trópos • anno X • numero 2 • 2017 – ISBN 978-88-255-1253-3
DOI 10.4399/97888255125331 – pag. 5-11 (dicembre 2017)

Preliminary Remarks on the Notion of Self–Reference

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> On another occasion, I wished to jump across a lake. When I was in the middle of it, I found it was much larger than I had imagined at first. So, I at once turned back in the middle of my leap, and returned to the bank I had just left, to take a stronger spring. The second time, however, I again took off badly, and fell in up to my neck. I should, beyond any doubt, have come to an untimely end, had I not, by the force of my unaided arm, lifted up my pig–tail, together with my horse, whom I gripped tightly with my knees.
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> E. Raspe, *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*

The Adventures of Baron Munchausen have illustrated and sometimes allegedly inspired great insights in philosophical reflections. The essential feature that unites most of them is the issue of self–reference. This usually attracts the interest of those into logic and epistemology: the paradox of the liar, just to make an example, is one of the most famous riddles in the entire history of philosophy. Bertrand Russell's solution to this and to all the paradoxes of its kind, as well as the so–called Munchausen's trilemma formulated by German philosopher Hans Albert are not inferior in fame. The adventures of the famous Baron also sprang up, in a somehow related field, in the coinage of the computer–science term *bootstrapping* that usually refers to a self–starting process that is supposed to proceed without external input.

Besides, it would be simplistic to only point out logical–semantic and epistemic aspects of this adventure. The Baron's self–congratulatory rhetoric also reveals an ambiguity of an ontological–transcendental rank: the famous scene, in fact, puts on stage more than just a circularity between truth and method, but also one of higher order between grounding and grounded, condition and fact, epistemology and ontology. In the history of philosophy,

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this problem has popped up in many forms and under different names, from Aristotle's *prime mover* — the thought of thought —, up to *the causa sui* in Spinoza, the recursive effect of *sympathy* in Adam Smith, the Kantian *Prozess* of Reason to reason, and to the critical–idealistic notion of *autonomy*, eventually re–emerging in the Twentieth Century as *hermeneutic circle*.

Self–reference is indeed said in many ways; and the relationships between these ways are yet to be thoroughly screened. As far as logic is concerned, it mostly gives way to paradoxes of a rather scarce interest, whereas in literature it offers one charming rhetorical device. In visual arts, it shows up as Droste effect, or as a *mise–en–abyme*. In Derrida's reflection and, in general, in post–modern philosophy, it appears as a necessary consequence of the denial of any *hors du texte*.

When it is said as self–foundation, it appears in its most disturbing form. In such cases, some also suggested to call it self–transcendence: in the murky reflections of self–referential collective practices, some saw the dawn and the genesis of the sacred, i.e. a violent system of differences grounded in violence (Girard 1972; Dupuy 1996). In other contexts, some imagined that the same logical form might be underlying the genesis of that socio–economic phenomenon that, after a millennium of full–fledged Christianity, has taken the place of the sacred and which we refer to as Capital. The latter could in fact be the result of a logical–ontological short–circuit in which the difference between money and goods, that is, between the condition of possibility of the existence of value and its very same occurrence, no longer exists (Amato, 2015).

Attempts to properly explain what is involved in these and other occurrences of self–reference are far from finding a complete synthesis; for the time being, the only thing that seems certain is that where a meaningful experience is given, in one way or another, a self–referential kind of grounding principle is always hiding; and where self–reference shows up as such, meaning seems to be fading.

The contributions to this volume focus on the nature of self–reference, in various historical and logical implications and in its links with the problems of the transcendental and of meaning in general. As one may expect, a multi–disciplinary approach defines most of the papers. Though not in formalized terms, the volume offers a number of attempts to both clarify the notions of self–reference, self–foundation, self–transcendence in themselves and to outline their diverse and yet consistent manifestations, in disciplines as diverse as epistemology, hermeneutics, literary theory, pedagogy, aesthetics and in other domains, such as philosophy of economics and philosophical anthropology.

In particular, the paper by Jean–Pierre Dupuy — offered as a tribute to his friend Francisco Varela — presents an epistemological reflection on the

numerous problems emerging from the hasty application of the notions of *autopoiesis* and the like in the social sciences. Yet one thing is to *apply* them to the analysis of the social realm, a completely different thing is to *reveal* them as already constituting the fundamental logic of much of the traditional corpus of Western humanities. With regards to domains as different as Literary Theory, Religious and Social Anthropology, Political Science, Sociology, Psycho–sociology and Philosophy, Dupuy shows that relevant ideas on the organization of the living, such as *organizational closure*, *autonomy*, *endogenous fixed point*, help us to better understand our age–old knowledge in social, economic, moral, and political philosophy.

