

**The Current Significance of Carlo Sini's Notion of the Subject:
A Contribution to the Debate between Postmodernism and New
Realism**
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Abstract:

This paper aims to contribute to the current debate between New Realism and Postmodernism, by appealing to the philosophy of Carlo Sini and specifically to his notion of the subject. To this end, the paper pursues two main goals. Firstly, we expound the notion of the subject as developed in Carlo Sini's philosophy: in particular, we illustrate the form that the subject assumes in this philosopher's thought of practices, which is a sort of hermeneutical pragmatism. The second goal is to assess the significance of Sini's notion of the subject in the debate between New Realism and Postmodernism. More specifically, according to the thesis here argued, we can recognise, in the philosophy developed by Sini, a unique form of the relationship between the subject and reality, which neither reduces the latter to a mere product of the former, nor raises it to something absolute.

Contrary to the progress of the Postmodern condition – first recognised by J. F. Lyotard (1984) – the last century's philosophical scene saw the establishment of a new philosophical current shunning any kind of relativism and proposing a form of renovated realism (Ferraris 2001/2014; Gabriel 2013; Meillassoux 2009). This realism opposes the Nietzschean maxim, acknowledged by Postmodernism (Vattimo 2012), according to which there are no facts, but only interpretations, and contrary to that maxim it holds true that reality is 'unamendable' (see Ferraris 2015). A lively debate has thus been sparked off in the last decade over the status of reality and truth (see De Caro, Ferraris 2012). This paper wishes to contribute to the unfolding of such a debate, which indeed revives the classical question on the objective or subjective nature of truth and reality: it does so by appealing to the philosophy of Carlo Sini and specifically to his notion of the subject. To this end, the paper pursues two main goals. Firstly, we wish to expound the notion of the subject as developed in Carlo Sini's philosophy: in particular, we shall point out the unique form that the subject assumes in this philosopher's thought of practices: which is – essentially – a sort of hermeneutical pragmatism. The second goal is to assess the significance of Sini's notion of the subject in the current debate between New Realism and Postmodernism. More specifically, according to the thesis here argued, we can recognise, in the philosophy developed by Sini, a unique form of the relationship between the subject and reality which neither reduces the latter to a mere product of the former, nor raises it to something absolute and emancipated from the subjective sphere of experience. This mode of the relationship between

world and man can provide a new approach to the question of the nature of reality distinct from both Postmodernism and New Realism.

Before pursuing these two main goals, we should introduce the intellectual profile of Carlo Sini and the principal topics of his work.¹

1. Introduction: Carlo Sini's Philosophy Between Hermeneutics and Semiotics

Carlo Sini is among the most influential living Italian philosophers. In his youth, studying in Milan, he was a pupil of Giovanni Emanuele Barié and Enzo Paci: the latter had been one of the major advocates of Husserl's phenomenology in Italy. Under Paci's supervision, in 1960, Sini completed his dissertation on the philosophy of Hegel.² He was Professor of the Philosophy of History at the University of L'Aquila and – after 1976 – Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the State University of Milan.

In addition to studying Hegel and ancient philosophy, Sini devoted his research to Husserl. Although his early formation was within phenomenological philosophy, he went on to focus his studies on American Pragmatism, especially Pierce, Whitehead, and Mead, and later on Nietzsche, French structuralism, and Heidegger's philosophy. This research path overall led Sini to establish a connection between semiotics and hermeneutics and to propose a unique reflection on the notion of interpretation, intimately linked to the problem of the sign; this has led Sini to develop a hermeneutic pragmatism or – in other words – 'semiological hermeneutics'.³ Milestones along this philosophical path are works such as *Semiotica e Filosofia*, *Passare il segno: Semiotica, cosmologia, tecnica* (1981) *Kinesis: Saggi d'interpretazione* (1982) and *Images of Truth: From Sign to Symbol* (1993). Alongside this, Sini developed another research trajectory, which has gradually become the central focus of his thought: an interpretation of alphabetic writing as the origin of the logical reasoning which has formed the scientific mentality of Western civilisation. More precisely, in Sini's view, it is the linearisation of voice, as accomplished by writing, which allows the emergence of the ultra-sensible vision of logical meaning, namely the universe of logic. The translation of vocal emissions into a system of written signs establishes a sphere of general meaning which is freed from contingency. Through alphabetic writing, oral discourse is split into its basic elements, in other words it is formalised into *logos*.

