

THE DRIVE TOWARDS THE REAL.

PHILOSOPHY IN THE EPOCH OF BIO-TECHNOLOGIES AND BIO-POLITICS

Sergio Benvenuto

After half a century marked by the primacy of language as both a philosophical and a political category – after the long phase of the *linguistic turn* – we're moving on to an age where philosophical and political interest is focusing more on life and its technological manipulations. In this age of technological reproduction of life a radical reconsideration of the difference between nature and nurture, animality and humanity, flesh and body is under way. Today, on the wave of one of Foucault's more successful concepts – that of biopolitics – and especially in Italy, a new reflection is arising (Agamben, de Carolis, Perniola, and others) centring on the fundamental relationship between “the bare life”, political-symbolical power and technology (meant as a universe of rights, as political decision and bio-technological intervention). This new questioning of the structures of life – the growing interest in the neurosciences and biology – leads to the promotion of the notion of the Real, whether meant in the Lacanian sense or in the wider sense of what is delineating itself beyond both the *Umwelt* (the environment) of the ethological sciences and *Welt* (the world) of phenomenology. The real is setting in more and more as a persistence of the *unheimlich*, of the uncanny meant as the out-of-the-home. Precisely insofar as it is interested in the Real, the human animal affirms itself as *ecstatic*, as always tending to go outside itself – and thus always outside its culture, its *Weltanschauung*, its life time... The sensitive issue for today's philosopher is to understand to what extent today's sciences – biology, the neurosciences and the cognitive sciences first of all – can integrate within their project, a necessarily reductionist one, this dimension of the Real, which illustrates the modern way for a different type of transcendence to affirm itself.

1. The Age of Life

Among Foucault's concepts one of the most fortunate still today is that of *biopolitics*. Why this success?

Much more so today than at the time of Foucault, we find ourselves facing the spectacular and threatening progress of the biotechnologies. In my opinion the first century of the third millennium will not be dominated so much by wars of religion, which have been attracting our attention in recent years, but rather by two great problems: the use and control of biotechnologies on the one hand, and mass migrations on the other. Both these problems deal with bodies: with the power of producing them artificially and with that of placing them in space.

At a time when life is technologically reproducible, bioethical concerns are of great concern to us. Not incidentally are political agendas more and more taken up by biopolitical issues: the legitimacy of abortion, the legal recognition of non-traditional sexual couples, GMOs, cloning, the production, patenting and commercialization of artificial organs, euthanasia, “the gentle death”, the modifying of the mind through psychotropic drugs, neurosurgery and so on. We know that humanity's choice to privilege certain sources of energy over others will determine how long life will survive on earth (if the choice is coal, life on the planet will cease several thousand of years sooner).

Biotechnological manipulation basically leads to a staggering increase of the power of politics – as in Huxley's Empire of *Brave New World*. In the past, politics

had at the very most the destiny of a certain number of individuals in its hands, not human nature itself. In the future the political debate will be more and more centred around the choice of the *kind of nature* human beings should have. More and more parents and politicians will have to decide what kind of soul their descendants should have.

Technology is now able to produce natural forms that are indistinguishable from artificial ones. The industry no longer opposes the soft-curved forms of life to the hard-straight forms of industrial products, but is capable of creating forms indistinguishable from those in nature. To the point that the very conceptual distinction between nature and culture – or between *physis* and *techne* – is undergoing a crisis. Biomorphous forms – which prevail today, even aesthetically, from design to architecture – express this attempt of erasing the borders between the natural and the cultural. Our aesthetics is becoming biomorphed, precisely because nature is becoming industrialized.

What's more, in the theoretical sphere, the challenge posed by the neurosciences and the cognitive sciences is infringing an old gentlemen's agreement between the sciences and philosophy, a sort of polite repartition of the field that dates at least back to Kant. Thanks to this division of labour, scientists dealt with the world and philosophers with the way we know the world (later, with phenomenology, with the way we dwell in the world). The trouble today is that cognitive scientists also want their say on the way we know and dwell in the world, and they have several strings to their bow, because their theories are not merely speculative. Many philosophers are not prepared to take on this challenge and are burying their head in the sand. I think, however, that the challenge posed by the natural sciences of the mind is today the most important, and this from an ethical and political point of view too. Will the exclusive field of philosophy be able to also remain the field of subjectivity? Or should philosophy's task with regard to other forms of life – including the sciences – rather be that of calling us back to the Real? Science constantly causes the Real to recede, but perhaps the task of philosophy ought to be to point its finger towards this receding Real.

Another reason, lurking more in the background, for the success of the term biopolitics is probably that for at least a century we've been witnessing a terrific quantitative increase of life. In just over a century the number of living human beings has increased four-fold and we've gone from 1 billion and 65 million in 1900 to over 6 billion today. Indeed, there are more human beings living today than all the dead of twenty-thousand years up to a century ago!

Not too long ago, old Claude Lévi-Strauss was interviewed: he insisted in saying that the world we live in is now totally alien to him. This because such a mass of human beings changes the very notion of humanity. He wonders, in a very Hegelian way, whether the quantity (so much human life) can change the quality (what human life actually is).

This overabundance of life affirmed itself in a 20th century which has witnessed massacres – due to wars, persecutions, genocides – the hyperbolic extent of which was unimaginable in previous centuries. Killings in the last century took on hyper-industrial proportions. On the one hand so much life, on the other so much death. And all this, it should be noticed, in an epoch that assumed an individualistic conception. Liberal individualism affirmed itself more and more at the expense of any form of either conservative or revolutionary communitarianism. How much individualism in the epoch of the standardization of both life and the destruction of life!

2. *Realistic Turn*

Over this background of **inflation of** life, a mutation, which now appears evident, can be read in the philosophical thinking of the last two decades. Tellingly, in the writings of today's most influential thinkers, we often find two insistent terms: *naked life* and *real*. This is particularly true in Italy. For example, in a recent essay Mario Perniola (2008) reconstructs all of Italian post-Second World War philosophical aesthetics as an aesthetics of “the bare life”, of which he thinks the forerunner is Pirandello.

