



INTERVIEW WITH FRANCESCO BERTO

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INTRODUCTION. Francesco ‘Franz’ Berto is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. Currently a passionate metaphysician and an explorer of deviant logics, he started studying Hegelian dialectic at the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, tutored and inspired by Emanuele Severino. At the time, he published *La dialettica della struttura originaria* (2003) and *Che cos’è la dialettica hegeliana?* (2005). As a postdoc in Padova and, successively, Paris, he obtained the 2007 Castiglioncello Prize for young philosophers with his *Teorie dell’assurdo* [English version: *How to Sell a Contradiction*, 2007]. In 2012 he has been appointed senior lecturer at the University of Aberdeen, taking part at Crispin Wright’s research project on the metaphysical basis of logic and working with Graham Priest on paraconsistent semantics, impossible worlds, and dialetheism. The results are contained in *Existence as a Real Property* (2013) [Italian version: *L’esistenza non è logica* (2010)]. Among students, though, he is chiefly well-known for his textbooks on quantified first-order logic [*Logica da zero a Gödel*, 2007] and Gödel theorems [*There’s Something About Gödel: The Complete Guide to the Incompleteness Theorem*, 2009], published in Italy by Laterza [*Tutti pazzi per Gödel: La guida completa al teorema di incompletezza*, 2008]. In the introduction, he declares that he has written the books mostly in order to pay his bills. Personally, we are proud of our economic contribution. We have questioned him on his view on non-existent objects and on his “impressionistic impressions” on the reception of Hegel in analytic philosophy.

Having been concerned with inexistent objects, non-standard logic, (even) Hegelian dialectic (!), you proved yourself an uncommon, yet extremely interesting philosopher. It shouldn’t be easy to work in isolation with respect to the more mainstream and fashionable debates... Thanks for calling me interesting!

Walking away from established debates can be a lot of fun: it allows you to explore original paths where less is taken for granted.

So-called analytic philosophy (*turbo-capitalistic philosophy*, as my esteemed colleague Diego Fuffaro would call it <https://www.facebook.com/DiegoFuffa>) often takes a lot for granted.

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Analytic philosophers work comfortably, we may say in Kuhnian fashion, within customary philosophical paradigms and without asking too many radical questions – until the paradigms enter a phase of recession.

Something of the sort is happening nowadays in ontology – precisely, in *meta*-ontology: the methodology of ontology. Here the Quinean paradigm of the Forties was taken for granted for a long time: ontological commitment is captured by the quantifier (“To be is to be the value of a variable” was one of Quine’s famous rhetorical mottos). And the task of ontology is to write down the complete catalogue of the furniture of the world – of everything there is. Ontology gets the list right insofar as it includes nothing that isn’t there, and leaves out nothing that is there. And that’s it.

21st Century ontology is dominated by reactions against such paradigm: grounding theorists like Kit Fine, Jonathan Schaffer and Fabrice Correia, neo-Meinongians like Graham Priest, fictionalists like Stephen Yablo and Hartry Field, quantifier variantists like Eli Hirsch, and ontological pluralists like Jason Turner and Kris McDaniel, all claim that there’s something seriously wrong with the Quinean framework. They propose to reform it in various ways, or even to reject it altogether. None of this would have happened if these folks hadn’t felt the need to walk away from the established path.

In *Existence as a Real Property*, you write: “It is thanks to Doyle’s creativity as a fantasy writer, that Holmes is available for reference and quantification at @” (p. 224). “Creativity” lays the foundations of the Comprehension Principle (UCP), according to which there is an object matching every possible combination of properties. But is the principle really so limitless? For instance, could Doyle write a story on the adventures of the round square in the actual world, or would he fall afoul to a modal error? Doyle could certainly do that, with no modal mistake. Here’s why.

First, your “There is an object matching every possible combination of properties” is one formulation of the so-called Naïve or Unrestricted Comprehension Principle:

(UCP) Any condition $A[x]$ is satisfied by something.

This principle quickly goes down in flames, for it delivers triviality. Let $A[x]$ be: ‘ $x = x \ \& \ B$ ’. By UCP, something – say, o – satisfies $A[x]$. Thus: $o = o \ \& \ B$. By conjunction elimination: B . But B was arbitrary. So one can use UCP to derive any conclusion one wills!

On the other hand, *nobody* has ever endorsed the UCP – not even Meinong. Instead, Modal Meinongianism (MM), the view endorsed by Graham Priest and myself, subscribe to, is a Qualified Comprehension Principle:

(QCP) Any condition $A[x]$ is satisfied by some object at some world.

And “world” here means any situation or state of affairs, including ones that could *not* obtain, that is impossible situations.

Now, something’s being round and square is an impossible situation for sure: the world could not be like that. But suppose Doyle writes about an *actual* round square, that is, something that is characterized by Doyle as round and square at the actual world @. How does MM handle this?

