refutation or negation of assent but rather the suspension of assent: in a totalitarian regime, every refutation or negation of assent is nullified by the game of unconditional assent. (Ludwig von Mises was the first to bring this game of unconditional assent to light, alluding precisely to this when he spoke of the ‘polylogism’ of totalitarian regimes).
 - 3.2.1) Dissidence is not dissent: an incomplete totalitarian regime rules out the very possibility of dissent on the basis of Ideology; a complete totalitarian regime does the same thing through the Spectacle.
 - 3.2.2) Dissidence is questioning: in the case of a totalitarian regime of Ideology, we shall speak of partisan dissidence; in the case of the totalitarian regime of the Spectacle, of nomadic dissidence.
- 4) I propose to call philosophy every discourse that revokes the unconditional by means of questioning: philosophy is pure dissidence.

**Review of Roberto Esposito, *The Origin of the Political: Hannah Arendt or Simone Weil?* Trans. Vincenzo Binetti & Gareth Williams
(New York: Fordham University Press, 2017)
Rita Fulco**

Mankind's being-in-the-world, its communal existence: Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil contemplated this subject in particular, from different angles and perspectives, during one of the darkest periods of European history. The reciprocal implication of the thought of two of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, despite their undoubted differences, is the focus of Roberto Esposito's attention. We may wonder, however, what underlies the interest in these two thinkers expressed by the author of the trilogy on community: *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* [1998] (Stanford, 2010), *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* [2002] (Polity, 2011) and *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* [2004] (Minnesota, 2008). Is it casual, a fortuitous intersection, or does it have deeper roots than might appear?

In fact, in *Categories of the Impolitical* [1988] (Fordham, 2015), the pages that Esposito devoted to Simone Weil opened up new perspectives, above all that of the 'impolitical' thinker, which had a significant impact on Weilian studies. Meanwhile, Arendt is undeniably present in Esposito's reflections, and her philosophy is not infrequently used to weave some important conceptual constellations. However, neither Weil nor Arendt could be considered among Esposito's key authors, unlike Spinoza, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Deleuze and even Machiavelli and Schmitt. These authors certainly represent essential theoretical points of reference for Esposito, up to and including his latest work (*Politica e negazione. Per una filosofia affermativa*, Einaudi, 2018), in which Simone Weil does not even make an appearance, although it contains a few mentions of Arendt. It is therefore particularly significant that Esposito, almost twenty years after the first edition of the book that he dedicated to them (1996), felt the need to come up with a new introduction for the reprint (*L'origine della politica. Hannah Arendt o Simone Weil*, Donzelli, 2014), in which he tries to sum up his relationship with Arendt and Weil. The interest that this new edition has aroused, both in Italy and abroad, certainly facilitated the timely English translation of the book in 2017.

This shows, in my opinion, that this dialogue 'in the margins' with Weil and Arendt is actually a milestone in the progression of Esposito's philosophy. We can better understand the reason for his interest if we interpret these 'margins' not as

synonymous with a ‘marginal place’, i.e. secondary, but rather as a *threshold* where *inside* and *outside* come into contact, yield to and implicate one another. The margin concept that Esposito decides to explore together with Arendt and Weil is the one contained in the title of this important book: *origin* and, in particular, the *origin of the political*, in regard to which Esposito follows the different paths proposed by the two thinkers:

The Origin of the Political analyses various aspects of their relation that are attributable in particular to their tension between origin and history, between the originary war (that is the Trojan War) and the constitution of the political city; or, in the words of Arendt and Weil, to the tension between *polemos* and *polis*. How does origin relate to what follows? Does it do so from outside or from inside, as a beginning or its opposite, as a genetic moment or as a point of contrast? Is War part of a politics that always implies an agonistic dimension, or the negative it leaves in its wake? (p. x).

Why, ultimately, is it so important for Weil and Arendt to question the origin of the political? Their reflection is always provoked by actuality, therefore their questioning of the origin makes sense in relation to their understanding of their own present. For Weil and Arendt, the present was totalitarianism, a spectre that even today, unfortunately, continues to circulate in Europe and throughout the world, albeit in different forms. Biopolitics, in fact at work in National Socialism, has today assumed less explicitly violent forms, but it can always revert back to thanatopolitics: Esposito draws attention to this risk, scrutinising its transformations.

The fundamental questions posed by Weil and Arendt, which Esposito echoes, are persistent:

Does totalitarianism have a tradition, or is it born of destruction? How deep are its roots? Does it go back two decades, two centuries, or two millennia? And ultimately: Is it internal or external to the sphere of politics and power? Is it born from lack or from excess? (p. 4)

These questions recur almost obsessively in Arendt and Weil, both explicitly and between the lines of their works, throughout their lives. The challenge is to understand what scope there is to create, through the categories of Western philosophy, a communal being-in-the-world that is not oppressive. At the origin of Western *history*, both Weil and Arendt, however, identify a *war*, the Trojan War – hence the importance of the *Iliad* in the reflections of both thinkers – which also marks the beginning of Western *politics*; war that does not end with an armistice, but with the *total destruction* of the city:

Politics in this sense, is born at the heart of a *polemos* whose outcome is the destruction of a *polis*. It is upon this constitutive antinomy that the two authors measure themselves, fully aware of what it means not only in relation to the reconstruction of the initial event itself, but also in relation to the interpretation of everything that follows. (p. 13)

The spectre of this beginning of history, coinciding with destruction, will always haunt the history and politics of the West, forcing us to question the role that this beginning has had in forming the conceptual constellations that underlie them:

It is this bond between origin and politics – the political destiny of the origin but also the constitutive originarity of politics – that captures the attention of both thinkers, who had already made the *polis* the primary concern of their reflexion. [...] The question to be resolved is, precisely, that of the relationship between origin – a specific originarity – and what originates from it. (p. 13)