In dealing with this topic, Sini began a fruitful and consistent dialogue with Jacques Derrida, albeit essentially disagreeing. The contention arises from the fact that Derrida's philosophy gives no consideration to what Sini calls 'the thought of practices'. In *Eracle al bivio* (2007) – which is, in effect, the second edition of

¹ A bio-bibliographical outline of Carlo Sini in the English language is provided by Silvia Benso's Introduction to the English translation of Sini's *Etica della scrittura* (2009).

² On the philosophical and human relationship between Sini and Paci see Sini (2015a).

³ On the relationship between sign and hermeneutics in Sini's philosophy see Carrera (1998).

Semiotica e filosofia. Segno e linguaggio in Pierce, Nietzsche, Heidegger e Foucault (1978) – Sini reproaches Derrida for restricting philosophical inquiry to metaphysical practice. Indeed, according to Sini, ‘Derrida thinks the origin, and the impossibility of the origin, once again *within* the metaphysical practice and its typical objects. For instance, he doesn’t understand how fruitful Gianbattista Vico’s extraordinary intuition of the “immense antiquity” of practices can be. Behind the empirical-transcendental difference, there is no arche-trace or anything similar. Behind it, there is a complexity of practices [...] – a problem of which Derrida hardly has any inkling’ (Sini 2007: 220).

This thought of practices, which Sini criticises Derrida for not taking into account, is simply another means by which Sini expounds his hermeneutical pragmatism, whereby the idea of pragmatism is strictly connected with the notion of practices. The term ‘practice’ was used originally by the pragmatist philosopher Chauncey Wright, from whom Sini adopted the term; it constitutes a crucial turning point in Sini’s philosophy and in his radical process of redefining the notion of the subject. Hence, before directly pursuing the paper’s two main goals of analysing the notion of the subject in Sini’s hermeneutical thinking and assessing its current significance, specifically in the debate between Postmodernism and New Realism, we should provide an outline of the philosopher’s thought of practices, in which this notion takes shape.

2. *The Thought of Practices*

Carlo Sini develops his thought of practices by harmonising, with a unique approach, issues from both hermeneutics and American pragmatism. He establishes a dialogue between Nietzschean perspectivism and the Heideggerian hermeneutic circle, on one hand, and the infinite semiosis theorised by Peirce, on the other, arranging them into a sophisticated conceptual network whose ultimate outcome is the notion of practice.

Sini develops this notion throughout his philosophical career, transforming it into the axis of his philosophy. But, for Sini, philosophising is itself a practice, and consequently the thought of practices is also a practice. So, in approaching the notion of practice we should first tackle the question as to what, according to Sini, a practice is.

Sini provides an answer – albeit a paradoxical one – in *Gli abiti, le pratiche, i saperi* (1996): a practice is constituted by a complex, an intertwining of practices. Behind a practice there is a whole breadth of practices of life and knowledge. No practice can be isolated in itself; every practice is connected with a manifold set of others. In chapter seven of *Etica della scrittura*, Sini explains this intertwining of practices in relation to philosophising in these terms: ‘Every life practice is a [form of] “wisdom” *sui generis*. At least, it is knowing how to do this and that (to stand,

walk, grasp, and so on); then, it is knowing how to say; and finally, it is knowing how to write, in all the senses of this expression' (Sini 2009: 104).

Walking, standing, grasping, are practices in which we have legs to walk and stand, hands to grasp and objects which we reach and grip. In these practices we know how to move our legs and how to grasp an object. In Wittgenstein's terms, we know the rules of the game and we are part of this game. In this regard, it is crucial to understand that, according to Sini, the practice establishes its own terms, its own rules of the game, to serve its purpose, the *telos*. Indeed, Sini claims that 'the general feature of doing is a relation, but not in the form of 'A does B', where A and B are already constituted as objects in themselves. Originally, doing is a relation that posits itself at its own extremes or posits its own terms' (Sini 2009: 104). At the origin there is a relation that establishes its own object and subject. For instance the practice of walking makes one a walker and walking has its own rules, which its subject must respect if they wish to 'walk'. At the same time, such rules are the result of a complex of practices: namely the practices of standing upright and balancing.

