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Doubt and Possibility
On the Symbolic Structures of Philosophical Thought

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Abstract

Any criticism that can be made of philosophy necessarily implies knowledge of the nature of its symbolic structures. Accordingly, in this paper, I argue that the reflective value of philosophy in the understanding of reality must start by taking into account the peculiar features of the symbolic elements, which compose and support its epistemic structures. The representative core of these elements is, to that extent, the philosophical concept. Through it, as I will try to bring to light, the human mind

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acquires an ideal coupling between thought objects and the act of thinking itself, which in turn differs from that of other forms of knowledge. The question remains, however, whether such unity always carries a sense of reality and what its nature is.

Keywords: concept, doubt, possibility, sense of reality, thought.

Dvom in možnost. O simbolnih strukturah filozofske misli

Povzetek

Sleherna kritika, ki jo lahko naslovimo na filozofijo, implicira poznavanje narave njenih simbolnih struktur. V skladu s tem v pričujočem prispevku zagovarjam mnenje, da mora refleksivna vrednost filozofije pri razumevanju resničnosti pričeti z upoštevanjem posebnih značilnosti simbolnih elementov, ki sestavljajo in podpirajo njene epistemične strukture. Reprezentativno jedro teh elementov v veliki meri tvori filozofski pojem. Z njegovo pomočjo, tako skušam pokazati, *človeški* um prejme idealno spojitev med miselnimi objekti in dejanjem mišljenja samim, kakršna se razlikuje od drugih oblik védenja. Toda odprto ostane vprašanje, *če* takšna enotnost vedno prinaša določen *čut* za resničnost in kakšna je njena narava.

Ključne besede: pojem, dvom, možnost, *čut* za resničnost, misel.

1. Introduction

Contemporary human beings live, as never before, entwined in a truly paradoxical web. On the one hand, modern life has provided them with a wide horizon of possibilities of meaning; on the other, they are daily confronted with the impossibility of realizing all these possibilities. They see a lot, but are not able to know everything. They intend a great deal, but are not able to accomplish as much as they would like to. This seems to lead to a paradoxical psychological outcome: not being able to be everything one feels. Such an impossibility cannot, on the level of human action, be separated from the practical realization of certain possibilities, which are presented to the individuals, nor, on a psychic level, be detached from the emotions which are fundamentally connected with them. Literature had already been premonitory in this regard. Ulrich, the main character in Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, lives solely and exclusively within the realm of possible things, but he cannot achieve anything real. Several of Fernando Pessoa's poetic heteronyms reveal to us, in the same way, the impossibility of modern man identifying with his own ego. The human systems of today's societies are increasingly supported by this paradoxical web, which surrounds individuals at every moment of their daily life. These systems feed on daily life and, by extension, nourish it—they are machines of the production of possibilities, or, in a conventional economic language, engines of speculation.

However, these possibilities determined by modern life are quite different from the possibilities created by philosophical thought. If the former are, above all, social conditions, the latter are reflective conditions. If Musil's character lives in *uncertainty*, the philosopher lives in *doubt*. Doubt, contrary to uncertainty, evidences an intentional activity of the subject and, therefore, delimits its object. Uncertainty can be equated with a "feeling" in the face of certain circumstances and events, neither necessarily implying nor permitting the full individualization of its root causes. Encountering these differences, we may inquire whether philosophy has the power to transform uncertainties into doubts.

Since an early age, philosophy, as a reflexive and self-reflexive epistemic domain, has determined to extend, but in a systematic and articulated way, the

possibilities of meaning of our reality. The best way to express this concern is the philosophical question itself. In general, great philosophical questions almost always take the form of the same formulation, namely: *What is knowledge?*; *What is freedom?*; *What is language?*; *What is thought?*; *What is truth?* Martin Heidegger, in his book *Was ist das – die Philosophie?*, reframes the nature of philosophical thought in the genealogy of questioning itself, that is, in the interrogative sentence *What is that?* (Heidegger 1963). For the German author, this question is a seminal formula that is born with Greek philosophy, but is always determined by the historical epochs and the respective authors who emerge as philosophers within them. In a brief introduction to philosophical thought, Thomas Nagel refuses to elaborate a nominal definition of the nature of philosophy, claiming instead that the best way to understand it is to address the nature of its main questions. To that end, he presents a selection of philosophical problems, ranging from knowledge to ethics and culminating in the meaning of life in general (Nagel 1987). Although it is not a detailed study, after reading Nagel's little book, we have a certain philosophical sense of reality, as we would have a poetic sense if we would read a Dylan Thomas' poem. The issues enumerated by him, however diverse they may be, express a peculiar way of articulating language and thought, which is as common in Aristotle as in Ludwig Wittgenstein.