Although Arendt and Weil identify the causes of oppression from different theoretical and political standpoints, both lucidly and extensively analyse the oppressive nature of power. Esposito manages to highlight the most original features and most enlightening insights of their philosophy and, above all, to emphasise the peculiarity of their conclusions:

Arendt reads the phenomenon of totalitarianism in terms of absolute exceptionality [...]. Totalitarianism [...] is the product of different subjective choices taken at specific points that, from that very point, are consequently rendered inevitable by subsuming the overall context in which they were articulated. (pp. 4–5)

Arendt, therefore, emphasises the substantial extraneousness of totalitarianism in relation to the previous forms that oppression assumed in the West. It is an event that is not due to an original predisposition of Western political categories, but to the convergence of individual wills, which warped these categories in an unprecedented, unpredictable way.

Weil takes a diametrically opposed position: it is true that totalitarianism is a new phenomenon in its 20th-century form, yet it is *internal* to the logic of Western politics. If we dig genealogically into the tangle of European history, we can trace certain traits in massacres and violence that occurred not only in modern history, but also in ancient history. Taking an approach that may seem paradoxical, Weil identifies some of its characteristics in French imperialism and, above all, in Roman imperialism, as Esposito rightly notes: ‘they can be extended to the point of constituting a line of continuity that concurs ultimately with the dominant line of

Western history, and, what is more important, with its constitutively political dimension' (p. 5).

Clearly, if this were the case, the way to find, within the Political, a *pharmakon* against the violence of the Political would be precluded. It is no surprise that Weil, especially in the final years of her life, focused on the need for 'spiritual education' for individual citizens and, above all, for all those responsible for governance. For Weil, the central question, in the absence of the intrinsic 'goodness' of the Political, is *metanoia* (changing one's mind, repenting): this is not an action that can be ascribed solely to the religious horizon; rather, it is the *conversio* of the mind: changing one's mind because, although it seemed infallible, it has failed, by transforming power, which should have been at the service of life, into a terrible instrument of death. In order to avoid this deviation, we must be able clearly to comprehend it in order to recognise and prevent it, and to do so, *metanoia* is essential.

It is from this perspective that we should read the profound pages that Roberto Esposito devotes to the concept of hero, which Weil develops, taking her cue from Plato, by establishing an interesting dialectic between the two gods that embody this figure:

Eros battles Ares without utilising arms, prescinding from force. But he does *battle with* him and does so *forcefully* with a strength that is not only equal but also superior to that of Ares. In the end, this allows Eros to grasp Ares *in the palm of his hand*. Despite its contrary inspiration, Love too fights. It wages war even against the god of war. It opposes war, but with a peace that resembles war, except for the fact that this is not a simple war but its contrary: a war of war, *on* war. (p. 69)

Esposito finds the connection between *love* and *nous* – evident in the *metanoia* that Weil hopes for, such that there is a connection between the ability to love and the ability to think and therefore the ability to think of a struggle in the name of Eros, rather than Ares – in Arendt's last work, the unfinished *Life of the Mind*. The hero of thought, or heroic thought, acquires, in this connection, those warlike traits which keep him standing in the conflict, ready to make up his mind at any moment, judging the justness of a cause, without shrinking from the fight:

He is no longer obliged to flee from conflict, because in the final analysis He coincides with it, for conflict is his origin and destiny to the extent that only in battle can He finally 'remain', having found rest and truce in the 'immobility' of the movement [...]. *He* – thought – no longer limits itself to battle. He is by now, like the 'first war', the battle to which we are eternally entrusted. (p. 78)

Thought, therefore, is the margin in which Weil and Arendt – joined by Esposito – contend with the origin of history and the origin of the political, entrusting it with the task of conducting a fair fight. This is certainly why Esposito is convinced of the central importance of the reflection that both philosophers dedicate to thought: ‘If I had written this book today, I would have paused longer on the meaning that both thinkers attribute to the dimension of thought’ (p. xi). Even if it is an activity of the mind, apparently especially focused on interiority, it can acquire a communal and political dimension, since it is closely linked to the faculty of *judgement*. Judgement, as Arendt argues in several works, is the most political of the human faculties:

Judgement is the most political faculty not only because it is the means by which we decide on an action, between what is right and wrong, or between the just and the unjust, but also because [...] it explicates itself while sharing out something for everyone. (p. xii)

So, we return to mankind’s being-in-the-world, its communal existence that ultimately constitutes the origin and goal of the reflections of this book, which, far from being a deviation, falls firmly within the progression of Esposito’s philosophy. It not only constitutes a decisive stage, but almost amounts to a sign indicating a direction that has always remained constant, despite a few ‘hairpin bends’. As Simone Weil put it, ‘thinking is a heroic act’: then as now, as always, it is impossible to make political decisions geared towards justice if we do not start with a *rigorous* – and thus heroic – thought exercise.

Review of Elettra Stimilli, *The Debt of the Living: Ascesis and Capitalism*. Trans. Arianna Bove. Foreword by Roberto Esposito (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2017)

Iwona Janicka

In recent years, debt has become the focus of important investigations orbiting around one central question: is debt the principal structuring condition of the contemporary era? Elettra Stimilli's *Debt of the Living*, now available in English for the first time since its initial publication in Italian in 2011, productively contributes to this rich ongoing debate.

The chief diagnosis of Stimilli's conceptual framework is that today it is not only that concrete services are invested with value but also, and more importantly, human beings and life itself have been turned into capital. Self-entrepreneurship structures both individual lives and social relations, compelling human subjects relentlessly to perform continual acts of self-investment, which ultimately serves as the mechanism by which we become arrested in the mire of capitalist logic: 'each person enters the process of exploitation at the foundation of the capitalist economy through an investment in their own life' (xii).