In this sense, a practice is empirical, 'since it contains elements of other practices that have already evolved' (Sini 2009: 107) and these other practices are coordinated by virtue of the practice. More precisely, in the practices, the elements are organised in view of the final cause, of which the things are signs, indications: i.e. the *telos* grounds a corresponding *ethos*. For this reason the practice is not only empirical, but also transcendental, because it is an opening of meanings, of possibilities that do not pre-exist and that emerge only through the practice itself. Shifted into new horizons, practices always acquire new meanings and senses. So every practice – we may say – is a figure, a sign, of the transcendental event of the world as an opening of meanings, and this event is always its interpretations (see Sini 2009: 108).

Now, this basic outline of the notion of practices raises the issue of the nature of the subject in the philosophy of Sini; in other words: who is the subject of practices?

3. The Subject to Practices and the Subject of Practices

In Sini's philosophy, the subject is not the metaphysical subject, nor is it the transcendental model of subjectivity, but rather it is a peculiar subject that takes on a twofold figure, a twofold nature: it is subject *to* the practices and it is the subject *of* the practices. That is to say, the subject is shaped by the knowledge of and living of practices within which it is engaged and of which – in a way – it is the 'actor'. In the figure of the subject *to* the practices, Sini argues, specifically in relation to philosophising, that 'we *are* [...] the practices that we exercise. While reflecting on the philosophising self, I find myself already constituted by a complex of practices and relations which come to me from the tradition. These practices define and

determine my current status and, more or less obscurely, confer a meaning upon it' (Sini 2009, 103, translation modified).

In this sense, we can argue that the subject has a *fate*. The practices, which the subject engages in, impress a mark upon it and its intentionality. The practices give form to the subject, they confer sense upon its action. More precisely, practices are the horizon of significance within which the subject's action is embedded. Indeed, Sini remarks that 'a subject's intentionality can be understood only starting from the practice in which the subject is situated, from its form and the content of its form' (Sini 2009: 109).

Yet the subject is not only the result of many practices. Within the practices it exercises the *function* of the subject. That is to say, the subject – itself a product of practices – can 'open' a practice, which is, in turn, a complexity of practices. This opening is possible only within practices that have already been activated. There are neither subjects nor objects outside of the practices, so the subject can be an agent within the sphere of practices to which it is assigned and in which it can open a practice, it can introduce a novelty. Concerning this point, in *Etica della Scrittura*, Sini constructs an interesting example to clarify the subject's unique function:

One should think of the Neolithic woman who *sees* in the seed the sign of the flowers and fruit. She is already the result of many practices (gathering, cleaning, cooking, and so on), within which she exercises the function of the subject. It is from the re-elaboration of these practices within the energy of a new meaning that she can open the practice of farming for a humankind still made at a stage of hunters and breeders. (Sini 2009: 109–10)

Beginning from these considerations, we can draw out the unique conformation that the subject takes on in the philosophy of Carlo Sini: on one hand, the subject is shaped by the practices, and on the other hand, the event is but the occurring of practices *through* the subject. In this sense, the subject is a sign of the event, it is a figure of it, it is a singular and individual happening of the event of practices: it is the novelty in the repetition, the variation in the identity. So the subject is subject *to* the practices, is formed by the practices, and is the subject *of* the practices, it is the singularity which is, at the same time, part of the practices and a supervenience. In other words, the subject cannot be reduced to the practices that it embodies, it is not simply the result of these practices, yet it can become what it is only by starting from a concrete world of practices: it is matter already formed, but at the same time also matter which must be formed again and again, time after time. Therefore the subject is not just given once and for all, but it is *in itinere*, it is a continual transformation, in which the 'formation' occurs through a rebound. More precisely every action of the subject contributes to forming the subject itself: by rebounds, by

reacting upon the same subject. For this reason, the subject is a *kinesis*, a movement: in other words, a process of continuous formation.

Through an inquiry into these rebounds, and into these peculiar relationships between voice and writing, body and psyche, nature and culture, Sini drafts a genealogy of subjectivity (Sini 2004–2005), according to which – as the philosopher writes in *La materia del soggetto* – the subject is, in every case, actor and author (Sini 2015b).