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One of the plausible, and perhaps most pedagogical, ways of understanding the relationship of philosophical thought with human thought in general is to try to show what are the symbolic structures of the former and how they are articulated. Starting with the assumption that philosophy raises questions and seeks answers to these questions, it is still insufficient to characterize it, to distinguish it, and to refer it to other knowledge forms. In addition, a critical analysis of the function of philosophy in contemporary society and the problems that it can neither inquire nor expressly formulate also depend on the study of the symbolic structures that support it, as is the prototypical case of philosophical concepts.

2. Thought and possibility

It is common to argue that philosophy has the ability to inquire and reflect on everything, even if such a claim is often meant as a criticism. One of the points that underlie the negative view that philosophy has in our days has to do with such misconception that philosophers think and talk about everything, about multiple subjects, and produce discourses that are not completely discernible. The opposite is rarely stated, namely, that philosophy has its limits as well, and these are not only imposed by reality, but also by its own symbolic structures. In this case, however, it is a matter of conceiving philosophy only as a discourse and finding in it its true *raison d'être*. Now, regarding this point of view, can the objects of philosophical reflection be conceived of only as discursive objects, that is, as matter that is submitted to a (philosophical) form? Or, on the contrary, do they entail anything more than the mere condition of subject matter?

Because philosophy, like the other sciences, builds its objects according to its concepts and theories, an answer to these questions may not only add to the meaning of philosophical thought, but also put into play the formation processes of philosophical objects as that first imperative condition of the phenomena that can be philosophically thought.

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For philosophy, what can be thought is more than a part drawn from our reality, not having, therefore, the merely epistemological status of an empirical object. As Giorgio Agamben points out in this regard, "the element of philosophy is not what obliges us but what demands of us; not what must-be or mere factual reality, but the demand" (Agamben 2018, 29). Still expressed in a preparatory way, one can assert that what can be thought re-enters in philosophical thought, not only as an object, but simultaneously as a potentiation of the act of thinking itself. Since not everything is thinkable, when a certain phenomenon is philosophically thought, this act contributes to the reproduction of philosophical thought and not only to the meaning of the object in question. This means that one can understand the multiple calls for speculation addressed by philosophers. According to Bertrand Russell, philosophy must extend the possibilities of "that speculative interest in the universe which is apt to be killed by confining ourselves to definitely

ascertainable knowledge" (Russell 2001, 90–91). The idea of possibility deserves all the attention on Russell's part, which, despite being unable to install a "feeling of certainty," contributes to increasing our knowledge of things "as to what they may be" (Russell 2001, 91). Therefore, as he reiterates, the value of philosophy lies above all in the "liberating doubt" (Russell 2001, 91). This Russellian sense of doubt should be considered in connection to Cartesian methodical skepticism rather than to Pyrrhonian skepticism.

It is obvious that Russell, throughout his philosophical oeuvre, often tended to transform and express the philosophical value of doubt through the elaboration and resolution of logical puzzles. One of the criticisms that today are addressed to the so-called analytic philosophy is precisely the use and abuse of "puzzling" questions. Some authors described it in the following terms:

> In positive science results are expected. In Analytic Philosophy everyone waits for the next new puzzle. Like the braintwisters holidaymakers take onto the beach, philosophical puzzles divert from life's hardships. They doubtless have their place in a flourishing theoretical culture. But Analytic Philosophy is at its core a culture driven by puzzles, rather than by large-scale, systematic theoretical goals. (Mulligan, Simons, and Smith 2006, 65)

This rather fierce criticism of the puzzling questions is a somewhat obvious sign that the negative view of philosophy is also anchored in its closure to everyday social problems. Strictly speaking, a puzzle, like a game, can be solved anytime, in any social context, regardless of the reality surrounding its players. So, the problem lies precisely in the immediate impression that the rules to play or, in this particular case, to decipher the puzzle are not the same as those, which govern our reality and our concerns about it.

