

STEFANO OLIVA

## THE CIRCULAR INSANITY OF PHILOSOPHY: AN AESTHETIC VISION

### 1. Philosophy and Melancholy

The connection between philosophy and melancholy is a commonplace in Western culture. In the twentieth century Martin Heidegger, among others, gave new theoretical depth to this union, identifying melancholy as the emotional situation of philosophy:

As a creative and essential activity of human Dasein, philosophy stands in the fundamental attunement of melancholy. This melancholy concerns the form rather than the content of philosophizing, but it necessarily prescribes a fundamental attunement which delimits the substantive content of philosophical questioning. (Heidegger 1929-30, 183)

The relationship between melancholy, understood as *Grundstimmung*, and philosophy is mediated by creativity. On this point, Heidegger recalls that Aristotle already combined art and philosophy by virtue of a common innovative action placed under the sign of melancholy.<sup>1</sup> In his *Problemata* (XXX, 1, 953a) in fact Aristotle asks: «Why is it that all those men who have achieved exceptional things, whether in

---

<sup>1</sup> In the context of a reflection on melancholy and community – where the first is understood as experience of the limit due to the non-appropriability of the latter, which counts therefore as a missing object –, Roberto Esposito (2018, 46) reflects on Heidegger's quoted passage asking himself «in what sense melancholy touches philosophy until it even coincides with it». The answer, with great honesty, remains suspended since the current stage of development of philosophical thought and politics do not yet allow, according to the author, to provide a positive determination other than an assumption of the limit as a common space – «original *munus*» – of political *communitas*.

philosophy, in politics, in poetry, or in the arts, are clearly melancholics?» (cited in Heidegger 1929-30, 183).

Giorgio Agamben (1977) also dwells on the same passage by Aristotle in a text devoted to the historical and erudite reconstruction of the concept of melancholy which, although dedicated to the memory of Heidegger, follows an alternative path to that of the German philosopher. Agamben points out that starting with Aristotle a rich tradition from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the contemporary age will connect melancholy and the doctrine of genius. In this process of development ranging from the medieval *acedia* to the Freudian account of melancholy as a recess of the subject from the object, the constant element is the attribution to the melancholic of «a natural propensity to interior withdrawal and contemplative knowledge» (Agamben 1977, 12). Agamben therefore confronts himself with the Freudian essay and indicates in the melancholy mechanism, which makes what in reality and inappropriate appear as lost, a precise strategy that outlines a topology of culture, in which «giving a body to the incorporeal and rendering the corporeal incorporeal. In the space opened by its obstinate phantasmagoric tendency originates the unceasing alchemical effort of human culture to appropriate to itself death and the negative and to shape the maximum reality seizing on the maximum unreality» (Agamben 1977, 26).

Agamben's reflection therefore provides some elements to understand more deeply the connection between melancholy and philosophy indicated by Heidegger but this intimate relationship, almost of coincidence, between the two risks remaining excessively vague if not based on an analogy of structure between them.

A further step towards a detailed comparison between philosophy and melancholy is made by Slavoj Žižek (2000), who instead of referring to the connection proposed by Heidegger returns – as well as Agamben – to Freud's essay on *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) to develop the coupling between 'black bile' and philosophical thought.

Far from accentuating to the extreme the situation of the frustrated desire, of the desire deprived of its object, melancholy rather stands for the presence of the object itself deprived of the desire for itself. Melancholy occurs when we finally get the desired object, but are disappointed in it. In this precise sense, melancholy (disappointment at all

positive, observable objects, none of which can satisfy our desire) effectively is the beginning of philosophy. (Žižek 2000, 662)

Žižek's observation is inserted in the context of a reflection on the theme of melancholy which makes extensive use of the conceptualization proposed by Jacques Lacan to realize his 'return to Freud'. According to Freud mourning and melancholy both have to do with the loss of an object, which in mourning is a real loss while in melancholy it consists rather in a loss of desire in relation to the object, and therefore in a loss of the object as an object of desire. For this very reason, Freud notes that melancholy has the feeling of having lost something without knowing exactly what it has lost.