4. The Twofold Nature of the Subject: A Contribution to the Debate Between Postmodernism and New Realism

Sini brings to light a twofold nature of the subject, which appears the more significant if we relate it to the current philosophical debate involving New Realism and Postmodernism.⁴ To put the terms of the debate simply, the latter criticises the former's constructivism and their view of the subjective character of truth and reality. Indeed, according to the realistic positions, the postmodern theory subsumes reality and the notion of truth within the hermeneutical circle: truth is relative to points of view and so there is no truth *tout court*; every interpretation depends on its context and it is ungrounded. This critique involves the notion of interpretation, formulated by Nietzsche and developed by Heidegger, according to which there are no facts outside of their interpretation; also and above all this critique concerns Kantian philosophy. In this regard, the German philosopher Markus Gabriel – in *Why the World does not Exist* – defines Postmodernism as a form of radical constructivism and recognises Kant as the father of this tradition.⁵ Before Gabriel, Maurizio Ferraris had similarly considered postmodern thought as a radicalisation of Kantian philosophy (Ferraris 2014: 13), in which there is access to the world only through a conceptual mediation. In Ferraris's view, such conceptual mediation becomes – in postmodern philosophy – a real construction of the world, on account of which, according to the philosopher, ontology is mistaken for epistemology, i.e. confounding 'what there is (and is not dependent on conceptual schemes) and what we know (and depends on conceptual schemes)'

⁴ A specific account of the debate may be found in A. Kanev (2020).

⁵ Specifically Gabriel argues that: 'postmodernism, arguably, was only yet another variation on the basic themes of metaphysics – in particular, because postmodernism was based on a very general form of constructivism. CONSTRUCTIVISM assumes that there are absolutely no facts in themselves and that we construct all facts through our multifaceted forms of discourse and scientific methods. There is no reality beyond our language games or discourses; they somehow do not really talk about anything, but only about themselves. The most important source and forefather of this tradition is Immanuel Kant. Kant indeed claimed that we could not know the world as it is in itself. No matter what we know, he thought that it would always in some respect have been made by human beings' (Gabriel 2015: 3).

(Ferraris 2014: 27).⁶ Within this line of inquiry, prior to the development of New Realism, we may place Meillassoux's speculative materialism, which sees in the Copernican revolution of Kant a 'Ptolemaic counter-revolution' in philosophy: modern science displays thought gaining access to a world which is indifferent to any relations the subject has to it; on the contrary, the *Critique of Pure Reason* reveals a correlationism according to which man cannot '*think what there can be when there is no thought*' (Meillassoux 2009: 121).⁷

Therefore, for the main proponents of New Realism, and of realism *tout court*, truth and reality, in a postmodern perspective, depend on the subjective side of experience: hence the world is inevitably a byword, a reality (Ferraris 2014: 15) in which illusion is preferred to truth, the latter dissolved and forgotten in favour of the power of rhetoric. Thus disengaging from truth (Vattimo 2011) does not have the value of emancipation, but it paradoxically implies, once again, acknowledging that 'the argument of the strongest is always the best' (Ferraris 2014: 3). Nevertheless, if New Realism on the one hand criticises postmodern thought, on the other it also seems to return to a pre-critical position, reducing reality to something independent of the subject, by virtue of which the object and truth are absolute. *Contra* such a position, Vattimo argues that no one speaks from nowhere, i.e. that there is no external perspective from which one may examine the world: 'truth is not encountered but constructed with consensus and respect for the liberty of everyone, and the diverse communities that live together, without blending, in a free society' (Vattimo 2011: xxxvi).

Yet between the two alternative positions upheld respectively by Postmodernism and New Realism, Sini's hermeneutical pragmatism could be a viable third option: one in which truth and reality do not depend on the subject. The transcendental, which Kant assigns to subjectivity, is 'embodied' in the practices. Therefore, the subject is not the creator of a world of meaning, but rather, the concrete world of practices 'runs through' the subject, it occurs through the subject. In this sense, truth occurs in the various interpretations as a self-eventuation, and the interpretations as well as the corresponding *ethos* of the

⁶ According to Ferraris, 'postmodernism gathers at least three orientations of great cultural importance [...] but the element that was by far the most ubiquitous (as it also involves a great part of twentieth-century analytic philosophy) was the one that proclaimed, with a radicalisation of Kantianism, that there is no access to the world if not through the mediation (which, in postmodernism, is radicalised and becomes construction) of conceptual schemes and representation' (Ferraris 2014: 13).