Easily enough: once ways the world could not be, that is, so-called non-normal or impossible worlds (see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/impossible-worlds>) are admitted in the semantics, one cannot expect modal operators to work uniformly across all worlds. And “actually” is one such operator. The truth and falsity conditions for “actually” given on pp. 175-6 of *Existence as a Real Property* (ERP) are as follows. Where w is a *possible world*:

‘Actually A’ is true at w iff A is true at @.

‘Actually A’ is false at w iff A is false at @.

If A is false at @, then ‘Actually A’ is not a necessary truth. But when w is a non-normal world, A can hold there even if A does not hold at @. So given $A[x] = “x \text{ actually is a round square}”$, we still have, as per the QCP, that something has, at some world, the property of being a round square at @. But this doesn’t give us anything which is *actually* round and square, for the relevant world is a non-normal one, and the truth conditions above don’t apply there.

The insight is obvious: you can imagine your impossible dreams to be actually realized, but that doesn’t make them real. What your imagination produces is only something that is represented as being such-and-so-at-@, but nothing that *is*, at @, such-and-so.

The modal semantics developed by you and Graham Priest (2005) allow for rigid designation (denotation operators have no world-indexes). At the same time, QCP possibly assigns every property – ‘of course’ even inconsistent ones – to some object. There seems to be at least one property, though, such that, if both rigid designation and QCP hold, cannot be instantiated in any world. We are talking about self-diversity: $\lambda x(x \neq x)$. For is it right to say that there can be no world in which Holmes fails to be identical to itself, on pain of abandoning rigid designation? And thus, doesn’t rigid designation validate the necessity of self-identity, at least in the sense that there is no world in which it doesn’t hold – even though there are (impossible) worlds in which it holds accompanied by its negation? Yes, MM is perfectly compatible with the necessity of identity: just have “=” get the same extension/anti-extension at all possible worlds. This gives you that if $a = b$, then ‘ $a = b$ ’ holds at all possible worlds.

Third, as for rigid designation and the “textbook Kripkeanism” story you have rehearsed: there being ways the world could not be, such that something is not self-identical, does not interact with rigid designation at all. Here’s my latest logical fiction story:

“Nonsy was non-self-identical and this made him very unhappy: he had done many different jobs, tried many experiences, met so many people, still he couldn’t find his identity: ‘Who am I?’ – he kept wondering. Luckily one day Nonsy became friends with Selfy, an unselfish self-identical girl ...”

... And so on. According to MM, in the above story “Nonsy” rigidly refers to Nonsy. Of course, Nonsy doesn’t really exist – he’s just a fictional character invented by me. At the actual world, though, Nonsy is perfectly self-identical: Nonsy just is Nonsy, and nobody else. And so he is at any other possible world: there is no way the world could be, such that something fails to be self-identical.

That “Nonsy” designates rigidly simply means that it refers to that guy even in counterfactual situations where he is supposed to have features he doesn’t actually have. We can, for instance, wonder what Nonsy would do if he fell in love with Selfy. Nonsy isn’t actually in love with Selfy (he doesn’t really exist, recall? Nonexistents cannot fall in love). Still we refer to *Nonsy* when we use “Nonsy” to describe the counterfactual situation we are wondering about. Now, given non-normal worlds, some counterfactual situations will also be counterpossible: situations in which Nonsy has properties he cannot have. $\lambda x(x \neq x)$ is just one such property. The usual textbook-Kripkean story holds: first we fix the reference of “Nonsy” at the actual

world. Then we hold the reference fixed across nonactual circumstances, including circumstances that could not obtain, aka impossible worlds. Kripke said that we ought to keep our language constant across alternative worlds. He was, of course, right. There is no incompatibility between things being non-self-identical in some impossible circumstance or other, and rigid designation.

It is another issue, *how* we can actually fix the reference of “Nonsy”. This is, in my view, the most serious problem of MM. It is called the Selection Problem. I tried to address it in the last Chapter of ERP and elsewhere, but it’s a tricky issue and all bets concerning it are still off.

Ok, we understand that you handle designation as a mere semantic clause allowing you to refer to Nonsy in every world-domain in which she (he? neither? both?) figures. But our textbook-like Kripkean stubbornness (and a good deal of Putnam *for dummies*, as you certainly guessed) suggests us that it is only conditionally upon admitting the necessity of self-identity that you can admit rigid designation, and that the two things are somehow connected – the former being a necessary condition for the latter. After all, when you baptize Nonsy (supposing you can) in the actual world, you baptize a necessarily self-identical thing. Given this relationship, it doesn’t seem to be possible to refer to him (her?) in contexts where that very Nonsy is not the same thing as itself – would you really achieve reference? That Nonsy should be self-identical in every world, and that it is odd to utter truths on a non-self identical Nonsy are at least powerful non-semantic intuitions... I think there’s a confusion between (a) referring at @ to something that, at world $w \neq @$, is such-and-so, and (b) referring at w to something that, at world w , is such-and-so.