Here Žižek introduces the Lacanian distinction between object and (object-) cause of desire, also referred to as *objet a*, often identified by the French psychoanalyst as the incarnation of a hole or as the constitutive lack that sets desire in motion. In this sense, the *objet a* is « [...] a privileged object, which has emerged from some primal separation, from some induced by the very approach of the real [...] » (Lacan 1973, 83). The distinction between (real) *loss* and (structural) *lack* is the base for the misunderstanding of the melancholic, who suffers from the lack of something that has never been present, but rather embodies the void around which, writes Žižek, the series of objects in reality is organized.<sup>2</sup>

Precisely because the melancholic has lost nothing in particular (it would not know how to indicate what it has lost), there is no object that can soothe its dissatisfaction. What has been lost is his desire for the object, which although long desired, once obtained shows itself for what it is: a simple object among others. It is here that Žižek finds the characteristic move of philosophy: faced with the disappointment that comes from any positive and observable object, the desire is lit for something indeterminate. This indeterminate tension (or *drive*), capable of taking one beyond the sphere of what is factual, would mark the beginning of philosophy.

## 2. Circular insanity

---

<sup>2</sup> Manuela Fraire (2001) underlines how female subjectivity, considered for a long time structurally missing compared to male subjectivity, is today the bearer of a «new melancholy», due «not so much to the loss of the object as to the lack of representations» outside the maternal role.

Melancholy is therefore presented as a refusal to be satisfied with any determined object and as an aspiration to a domain that cannot be reduced to empirical, to the sphere of facts. In this retreat from the outside world and from the multiplicity of real objects, as Agamben already noted, we can find an element of continuity between the traditional juxtaposition of philosophy and melancholy and the Freudian approach, which emphasizes the «profoundly painful dejection» and «cessation of interest in the outside world» (Freud 1917, 244) of the melancholic.

The loss of the object as object of love, and therefore the unconscious loss to which Freud (1917, 245) refers, becomes the basis on which Žižek identifies melancholy with the beginning of philosophy, which therefore turns out to be not a science endowed with its own object but a tension towards a knowledge that is beyond the empirical and factual sphere. The philosopher, like the melancholic, cannot find satisfaction in any object: the drive that moves him goes beyond the normal satisfaction of a need, which is normally appeased in reaching the goal.

Philosophy's dissatisfaction with every positive object seems to call to mind another place of Freudian reflection: the relationship between life instincts and death instincts in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Freud is induced to formulate the hypothesis concerning death instinct on the basis of certain phenomena, first of all the compulsion to repeat, apparently not referable to the pleasure principle. The repetition, in the game as in the dream, of unpleasant episodes of life seems in fact inexplicable, if one considers the pleasure principle as the golden rule of human behavior. On the other hand, if pleasure coincides with the discharge of a tension, the impulse to return to the inorganic state represents the extreme application of the pleasure principle. What therefore lies beyond the pleasure principle would not so much be the death instinct, which is the most radical consequence of this principle, but the life instincts since, as also Laplanche and Pontalis (1967, 242) note, «it is clear therefore that from the economic standpoint too the life instincts fit badly into the energy-based model of the instinct as a tendency towards the reduction of tensions». In any case, the dualism between Eros and Thanatos (but also their intimate bond), placed by Freud beyond the principle of pleasure, determines

the overcoming of a pulsional economy characterized by the precise correspondence between drive and object that satisfies it.

The same tendency to go beyond the pleasure principle, i.e. beyond any mere satisfaction due to a positive object (or beyond the correspondence between loss and what has been lost), seems to characterize the beginning of philosophy, as Žižek understands it in connection with melancholy. But with reference to the Freudian text, Žižek highlights only one aspect of what in *Mourning and Melancholia* is called «circular insanity»:

The most remarkable characteristic of melancholia, and the one in most need of explanation, is its tendency to change round into mania – a state which is the opposite of it in its symptoms. As we know, this does not happen to every melancholia. Some cases run their course in periodic relapses, during the intervals between which signs of mania may be entirely absent or only very slight. Others show the regular alternation of melancholic and manic phases which has led to the hypothesis of a circular insanity. (Freud 1920, 253).

