

The Post-modern and Modernity from the Point of View of the History of Philosophy

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Abstract: The article examines the irruption of post-modernity into modernity and in regard to the specific discipline of the history of philosophy. The first two perspectives for the study of the above mentioned relation are those of knowledge and power that permit the understanding of the process of historicizing philosophy. Of crucial significance is equally the element of phenomenological evidence or else the donation that delimits respectively the fields of phenomenology and philosophical constructivism. The phenomenological donation elaborated by Jean-Luc Marion constitutes a challenge to the cultural approach of constructivism in relation to the fact that the latter has become the major methodological horizon of the actual history of philosophy. The accusation that both the phenomenological donation and the philosophical constructivism direct against each other is the possible and troubling return of metaphysics either through donation or constructivism. The question that thus rises for the history of philosophy would be that of a possible renewed desire for metaphysics.

Keywords: modern; post-modern; knowledge; power; donation; phenomenology; constructivism; history of philosophy

I. Introduction

The final years of the 20th century were colored by a discussion concerning the post-modern era and its relation to modernity.¹ Different versions and ideas about this relation were advanced, moving from a kind of coextensive signification of the two terms to the idea of a total

¹ See Peter V. Zima, *Modern / Postmodern. Society, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Continuum, 2010).

rupture between the modernist project and the post-modern one. The epistemic field of the history of philosophy was also affected by this debate since the study of the relation of the different discourses was progressing from a kind of hierarchical codification toward the co-presence of various philosophical reasons to be apprehended through tolerant eyes and apart from any idea of axiological neutrality that would subjugate them to some form of instrumentality. Only the expressions of totality were to be set aside, especially those of the dialectical form. A co-Being of toleration and liberality was to be construed, quite apart from the discourses of totalization (dialectical or not).

There is also the conviction that the post-modern is to be placed inside the context of modernity since the latter remains the necessary ground for the success of the former. A first tension to be examined here, in regard to the history of philosophy and as to the presence of the post-modern within modernity, is the one between “archive” and “authority;” this has to be made on the limits of the philosophical requirements of our post-modern present. An even ontology like the one mentioned above, without sublime or profundity, requires consequently a reflection about the constant tension between abstraction and constitutionality within the historical philosophies. Up to now numerous philosophical finalities were inscribed within the context of the desirable life while the human passion should not be bound to any act of excess. Yet the unitary, transcendental archetypes were progressively abandoned either as distinct entities or as origins and in favor of multiplicity, either as individual desire or as situated co-Beings. The actual times, therefore, abandon both the speculative origination and the teleological views of the philosophical project. Time is immanentized in a most radical fashion and henceforth the prevailing idea is not that of the universe measured by high intellect but desiring motion and the tumult of the living beings while the rationalist mechanics is replaced by the rise of biotechnology. This is no doubt a new ontology of extremely radical immanence that refutes phenomenology or the autonomy of the phenomenon.

II. Knowledge

The element of relation constitutes the endless, finite and energetic constant factor that persistently creates new modes of ontological character. Yet, the post-modern tropism is not any kind of ontological reality but a temporary state of affairs and open possibilities for identifying differently its structure. Under the term “tropism,” the modernist ontology expresses its immanent flatness in creating concepts (ontological extension) while the imaginary refers to nothing else than the decomposition of the mental mechanism that supported the old speculative ontologies.

However, the modernist ontology instead of being consumed in the critical extinction of idols proceeded to an attempt to construe a new episteme of dispositions and cognitions. In particular, a new science of the forms of representation was produced, in the light of the fact that the limit between presentation and representation had become particularly blurred so that the two terms, in the tradition of Nietzsche, appear as co-extant. If the modernist ontology reflects about being, the post-modern one is identified to the diagnostics of ontological symptoms where the whole point of the philosophical discussion is to embrace a new geometry of tropisms, i.e., without geometrical axioms of orientation – such refutation is to be seen in the Deleuzian rhizome.² The distinction between being and attributes was denounced as external to the world, against the idea of a being that was required to stay linked in an axiomatic manner to the attributes of the accidents and in order to be the being of beings; the modern being appeared mobile and ever-changing, vibrating along with the rhythms of life, coincidental and diversified. Actually, the post-modern being is mannered but its versions create knots of existence, relations rather than units or entities, in a non-deterministic way. Each