⁷ 'For as everyone knows, in the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant presents his own revolution in thought under the banner of the revolution wrought by Copernicus – instead of knowledge conforming to the object, the Critical revolution makes the object conform to our knowledge. Yet it has become abundantly clear that a more fitting comparison for the Kantian revolution in thought would be to a "Ptolemaic counter-revolution", given that what the former asserts is not that the observer whom we thought was motionless is in fact orbiting around the observed sun, but on the contrary, that the subject is central to the process of knowledge' (Meillassoux 2009: 117–18).

subject are not ungrounded, but they are the result of an intertwining of practices, which truth occupies and dwells in.

We must reckon here that Sini, in his works, discusses the nature of truth from two different perspectives: event and meaning (Sini 2011: 13).⁸ On the one hand, the fact that the world occurs is the event of truth, and on the other hand, what occurs, in each circumstance of the various practices, is the truth in its contingent figures, so that we cannot resolve the event in its partial meanings, nor separate it from the transient figures in which it occurs.⁹ Hence Sini can argue that both postmodern and neorealist philosophers 'frequent the event of truth in the figure of their practices and elicit [...] "evident objects" from it. Such "objects" speak of the truth of the world each in their own way and considerably enhance its comprehension' (Sini 2011: 14).

Insisting upon the movement of truth, which concerns its event as much as its interpretations, Sini's philosophy seems thus to overcome both the trammels of realism, addressed to a reality and truth — as an absolute — as well as the limitations of relativism, according to which only interpretations and no facts can be given: indeed in the philosophy of Sini there is no relativism¹⁰ — as the philosopher remarks time and again in his *Denkweg* — but a thought of practice, for which the subject is a sign of truth; such truth has its place in the concrete world of practices, which ground their subjects and their objects. In this way, the two sides of the subject, and the double meaning of truth, respond to an issue that engages both Postmodernism and New Realism: the question of the relation or interrelation between subject and object.

This question is faced by Carlo Sini from a perspective that is neither subjective nor objective; rather, he refers to the notion of practice: not an absolute principle, as with the Heideggerian notion of Being that shows and hides itself, or the archi-trace or archi-writing proposed by Derrida. Indeed, the practice is a concrete intertwining of knowledge and life, starting from which, 'something' becomes subject or object. So the study of practices can lead to an identification of the characteristics of subjectivity, and allow us to understand its origin and its unique *ethos*. Specifically, for Sini, as we have expounded, the practices of alphabetic writing can outline the character of the subject as it has developed in Western culture, along with its rationality understood as an intellectual vision of meanings. Indeed, the universe of meaning that is proper to the human being is understood by the philosopher as the result of different practices involving body, vision, gesture, upright stance and their ultimate transcription and re-elaboration in

⁸ On the twofold meaning of truth in Sini see especially Sini 1993: 134ff.

⁹ In this perspective, 'interpretations of truth, which are transient, and the event of truth remain for Sini separate concepts, albeit linked through the concept of event as eventuation of (vertical) truth in specific ways of inhabiting it' (Benso 2009: viii).

¹⁰ According to Sini the very statement that all truths are relative is 'absurd, because the statement as such is attributing itself an absolute value; its apparent "weakness" is actually dogmatically very strong' (Sini 2011: 9).

the practice of writing; thus our rationality is not a mere metaphysical addendum to our being animal. Hence, in Sini's philosophy, through these practices, and especially the practices of writing, thanks to which we can avail ourselves of a universal world of meanings, the subject adopts the fate of becoming a sign of truth, a sign that is, as Carrera writes, formed by past interpretations and destined for future interpretations (Carrera 1998: 51). Similarly to Peirce's and Heidegger's claim that '*Man is a sign*', in Sini's perspective, man is a sign of truth; a truth not ungrounded and left to the will of the subject, as postulated by relativism, nor absolute, as postulated by the various forms of realism, but rather a truth that roams around in the multifarious practices, informing human existence, rendering it sign.

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