What is characteristic of the mania that alternates with depression is the common absence of a specific object. The melancholic, in both moments, does not know how to indicate which loss he suffers as well as the reason for his excitement: «We may venture to assert that mania is nothing other than a triumph of this sort, only that here again what the ego has surmounted and what it is triumphing over remain hidden from it» (Freud 1920, 254).

This double aspect of melancholy, i.e. the twofold possibility of a depressive moment and a manic moment, both without a precise object, can provide us with an interesting element to deepen Žižek's idea of melancholy as the beginning of philosophy, possibly breaking the traditional link between 'black bile' and the life of thought, while maintaining the reference to melancholy, now understood as a manic-depressive disorder.

### **3. Beginning and End of Philosophy**

From what has been said, the beginning of philosophy would be marked by dissatisfaction with every positive object, a dissatisfaction irreducible to the pulsional economy (tension-discharge) and which instead opens a horizon beyond the pleasure principle. This horizon can be associated with melancholy but this does not mean that only

sad passions dominate it, i.e. that the dominant emotional tone is only depressive. Melancholy is in fact subject to cyclical phases, to a change of aspects that involves alternating moments of discouragement and moments of jubilation.

To subtract philosophical melancholy from its exclusively depressive aspect, consecrated by tradition, we can refer to what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls «the miracle». In a well known conference in 1929 dedicated to the theme of ethics, and in particular to what can be considered «judgment of absolute value», Wittgenstein describes the paradoxical experience of being amazed at the existence of the world.

If I say "I wonder at the existence of the world" I am misusing language. [...] To say "I wonder at such and such being the case" has only sense if I can imagine it not to be case. In this sense one can wonder at the existence of, say, when one sees it and has not visited it for a long time and has imagined that it had been pulled down in the meantime. But it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing. [...] One might be tempted to say that what I am wondering at is a tautology [...] (Wittgenstein 1965, 8-9).

In the experience of which Wittgenstein speaks, the wonder of the existence of the world, literally there is no wonder at *anything*, because what is astonishing is not a 'thing' among the others. The world in fact, as we read in prop. 1 of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), «is all that is the case», i.e. the totality of facts, all the existing states of affairs, where things are combined. Just as the world is not a single thing but the non-representable totality of things, in the same way the tautology, says Wittgenstein, is not really a proposition since «[they] are not pictures of reality. They do not represent any possible situations [and] admit all possible situations» (Wittgenstein 1922, 4.462). To wonder at the world is similar to wonder at a tautology because in both cases one does not wonder at something but at the totality of things, at the very condition for there to be something: «And I will now describe the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle» (Wittgenstein 1965, 11).

In this specific sense, a miracle is neither an exceptional event nor an extraordinary thing. Rather, the term indicates a way of *seeing the world* characterized by amazement and gratefulness. But such feelings, as in Freudian melancholy – and particularly as in the depressive

state – are not due to any positive fact. Miraculous is a way of seeing without object. In this sense, the Wittgenstein's wonder for the existence of the world is a good representation of the manic pole that represents the counterpoint of depression in «circular insanity».

With respect to Žižek's observation, which saw in melancholy the beginning of philosophy as a research for knowledge without an object, one can now try to distinguish the two moments indicated by Freud as two constitutive moments of philosophical investigation. On the one hand, the lack of the object felt in the depressive experience would inaugurate philosophical reflection, whose drive is directed beyond any possible objectual satisfaction; on the other hand, seeing the world as a miracle, i.e. the manic experience devoid of object, would mark the end of the philosophical inquiry. On this point it is appropriate to read Wittgenstein's reflections on the miracle together with the propositions of *Tractatus* devoted to «the mystical» (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.44; 6.45; 6.522), understood as that which is irreducible to the sphere of facts and therefore escapes the grip of language. As will be reiterated later in the *Lecture on Ethics*, the mystical is connected to the sphere of absolute value, or in the terms of *Tractatus* to the «problem of life»:

We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer. The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem [...] (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.52-6.521)

Once the double nature of the «circular insanity» has been taken into consideration, it can be reiterated that melancholy is connected to philosophy not only with regard of its beginning but also to its (temporary) end.<sup>3</sup> This also enriches the spectrum of emotional tones related to philosophical activity, no longer marked only by a pensive and

---

<sup>3</sup> The fact remains that, in a cyclic route, end and beginning do not oppose each other and are always on the verge of turning into each other. So also with the peaks of the miracle (or to use another Wittgensteinian image, the ladder on which one has climbed) and the first steps of the research. As Paolo Virno (2015, 30, my trans.) notes, «finding a ladder to throw away after having climbed it, is the fundamental sublime experience», and it is always possible that the miraculous existence of the world provokes in the long run the melancholic desire for the missing object.

gloomy withdrawal from the objects of the world but also as an enthusiastic appreciation of the world as a whole.

#### 4. An aesthetic vision

Such a consideration of the philosophical path, from its beginning to its end, and in particular the passage from one phase to the other, must be seen from an aspectual point of view. As the Freudian text suggests, melancholy is not determined by the lost object (which is unconscious) but by the feeling of loss; as Wittgenstein's reflection shows, the miracle does not lie in the nature of what arouses astonishment but rather in a certain way of seeing the world. The transition from the depressive moment to the manic moment can be considered as a change of aspect, in the meaning used by Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Halfway between perception and thought, in «noticing an aspect» (Wittgenstein 1953, II, xi) nothing changes in the object: what really changes is the way of organizing perception, what Wittgenstein calls *seeing-as*. Applied to the melancholic cycle, nothing changes in the object (which, let's remember, both in the case of the depressive moment and in the case of the manic moment escapes the consciousness of melancholy) but what changes is precisely the mode of vision, the *seeing-as*, and with it the emotional tonality of which it is tinged.

In both cases, what comes to the fore is not the *what* but the *how* of the experience. This *how* determines the modality of relationship to himself and to the reality of whom who experience. This is what, with Wittgenstein, we can call «aesthetics»<sup>4</sup>: not a reflection on particular objects or their attributes and properties but rather the adoption of a point of view on the experience that is made, testified by gestures, practices, concrete forms of life. «I know exactly what happens when a person who knows a lot about suits goes to the tailor, also I know what happens when a person who knows nothing about suits goes-what he says, how he acts, etc.», writes Wittgenstein, and James Taylor, a student on the Wittgenstein aesthetic course at Cambridge in 1938, adds: «This is aesthetics» (Wittgenstein 1967, 7).

---

<sup>4</sup> In other ways, of course, melancholy can be considered a relevant aesthetic emotion both in our experience in the artistic field and in everyday life (see Brady and Haapala 2003).



In a recent book, Giovanni Matteucci has identified the core of aesthetic experience in the privilege accorded to «experience-with» rather than «experience-of». Just as in Wollheim (1980) the concept of *seeing-in* concerns a mode of relationship rather than determined content, and in Ryle (1949) the *knowing-how* is different from *knowing-what*, for Matteucci is «inevitable that between what and how, the aesthetic definitely sides for the latter, or even for the phenomenology of against ontology» (Matteucci 2019, 53, my trans.). Therefore the aesthetic experience derives its specificity not from the object to which it is directed, or from its properties, or from the judgment that can be expressed on them, but from the way in which the experience itself takes place, which for Matteucci is a collusive modality, i. e. an interplay in which the subject interacts *with* the object.

In this perspective, explicitly influenced by Wittgenstein's "second" philosophy, the whole cycle of philosophy, from its depressive beginning to its maniacal outcome, undergoes an aesthetic consideration, showing how the change of aspect is due to a different experience-with. But it should be noted that the characteristic element of philosophical melancholy lies precisely in the lack of an object. If in noticing an aspect it is the same object that does not change, while the organization of experience changes, in philosophical melancholy it is the same *absence of a particular object* that now sets the search in motion – giving rise to an implacable dissatisfaction – now puts an end to the philosophical question, consuming the question and determining the experience of the miraculous existence of the world.