The underlying assumption of *The Debt of the Living* is that 'power has taken on the form of an economy in the era of globalisation' (1). The book's aim is therefore to analyse the mechanisms that have produced and continue to sustain this form of power. Stimilli draws effectively on the works of Max Weber and Michel Foucault to further explore the link between Christianity and economy. In so doing, the conceptual figure of an indebted ascetic emerges, which helps us to understand the fundamental condition of our current existence. The author takes up Weber's 'implicit auto-finality of the search for profit' (4), that is, that profit in capitalism is an end in itself rather than a means to an end. However, her claim is that accumulation and profit can no longer be linked to renunciation as part of inner-worldly asceticism, *pace* Weber, but instead are 'traceable to the compulsive drive to enjoy and consume' (1-2). Therefore, indebtedness today 'has become an extreme form of compulsion to enjoy' (3).

The first part of the book offers a genealogical investigation into Christian asceticism with a particular focus on *how* asceticism became a form of life with Christ. Stimilli demonstrates that during early Christianity, 'a properly "economic" mode of life' developed in which humans 'could invest not in their "works" and their effects, but in a practice that fundamentally appeared to have no purpose' (49). Only later, with *oikonomía* as 'an abstract plane of salvation' involving a set of specific practices, could asceticism evolve to become a Christian problem treated in Christian literature (49). By carefully reconstructing the 'economic experience

of life expressed [...] radically in early Christianity' (50) and 'the Christian development of the concept of *oikonomía*' (101), Stimilli elucidates the mechanisms that underpin our current economic system. Asceticism emerges as a form of investment 'in what can be enjoyed, gained, and used from its practice' rather than 'what can be permanently acquired' (101). This helps the author demonstrate how 'Western economic discourse did not begin with reflections on property and ownership, but rather the development of the possibility to invest in that which, while impossible to fully own, is associated with the inherent calling of human activity' (101), the self-finality of human action in ascetic practice.

In the second part of the monograph, Stimilli turns her attention to the question of capitalism as religion, arguing that 'the experience of Christian life becomes one of "debt" and the onerous condition is not, in itself, a mere void to fill, but the epicentre of its existence' (129). Debt becomes 'the presupposition of a constant enslavement', where reproducing constant lack is a tool for subjugation (129). The author proposes that 'thinking of capitalism as the ultimate form of religion may [...] help us understand the explosive return of the religious that we have witnessed in recent years' (124).

In both religion and capitalism, power is at its most effective in constraining human action when it is an end in itself – inherent to human praxis but, at the same time, separated from humans (177). To hone her analyses, Stimilli turns to Foucault in order to underline the productive aspect of ascetic techniques for creating and disciplining subjects. The author fleshes out Foucault's ideas on the Christian origin of liberal governmentality and closely investigates the practices through which this process occurred. Where 'the maximum level of self-control [is] an expression of freedom, the liberal technique of governmentality is a form of domination without constraints that guarantees power and absolute efficiency' (181). Within this framework, 'techniques of power and the free ability to give form to life intersect to almost completely merge' (181).

The Debt of the Living opens up for discussion a series of important questions, of which three in particular are, to my mind, critical in terms of considering Stimilli's work and its theoretical utility in scholarly conversations spanning various disciplines. First, Stimilli's framework seemingly privileges neoliberalism as the only authority that retains the capacity to issue imperatives such as 'you must change your life!' (as in Sloterdijk) or 'invest in yourself!' The authority of such admonitions is derived from the brute force of the catastrophe(s) that are today ongoing worldwide. The incidence and effects of global crises are self-evident at this point. Nevertheless, Stimilli appears to devolve power completely to neoliberalism. This forecloses avenues of inquiry as to the possibility of praxes of resistance, embedded within or running counter to the capitalist regime. In this context, several important questions arise: Is it possible to make a distinction between the wish to become the best version of oneself, arguably an affirmative act of self-development, and the constant self-investment that we are encouraged to make in the new spirit of capitalism? Is there a way to uncouple self-

improvement (in a non-capitalist, non-economic way) from self-investment, considering that both operate in terms of auto-finality? Or is this wish to invest in oneself and improve oneself already automatically inscribed in the paradigm of the indebted ascetic?

As Stimilli argues, we are at a point where inner-worldly asceticism has stopped being linked to renunciation, that would lead to the ultimate achievement of an extrinsic goal, and has been transformed into a mechanism through which capital reproduces itself (45). Is there a way within this conceptual framework to derail the ascetic practice, or are we condemned to reproduce capitalist logic and contribute – wittingly or unwittingly – to the problems that it entails? At the very end of the book, Stimilli addresses such issues, albeit briefly. Foucault is presented as a source of hope, offering ‘exercises’ that would ‘activate “counter-conducts”’ and that would allow us to ‘find points of “resistance” to the power by which we are governed’ (182). ‘At stake here’, Stimilli asserts, ‘is the possibility of reactivating, in ever different ways, the same finality without end that is inherent to human action and that, when not incorporated into an empty mechanism that is an end in itself [...] can coincide with its innovative ability to change’ (182). This establishes the challenge of investigating concrete practices that could turn our capitalist-furthering asceticisms into co-operative asceticisms. The question then becomes whether the conceptual framework of debt would be the most productive paradigm with which to achieve such ends.