Especially, with regards to the theme of this volume of *Trópos*, he sheds light on the only seemingly paradoxical relation that links relevant social phenomena such as self–referentiality, self–externalization (or self–transcendence) and (self–)deconstruction. Indeed, Dupuy claims that the notion of self – transcendence is best clarified when confronted with that of (self–) deconstruction, especially when we deal — as he does in the last section of his contribution — with the infinite closeness of a process of social totalization to a process of social decomposition. It is a matter of understanding that both the social whole and its destruction (or deconstruction) have the same logical form: tangled hierarchy.This is the form of self–externalization proper both *to* the self–constitution of the social order and *to* its spontaneous decomposition or destruction: one just has to realize that neither social totalities are always already constituted.

Francesca Dell'Orto firstly points out the parallel between traditional metaphysics and naturalism moving from Husserl's perspective; secondly, she aims to clarify the specificity and the ambition of a "phenomenological metaphysics", which measures against the difficulties of a radical self–reference.

In Husserl, natural attitude and traditional metaphysics have in common the denial of the *epoché*, that is of the a priori and immanent correlation between the constitution and the constituted. This way, running parallel to the natural naïveté gleams a transcendental one. As Dell'Orto argues, phenomenology discovers that truth and method, so to say, overlap each other, in reducing the world the ego makes it possible according to eidetic laws. Therefore, a "phenomenological metaphysics", if it has a sense, should give genetically reason of this movement, which makes reference to the corporeal rootedness of consciousness, that is to its sensible, practical and pre–predicative level.

Apparently, enactive emergentism seems to respond to this issue, as far as it claims for a co–emergence of living organisms and world, and their co–evolution along a performative path marked by passivity. On this ground, harking back to Francisco Varela, it is possible to develop a "neuro–psycho–

(evolutonary)–phenomenology", which has the merit of trying to avoid the risk of reductionism and the static absolutizations of classical metaphysics. But the ambition of genetic phenomenology, according to Dell'Orto, should go further: in as much as it includes time, it should take into account the not–individually–lived, the already–constituted significations which are neither merely biological nor environmental, rather intersubjective, historical, and cultural. These different ways of giveness are always intertwined, since they stem from a unique process of constitution which progressively complexifies. The mistake of naturalism consists in tending to isolate "nature" from the more complex range of conditions of possibilities. Phenomenological metaphysics should answer for an inclusion and a self–inclusion: the inclusion of all experiences in the "multilayered" temporal display and the inclusion of itself in itself, for itself contributes, while describing, to that temporal display.

Distancing from metaphysical questions, and addressing the epistemological issue about scientific inquiry and verification, John F. DeCarlo's contribution has for goal mitigating the self–referential nature of the Bayesian model so to broaden its experimental and theoretical verification process. DeCarlo's starting point is the Quine–Duhem paradox, highlighting, from a holistic perspective, the contradiction between the need to isolate known and unknown hypothesis, in order to test a given hypothesis, and the impossibility to do so. Discussing the Bayesian solution, which introduces the notion of degrees of belief that an investigator has for a hypothesis, relative to others, DeCarlo underlines the tradeoff between the positing of meaningful–verifiable experience and the type of limiting self–referential implications in the use of self–credences. In fact, the Bayesian response to the methodological and epistemological issues posed by the Quine/Duhem paradox has been upgraded by using a new historical interdisciplinary approach, whereby the patterns of structural forms of creative thought could improve qualitative methodologies of exploration and analysis, leading to new scientific insight. Following the work of Mary Hesse about confirmation theory, DeCarlo's investigation extends the question of the significant role played by various types of analogy and structural creative thought, including: synthesis, blind spots, thin places, inversions, poly–holism, and wild and divergent strands, many of which often stand outside the purview of investigating scientists.

But, in contrast to Bayesian model, the paper offers a *non a priori* grounding and/or functional and explanatory set of principles founded in the pattern of historical–interdisciplinary structural creative thought, evident in the history of the physical sciences, at large, and in particular scientific histories of physics, biology and political economy, which DeCarlo accurately reviews.

Via this critical methodology, the self–referential nature of the Bayesian model turns out to be significantly moderated and its experimental and theoretical verification process objectively broadened. In this respect, a new set of mental categories associated with various structural types of creativity could both help to guide scientific explorations and evaluate new theories and models and related experimental data.

Adding a further insight to our investigation on self–reference, and moving from literary suggestions, Bill Johnsen provides an attempt to reckon the postcolonial world of the XX–XXI Centuries by looking at Joseph Conrad as the chronicler of colonialism's failure from the inside point of view of the colonists, at Chinua Achebe, from the inside point of view of the colonized, and at Dermot Bolger, who insists that it is time for both colonisers and colonized to be done with postcolonialism, at least in Irish writing. He argues that to properly do so, we have to count heads beyond the intense partisans of pro and con and to include the great majority who lost their allegiance to imperialism.