Finally, the aesthetic point of view on the connection between melancholy and philosophy makes it possible to reconsider the very status of that research that presents itself as 'love of knowledge'. Both at its beginning and at its end, philosophy remains a research structurally devoid of object. If the lack felt at the beginning, in the depressive rise of his question, could find a positive answer, it would result in a description of facts, i.e. in a particular science possessing a proper object.<sup>5</sup> It is for this reason that its most consistent outcome is not the

---

<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the truly philosophical question originates from a drive that goes beyond the principle of pleasure, that is, beyond the drive economy in which there is a correspondence between tension and discharge, or between need and satisfaction (see Oliva 2018).

satisfaction of question but its extinction, as Wittgenstein suggests. But we must remember that even the jubilation for the existence of the world is in reality devoid of object, since the world cannot be considered an object. What changes in the course of research, what determines its happy outcome or not, is not the achievement of the object: if philosophy wants to remain what it is, 'love of knowledge', its tension must not be resolved in 'possession of knowledge'. What changes between the depressive beginning and the maniacal outcome of philosophy (between its object free question and the cessation of the question) is the change of aspect of the missing object: a nagging lack or a void to stand in.

### Bibliography

Agamben G. 1977: *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, eng. tr. by R.L. Martinez, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Aristotle, *Problemata. Aristotelis Opera*, ed. Bekker, Berlin 1831, vol. 11.

Brady E., Haappala A. 2003: *Melancholy as an aesthetic emotion*, "Contemporary Aesthetics", vol. 1, <https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=214>

Esposito R. 2018: *Malinconia e comunità*, in Id., *Termini della politica. Comunità, immunità, biopolitica*, vol. I, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, pp. 37-47.

Fraire M. 2001: *La condizione femminile della melanconia*, in Borrelli F. (ed.), *Pensare l'inconscio*, Roma, Manifesto Libri, retrieved at: <http://www.psychiatryonline.it/node/2393>

Freud S. 1917: *Mourning and Melancholia*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV, London, the Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1981, pp. 237-258.

Freud S. 1920: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, eng. tr. by J. Strachey, New York, London, Norton & Company, 1961.

Heidegger M. 1929-30: *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics. World, Finitude, Solitude*, eng. tr. by W. McNeill and N. Walker, Bloomington and Minneapolis, Indiana University Press, 1995.

Lacan J. 1973: *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, eng. tr. by A. Sheridan, New York, London, Norton & Company, 1998.

Laplanche J., Pontalis J.B. 1967: *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, eng. tr. by D. Lagache, Karnac Books, 1996.

Matteucci G. 2019: *Estetica e natura umana. La mente estesa tra percezione, emozione ed espressione*, Roma, Carocci.

Oliva S. 2017: *Domande scientifiche e pulsione mistica. Wittgenstein, Freud e Lacan al di là del principio di piacere*, "Studi di estetica", 1, pp. 97-110.

Ryle G. 1949: *The Concept of Mind*, London, New York, Hutchinson.

Virno P. 2015: *L'idea di mondo. Intelletto pubblico e uso della vita*, Macerata, Quodlibet.

Wittgenstein L. 1922: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London, New York, Routledge, 2001.

Wittgenstein L. 1953: *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

Wittgenstein L. 1965: *A Lecture on Ethics*, "The Philosophical Review", Vol. 74, No. 1, pp. 3-12.

Wittgenstein L. 1967: *Lecture and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press.

Wollheim R. 1980: *Seeing-as, Seeing-in, and Pictorial Representation*, in Id. *Art and its Objects*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge UP, pp. 205-226.

Žižek S. 2000: *Melancholy and the Act*, «Critical Inquiry», vol. 26, n. 4, pp. 657-681.