These years of reference to the real and to the bare life come after a period, up to 15-20 years ago, when what shined on the forestage of Western culture were terms like *language, symbolic, signs, signifiers, grammar, communication, codes* and such like. For many decades various areas of Euro-American culture were **hauled** into what R. Rorty called the *linguistic turn*. What is meant by linguistic turn today is the fact that Western culture has been polarized by the primacy of language. This primacy ranged from the analytic philosophy typical of the Anglo-American universities down to hermeneutics, which is actually a reworking in textualist terms of phenomenological philosophy.

Why – beyond the differences between schools and disciplines – have Language and Communication fascinated the West for at least half a century, continuing to dominate the thinking of the crowds as their today's divinities? Everywhere young people choose Media or Communication Studies or similar faculties... Today the tendency is to think that real power is not given by oil, weapons or money, but rather by the ability to communicate. In Italy, with Berlusconi, we know that only too well.

Indeed, language is something Janus-faced that finally seemed to allow a conciliation between soul and body, spirit and matter, at once objectifying interiority and subjectivizing externality. To philosophers language had replaced the Kantian categories or Hegel's Objective Spirit: a synthetic a priori *escamotage* to overcome the nagging dichotomy between the ethereal world of our thoughts and projects and the tough, inhuman world of things¹.

¹ On the one hand language is inseparable from the human mind, insofar as it makes thinking possible and it expresses the symbolic abilities of homo sapiens; but, on the other, it is also a

Then at one point some of those who within their various currents had allowed linguistic metaphors to prevail, began to talk more and more about the real. This shift from Language to the Real is also noticeable in the arts, where photography and video prevail, i.e. reproductions of real things. One of Barthes' most influential texts today is about photography (Barthes 1980).

Real: precise concept or mere word? I.e., by insisting on the “real” are these authors really all talking about the same thing? As far as I'm concerned, I notice that when I'm invited to contribute to seminars or conferences in various countries, my references to the Real usually generate strong approval. Why is the term fashionable? Does the audience really understand what I mean by real? And do I thoroughly understand it myself?... Real is a signifier – a Lacanian would say – that is successful today, like Language used to be. Even though every school of thought thinks of Language and the Real in totally different ways. But in history sometimes words are more significant and effective than clear and distinct concepts².

3. *Das Unheimliche*

Not all the significant thinkers who take this realist route use the actual term *real*. For example, Agamben (1998, 2004) insists more on the issue of “bare life”, and we shall see in what sense this notion connects to what we are putting forward as real. Those who prefer the term *real* are those scholars who are in one way or the other influenced by the thinking of Jacques Lacan. The latter had suggested to consider subjectivity according to three registers: imaginary, symbolic, real. At first this tripartition – Hegelian in the broad sense – is very easy to understand. But it is only apparently easy.

What terribly complicates things is that for Lacan the real, set apart from the other two registers, is not to be confused with mere *reality*. Capturing the difference between reality and the real is the crux of the question. Reality is the table here

describable concatenation of objects, even though an “intentional” thing. Like in a game of jugglery, language seemed to make possible a transcendence towards things – insofar as the sign *ox* refers to the real *ox*, which exists beyond and before the signs – while at the same time allowing us to remain within the comfort of immanence: the *ox* denoted by the English morpheme *ox* remains simply a signified within a linguistic system, beyond the bovine skin it remains a symbolic creature. Language always pushes us towards things, yet we never really quite leave it. Thanks to semiological metaphor one could finally take a *sine die* break from the overbearing inheritance of Cartesian dualism: we were escaping the distressing alternative between the free world of cogitations and the determinist world of things, that obstinately resists us. Like a nimble somersault, language worked for us both as something that was discourse and heavy machine, materialized thought and spiritualized matter.

² By subscribing to a historical turn do I intend to renounce the “untimely” originality one supposes every thinking should pursue? Should one make a Hegelian primacy of the present with respect to the speculative need of historical “untimeliness” prevail? Of course not. The point is that our (potential) originality isn't used against or outside History, but always *within* history itself, in a sort of dialogue-friction with it.

before me, or the Toshiba computer I'm using to write. Note: this type of example – evoking technical products – is what philosophers prefer when talking about “reality”³. The question to ask is: why do they immediately think of manufactured objects that are part of their *domus*? Now, our home is a being half-way between truly external Reality and the reality we consider more inner, that of our body, **which is always an integral part of our soul (or subjectivity)**. The home is on the one hand an extension of our own body and that of those dearest to us and, on the other, the part of the external world that concerns us most directly. Now, the real – as Lacan intends it, and as we shall intend it – is NOT this domestic home-style, *heimisch* (from *Heim*, the hearth) reality. The real lies outside domesticity.

Insofar as the Real is a rupture with a reassuring environment, its affective effect is *unheimlich*, uncanny (but the concrete sense of the German term is “not-homelike”). The reference to *Heim*, home, is central.

Two 20th century authors have expanded most convincingly on the concept of *Unheimlichkeit* or *Unheimliche*: Freud and Heidegger⁴. Their interpretations, which were almost contemporary, of *das Unheimliche* do of course differ and we won't go into the details here. But it should be noticed that, beyond the differences, both Heidegger's and Freud's structuring of the issue underlines a sort of dialectics or ambiguity between being-at-home and not-being-at-home. For Heidegger it is precisely when we fearfully withdraw to our hearth that we confront what awaits us in the heart of our hearth, i.e. the fact that we recognize ourselves as being radically **off guard**, because being **caught off guard** is our fate as human beings. For Freud, our uncanny confrontation with a horror towards what is not at all familiar returns to us a contact with a deep-down hidden familiarity, like with a corpse we had once concealed in a wardrobe and had forgotten about. Heidegger, in other words, accuses the being-at-home of being an escape from the reality of not-being-at-home; Freud instead recognizes the not-being-at-home as the emergence of a deeper being-at-home that modern secularized rationalism has hidden beneath the carpet. They both point, in opposing but complementary ways, to the twisted relation between reality and real.

On his behalf, Lacan says of domestic reality that it is a world moulded by the imaginary. It is the imaginarily domesticated world, one centred *via* our body coordinates, it is a body-reality – like our home, which is also a body-reality. Instead, for Lacan the real is what cannot be mirrored. And the subject itself is real insofar as it cannot be mirrored.

³ Heidegger too, in his essay *Das Ding* (Heidegger 1954) gives as paradigmatic examples of “thing” the jug, the bridge and the threshold. All things that have been produced or imply a form of production. (He does also mention the tree, but insofar as it links the earth to the sky, insofar as, in other words, it is similar to a bridge.)