In fact, the dichotomy *doubt–certainty* characterizes all the epistemic program of philosophy as the dichotomy *truth–falsity* characterizes that of science in general. From classical antiquity to modernity, philosophical doubt has primarily settled on questions formulated in epistemological terms. As human knowledge was tendentially structured according to a hierarchy of its sources—as is evident in Plato's *Theaetetus*—, then the knowledge that is given

through the senses immediately served as the object of an inquiry, at the same time, as the first focus of philosophical doubt. Epistemology, in fact, has never abandoned this skeptical foresight and, today as always, its formulations and proposals still denote the influence of the binomial doubt–certainty.

Charles Sanders Peirce, referring to Cartesian methodical skepticism and its contribution to overcoming scholastic thinking, asserts that the idea of universal doubt leads to a deadlock, as it calls into question the scrutiny of phenomena, which can be the object of thought. As he reiterates, "we cannot start from complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy." (Peirce 1955a, 228) And finally, he adds: "Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts." (Peirce 1955a, 229) Thus, according to Peirce, philosophical inquiry is not determined, in unique and exclusive ways, neither by the enunciation of a simple question nor by the idea of "questioning everything" (Peirce 1955b, 11). In order for the human mind to move from doubt to certainty—which in Peircean terminology means *belief*—, the former must necessarily "be a real and living doubt, and without this all discussion is idle" (Peirce 1955b, 11). Doubt, thus conceived, must therefore have a rationale and a real referent, and any discussion will be fruitless and even disappointing unless it meets these two rational criteria.

In this sense, philosophical questions do not always result from the same uncertainties that may be present in our judgments about reality. Philosophical doubt is expressed, above all, in the openness of questions, in the possibility of answers, whose nature can continuously lead to other questions. As Luciano Floridi rightly points out:

> [...] uncertainties are not necessarily linked to open questions. Whether there will be a financial crisis next year (or a battle tomorrow, for Aristotle) is a closed question not because we have an answer—we do not by definition, and if we did, we could simply change the example— nor because disagreement, lacking a definite answer, is unreasonable; it is closed because we understand that our lack of a definite answer, and hence our disagreement, is based precisely on insufficient empirical or logico-mathematical resources. (Floridi 2013, 205)

On this account, we can affirm, without reluctance, that philosophical questions have an open character, because the field of meaning possibilities concerning the phenomena of thought is expanded. Generally, our knowledge is dependent on the generation of possibilities. At the same time, it means that phenomena are brought to the knowledge if, in their apprehension, more possibilities are generated than those that can be truly actualized. There is no pure apprehension of phenomena—or, in Ernst Cassirer's words, no *materia nuda*, no brute facts (Cassirer 1994, 18)—devoid of our previous experiences and knowledge, as well as our expectations. Therefore, the knowledge of a given phenomenon, so that it might be actualized, also implies a selection and denial of meaning possibilities.

More specifically, the excess of possibilities is then a seminal condition for a phenomenon to be known, that is, it makes possible, first, the expression of the phenomenon as an object of knowledge. To say this, also means to assume that knowledge in general—as well as its structures and operations supported by meaning-making processes—requires such cognitive surplus in order to be reproduced. However, the increase of meaning possibilities does not necessarily lead to the formation of a matching consciousness. On the contrary, this has always been—and still is—the challenge placed on modern society, since meaning can only be grasped by the actualization of possibilities, that is, it requires responses, not mere reactions. To paraphrase Ernst Cassirer, reactions are distinguished from responses, because in the former "the direct and immediate answer is given to an outward stimulus," whereas in the latter "the answer is delayed," because "[it] is interrupted and retarded by a slow and complicated process of thought" (Cassirer 1956, 43). Taking this into account, it is also defensible to claim, with some reason, that one of the problems that contribute to the alleged crisis of philosophy concerns the discrepancy between *the time of reflection* and *the time of need for answers*. The acceleration of time in our societies makes the two, so to speak, deceptively simultaneous. On the other hand, and no less relevant, this illusion also gives rise to the feeling that philosophical thought is only confined to the a posteriori problem solving, as if it were, in fact, a mere instrument for solving puzzles.

3. Possibility and concept

According to Isaiah Berlin, one of the key functions of philosophy is to reveal the ways, in which we conceive and know reality. In this sense, the question is how human mind processes and categorizes its experiences—aesthetic, moral, political, religious, scientific—, taking into account the symbolic means that support and express it. Therefore, according to this transcendental purpose, the object of philosophy "is to a large degree not the items of experience, but the ways in which they are viewed, the permanent or semi-permanent categories in terms of which experience is conceived and classified" (Berlin 1999, 9). Although this formulation of Isaiah Berlin cannot be taken as the only one that best defines the philosophical realm, it does, however, provide us with a crucial question: what is the contribution to philosophical thought of an examination of the ways, in which we structure our experience, knowing in advance that it—that is, philosophical thought—is an activity anchored in the theoretical value of concepts?