The second key question that this book raises is about generosity. In her analyses, Stimilli convincingly demonstrates how the political and social potential of Marcel Mauss’s idea of the gift has been unhelpfully negated by Jacques Derrida’s reading of this concept in his book *Donner le temps (Given Time)* (1991). Here, Stimilli follows and mobilises the work of M.A.U.S.S (*Mouvement anti-utilitariste dans les sciences sociales*), a group of French scholars who attempt to draw practical consequences from some of Mauss’s ideas and who consider Derrida’s reading ‘too disembodied and spiritualised’ (25). The Derridean deconstructive spirit has contributed to the – perhaps overly hasty – renunciation of the idea of gift as a valid possibility that could be effective at several practical levels, both political and social. Stimilli hints at the gift as a potential counter-manoeuvre by which we may challenge neoliberalist regimes. Yet, an ethics of generosity appears, superficially at least, to be fundamentally incompatible with, even impossible within, the debt-based framework that Stimilli advances. Can this apparent incongruity ever be resolved? Moreover, does this issue reflect broader limitations of the debt framework, which may inhibit the ways in which we think about, and realise, alternative economies and alternative worlds?

Such querying of the suitability of a debt framework when it comes to the theoretical and practical work of re-claiming subjects from neoliberalism is equally reflected in the third significant question posed, albeit implicitly, in Stimilli’s book. Throughout, the author blurs boundaries between, on the one hand, financial(ised) debt (capital, conventionally understood), and, on the other, ontological debt, that

which human subjects always already owe to other human beings and things, levied by the very act of coming into the world. In the context of the latter, is there perhaps a tacit dream of sovereignty or independence in the wish not to be in debt to anything or anybody? To be quits? The highly marginalising aspects of being in financial debt in our society are unquestionable, and Stimilli quite rightly emphasises its harrowing effects. However, it is important to ask: to what extent is it possible to disentangle being ontologically in debt to someone, or in other words, being obliged to others – which constitutes our very being in the world – from the financial aspect of our existence and the oppressiveness of economic debt? Ultimately, to what extent is debt actually the crux of the matter?

The Debt of the Living offers its readers a careful reading of a wide selection of important thinkers, alongside a thorough analysis of what it means to be an indebted human subject. Raising a series of urgent questions, this book makes a valuable contribution to the debates surrounding our current condition.

**Review of Roberto Calasso, *The Unnamable Present*. Trans. Richard
Dixon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019)¹
Arthur Willemse**

If Roberto Calasso, in his latest book, *The Unnamable Present*, engages with physics and information technology, it is through a hermeneutical lens. It is not the actual debates occurring within such disciplines that matter to this esteemed Italian writer and publisher, but their anthropological and cultural significance. What does it say about us if we regard reality as built up from discrete atomic particles, or if we regard it as one continuous wave? In the case of the latter, where does consciousness stand in the relentless torrent of Being? Furthermore, Calasso asks the question of how such views are the product of a particular history: the genocidal twentieth century.

The Unnamable Present is the latest volume within a great project which commenced in 1983 with *The Ruin of Kasch*, wherein Calasso lays out his critique of culture. Even if it is unclear whether this volume, the eighth in the series, signifies that this project is now at its end, the book reads as a culmination: while earlier works tend to focus on a particular subject (*The Ruin of Kasch* being an exception), here Calasso synthesises his main preoccupations into one encompassing vision of the West in the twenty-first century.

The book's structure is as follows: In the first part, Calasso presents the difficulties that beset any attempt to understand our contemporary moment: the exemplars of our time have themselves given up any constitutive relationship to the idea, and to mythology. Tourists and terrorists are both not only cynical in their actions, but their entire experience of the world is informed by cynicism. Not being guided by ideas, the human being of today experiences the domain of intelligence as a ubiquitous pool or indeed a *web* into which we are thrown, in much the same way as the existentialists of the last century were thrown into the *world*. Independently, it pre-exists us. To be sure, it is a commonplace observation to state that, today, man in relation to the computer rarely occupies the active role of *programmer*, and is instead assigned the passive role of *consumer*. This leads Calasso to the hermeneutics or experience of physics and intelligence technology in the twenty-first century, and the way in which it gives up on the notion of the atom as a 'discrete particle' in favour of a continuous flow of reality.

The second part of the book presents a narrative of the holocaust, composed entirely of glosses on the correspondence of more or less well-known European writers and their acquaintances. In a way, this is the empirical part of Calasso's study, and, lightly but surely, he grounds his analysis upon this material.

¹ This essay was expanded from a shorter review first published in *World Literature Today*.

Finally, there is a very brief piece on Baudelaire, and his clairvoyance with regard to our century.

The Unnamable Present, like *The Ruin of Kasch* and the rest of the series, is obsessed with the ways in which the modern mind attempts to distract itself from death. Mythology and the logic of sacrifice, marihuana, the *soma* of the ancient Vedics, and other substances; these different inebriations dilute and distort, but ultimately mediate the mind's relation to death – and for Calasso, they reveal something essential about the human being. This goes for the ancient Vedics described in *Ardor*; for Baudelaire and his generation, for the assassins ('*hashshāshīn*') of *The Unnamable Present*, and it is also the meaning of the French diplomat and statesman Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord – the protagonist of *The Ruin of Kasch*.

Indeed, in this struggle, Talleyrand becomes emblematic – not in the way of political theory, but through Calasso's aesthetical appreciation of Talleyrand's every gesture. Like *La Folie Baudelaire*, *The Ruin of Kasch* follows its protagonist through a great many *salons*, where they – Talleyrand and Baudelaire, exemplars of their time – stand out. Talleyrand represents a crucial effort on the part of the modern mind to channel its constitutive link to mythology – as it is slowly but surely depleted through history. The unnamable present, then, means the historical moment – a certain radical post-modernity – when such effort has become impossible, meaningless. Rather than exploiting or preying on the myths that have informed our historical momentum and narrative, we have turned for sustenance to the very separation between myth and our time.