⁴ For a comparison between these two approaches to *Unheimliche*, see Bass (2006).

This thesis of Lacan's remains a bit of a *petitio principii*. Let's then try to give a little more pregnancy to the difference between reality and real drawing on other perspectives.

4. Signals and Noise

If we turn to biology, "reality" is what Jakob von Uexküll⁵ (a pupil of Heidegger's) called *Umwelt*, the environment – the "world-around-us". To biology the environment is by no means the total of external things and conditions, thus the same for all organisms living in a particular space. On the contrary, the environment is what appears as significant always and exclusively to a given species: it is the totality of traits that constitute a pertinent *signal* for a particular organism. This means that each species living in a specific territory has its own environment. Uexküll (1956, pp. 85-88) referred to the case of a particularly simple sort of environment, that of a tick: this animal reacts only to a very few external elements, particularly to butyric acid. Only this acid acts as a *disinhibitor* (Heidegger said) of some of this animal's specific drives. Of course, the environment of homo sapiens is much richer and more complex than that of a tick. But what is the environment for us human beings? Is it what they call "reality", ranging from a table right up to the farthest galaxies, insofar as some human beings – called astronomers – in a certain sense "live between the stars". Reality is everything that disinhibits our drives; it is, in other words, everything that interests us. But is this the only thing that *exists* for us?

Among biologists, it is Lewontin (1994) in particular who explained how each organism – from the most inferior right up to homo sapiens – never limits itself to adapting to *this* environment, but tends to transform it and make it submit to its survival and reproductive needs. The environment of any species is never just the set of objective conditions an organism has to abide by in order to survive and perpetuate itself, but it is also produced by this organism and by all the other organisms occupying that given territory. Organism and environment are two sides of the same coin⁶. The environment is like a rented house: we adapt to it and also adapt it to us.

This environment is then everything that sends signals to an organism: it is the total of everything that can work as disinhibitor for its reactions. Now, this concept of signal – M. de Carolis (2004) explains – implies the domain of *noise*. Take a piece of music broadcast on the radio: sometimes the signal can be disturbed by particular noises, such as interference from other stations, yet we're still capable of distinguishing the music from the noises. Being trained to listen, we manage not to

⁵ Von Uexküll & Kriszat (1956).

⁶ This rectifies the adage of classical Darwinism, which says that the organism that survives and reproduces itself is the one that better adapts to its environment, for the very simple reason that this environment is also what a living organism has adapted to suit itself. The environment is the result of a struggle, a competition between organisms and not an independent variable.

confuse the two types of sound. If the noise isn't excessive, we can push it into the fringes of our perception and almost not hear it anymore: we only concentrate on the signals, on the music.

Our abilities to separate signals and noise are partially acquired; other animal species ignore noise because genetically “built” to do so. But this immediately generates a crucial question: the fact that, *sooner or later human beings will become interested in the noise too*. They will become interested in something that shouldn't interest them. Homo sapiens has this peculiar biological characteristic: it is not *specialized* in signals. It is not satisfied with those it presumably should respond to because of innate mechanisms, nor with those it reacts to because of a cultural training. For genetics, the human being is programmed by his genome; but he behaves as if he were programmed to exit the programme.

5. Opening to Chaos

“At present I do not really know what I want; it may be that I do not really want what I know and want that which I do not know”

M. Ficino (Letter to G. Cavalcanti)⁷.

Is the real then not a disinhibitor? Or does the human being seek new disinhibitions? It isn't satisfied with its own environment but explores a world it doesn't know precisely because it is unknown. It doesn't stop at exploring its vital space: it goes beyond its own horizon. The lazy man Oblomov said “how can I want what I don't know?” But human beings are not always Oblomovian: they constantly want what they don't know.

In the end we know that the environmental dimension is our stupidity. When we wish someone on **their** birthday “may you live to be a hundred”, I always think to myself: “I hope he doesn't live to be a hundred with Alzheimer's or totally senile!” What scares us about a long and happy old age, but in stupidity? In general, what is it that makes us dissatisfied with happiness when it doesn't appear to be also a reward for a life project that leaves us *open* onto the real?

The most diverse philosophies of the 20th century (from Heidegger to Popper) have made this fundamental signifier their own: *opening*. The widest opening is specific to a humankind **boosted, potentiated to** the maximum. Is opening will for power? Our century has definitely celebrated the possibility of opening up (today called *flexibility*) as the power making all other forms of power possible.

But there's also a stupid opening, which only responds to the signal – like the tick, which only responds to butyric acid – ignoring the noise. Now, what makes some proud of humankind is the fact that we are not satisfied with our humanity, we are not satisfied simply with what is manifest to us, but we're pushed to pursue the thread of the Real. The real stuns us because of a profound disconformity with what interests us.

⁷ Ficino, *Epistolae* - the Letters of Marsilio Ficino., vol 2, letter 22.

We don't say this to stress the supremacy of homo sapiens over all other animals. After all, it's not clear if other species also take an interest in noise. What is important is to highlight this problematic ambiguity of the human being: the fact that the separation between signal and noise is transgressed, that, in other words, some beings are capable of thematizing noise to find in it a signal function at another level. And the task that tends to thematize noise, trying to "reveal" it as a signal, is the task of the arts and the sciences, human creativity.

What does the fact that the human being takes into account noise concretely mean? Is it simply the fundamental distinction operated by phenomenology between *Umwelt* and *Welt* that is being posed again here? No, because the *Welt*, the world, is something the human being *has shaped*. When we talk about "Goethe's world", we are not referring to everything that took place in the planet when Goethe was alive, but to a structure of relations in which Goethe had his place, we are basically referring to a form or structure. Heidegger wrote: "The stone is without world, the animal is poor in world, man is world-forming [*weltbildend*]" (Heidegger 1983). Heidegger is drawing on Kant: man is world-forming. From this perspective, on the other hand, what counts in man is his *dif-formity* from the world.

To Heidegger the world is something the human being forms because he reveals it: the *world* is basically inseparable from *manifestation* and truth. The world is the structure of phenomena, insofar as these manifest themselves to subjects. Now, what we here call real is something we only have traces of, and like any trace worthy of that name, it refers back to something the trace of which is a trace. Something that, beyond the trace, **does not** manifest itself.