² See Simon O’Sullivan, *Art Encounters, Deleuze and Guattari. Renewing Philosophy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), especially the chapter “Rhizomes, Machines, Multiplicities and Maps Notes Toward an Expanded Art Practice (Beyond Representation),” 9-37.

knot is the temporary center of a series of acts and actions and does not concern the intuition of causative, unique and essential beings.

In the post-modern ontology, power is the new center of ontological force. The being is action and behavior; the idea of power or rather the reality of power allows for the abolition of the need for surpassing the well-known tensions between rationality and metaphysics. The action follows encounters and interactions where the causality appears only *a posteriori*. The set of encounters and interactions is nothing more than the inventory of acts or, otherwise, an “archive” and thus we have the term “ontology of the archive.”³ The first record file of the archive is due to the thirst for knowledge, i.e., the will to survive of the archivist. Life is just a study of the violent and non-livable relationships of the co-Beings, i.e., the culture. The relationships of co-Beings are passionate, and the deep structure of their *pathos* is imitation while the passion is not drive but the field of imitative action. The co-Beings are not subjects but folds of power while the true being is nothing else than the joint space, the interactions and encounters of the so-called individuals. The archive ontology is in some respects the ontology of correlation. There is no desire without simulation as opposed to the older modernist view that there is no desire without prohibition and transgression; the simulation is nothing else than a mirroring game without reference. If we had to return to the idea of subjectivity, one should re-adopt a type of relationship between being and attributes or else a relationship of being and having while the totality of desire would be the desire to possess. Instead of establishing the relationships of unique entities (individuals), the research must turn to the history of becoming (a subject): how did I become what I am and how does the self becomes?

The diffuse, major politics of the living being is expansive and pervasive. The truth here is a strategy, a stake and an articulation of suffering and action. The living being is open, pierced

³ See Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

by power, the subjective consciousness intersects with the elements of danger, experimentation and manipulation. The problem of the conscious choice will not be a priori since only the history is a priori. What does the care of the self may signify at this point? The philosophical iconology that takes the place of the old distinction between presentation and representation is a source of versions and varieties, a kind of teleology canceled. Normativity is the other name for the life-plans (narratives) of individuals. The choice of normativity meets the progression of the narrative. The substantial diffusion of power rises against the ideas of balance and harmony. The memory in the plural is nothing but the inter-personal memory of the life-narratives (otherwise, that which is popular).⁴ The refutation here of the utilitarian vocabulary signifies a strong relationship between rupture and innovation. The iconological versions of a given culture are not structured rigidly, on the contrary they demonstrate the real elements of moral luck, the events and the errors of the co-Beings. The iconological versions are networked in order to avoid the tautological coincidence of one to the other. In regard to the relations of individuation and personalization, the subject should not be consumed in internal pursuits that are only the characteristic of regional modernism and in fact the products of iconological networking. The living being must always depend on power.

III. Power

The discursive practices of institutions are ubiquitous through the absolute difference between the events and their memorial formation. Instead of an omnipotent structure of (Freudian) censorship, we have the Nietzschean power of the weak. The diffusion of peripheral modernism re-unites the technique, the culture and consciousness where multiple narratives preclude the exception. The innovation of regional modernism is rising against the traditional ethos through the mechanism of erot-

⁴ G. Arabatzis, "Cosmos" et 'Politès': paradigmes païens et chrétiens," *Diotima* 40 (2012) : 193-198.

ic confessing and instead of the harmonious composition of the whole we have the seductions of diffusion. The strategy of the living being is therefore as much expansive as diffuse. The experience of the modernist transformation goes through urban desire and the normativity of life. The modernism becomes necessary and thus the sufferings of culture are reconciled with action. The practices of cultural *semiosis* may refer to Kafka's Penitentiary Colony or to the exile of Plato's poets, while the generalized *semiosis* opposes the romantic psychology. This strange duality of modernity and romanticism is due to the repulsion or memory. The technological radical immanence is a long canonized and thus forgotten historical process involving de-Christianization, humanism and the Enlightenment. The radical immanence is revealed in the heretical naturalism of the Marquis de Sade where the pleasure of matter is confided to all.