Roberto Calasso is an erudite scholar of nineteenth century proportions. There is no end to his references. First among them in the present volume is W. H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*, and, given Calasso's breadth, selecting one reference as decisive gives nothing away. Near the end of the first part of this book, Calasso cites a lengthy passage from an introduction written by Robert Frost for Edwin Arlington Robinson's 1935 collection of poems, *King Jasper*. Frost speaks obliquely here of the difference between griefs and grievances. While grief is a patient pain, grievance is a pain that is articulated only through a need for vengeance. It appears that Frost finds himself before a dilemma. On the one hand, there is the call to make good on our grievances, in a mad and final 'rush on the citadel of evil'.² This is the call of revolutionary utopian politics. On the other hand, there is the demand, this time written in law, to give up on grief altogether, surrender any remaining religious feeling and respect before the unknowable contingencies that condition our lives, and embrace science and progress. This is the call from 'Wall Street, the League

² Roberto Calasso, *The Unnamable Present*. Trans. Richard Dixon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2019), p. 88. Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995), p. 743.

of Nations, and the Vatican'.³ Indeed, when progress is assured, grief appears irrational. Yet Frost warns us that progress is not certain, and we may find ourselves disarming unilaterally before an enemy who is not interested in winning a merely symbolic victory.

Placed before these two demands, Frost displays a kind of messianic indecision, and rather chooses to remain with the analogy, the comparison or correlation. Also resolved to defend the culture of analogy, Calasso sides with this warning against pacifism. Indeed, *The Unnamable Present* dwells on, specifically, Islamic terrorism, and its determination not to attack any idea in particular – as it knows the West is not committed to any one idea in particular – but to end the lives of those they imagine to represent the West.

The concern with analogy expressed here in *The Unnamable Present* can also be found in Calasso's earlier *La Folie Baudelaire*. In the present volume, the analogists are explicitly named, and are presented as the enlightened elite of secular culture. Leibniz, atomic metaphysician, is part of this tradition, as is the author René Daumal, known for his *Mount Analogue*. However, not much about the analogists is explained here, except that the disinterested but keen attention that they pay to the world sets them apart from the tourists who roam the planet in the twenty-first century. *La Folie Baudelaire* has more to say about analogy; it means a crucial discovery for the poet of *Les fleurs du mal* as it captures the very spirit of modernity that has moved the West since the scenes of Oedipus: 'to *interpret infinitely*, without a *primum* and without an end, in unceasing, suddenly shattered, and recursive motion'.⁴ Instead of putting analogy in the place of the medium, as had been the case in other cultures (ancient China is named), Calasso sees it absolutised in Western culture. The analogists are those who are in touch with the very substance of mythology, the symbolic, where items and concepts can appear in one another's place, and refer back to one another.

It is interesting to note that Calasso's compatriot and contemporary, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his critique of Western culture, returns to the same root. However, in Agamben's analysis, from his early work, *Stanzas*, Oedipus, the hero of modernity means also a betrayal of the foundational experience of language: the decisive unlocking or decoding of the Sphinx's mysteries belies the human being's existence in a language that does not exhaust itself in meaningful statements and communications, but envelops us whole.⁵ This is the language of mythology, and both writers are detailing the human mind's taking leave of that language. This reference to a Golden Age of meaningfulness puts Calasso and Agamben together in a relatively small category. It is the theological element in

³ Calasso, *The Unnamable Present*, p. 88.

⁴ Roberto Calasso, *La Folie Baudelaire*. Trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2012), p. 13.

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*. Trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 137 –9

both of them. Yet simultaneously, they are miles apart: if Calasso is wholly committed to exploring the undercurrents of ancient mythology and the ripples they continue to cause, Agamben is prepared to shed light where none has shone before, and to debunk the political ideologies facilitated by such old stories, and the mirage of a bottomless pit that they create. I have already pointed out that Calasso finds meaning in the fictions and myths we tell ourselves, in the hallucinogenics we take. This intoxicating element, in Agamben's work, meets a resolute, Marxist air of suspicion. The debate between Calasso and Agamben, then, focuses on this question: is the human, together with its essential capacity for fiction, redeemable? Indeed, in a brief juxtaposition with Adorno, Agamben's position is presented like this: 'rather than rescuing the subject by way of remembering its loss, as Adorno would have it, Agamben would prefer to lose the subject in order to allow for its redemption'.⁶

For these reasons, Calasso is less critical of the Oedipal trope within our culture, but like Agamben he sees the contradiction between an infinite helix of analogies on the one hand, and a 'natural obscurity of things' on the other. Baudelaire's genius was able to locate the point of their reconciliation. Here, it is worth mentioning that Cadmus, the protagonist of Calasso's most famous book, is the ancestor of Oedipus. The archaeological gesture in Calasso always points further *back*, while in Agamben it is aimed at opening up a particular *nameable* experience of the present. In this respect, it is fascinating how for Calasso the paradigm of the sacredness of the human being is found in the ancient civilisation of the Vedics – absolutely removed from us today – whilst for Agamben it exists in the Nazi concentration camps, the still insurmountable problem of the evil of man. Both are examples of human activity that made an attempt to escape history without leaving a trace.