As Derrida noticed (1967, p. 117), phenomenology "is always phenomenology of perception", i.e. its model is what manifests itself directly, undoubtedly, in the perceptive act. To this Derrida opposed the fact that "the thing itself always shirks away". For Derrida the point is that as the thing always **shirks away**, one may as well let it go, to concentrate instead on the traces and on the *archi-trace*. It seems to me, instead, that the task of philosophy can no longer be that of concentrating – as positivism also does – on traces, but to remind us that, however much the thing in itself **shirks away**, it's just that that interests us.

For the modern philosophical tradition, from Descartes onwards, this is a hard pill to swallow. Already in empiricist philosophy all that counted was what manifests itself as perception. The transcendentalist philosophies, from Kant to the post-moderns, never undermined this modern assumption: that philosophy never probes into black boxes (as the sciences do), but limits itself to the sunny, manifest, clear evidence of the phenomenon. Not incidentally everything that doesn't manifest itself – God, the immortality of the soul, the Kantian thing-in-itself, perfect happy society etc. – is denounced by the modern philosophies as unreal. It's not even important to state, for example, that God doesn't exist: as He does not manifest himself, the problem of his existence doesn't even arise, it is irrelevant.

Yet the real interests us more and more because, even if it doesn't manifest itself, it does leave traces. How does what doesn't manifest itself then manifest itself?

We could say, to make it short and sweet, that the real manifests itself as *chaos*, “the insurmountable that surmounts us” (Heidegger 1961; French tr. p. 443). Already Nietzsche had said that knowledge is a work on Chaos, “not ‘knowing’ but schematizing – imposing upon Chaos the regularities and form that are needed to satisfy our practical needs” (1888, n. 515). In our terms: to know is to find signals in noise. If we listen to a symphony on the radio, we recognise it as such because we perceive an order in it, while any noise is chaotic. In Lacanian register: the imaginary and the symbolic are in the realm of order, the real is in the realm of chaos.

6. Non-Mechanistic Naturalism?

This chaos, on the plain of human existence, can break in as bare life. In the sense that classical naturalism talks about it?

The materialism of much of 20th century philosophy has been a spiritual and ideological materialism, unconnected to the practices of science and technology – rather, often opposed to them. This materialism, which is not interested in *causes*, has relegated biological knowledge, on the wave of Husserl's *Crisis of European Sciences* (1959), to the status of mere apparatus for calculation and prediction, irrelevant for the understanding of subjective life. It seems to me that this era of transcendental materialism is about to come to a close. The confrontation with the neurosciences, the life sciences, with system and complexity theory, can no longer be delayed in philosophy.

This does not mean adhering to the reductionist programme: as de Carolis writes, we can attempt a *non-reductionist naturalism*. In other words, we can go back to the real life, without this implying an absolutization of the explicative theories developed by the life sciences (scientific theories are always relative, counterfactual: “if... then...”). Today the sciences are all mechanical – starting from physics, before there was a classical mechanics, today there's quantum mechanics. The point is: can there be today a naturalism that is not exclusively mechanistic? A naturalism that takes into account the opening of homo sapiens towards the real?

It seems to me that philosophy's great challenge today should be the following: is it possible, within bio-scientific enquiry itself, to **indicate** the dimension of transcendence as pertinent? In other words, is it possible to show human transcendence – the care of humans for the Real – not *beyond* but *through* biological mechanisms? Is it possible to indicate a non-transcendent transcendentality? How to think out, within life mechanisms, subjectivity's *ekstatic* vocation? How to think out the fact that lots of people would like to live to be a hundred, but without being stupid and oblivious? For example, the fact that we're interested in knowing what will happen after our death? In fact, if it didn't interest us, we wouldn't even bother having kids: what parents would be so degenerate as to hope to outlive their offspring? And we're interested in the fate of the universe even after the

disappearance of humankind. Strange, but that's the way it is! Does astronomic theory interest us only insofar as it foresees the death of humanity, or also because it tells us how things will continue *after* humanity?

One of philosophy's tasks could be not only that of signalling that the human being is not only co-adapted to his environment, but that he is also open to the real. This would also be the task, in a world tempted by technologically closing itself inside its own environment, of re-opening it to the real.

7. Derrida's Propaganda

A trace that the *realist turn* highlights in several recent philosophical contributions is animal life. A certain afterthought on animals is marked in thinkers who until recently had seemed to be going in the direction of the *linguistic turn* – e.g. Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben.

For years, until his death, Derrida lost no occasion to talk about animals – I'd say that he was almost obsessed by the idea. He had been insisting for a long time on a critique of the sacrificial vision that elects animals as victims of our exclusion from the animal world.

Derrida said⁸: “Fascism begins when you insult an animal, including the animal in man. Authentic idealism consists in *insulting* the animal in man, or in treating man as an animal.” “Fascism” is today an insult in itself: Derrida doesn't hesitate to insult those who insult the animal. I would say that for him it is better to insult man than animal. He clearly says that the vilest thing is not forgetting the humanity of human beings, but rather their animality. The most human attitude towards other human beings is recognizing their animality *too*.

Thus, even philosophers heirs to the *Sprache über Alles* notice that too radical a distinction between humanity and animality is inhuman in the end. That the living *being* comes before the *holder* of language and reason.

At the ethical and political level, one slowly comes to realize that a true comprehension of the other human being means recognizing, accepting, his animality, and that this acceptance is the premise for any charitable and loving attitude. Our philosophical tradition has always seen human *caritas* (love) and solidarity too conceptualistically: as a conclusion of the recognition of the *pure human category* the others belong to. According to this conception we are good for purely logical reasons: because we recognize that all human races are part of the *homo sapiens* species. And *homo sapiens* is analytically definable as “rational animal”, or as “comprehending being”, or as “speaking being”. But no charitable spirit is such for logical reasons! All our affective life controverts this philosophical preamble, and not only because many love animals more than their equals: our

⁸ From his acceptance speech of the Adorno Award in Frankfurt, 22-IX-2001 (Derrida 2002).

charity is really such when behind the *mens rationalis* we are called by the *animal* living and writhing in suffering and enjoyment. It is the presence and the tears of those suffering from Alzheimer's, for example, that makes us treat them charitably, even if they are short of *res cogitans*.