Conrad's Marlow rehearses that loss in *Heart of Darkness*, his tale is one of the earliest and most effective of all subsequent interventions into the twentieth century colonialist archive, culture and imperialism's tale, and Johnsens claims that it is best understood in light of René Girard's theory of human culture. Girard's general model of sacrifice is crucial for belatedly revisiting and crediting modernism's anthropological insights. According to *mimetic theory,* human culture originated in religion, in man's power to fool himself so to believe that the gods require blood sacrifice, and, consequently, the ritual victim is credited for everything wrong and right in society; yet, when violence, once misunderstood as transcendent, is understood as solely human, as *self–transcendent*, it can produce nothing but itself. For Girard, this revelation derives from Scripture, but, as Johnsen's study confirms, also from great literature, the secular scripture. In Johnsen's view, the place of Conrad in the formation of this secular scripture is given by Marlow's denial to accuse, that is his admission to share the guilt of the accused. In parallel, the weakening, or "secularization", of Kurtz as well as the crowd that first adores and then vilifies the accused refers to the necessity of turning down the satisfactions and self–justifications of the violent sacred until we see, as Girard says, that the time of this violent 'transcendence' is over, that there is nobody to blame but ourselves for our violence.

Emanuele Antonelli tackles the issue of self–reference with regards to aesthetics. He offers an interpretation of Luigi Pareyson's notion of *formativity*, claiming that the best way to understand it is through an analogy with the notion of *self–transcendence* recently put forward in the vast domain of the sciences of the self–organization of complex systems. Following Jean–Pierre Dupuy's approach, of which the reader has an outstanding

example in the first contribution of the volume, he shows — by referring to the numerous *topoi* where often surprisingly precise parallelisms, convergences and semantic identities are to be found — that, though being largely independent in their genesis, the logics of the two notions are intrinsically consistent with each–other. As a result, he claims that our understanding of Pareyson's theory of the work of art is improved when we look at it as a study on the integration of different layers of organizational closures. The *success* of the relation between the matter, the form, the idea, the artist and her technique, gives way to a work of art where the process of self–transcendence is accomplished. This process is described by Pareyson as an attraction of the future and already achieved form, the *forma formata*, on the operations of which it will be the result. The final outcome is, thus, at the same time an effect and a very special cause of the process: the vicious circularity of self–reference is avoided by self–transcendence, since the *self* to which the process refers to forms itself only through this reference.

Staging a "dialogue" with and between philosophers and psychologists, from Piaget to Heidegger, from Aristotle to Kant, the essay by Andrea Amato discusses the thesis that, in its original condition, man lives a sort of communion with the world given by a substantial affinity between *inside* and *outside*. This original condition of man rests both on undifferentiated impulses and on the faculties of feeling and emotion. In particular, the primary impulses find a world already organized and can refer to it without succumbing immediately as they possess and are governed by an autonomous principle, that of economics. Feelings and emotions, on the other hand, can regain agreement with the world only after a break in the balance between us and the external reality, which implies the exit from an already–separated self. At this point, the new relationship will be internalized and, in some way, will become more aware. Otherwise, in everyday life, we tend to bring back the relationship with the world to a balance, based on the routinization and on the average of our usual energy consumption. Therefore, in multiple ways, there arises some form of stabilization and conceptualization of our general and overall disposition towards life and the world. Nonetheless, if this stabilization, which takes root in our rational faculty, "stores" the pulsional chaos, reason, while stabilizing, lets the chaos appear as chaos. It can only appear to a will that seeks to stabilize it. On one hand, chaos needs practical reason in order to be separated, seized, and especially organized; on the other hand, practical reason can never completely stop referring to it. To put it differently, following Amato's words, it can be argued that as life and world, with their impulses and disorder, and reason, entail each other, both logically and existentially, so chaos and praxis belong together.

Whereas self–reference is primarily studied in the context of philosophy of language, this volume attempts to show how it encompasses very

traditional questionings in the history of continental philosophy from its beginning and all along its most crucial turning points. Every time philosophy has looked for causes, both on an ontological and an epistemological plane, it has ultimately faced the phantom of the infinite regress, the ramification of the supposed linearity, and the loss of the origin. The circularity of self–reference is itself the expression of a fundamental indetermination and seems to sanction an impassable boundary for thought. We tried to challenge this sentence by discussing some very implications of self–reference, some of its occurrences, and, if needed, recasting its definition to the extent of shifting the connected idea of aporetic reflexivity to that of self–transcendence, where the prefix "self" stops to make allusion to the selfhood of an *idem* and points at the dynamic processuality of a complex system.

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