It is due, in large part, to the distinct nature of philosophical concepts that thought objects acquire a dual operational status, namely: on the one hand, they enter in the reflexive stream as "matter" of thought; on the other hand, they give "form" to thinking itself, insofar as they re-enter into the meaning-making processes as true supporters of what can be intelligible. Therefore, philosophical objects are not reduced to the mere condition of thought objects, of facts apprehended by intellectual activity, but they become—or at least afford this possibility to—power of thought. In other words, potentially, philosophical objects allow us not only to think about reality merely in its individual aspects, but also to articulate the very act of thinking according to certain reflexive categories that can be applied to other phenomena of reality.

Accordingly, it is on the basis of these assumptions that we can assert that philosophical objects are *eccentric objects*. They are not merely reflective subject matters, but simultaneously contribute to thought's self-reflective articulation. This condition is necessary for the constitution of philosophy as effective and autonomous epistemic domain. Using Robert Brandom's words, we may say that philosophical activity "is a self-reflexive enterprise" and, consequently, "understanding is not only the *goal* of philosophical inquiry, but its *topic*

as well. We are its topic, but it is us specifically as understanding creatures: discursive beings, makers and takers of reasons, seekers and speakers of truth." (Brandom 2001, 77) Yet, although philosophical activity in general tends to select its objects according to this twofold operative status, not all elements of our reality lend themselves to the eccentricity of philosophical thought, insofar as they call into question the reproduction of meaning possibilities. Quite the reverse, there are phenomena, which are not indifferent to philosophy, that engender a kind of reflexive resistance. Thought finds in them its limits rather than its possibilities.

Regarding this issue, it is enough to think, for instance, of those phenomena linked with terror feelings, which, in the history of philosophy, began to be aesthetically analyzed in connection with the concept of the sublime, initially conjectured by Pseudo-Longinus and later systematically developed by Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Schiller. Despite the connection to aesthetics, due to its emotional absolute nature, terror, for philosophy, presents itself as a subject matter that reduces meaning possibilities and all questions that may arise—its cognitive level is anchored in organic reactions and not so much in a high abstraction order. Here, Julia Kristeva's words are worth remembering. In the opening paragraphs of *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, she defines horror as abjection: "When I am beset by abjection, the twisted braid of affections and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object*." (Kristeva 1982, 1) So, regarding meaning-making processes, the abject is to be distinguished from the object as follows:

> If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. (Kristeva 1982, 1–2)

This means that in the analysis of the abject, although there is always a certain connection between thought and reality, such a connection is more limited and conditioned by the phenomena concerned than by the meaning possibilities of philosophical thought.

Because of this *sui generis* profile of its objects, philosophical activity is seen as obliged to use other symbolic operators that allow it to reinforce the intentional nature of thought. Such is the case with the function performed by examples. Examples serve to create a two-way bridge between the concept and the object. Hence, not all examples can serve this purpose. In other words, the example updates the relationship between the concept and the object, between the self-referentiality and the hetero-referentiality of the concept, thus preventing it from becoming an empty symbolic operator without reference. In the case of abject phenomena, for instance, there is a reflexive resistance in them and a consequent uncertainty of meaning, because they also give rise to a kind of break in the connection between the concept and its hetero-referentiality. This has as its immediate theoretical consequence the referential emptiness of the philosophical concept and its inability to articulate phenomena doubly in objects of thought and objects connected with a sense of reality. Thus, phenomena considered abject are, at the level of exemplification processes, potentially multipliers of communicative effects and not so much of conceptual articulations. Hence, philosophical thought avoids resorting to the use of examples considered abject. Of course, this is only plausible if we accept the premise that the example—namely, the effective example—is capable of reducing the effects and ambiguities of communication, thus reinforcing the suggestive link between concept and object. Now, given the paradoxical nature of many phenomena of contemporary life and the fact that philosophers do not use many abject examples, this will greatly contribute to the masking of several dimensions of reality.