So, for the *realistic turn* life is a key to subjectivity. The fact that life is the opaque background end of every subjective transparency.

Of course, life, the body as *Leib*, drives (*Triebe*) played – on the Nietzsche's and Freud's wave – a great role in 20th century thought. But they dealt with a metaphysical life, a metaphysical body, not the life and body the life sciences have been dealing with in increasingly precise and problematic ways. 20th century philosophy also wanted to be a reappraisal of the reasons of the body against pure reason. According to Freud “*Le cul a ses raisons que la Raison ne connaît pas*”. But the body this “linguistic” culture evoked so much was a body hyper-sensitized by language. It was life as *bios*, not as *zoé*. An uncountable number of papers and books have conjugated body and book for decades: books would be assimilated to paper bodies, bodies would be interpreted as books of flesh. It wasn't therefore the body-machine of biologists, it was rather a body spiritualized as writing. What was being said was: “science speaks of the dead body, not of the lived body”. But this lived body was but a book!

The lived body of 20th century philosophies coincided with our subjectivity, it was part of the *Dasein*, it was the body as taken in the project, the action, the exchange, as in being consciousness transcending itself in the world. Yet we perceive the body as such – not simply as *me* – precisely when it *resists* my subjectivity. It is when we fall ill – when the body ceases to do what we want it to – that we feel the body imposing itself as a cumbersome real. Take the experience of the phantom limb in those who've undergone an amputation; or take anosognosia, when a subject with a paralyzed limb no longer feels it, as if it didn't materially exist. These two phenomena have something of the *unheimlich* for us, just because they put us into contact, though reversely, with the real of the body. In these cases the real irrupts because in both conditions a discordance between subjective sensation and objective presence/absence is produced.

It was Freud, more than any other thinker, who showed how the Real doesn't only come to us from outside, but also from within our body: his *Es*, Id, is just this irreducibility of the real of the flesh to the way in which every Ego forms its own world. Freud pointed out the deep down dyscrasia between the Ego as *Heim*, and the disturbing extraneousness coming from our own body. I therefore believe that the transcriptions of psychoanalysis in linguistic terms, or hermeneutical and phenomenological ones, remove the more radical sense of Freud's work, i.e. his “biologism”: the psychic dam will never be able to drain the ocean of the *Es*. Because it is true that on the one hand psychoanalysis looks for a sense in what presents itself as non-sense, but on the other it also aims at making us touch, beyond any sense, the traumatic impact of a Real that we may end up spending the rest of our lives domesticating, but that rocks and stuns us.

Now, this body that resists us – the non-subjective body of biology, *zoé* – is the one philosophy has removed. But only when we realize that our body is other-from-me can we then ethically appreciate the other's body, the fact that the other is first of all a body, even if demented or sleeping.

8. Agamben's Re-Opening

Another sign of mutation is Giorgio Agamben's booklet *The Open* (Agamben 2004)⁹. Here he distances himself from Heidegger – from the 20th century philosopher who more than any other tried to separate man from the living. Heidegger, as we've already seen, considers the human being, *Dasein*, precisely for his being different from the animal. The animal, and life in general, are thus only comprehensible if we take humanity as a starting point: they are comprehensible only as a lack or want of humanity.

Heidegger wrote: "Plants and animals depend on something external to them, without ever 'seeing' either the outside or the inside, in other words without actually ever seeing their being revealed in the free of Being" (Heidegger 1993, pp. 237-8). What constitutes human specificity is the Open. (The Open would then be reinterpreted in the late 20th century in linguistic terms). The animal, on the other hand, is wanting in world – i.e. it is "at once open and not open". The animal is open not onto the world (*Welt*), but onto its environment (*Umwelt*), in the disinhibiting circle, by which it is like captivated, **stunned** (*benommen*). Emblematic of being-animal is the improvident moth, burnt to death by the flame that attracts it: the moth never knows the stimulus that kills it. For Heidegger the animal is "open in a non-disconcealment that, on the one hand, captivates it and dislocates it [...] with unmatched vehemence, and, on the other, does not in any way disconceal as a being that thing that holds it so taken and absorbed."¹⁰ Captivated or stunned, the animal "is ecstatically drawn outside of itself in an exposure which disrupts it in its every **fiber**", but it is an exposure that reveals nothing. Now, according to Heidegger, the human being touches this animal *Stimmung* when experiencing deep boredom.

When we are forced to wait and don't know how to kill time, we suddenly find ourselves like abandoned in a void: in boredom we experience this void as indifference that enwraps the entity in its totality. Now, boredom is the fundamental *Stimmung* of the *Dasein*: it means being consigned to something one refuses (the entity in its totality) and being basically open to a closedness¹¹. But, Agamben points out, is this deep boredom, where the human being is consigned to something that's refused to him, not then exactly like **the animal being stunned (captivated)**, exposed

⁹ I'll quote here Agamben from the Italian edition (Agamben 2002).

¹⁰ Agamben (2002, p. 62).

¹¹ Agamben (2002, p. 65).

in a non-revealed? I.e., doesn't what Heidegger considers constitutive of the human being hold a form of animal exposure? Is animal stunning **not basically** something essential, at the basis of the very opening that Heidegger thinks characterizes the *Dasein*? In short, wouldn't it be better – in opposition to Heidegger – to think of humanity as on the base of animality?

Boredom is the metaphysical operator where the passage from want of world to being-in-the-world takes place, from the animal *Umwelt* to the human *Welt*. But this passage can be conceived, Agamben points out, also as a **deactivation** of our animal relationship to our environment. I.e., we can conceive man as an inhibited animal, as suspended animal life. Particularly after the exhilaration of coitus does the human being experience a similar mood: **the idle bottom end humanity suspends itself from.**

Heidegger's vision is substantially humanistic and spiritualistic, despite his denials: here nature is opposed to history or culture. Nature is the world of closedness and the night, history is revelation and opening. Agamben wants to go beyond this opposition and reach "a new and more blessed life, one that is neither animal nor human"¹².

The human being, according to the Heideggerian conception, is essentially he who *lets* beings *be* – and so he is opening, he is project making itself free for the possible. Instead it is necessary to think of the animal (and of the animal in man) as *outside being*. Letting the animal be means leaving it outside Being (*Sein*) – i.e., neither as being nor as non being, neither open nor closed. But then what the hell could this "something," that is no longer either strictly animal nor strictly man in the classical sense, be? What can this new figure that places itself beyond being and nothingness be?