Ever since the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault turns to a study of persistent asceticism, what he thinks of as the everlasting Victorian regime.⁵ This can be seen in a Nietzschean style as a metaphor for the history of philosophy. It is Christianity that generates originally the modern forms of power, that is, the will to encompass a soul and an identity that can be corrected and transformed precisely by power. This means a process of continuous obedience and self-examination, the detailed confession of desires; these are the axes of force that that modern power invests. One can discern here the toils of the once supreme intellect. Foucault follows closely the parallelism of Christianity and history of philosophy as well as the brutal renunciation of Christianity by Nietzsche and in some ways the nostalgic return to the ancient Greeks and their care of the self. The genealogical analysis of the relation of Christianity to modernity gave birth to the problematizing rupture between self-control and sexuality that goes far beyond the Greek limits of the care of the self. Foucault in that also remains a true Nietzschean thinker. Instead of examining the spiritual uni-

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. Volume I: An Introduction (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) 3ff.

verses like hermeneutical thinkers do, Foucault insists on concentrating upon the technologies of the self; instead of giving descriptions and interpretations, he insists on processes. The effects of power constitute a plunge into truth and the *epistemes* are the privileged concealed spaces for the development of the technologies of the self. A process is not, importantly, a dialectic evolution but the indeterminate history of violence and rupture. Foucault denies the idea of a coming-of-age novel of the human spirit like the Hegelian phenomenology, he stands against the history of ideas and moves toward a constructivist universe. The concept of technology of the self generates thus a series of interchangeable individualities.

IV. Donation

A collateral tension in the history of philosophy generated by the irruption of post-modernity into modernity is the one between time and subject. Nietzsche has criticized the philosophy of the western world as a kind of Christian Platonism based on the duality of consciousness and resentment. The Cartesian ego (*cogito*) is assumed by the being and in consequence by alienation while the duality idol-image becomes part of the movement of actuality. The idol objectifies the Godhead but the image reveals the negative theology of the distance from the divine. Thus, the apophaticism of the image goes beyond the Nietzschean critique of the Christian Platonism and Karl Barth's abyss between the humane and the divine. The phenomenon becomes a ground for anti-nihilistic thinking in the sense of figurative representation. Phenomena seem to be a kind of an unconditional gift (a phenomenal donation), a gratuitous appearing. The Husserlian phenomenology tries to relieve the phenomena from any metaphysical reductionism as much as from the Nietzschean perspectivism; the phenomena belong to an irreducible to psychology immanence of consciousness; in the sense of the above, a phenomenon is a donation to consciousness. Consciousness is not a condition of phenomena but the recipient of the donation of phenomena. The conscious intuition is

not an active faculty since the intuition exists only because there is the donation of phenomena. The fact that the consciousness is the consciousness of something (i.e. intentionality) must be understood in reference to the gift of manifestation. The donation, therefore, comes first and consciousness follows. The donation, however, is not the ground of phenomena since it is in itself exhausted in the phenomenon.