Robert Frost's warning against unilateral disarmament does not merely apply to debates around pacifism. It connects to the concepts of science, philosophy, political theology, and the messianic. For a high culture wherein analogy is the principal value, the messianic becomes its most terrifying possibility. Frost's position is one which resolutely faces up to this problem. As pointed out, he first warns against seizing the messianic moment in 'one last rush on the citadel of evil'. Yet, his warning more urgently applies to embracing the opposite tenet, to give up grief itself, in a move to eclipse all religious experience of the unknown in favour of rationality and science and belief in historical progress. In a way, Frost hears the calls from revolutionary politics to install utopia now, as he hears speakers imploring him to give up altogether any stake in the absolute. For this is what Frost takes 'Wall Street, the League of Nations, and the Vatican' to ask of him: that he surrender his claim on, or his part of, a reunion with the absolute materiality of

⁶ Yoni Molad in Alex Murray and Jessica Whyte (eds.), *The Agamben Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 20.

human society. Ignoring both these options, Frost is resolved to dwell indefinitely in analogy.

In my reading, the reference to Frost is crucial because, in the context of this volume, Calasso is doing the same thing. On the cultural level, he is with the analogists; however, on the level of political theology there is no justification for the analogy. Instead, we have to look for those literary writers who have the ability to unite the analogy with the absolute – as Baudelaire did. For this is what *The Unnamable Present* proposes: an extended and extending analogy of the absolute.

For the humanist Calasso, for this eminent historian and philologist, Frost's dilemma is an *aporia*, a dead-end, and it is adjudged that Frost is right not to give up his position before it. Indeed, there are no, and nor can there ever be, humanist, historical, or philological resources to justify any attempt at overcoming this issue, and Calasso mocks the transhumanists. For this reason, however, it is interesting to wonder what could have happened had Calasso seriously engaged with Agamben. For Agamben does not join the transhumanists, obsessed with death, either. In his analysis, on the contrary, subjectivity in the West is not an original metaphysical concept, but the effect of a politico-legal apparatus that keeps putting human life in an irreducible proximity to legal imputability. The urgency of Agamben's project throws an entirely different light on Robert Frost's messianic indecision.

Indeed, it remains to be seen whether the culture of analogy can be defended on the very ground-zero of analogy. Recently, a revival of the theological mode of philosophy has inspired a number of philosophers to explore the messianic potentialities within our tradition. Agamben's work is enormously important here. Yet even more explicitly relevant, given the stakes that Calasso is raising, is the speculative thought of the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, who in his essay *After Finitude* precisely addresses the theoretical debate that underlies terrorism and fanaticism:

The modern man is he who, even as he stripped Christianity of the ideological (metaphysical) pretension that its belief system was superior to all others, has delivered himself body and soul to the idea that all belief systems are equally legitimate in matters of veracity [...]. We are trying to grasp the sense of the following paradox: the more thought arms itself against dogmatism, the more defenceless it becomes before fanaticism.⁷

The patient and dignified grief that speaks through Robert Frost and Roberto Calasso, the thinking of the analogy, is proudly free of dogmatism, but, as Calasso himself concedes, '[y]ou can simply ignore it. And this act of omission has a boundless power, like a blow delivered by a murderer'.⁸

⁷ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 48.

⁸ Calasso, *La Folie Baudelaire*, p. 16.

In *The Unnamable Present*, Calasso faces up to a world that has done away with his *milieu*, his element – the culture of analogy, the physics of the discrete particle – as it has irrevocably committed itself to a digital, virtual reality. This book could very well contain the record of an analogist’s final guidance and implorations to that world.

Biographies

Angela Arsenà is a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Humanities, Literature, Cultural Heritage, and Education Sciences at the Università degli Studi di Foggia. She has a PhD in Philosophy from Pontificia Universitas Antonianum, gained under the supervision of prof. Dario Antiseri, with a thesis on the logic of hypothesis. Her current research interests range from the hermeneutics of myth to the philosophy of religion, in addition to theoretical problems concerning the transmission of philosophical knowledge through digital media. She recently wrote *Dal villaggio globale alla polis globale*, published by Rubbettino editore.

E-mail: angela.arsena@unifg.it

Julia Corsunov studied foreign languages and literature at the University of Trieste, with a special focus on the translation of literary texts from American English into Italian. Her interests lie in proletarian literature of gender with particular reference to the works of Meridel Le Seuer.

Rita Fulco has been a postdoctoral fellow in Theoretical Philosophy at the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa since 2016. She qualified as Associate Professor ('Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale di II Fascia') of Theoretical Philosophy (2015 and 2018), Political Philosophy (2014 and 2018) and Moral Philosophy (2014).

After a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Palermo ('Diritti umani: evoluzione, tutela e limiti' [2013]) and another from the University of Messina ('Metodologie della Filosofia' [2000]), she obtained a two year Post-Doctoral fellowship at the University of Messina and a DAAD fellowship at the University of Freiburg-im-Breisgau.

She is a member of the *Association pour l'étude de la pensée de Simone Weil*, the *Centro europeo di studi su mito e simbolo* (Centro interdipartimentale, Università degli Studi di Messina), the *Associazione italiana Walter Benjamin*, the *Centro di Studi sul Pensiero continentale e sulla Geofilosofia* (affiliated with the *Italian Thought Network*), and the editorial board of the Philosophy collection, 'Novecento' published by 'Mimesis'. She has worked on the theoretical, religious, ethical and political entailments of 21st century philosophy, and most especially on the writings of Simone Weil, Emmanuel Levinas, Sergio Quinzio and Manlio Sgalambro.

Web page: <https://scuola.academia.edu/RitaFulco>

Publications: <https://ricerca.sns.it/simple-search?query=rita+fulco#.W7mwXxMzYcg>

Ido Govrin (b. Jerusalem, 1976) is the author, editor and translator of several books, essays and journal articles on art and philosophy. At the same time, he is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice includes sound, installation, printmaking and text. He is currently completing a doctoral thesis on Philosophical Archaeology in theory and artistic practice at Western University (Canada). In addition to his scholarly and artistic work, he has curated a series of contemporary art exhibitions under the title *Laptopia* (2005–2011), was the director of the *Musica Nova* ensemble (2008–2012) and since 2005 has run the record label *Interval Recordings*.