Agamben delineates this "left outside being" as "an existing, *real thing* [my italics] that has gone beyond the difference between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiende*)"¹³. Something like a central void, a hiatus, suspension of suspension... Now, the fact that from Agamben's pen slips the term *real* seems crucial to me. This real is in fact beyond the difference between Being and beings: it something "saved" in its being strictly "unsaveable".

Agamben's effort is admirable: within the bounds of the language of phenomenology, which is his language, he tries to say something that phenomenology doesn't **know to say**. Phenomenology is polarized on Being and thus on the being-there that takes care of It, not on the real – to phenomenology the real is reduced to the system of objects, of the entities-for-a-subject, which abandons us to the objective studies of science. Indeed, in phenomenology the question of the real is evaded because the things of experience are traced back to *Erlebnis*, to lived experience, thus once more to subjectivity as fundament. This despite phenomenology's programme of "going towards things themselves".

¹² Agamben (2002, p. 89).

¹³ Agamben (2002, p. 94).

The importance of Agamben's contribution doesn't consist, in my opinion, in reminding us that in the human being there is a way of "being open" that is also that of the animal: it consists rather in the fact that it tells us that the human being, beyond his opening to a world that he reveals, is also open (sometimes) to an inaccessible entity, and thus one that is never revealed. This is what I call here the Real: events we're exposed to, but with no revelation. The real *stuns* us just insofar as it is never really revealed. Heidegger wrote: "...to this being open [of the animal] the very possibility of having the disinhibitor as a being revealed is taken away, this is why the having of the being-open is a non-having, it is precisely a not having a world, if it is true that the revealability of the being as such belongs to the world" (Heidegger 1983, pp. 391-2¹⁴) Paradoxically, when the human being goes beyond his own humanity – and ceases to be a former of a world – he meets again this "poor" opening of the animal: opening on something that can never be had, on a real that will not reveal the being as such.

Now, these thoughts of a crisis of phenomenology –such as Derrida's and Agamben's – thematize an *Erlebnis*, a life experience, that puts us into contact with what has no experience, with what responds poorly nor corresponds to subjectivity, which balks at any intersubjective temptation. So Agamben (like, in different ways, Derrida and others still) realizes that phenomenology too has to reckon with what it cannot think and refuses to think – beyond *our* world, with the real.

I realize that this appeal to the Real opens up more questions than those it answers. Is this appeal to the Real not a return to old metaphysics? What can the conviction that not everything of the world is fairy-tale, and that beyond the fairy-tale it's the Real that **matters**, entail today? Is this a return to objectivist realism? I wouldn't say so, as what counts in science according to positivism is only its determining order and laws in nature. The misery of rationalism – in some respects indispensable – consists precisely in always trying to reduce the real to the world: it adopts the principle of sufficient reason, *nihil est sine ratione*, i.e., in Hegelian terms, everything that is real is rational and vice versa. But the Real is not *nihil*, yet it is *sine ratione*.

So, every form of positivism represses (*verdrängt*) what is really negative: chaos, the pure event, *singularity*, as it's called in mathematics and physics¹⁵. It represses what **rebuts** any prediction. But perhaps man has evolved precisely because he has allowed himself to be **rebutted**.

9. *Animal Sacrum*

Agamben has also recalled the figure of *homo sacer*. In the ancient Latin world, *homo sacer* was a human being who had lost any rights, someone the law no longer protected and anyone could kill at will. Starting from this prototype,

¹⁴ Agamben (2002, p. 59).

¹⁵ For example, in cosmology the **Big Bang hypothesis touches upon a singularity: no process or event prior to this Big Bang can be invoked as its cause.**

Agamben evokes other human figures with no civil status, those who live in a “state of exception” in the sense of Carl Schmitt. From the detainees of the Nazi concentration camps to illegal aliens gathered up in transit camps and with no civil status.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben (1998) says that Auschwitz represents the borderline case, the highest margin between facts and truth, ascertainment and comprehension. Auschwitz is the real, therefore nothing is true anymore: the concentration camp “necessarily exceeds its factual elements”.

I think that these forms of exposure or condemnation owe their impact to something Agamben doesn’t actually say, but something that is however no less crucial.

This unsaid part seems to me to be the reverse of what he says: i.e. that naked life is not only something horrific we try to flee, but also something that we miss and to which sooner or later we appeal to. Indeed, the 20th century wasn’t only the age of the explosion of life and death, but also that of total control over the planet by human beings. Everything has been colonized and politically portioned out, even the Poles, the seas and oceans, and in part the skies too. There are no more stateless ones. In the Middle Ages, when one was lovesick, one would go and live in the forest for a while, like an animal; the wild life was a sure refuge for someone in grief. Nowadays, on the other hand, no part of the planet is *wild* anymore, nobody lies outside political and administrative divisions (even though there are still pockets where “savages” resist, as in the mountains of Afghanistan): nearly all of the space in our planet has been environmentalized. Today the human *Welt* and *Umwelt* tend to coincide. The world appears covered by the famous 1:1 map of the Empire that a Chinese emperor in a Borges¹⁶ tale had ordered to be drawn up. Too adequate an overlapping between images and things often stifles us. The bare life, therefore, doesn’t only mean being an object of persecution and exclusion, but also something we’d like to draw from as at the source of our very social and civil life. The world changes because the bare life ends up breaking symbolic structures, whatever these may be. In a certain sense every Revolution is a cry for the bare life.

I personally view with suspicion a sort of philosophical radicalism that tars everything with the same brush and assimilates our life in the West – unsatisfying, depressing, but comfy – to the horrors of the concentration camps. A certain sort of catastrophism risks becoming the night when all the cattle is grey. What’s more, this denunciation of the “bare life” or “homo sacer” makes the dimension of the real, of the *zoé*, come across only as something horrendous. The evocation of the real too often coincides with a way of being-in-the-world imbued with fear or pure revulsion. Now, the real, as *Unheimlichkeit*, is not only a threat: it is also what in the end charms us, the wonder that cannot be disenchanting.

¹⁶ Borges & Bioy-Casares (1973).