Despite the evocative power of examples to give expression to the applicability of the concept—that is, to its hetero-referentiality—, philosophical objects necessarily transcend the realm of the particular. They are more than ordinary objects of thought. By being conceptually articulated, they transform themselves into intellectual powers, into dynamic levers of the act of thinking itself. We can define the concept as a selective designator that acts on several representations and interpretations of a given phenomenon, thus granting them reflective unity. Since it is not a mere discursive "term," to operate on these elements abstracted from phenomena, it presupposes a self-referential dimension. Here we could, to a certain extent, use the radical approach of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who define the philosophical concept as not

having a propositional extension, but rather a self-referential intention, and therefore cannot be converted as intended by a large part of logicians, in a chain of propositions (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 26–27). On the other hand, however, each concept carries a semantic heritage, even in those cases, in which it seeks to call it into question; consequently, there are no pure concepts, devoid of any theoretical mutual relations.

In fact, the philosophical object is not at all a lifelike subject matter. Conversely, what best defines it, is the close symbolic articulation that it fosters between thinking and thought, precisely because it is an intensified form of inclusion of these two constitutive moments of reflection in general. In this narrow sense, the widespread idea that philosophy promotes a "vision of the whole" of reality, as advocated by George Edward Moore (2013, 1–27), and that this holistic approach is present in most of the acts of philosophical thought, such feature presupposes *ab initio* the twofold reflective status of its objects. To confer on a certain phenomenon of human reality a total symbolic spectrum, in which its parts are necessarily congruent, means, concretely, to empower it as the cause and expression of the thought itself.

But in the light of what has already been said, there is no guarantee that these aims of philosophy will fit perfectly with the worldview of contemporary human beings. Much because of new information technologies, reality comes to them in a fragmented manner, devoid of suitable articulation principles, and often without a clear purpose. If there is a universal principle that grounds philosophy, it is precisely that, which states that thought must anticipate action, and not the other way around. That this anticipatory dimension makes philosophy a privileged theoretical domain for ethical thought is an undeniable fact. Leveraged in part by the numberless questions raised by scientific and technological progress and its repercussions on human life, there is, however, a growing tendency to confine philosophical thought to ethical concerns. The ethical sphere of reality is essentially anchored in a *must-be*, whose nature, however, transcends many of the human spheres of intersubjectivity, culture, and life in society. If the perception of reality is not just a set of accomplished facts, but also facts under construction and even those that can still be constructed, this implies conceiving philosophy according to an expanded sense of reality.

4. Concept and sense of reality

If philosophy should not be understood as a mere discourse, then it cannot be circumscribed to the boundaries of the logical analysis of language. Although philosophy present in the author's oeuvre should not be reduced to this assumption, Ludwig Wittgenstein's logical conceptions of the function of philosophy can be summarized in accordance with the supposed dual catharsis of thought, set in motion through a sort of a purification of language. The Wittgensteinian axioms that philosophical activity "is a battle against bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" (Wittgenstein 1986, 47) and that it is there, in this restricted domain, where its true field of action lies, are in fact ways of reducing the concept to a pre-established propositional value. And this is why Wittgenstein can also assert that, in philosophical work, "we do not draw conclusions"; on the contrary, "philosophy only states what everyone admits" (Wittgenstein 1986, 156). That is to say, the concept, being reduced to the scope of the logical truth, ceases to initiate any reference to a dynamic worldview; it remains, inversely, enclosed in the propositional circle of truth and falsity. Accordingly, the analysis of a philosophical question "is like the treatment of an illness" (Wittgenstein 1986, 91), reducing, consequently, philosophy to a form of intellectual therapy. Against this sort of epistemic reductionism, we can say that just as art is not mere entertainment, philosophy also does not have a purely therapeutic function.

Due to their operative nature, philosophical concepts transcend the condition of abstraction tools, in order to conceive and articulate particular features of reality. They also carry a sense of reality—or, if one prefers to use an old German philosophical expression, a *Weltanschauung*—, which contributes as much to its operative efficacy as to its hetero-referentiality. The degree of articulation of the concept with the sense of reality reaches, in philosophy, its greatest intensity, to the point that, sometimes, the rational demarcation lines that may separate them—that is, the concept and the sense of reality—can be blurred too. Generally, the distinction is, or is to be, introduced and updated again, when a new concept comes to question its forerunner.