Iwona Janicka is an Early Career Innovation Fellow in the Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Warwick. Previously, she held a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship at Warwick (2015–18), alongside various visiting fellowships, at the Hannover Institute for Philosophical Research and the Posthuman Aesthetics research group at Aarhus University, amongst others. As a Gates Scholar, she completed her PhD in French at the University of Cambridge, Trinity Hall, in 2014. Her monograph, *Theorising Contemporary Anarchism: Solidarity, Mimesis and Radical Social Change* (Bloomsbury, 2017), considers the concept of universality and social transformation in contemporary philosophy.

Katherine Langley is a postgraduate at the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne and a freelance translator.

Michael Lewis is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne and General Editor of the *Journal of Italian Philosophy*. He is the author of *Heidegger and the Place of Ethics* (Bloomsbury), *Heidegger beyond Deconstruction: On Nature* (Bloomsbury), *Derrida and Lacan: Another Writing* (Edinburgh University Press), *The Beautiful Animal: Sincerity, Charm, and the Fossilised Dialectic* (Rowman and Littlefield) and, with Tanja Staehler, *Phenomenology: An Introduction* (Bloomsbury), along with articles on Agamben, Bataille, Derrida, Esposito, Lacan, Stiegler, and Žižek, among others. Together with David Rose, he is the editor of *The Bloomsbury Italian Philosophy Reader*. He is working on two books, one entitled *Logic, Ontology, Politics: A Philosophical Interpretation of Agamben* and the other concerned with a reinvention of philosophical anthropology in contemporary continental thought. Educated in Philosophy at the University of Warwick and the University of Essex, he has taught at the University of Sussex, the University of Warwick, and the University of the West of England.

Franco Manni has a BA in Theology (Gregorian University, Rome), MA in Philosophy (Scuola Normale, Pisa), and is currently working on a PhD in Theology (KCL). He has edited and written books and articles primarily concerning Italian political philosophy, and incorporating such figures as Benedetto Croce, Georges Sorel, Piero Gobetti, Antonio Gramsci, Giovanni Preziosi and Norberto Bobbio.

E-mail: endoester@gmail.com

Roberto Mosciatti currently works as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Michigan. He specialises in philosophy, studies and publishes on contemporary Italian Thought, while paying particular attention to themes such as post-humanism, cosmopolitanism, capitalism, and bio-politics. Parts of his theoretical efforts appear in ‘Closing the Space between History and Knowledge: on Agamben’s Apophatic Pragmatism’ (*Italica*, Vol. 94, 3, Fall 2017), and also in ‘Toward a Progressive Cosmopolitanism: On Gramsci’s Reconstruction of Man’ (*Journal of Romance Studies*, Vol. 19, 1, Spring 2019), exploring the borders that separate post-human discourses from cosmopolitan political theory.

Andrea Muni is an independent researcher and teacher at Trieste’s School of Philosophy. He also works as a lifeguard and substitute-teacher in high schools. Andrea obtained his PhD in philosophy at the University of Trieste under the supervision of Pier Aldo Rovatti. His philosophical research mainly focuses on the notion of ‘discourse’ and ‘ethical subject’ in the thought of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan. He is the editor of the philosophy journal *aut aut*, chief-editor of www.chartasporca.it, and collaborator with the Italian cultural magazine *L’Espresso*.

Pier Aldo Rovatti, b. 1942, is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Trieste. He started his research with his teacher, Enzo Paci, on the issue of social needs in phenomenological Marxist theory. He then worked on Husserl and Heidegger and, in the last two decades, has focused his research mainly on French Poststructuralism (in particular Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida). He has been the editor of the philosophy journal *aut aut* since 1976, and has co-edited, together with Gianni Vattimo, the well-known volume, *Il pensiero debole*. He is also the author of books on Levinas, Husserl, and Wittgenstein, as well as *La filosofia può curare?* and *Abitare la distanza*. He collaborates with the newspaper *La Repubblica*, *L’Espresso* and the local newspaper *Il Piccolo di Trieste*.

Damiano Sacco is a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICI), Berlin. He completed his postgraduate studies in theoretical physics at King’s College London and philosophy at the Centre for Research in Modern European

Philosophy, Kingston University. He has articles forthcoming on the works of Barad, Derrida, Heidegger and Meillassoux.

E-mail: damiano.sacco@ici-berlin.org

Carlo Sini is Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at Milan State University, where he has worked since 1976. Sini studied Philosophy under Enzo Paci, becoming deeply involved in the exploration of Husserlian phenomenology, which his teacher was helping to introduce into the Italian world. He later became engaged in a study of American pragmatism, as well as contemporary French thought, and the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. His primary concern may be said to be with the notion of the linguistic sign and the question of interpretation, attempting as he does to fuse semiology and hermeneutics. Of his many books, two are available in English translation: *Images of Truth: From Sign to Symbol*, (Humanities Press, 1993) and *Ethics of Writing* (SUNY Press, 2009).

Davide Tarizzo obtained his PhD in hermeneutic philosophy from the University of Turin in 1996, under the supervision of Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti. His thesis was published in 1998 under the title of *Il desiderio dell'interpretazione. Lacan e la questione dell'essere* [*The Desire of Interpretation: Lacan and the Question of Being*]. In 1997, Tarizzo moved to Paris to work with Jacques Derrida. From 2002 to 2008 Tarizzo held teaching and research positions at the University of Salerno, the University of Eastern Piedmont Amedeo Avogadro, and the University of Naples 'L'Orientale'. From 2005 to 2010 he was Scientific Secretary for the PhD in philosophy coordinated by Roberto Esposito at the Italian Institute of Human Sciences, Naples. He currently teaches at the University of Salerno.