When I say that a part of us yearns for “bare life”, I’m not referring to the bare life or to the “authentic adventures” promised by tourist culture. Certain forms of tourism reflect the domestication of the real: accidents are planned, staggering adventures are pre-organized. I’m thinking of American novels turned movies like *Deliverance*¹⁷ or *Into the Wild*¹⁸. On the wave of Thoreau’s preaching, these American heroes pursue experiences approaching the natural state: they risk the horror of the *homo lupus* to gain a hard-fought enjoyment. But here we still have a domestication of nature, even if these characters don’t do violence to it.

Sometimes – and this is more the exception than the rule – we wish for the bare life because it puts us into contact with our *zoé*. In other words, we entertain the idea of being outside the symbolic in a dimension of pure event. This wish should not be confused with the romantic will of a boundless communion with nature, according to the old aesthetics of the sublime: to enjoy wild nature as something sublime is already its domestication, albeit one that is only aesthetical. The appeal of the bare life is in fact undividable from the “clothed life” of our social inscription: it implies the cancellation of any sort of inscription, it is not an inscribing of virgin nature as a cultural image, as a “charming landscape”.

A friend of mine, a cultivated and intelligent woman, wishes to adopt a child, but shirks away in horror from the idea of maternity: “having children is savage and beast-like!” Will the naked production of life become more and more something reserved to the Third World? Nature to the poor, nurture to the rich? Yet this horror many “civilized” women have for natural motherhood should make us suspect of a forbidden charm, as Freud teaches: the charm of bare life. Every symbolic inscription and political sense always inscribes a life that brutally offers itself as an accident. For example, the senseless fact that one is born and dies. In Italy we have the concept of “civil status”. These can be four: married, non-married, living, dead. In some cases in Italy a “certificate of existing in life” is required... In other words *Kultur* inscribes the presence or absence of copulation, the presence or absence of life. But the inscriptions in the *Kultur* schematize – as Nietzsche would say – the chaotic events of birth and death, of coitus and fecundation. Animal events that we try to domesticate symbolically.

Lacan (1978) used to once say that people need psychoanalysts because they feel stifled, strangled by the real. But he was describing this real as the structured world of science and technology, the non-natural environment conceived precisely to satisfy our needs; it was, in other words, the “real” produced by knowledge. When nature is remodelled to become the world of one’s dreams, this world drifts towards the nightmarish. The real that stifles us is the virtual world, more and more unbearably virtuous.

10. Moby Dick

¹⁷Novel by J. Dickey [1970], film by J. Boorman [1972].

¹⁸Book by J. Krakauer, film by S. Penn [2007].

This tropism towards the Real fails not to transform our reading of literary and artistic works.

Let's take Melville's *Moby Dick*. The traditional critical approach used to decipher the possible symbolic meanings of the White Whale and Captain Ahab's hunt for it – hence the floodgates opened to, metaphysical, religious, Marxist, psychoanalytical interpretations and so on. This hermeneutical plethora confined the text within a Kitsch dimension, as indeed the Kitsch consists in over-familiarizing a disturbing text by filling it up, fattening it up with sense. Sontag's essay *Against Interpretation* (Sontag 1961) marked the end of this phase: Then, with the Linguistic Turn, the type of criticism that later became known as post-modernism **exposed** the transcendence of sense and focused on the linguistic strategies suffusing the White Whale with a halo of sense. The point was no longer to reveal a latent sense in the text, but to show how the immanent text was wittingly constructed precisely to spur us to find senses: the study of the novel's signifying structure prevailed over the deciphering of meanings. But today, with the Realistic Turn, we've left even semiological construction behind us.

After all, what strikes us today, as it did then, about the story of the White Whale? The fact that Moby Dick escapes capture by the whalers. To the latter whales had one specific sense: killing them and selling them for oil. Even though the technology of the time probably makes us smile, Ahab and his men illustrate the typically modern project of technological control and dominance over nature. Like in so many films – Hitchcock's *The Birds*, Spielberg's *Jaws* and so on – *Moby Dick* celebrates the unforeseen scandalous resistance of animals against modern man's attempt to use them. Melville's novel is basically seeped in symbols precisely because it refers back to a living Real – a bare life – that wounds the semantic organization of the world. We could say that the sense of the White Whale is to remind us of the limits of every sense, of the industrious like of any other kind.

But one might say, aren't we running the risk – by interpreting Moby Dick as the Real's resistance against the technological environmentalization of the planet – of adding yet another meaning to the hermeneutical rigmarole? Is it not a surreptitious way of reintroducing the Kitsch of sense using the shadow of non-sense?¹⁹ It's a risk one always runs, in literary criticism as much as in philosophical analysis. The point is to understand that in general our need to find meanings and functions, for texts as for the world, is born out of the dramatic impact the Real has – on some occasions – with our *domus*. Moby Dick has become an *unheimlich* emblem not only because Melville's novel is well constructed, but also because it makes us experience first hand the check, both literary and technological, sense is in. The Real is not the ultimate sense to find in the deepest recesses of texts and art works, the senseless

¹⁹ For example, what should we think of the fact that Ahab dies attached, for ever, to Moby Dick? The easiest interpretation is to think that he actually loved the hated whale too much: love and hate are identical here. But we could see Ahab ending up as part of that real he wanted to reduce to a part of himself.

sense to reveal, but it is rather the discordant impact of an event, even if it spurs us to integrate it in the network of symbols, of exchanges – “schemata”, Nietzsche would say. Human creativity – artistic, scientific or philosophical – sucks from the Real, knowing at heart that its breasts will never run dry.

11. The Fairy-tale and the Vat

“Man”, Hegel argued, will be really free only by surrounding himself with a world entirely created by himself – and this is indeed what’s happening. It’s “the insurrection against nature” (Sloterdijk). But to many today’s world, precisely because of this triumph of the Hegelian project of excessively humanizing the planet, seems unbearable. In an anthropomorphized and rationalized world there’s no longer room for the inhuman transcendence of the Real – for something that takes us by surprise, that makes us undergo a crisis and changes us. Hence a paradoxical, unpopular, need for the void.

Hilary Putnam (1975) made the most of the philosophical figure of “brains in a vat”. Putnam’s figure modernizes the Cartesian methodological doubt: perhaps we don’t have a body at all and are only brains in an organic liquid, brains electrically stimulated by a mad scientist. It is these stimuli that would then give us all the objective and subjective sensations we call “the world”, including the sensation of having a body and moving. Being-in-the-world is only what we believe, our actual situation is being-in-a-vat. It should be stressed that Putnam’s hypothesis is conceived as a bio-technological – or biopolitical – **contraption**.