For Jean-Luc Marion, Husserl is a post-Nietzschean, but perhaps it would be more correct to say he is anti-Nietzschean. The phenomenological age, that is the world put in brackets, allows the identification of experience and immediate consciousness without any reductionism that would eliminate explicatively the phenomenon. No interpretative action can be more important than donation itself. The donation is not solely an act but a process, it is an endless donation which is revealed in a continuous intentional act. Yet, for Marion, the donation goes beyond intentionality which for Husserl remains the basic phenomenological structure. The superiority of the gift is, according to Marion, due to its a priori character; for him, the longer the phenomenological *epokhe* the more apparent becomes the donation which appears as a form of philosophical asceticism or philosophical fasting. Here one sees a critical difference with the idea of structure: for structuralism, the gift of appearance is a floating signifier. The floating signifier of manifestation seems to be the reason for dealing with the lack of meaning in the environing world or the *Lebenswelt*. Here lies the absurdity, the functionality and the epistemology of shamanism for Claude Lévi-Strauss.⁶

One question would be how the donation is combined with critical philosophy, especially the critical refutation of the virtue of wisdom by Kant in the context of his ethics, which is entangled in the repudiation of ancient aretaic ethics and in favor of the categorical imperative. For Marion, the donation is making everything clear and distinct. The consequences of the phenomenology of donation,

⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Sorcerer and his Magic," in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 167-185 (Middlesex: Penguin, 1963).

however, are different from those of the classical phenomenology. Furthermore, the phenomenology of donation is not associated to some radical ontology because the donation is considered as preceding being. The idea of donation imposes a transformation of phenomenology and ontology that is leading to a new philosophical era. The phenomenon, eventually, is identified with donation. The donation of phenomena releases them from any conscious activity, either supervision or understanding. Yet, it does not refer to any form of origin; whatever appears is to be understood in the sense of a given being. Even, the ontological difference is posterior to it. Thus, the donation goes beyond deconstruction.

It is no wonder that Derrida questioned the idea of a pure gift (pure in the critical sense, thus transcendental rather than transcendent). For Derrida, the pure gift cannot exist because it is given and thus is part of transaction economy and recognition, as in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* according to Alexandre Kojève.⁷ The gift is never pure, i.e. a donation, but it is part of a deferred fairness (as in the *Republic* of Plato where it comes with the establishment of the ideal constitution). Therefore, it is not pure irreducibility, as Marion claims, i.e., it belongs to a transaction. Marion argues that Derrida's idea of the gift is not about phenomenological donation; Derrida's gift, he adds, is anthropological and not phenomenological. Marion thus makes a move away from the sciences of man (*sciences de l'homme*), as opposed to Merleau-Ponty's dream of a conjunction of philosophy and the sciences of man⁸ that gave French philosophy a prominent role in late 20th century thought. The donation for Marion cannot belong to an economy where the donation of the phenomenon produces an asymmetry since the mechanism of donation in itself remains undisclosed. The disclosing – undisclosed movement clearly points to Martin Heidegger, beyond any economy of recognition, in a completely anti-Hegelian manner. In

⁷ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man," in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 43-95 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

this way, the economic cycle is broken. The donation of the phenomenon does not refer to any axiomatic anthropology, neither to the “donor,” nor to the “given” nor to the one “accepting the gift.” The donation is therefore non-reducible and self-referential. Marion comes to accuse Derrida for “metaphysicism,” i.e., the reduction to foundations (economical-sociological-anthropological) and hence for a form of a philosophy of origins. Derrida, on the other hand, does not hesitate to accuse Marion also for “metaphysicism,” i.e. the reduction to the immediacy of consciousness, which in fact would be very close to spiritualism.⁹

V. Conclusion

The irruption of post-modernity into modernity produced the relativization of the modernist project. The new epistemic field conquered by post-modern thought points to the introduction of the joint explicative axes of Knowledge and Power under a new light that transforms the ways that we conceive of the history of philosophy. The conjunction of philosophy with the sciences of man intended by Maurice Merleau-Ponty is challenged by the very idea of phenomenological donation promoted by Jean-Luc Marion. The opposition of Marion to Derrida in regard to donation marks a defiance to philosophical constructivism and some uncertainty as to the post-modern thought which can be thus perceived as a general relativization (beyond the relativizing of the modernist project).

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⁹ See Jason W. Alvis, *Marion and Derrida on The Gift and Desire: Debating the Generosity of Things* (Cham: Springer, 2016).

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