He has edited and translated many works by Arendt, Badiou, Cavell, Deleuze, Jankélévitch, Minkowski, and Nancy. His own books include *Il pensiero libero. La filosofia francese dopo lo strutturalismo* [Free Thinking. French Philosophy after Structuralism] (2003), *Introduzione a Lacan* (2003), *Homo Insipiens. La filosofia e la sfida dell'idiozia* [*Homo Insipiens: Philosophy and the Provocation of Idiocy*] (2004), *Giochi di potere. Sulla paranoia politica* [*Games of Power: On Political Paranoia*] (2007), *Life: A Modern Invention* (2010, English translation 2017), *The Biopolitical Order: Science and Society in the Age of Optimisation* (forthcoming), and *Political Grammars: The Unconscious Foundations of Modern Democracy* (forthcoming).

Arthur Willemse teaches legal theory and philosophy at the universities of Maastricht and Hasselt. His book on Agamben and Derrida, *The Motif of the Messianic*, appeared in 2017.

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Call for Papers

Special Issue: The Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics of Inoperativity

Editors: Giovanni Marmont and German Primera

The theme of ‘inoperativity’, although already present in the very first volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, has increasingly claimed centre stage within the rich philosophical universe of Giorgio Agamben. A concept first found in Alexandre Kojève and Maurice Blanchot, and later developed by Jean-Luc Nancy, Agamben’s own take on inoperativity has frequently been misinterpreted, and at times even outright dismissed, as indicating simple inactivity or the absence of labour (as in Georges Bataille). In fact, this crude interpretation does not even begin to do justice to what is really at stake in the complex notion of inoperativity: an attempt to rethink acting in terms that could neutralise the *productive* force governing it. Production, in this case, is to be taken in the broadest possible sense, as the obtaining of results, the achievement of an end, the successful completion of a process. In other words, what inoperativity indicates is a subversion of the established relations between means and ends, the radicality of which has far-reaching implications for debates in politics, ethics, and aesthetics.

With this in mind, for this Special Issue we are looking for works that engage in a closer inspection of the important yet controversial notion of inoperativity, certainly as articulated by Agamben but also covering the emergence of this theme throughout the more or less indirect ‘dialogue’ between the Italian philosopher, Blanchot, and Nancy. Additionally, we are particularly interested in investigations that trace possible *productive intersections* – whether explicit or not – between Agamben’s inoperativity and other kindred conceptualisations of (political/ethical/aesthetic) action, as found in other authors and intellectual traditions. Also of great relevance would be transdisciplinary explorations and interventions in the arts (including architecture and design) that take the notion of inoperativity as a central coordinate. The ultimate aim of the issue is, then, to tease out the possible as well

as actual relevance of this notion across a number of fields, theories, and practices.

Possible lines of inquiry include (but are not limited to):

- *Conceptualising inoperativity*:
inoperativity and its connection to other concepts in Agamben's thought such as modal ontology, destituent power, use, messianism.
- *Triangulating inoperativity*:
the emergence of inoperativity throughout the work of Agamben, Blanchot, and Nancy.
- *Broadening inoperativity*:
linking the notion of inoperativity to the thought of other authors and/or other philosophical traditions (e.g. non-Western, queer, black, indigenous studies).
- *Practising inoperativity*:
the notion of inoperativity being implemented through forms of artistic intervention, prefiguration, resistance, ungovernability, etc.
- *Collectivising inoperativity*:
how inoperativity can help us rethink community, immunity, sociality, collectivism, anarchism.
- *Extending inoperativity*:
ways in which inoperativity has been either linked to or differentiated from the politics and ethics of strategies such as the refusal of work, sabotage, insurrection.

We are looking for articles of around 8000 words. Ideally, the text would be referenced in the Harvard style, and formatted according to English, rather than American English, conventions, but conformity with this is not necessary in the first instance. All submissions will be peer-reviewed, and we hope to provide authors with a response within a month, ideally.

Please send all submissions and any questions you might have to:

Giovanni Marmont (G.Marmont2@brighton.ac.uk) &
German Primera (G.PrimeraVillamizar@brighton.ac.uk)

Deadline: February 29th 2020

Future Special Issue: The Reinvention of Human Nature in Italian Thought

We also invite submissions for a forthcoming special edition on the question of human nature, the human animal, anthropology, and the intersection between the biological and the symbolic, in and around Italian thought.

Send all submissions and questions regarding this issue to Michael Lewis (Michael.Lewis@Newcastle.ac.uk).

Future General Issues:

We also invite you to submit articles, translations, reviews, and other material for future general issues of the *Journal of Italian Philosophy*, as well as proposals for special issues, and suggestions regarding the journal.

We request articles and translations of around eight thousand words or less, on any topic relating to Italian Philosophy, but, since this is an online journal, we see no need strictly to insist upon such limits if the text merits it. Ideally, the text would be referenced in the Harvard style, and formatted according to English, rather than American English, conventions, but conformity with this is not necessary in the first instance.

All submissions will be peer-reviewed, and we hope to provide authors with a response within a month, in ideal circumstances, but please be patient if you write at a busy time of the year.

All general submissions should be sent to Michael.Lewis@Newcastle.ac.uk.

Address for Submissions:

Journal of Italian Philosophy
Philosophical Studies
University of Newcastle upon Tyne
Tyne and Wear
NE1 7RU
United Kingdom

Website: <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/italianphilosophy/>

E-mail: Michael.Lewis@Newcastle.ac.uk