Now, scientific thought in its multidisciplinary epistemic web presents several senses of reality, whose features, although they may converge, are

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not always susceptible to being reconciled with each other. On another level, more precisely when it comes to reconciling these scientific observations with those of philosophy, it is hardly possible, for example, that the concept of "freedom" evoked by philosophers is corroborated by what is presupposed by some neuroscience laboratory researches, namely, those concerning decision-making mechanisms. The intense debate that was generated in our time on the neuronal determinism has thus far been incapable of developing the supposed compatibility between the two fields of knowledge. In spite of the vain attempt of the so-called "neurophilosophy," this has never appeared plausible or possible, since, for philosophical thought, a free act should not be understood through quantitative diagrams and processes, such as those employed by Benjamin Libet in his experiments. What is the sense of reality prevailing in these neurological accounts? If we start from the idea of freedom present in much of the philosophical theories and in today's social imaginary, it becomes clear that an individual who does not have the freedom to make his or her choices, because he or she is fully determined by his or her neural mechanisms, is deprived of the conscious faculty of, among others, choosing his or her political leaders, the purposes and means of his or her civic and moral behavior, the education forms s/he desires for himself/herself, and for his/her loved ones, and ultimately his/her own view of the world. Therefore, without the freedom of decision and without the conscience of it, every human being is subjected to the destiny of those who have the power to decide.

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There have always been and will certainly be direct and indirect references by philosophers to scientific theories and concepts. Just as there were always philosophical concepts that were constructed by analogy with scientific concepts. Still within the ethical field—and used again here to emphasize the principle of incompatibility between the *Weltanschauung* of philosophy and that of the other sciences—, let us consider, for instance, Francis Hutcheson's attempt, in his theory of moral passions, to conceive the concept of "benevolence" in full articulation with the physical principles of Isaac Newton's gravitation law and thus to show that this moral sentiment tends to increase when there are contiguous relations among individuals (Hutcheson 2008, 150). But as with some neuroscience rules, Hutcheson was also led to

neglect the social and cultural influences of habit and conventions in human being's psychic life.

To summarize my point in pictorial terms, the philosophical concept is not a figure without background. In purely hypothetical terms, it would be up to the concept to convey and make discernible the background, the sense of reality, from which it emerges and to which it alludes. One of the major problems with philosophy in general is that such articulation is not always well defined and understandable. Moreover, what sometimes sustains the pivotal dynamic of a given conceptual web—the cross-referential processes from one concept to another—, greatly diminishes the possibilities of objective discrimination of the foundations that bind it to a certain sphere of reality.

5. Reality and understanding

Although different, philosophy, like art, is not restricted to duplicate certain parts of our reality and subject them to reflective and theoretical scrutiny. Similar to the two forms of knowledge—art and philosophy—, there is the human attempt to make visible what is not yet visible, which is buried in the immense debris of daily life and which, as such, tends to remain inaccessible to the human mind. In this respect, José Ortega y Gasset, drawing from the Greek idea of *alétheia*, tells us that "philosophy is a gigantic effort at superficiality, that is to say, at bringing up to the surface and making open, clear, and evident that which was subterranean, mysterious, and latent" (Ortega y Gasset 1961, 111). This is, strictly speaking, one of the greatest criticisms that can be imputed to philosophy in general and contemporary philosophy in particular. The accelerated reality of modern life facts does not yet seem to be intercepted by the creative capacities of philosophy, in order to exercise mastery over the discovery of reality, rather than be limited solely to the a posteriori description, appreciation, and conceptualization these same facts already experienced by today's human beings.

But such aim is not always apparent to philosophers. Based on the Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy, Michael Dummett, in *The Nature and Future of Philosophy*, advocates that philosophical knowledge is unable to portray new facts about reality, being its main theoretical goal only "to improve

our understanding of what we already know" (2010, 10). Departing from this maxim, Dummett then establishes the following distinction between science and philosophy:

> Science supplies us with ever more facts about reality, although to do so, it has often to fashion new concepts in terms of which to state those facts. It thus enlarges our field of vision. Philosophy seeks to rectify our vision, enabling us, as Wittgenstein said, to see the world aright, including those features of the world that science reveals. (Dummett 2010, 30)

This assessment, shared by Wittgenstein and later by Dummett, nevertheless arouses an inexorable misunderstanding: the misconception that the understanding of reality is originally entirely dependent on the *common sense*, about which are facts that constitute it. Thus, the precedence of the fact supports the appearance of philosophical judgments and concepts; only this would be enough to shape a reality understanding principle. We must, however, challenge such *petitio principii* argument. For, if this were so, all philosophical judgments would soon result in mere intellectual processes quite analogous to perception processes. In order to be philosophically articulated, understanding requires new perceptions of reality, which are not yet bare facts shared by a community of observers—like that of scientists—and which, on the other hand, may never be accepted as plausible facts. If one disregards this creative dimension of philosophical activity, then the very idea of understanding will be weakened and will no longer have any significant bearing on the world and its relation to it.