This metaphysical metaphor has become the theme of various works of science-fiction. In particular of the *Matrix* trilogy of films, which has impressed many philosophers. I shan’t go over the plot in detail here, as most will already be familiar with it. In this movie the ancient allegory of the Platonic cave is brought up to date.

Cypher, one of the film’s characters, visiting the imaginary world of the *Matrix*, pronounces, as he eats with pleasure, the words: “You know, I know that this steak doesn't exist. I know when I put it in my mouth, the *Matrix* is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, do you know what I've realized? Ignorance is bliss”. Cypher in fact backs philosophers who for over two centuries have glorified sensible appearance as opposed to any supposed thing-in-itself, against the pertinence of a real beyond appearances. For modern nihilism we can safely take as reality the phantoms induced by the *Matrix*: “the real world has become a fairy-tale”. Or, as the ’68 slogan went, “take your dreams for reality”. We see today clear signals of the resurgence of a metaphysical concern that seemed to have faded away into the nihilistic exaltation of subjective experiences as the only thing that counts for us. What is emerging today – in a world more and more virtualized by technology – is a need to appeal to the Real, also because this appeal seems to be the hard-core of any ethical attitude.

I don’t believe that today the problem is any longer, like in Plato, that of distinguishing the true reality (*ousia*) from appearances (*eidola*): now the problem is

whether we should consider the world simply as the system of the objects which interest us (because we love or hate them) or whether, beyond *our* (domestic) objects, something would matter as *in itself*. This is the problem in our experience of being in love: up to which point do we love of the other what *s/he has* (beauty, charm, intelligence, pleasure s/he can give us, etc.) or what *s/he is*. The scientific approach drives us to reduce the other's Being to a combination of what s/he has, but I believe that every ethical disposition presupposes the other **insofar as** s/he is (**insofar as** s/he is real).

The point is that in *Matrix* this Real, in the name of which the “realists” fight against Illusion, is ultimately a desert. Compared to the ever more dazzling, glittery and significant forms the technologies offer us, this appeal to the Real has the impact of an ascetic exhortation.

12. Wittgenstein's Wonder

Wittgenstein didn't talk about the real but about the *mystical*. In his conference “On Ethics” (Wittgenstein 1929), he clearly said that ethics – but essentially aesthetics too - is not an expression of a linguistic game, but refers to something *absolute*²⁰. Here Wittgenstein takes up in his own way the Kantian distinction between hypothetical imperatives and categorical imperatives: Games imply relative judgements, whilst ethics is an absolute value judgement. As in this sense ethics is “supernatural”, Wittgenstein says, it is not possible to speak about it in logical and rational terms, he can only give almost affective equivalents. As an example, he gives *feeling absolutely safe whatever happens* – something absurd at the rational level. Another example is his *wonder at the existence of the world*. Two opposite examples in the end: because the sensation of feeling absolutely safe assimilates our life to the domestic hearth, to feeling at home; whilst wonder at the world as it is presumes alienness to the world, which consequently comes across as surprising. Ethics, therefore, is evoked through both a radical domestic figure and a radical extra-domestic one.

But I find it particularly significant that to make ethics sensible, Wittgenstein evokes wonder. For Aristotle, *thaumazein*, wonder, was the philosopher's initial spring. The philosopher wonders about solstices and puppets, for example. The difference with Aristotle is that to him wonder was only the beginning of philosophical concern: then philosophy explains everything away and wonder disappears. Instead for Wittgenstein, as for Heidegger, the task of philosophy – in contrast to that of the sciences – is to keep the feeling of wonder alive. It is true that science explains more and more things, but one is a philosopher if one is not satisfied with these explanations, which will always remain hypothetical, fatally counter-

²⁰ According to psychoanalyst Cristiana Cimino (2008), this relationship to the absolute also characterizes the experience of the psychotic and borderline.

factual “if... then...” propositions. An important fact is that to Wittgenstein – as to other 20th century philosophers – philosophical interrogation, ethics and wonder are closely involved. But wonder about what? Not surely about what science cannot (yet) explain, but wonder about the fact that things are.

Wittgenstein also specifies that “the miracle of the existence of the world” is not a proposition of language and that the miracle is in a certain sense the existence of language itself. This because to him the world is coextensive to signifying language; in our terms, we would say that the world is everything that, thanks to our language, has sense. But ethics and aesthetics – like everything that for Wittgenstein is absolute – go beyond the world and beyond language, in other words, beyond sense. There never will be an ethical science, insofar as ethics is “a document of a tendency in the human mind [towards the absolute value] which I personally cannot help respecting deeply”. In our terminology: the human being seeks the Real as something absolute, lying outside scientific hypothesis. But the trouble is that the Real always gives itself only relatively. We are exposed to it, but it doesn’t reveal itself.

It seems to me that what Wittgenstein is trying to say is this: that ethical (and aesthetical) experience is something that only apparently depends on norms, rules, and commandments and that it actually invests the other as real. Of course, the other that **matters** changes according to ages and cultures – in some the other that **matters** is only a member of your tribe, in others all human beings and even animals... But ethics is connected to the fact that, whoever this other is, we *respect* it (*aidos*, the Greeks called it: respect, shame and modesty) not insofar as we love or hate it, but insofar as it is subject in itself, real in other words. Beyond the horizon of our objects, its existence *obliges* us. It is the (absolute) being other, not our relation with it, that counts in ethics (and in aesthetics too).

To take up Agamben’s terms again, we can say that in the ethical dimension of our existence we are all animals: we are captivated by the being without it revealing itself.

Of course, science advances because it is attracted, stirred by the real: but its task is to set things **in order starting from disorderliness**, to show, as the Chaos theory experts say, that “order is disguised as chaos”²¹. Science “stays on the edge of chaos”, but it never falls into it: it explains why it domesticates a real the contours of which it traces? – through predictions and simulations, reconstructions and models. But what prevents science from resting on its laurels in any age is the challenge posed by the real, i.e. the noise that goes through the world. This false note that disturbs any song celebrating the intelligible sense of things.

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²¹ On “the laws of chaos”, see Prigogine (1993).

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