The question of whether or not there is an evolutionary principle in philosophical thought is still put today, especially by those engaged in the writing of the history of philosophy. It is obvious that, in many cases, it is almost inevitable that such a question will be asked when, through a historiographical record, themes, concepts, and theories are compared and differentiated. It is easy, therefore, to project into philosophy the nature, which is genetically circumscribed to sciences and which, consequently, is structurally alien to it.

There are, of course, philosophical questions that have ceased to be theoretically considered; in turn, their disappearance might trigger the

appearance of even more pertinent ones. We can, in this sense, inquire into the reasons that lead a question to cease to be part of a philosophical doubt, but this does not entail, per se, an inherent and necessary evolutionary principle to philosophical thought, similar to that of the "paradigm shift" formulated by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Philosophy changes, transforms itself, but does not necessarily progress. From the Platonic and Aristotelian formulations on the inferior nature of slaves and those relating to racial discrimination present in the anthropology of Immanuel Kant up to the present century, there is, in fact, a great moral shift that connects philosophical thought with civilizational, ethical, and humanist advances. This does not mean, of course, that philosophy has not contributed—as I think it has—to the abolition of nefarious prejudices, such as those attributed to Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. On the contrary, there are strong historical reasons to believe that it did. But this does not imply drawing, within the framework of philosophy, a structural evolutionary path parallel to that of personal convictions and social conventions. More or less dynamic, more or less static, philosophy persists as a way of organizing our understanding of the world. Whether this understanding will make us better citizens, will lead to the transformation of reality, as Karl Marx intended, or will ensure the happiness of those who are interested in it, are all immeasurable possibilities, unable to be subjected to a cause–effect nexus. Indeed, when a question ceases to be a philosophical problem—whether because it is excluded or because it is overlooked—, there are, according to what has already been formulated, reasons for seeing in such cases an internal feature that moves philosophical thought, namely: the well-aimed articulation between the questions and the reproduction of philosophical thought itself.

6. Final remarks

When it is commonly said that in our time *there are more doubts than certainties*, what is really being affirmed? Following our reasoning, one can assert that such a statement is a significant symptom of the lack of visibility of a sense of reality capable of leading the questions to the real level of answers. Such a symptom is not new. John Dewey, in the last paragraphs of his *The Quest for Certainty*, makes the following remark:

> Man has never had such a varied body of knowledge in his possession before, and probably never before has he been so uncertain and so perplexed as to what his knowledge means, what it points to in action and in consequences. (Dewey 1929, 313)

In the cases where thought is able to exert all its reflective power, reality is distinguished from it, and vice versa. And it is precisely through this possibility that new forms of awareness are added to the world. When this does not happen, our world is only a memory of what has already been, of what is already known, of what has already been thought. What does not consciously become reality or sense of reality, tends to pierce the heart of contemporary individuals. Mediation exceeds the required information of the object; there is no time for this to convey reality or some possible relation to it; only reactions to it are aroused. Based on what has been said, one of the relevant challenges to philosophical thought is precisely to express, through the life of the concept, a unified sense of reality, whose structural nature may be distinct from the order of the fragment, the fleeting, the ephemeral, of the information flow established by the new means of information and communication. It is, in essence, to reinforce the philosophical power of the concept, but always through an increase in the visibility of the sense of reality. The emphasis placed on concepts and their theoretical relations, therefore, must neither be detached from their multiple social and cultural extensions nor must it obscure the possibilities and limits of philosophical thought. Without a clear statement of this latter condition, philosophy will always continue to be conceived as a purely abstract epistemic domain, intended only for the solving of logical puzzles. The great difficulty lies there.

Because it has neither the essence of religion nor that of science, philosophy, faced with the countless senses of reality, finds itself confronted with the impossibility of offering a univocal form to all of these modes of intuition of the world. However, such impossibility can always be transformed into the possibility of its reinvention—in other words, it can serve as a double moment of encouragement and challenge, as well as of raising awareness regarding the limits of philosophical thought itself.

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