It might be that, in a (closest) world w where Nonsy is not self-identical (“in contexts where that very Nonsy is not the same thing as itself”, as you say), we cannot refer to him, say, because we keep referring to something else (!) or to nothing at all.

That goes under case (b). So it’s not our problem here at @. We are in case (a): We can refer to Nonsy at @ (I just did it), as he is perfectly self-identical around here. We can then describe a counterfactual (indeed, counterpossible) scenario, w , in which Nonsy is non-self-identical (I did it above). That we *would* have problems in referring to a non-self-identical object in a counterpossible scenario where there are such things around doesn’t affect our actually referring to something, which is then represented as non-self-identical in a logical fantasy.

Modal Meinongian metaphysics seems to lack an important feature: essential properties. Particularly, your semantics combines rigid designation and UCP, from which we can derive that every object can change every property, maybe even lose its self-identity, by yet ‘remaining’ the same object we are referring to in the actual world. Does any deflationism about essential properties hide behind this omission? And if so, how can it go together with rigid designation? Luckily, MM is perfectly neutral with respect to essentialism.

MM allows worlds where, for instance, Socrates is an iPhone 6. Essentialists may not like this. But they would be wrong. For MM semantics includes non-normal worlds, which are ways things *cannot* be. And the theory does not mandate taking worlds where Socrates is an iPhone 6 as possible.

Suppose you, qua essentialist, want Socrates to be essentially human. Then just impose to (the formal language counterpart of) “is human” the constraint that whatever makes it actually true also makes it true at any possible world (where the thing exists). Then Socrates, being human, will also be human at all possible worlds (ditto): situations in which Socrates is a smartphone will be ruled out from the realm of possibilities.

If, on the other hand, you don’t like Socrates to be essentially human, because you are an anti-essentialist, just avoid imposing such a constraint. MM can make you happy either way.

Can we *conceive* Socrates as a glossy black new iPhone 6, even if the essentialist supposition that this is not a possible scenario is right? I claim that we can, but this issue, having to do with the connections between conceivability and possibility, is a tangled one, and we may avoid getting into this during our chat.

Right. Please, allow us to change our subject. In the previous discussion, we talked about contradiction, and you dealt with this problem by using paraconsistent logic. In the past you’ve also worked on dialectic. But what are the main differences exactly? And more generally, what is the relationship between dialectic and formal logic? The interest in dialectic still has an influence, perhaps subliminally, on your current research, or is it a closed chapter? “Dialectic” means lots of different things. If what you have in mind is Hegel’s dialectic (or Hegel’s dialectical method, or whatnot) – the relation between that stuff and formal logic is extremely complicated.

In the Sixties and Seventies, when the interest in Marx’s and Hegel’s thought was very lively, various people tried to “formalize” Hegel’s dialectic (there’s a great anthology on this, *La formalizzazione della dialettica*, edited by one of my philosophical heroes: Diego Marconi). Some of these formalizations used paraconsistent logic. The idea was that, since Hegel believed there to be true contradictions and took them to be essential to his “dialectical method”, we had better adopt some paraconsistent logic to make sense of his views. For any non-paraconsistent logic, in the face of true contradictions, will allow you to infer that everything is true – and Hegel cannot have been *that* foolish.

However, that Hegel’s dialectic requires there to be true contradictions is controversial: Bob Brandom, Diego Marconi, Emanuele Severino, Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer, and others, deny this. If they are right, there’s little need for paraconsistency to make sense of Hegel’s dialectic.

As for my research on Hegel, I sometimes wish to go back to that. But I have so little time. Well, time will tell.

Introducing *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* by Sellars, Richard Rorty argues that along with Quine, the later Wittgenstein, and then Brandom and McDowell there has been a transition of analytic philosophy from an initial empiricist phase to a Kantian phase, to finally land to Hegel. In this turn, you went in the opposite direction, departing from Hegel and arriving to analytic metaphysics. Given the historical perspective proposed by Rorty, in what would be the originality of analytic philosophy in repeating the same steps? Ah, the sociology of philosophy is a difficult subject! Well here are my impressionistic impressions, shaped by my personal experience and unsupported by statistical data.

After having been dipped for some years in the analytic philosophy of the Anglo-Saxon countries, I’d say that the transition Rorty envisaged hasn’t happened. The later Wittgenstein is less and less popular in the analytic camp, his main supporters being nowadays

mostly interpreters of Wittgenstein who talk to each other, rather than people who engage in systematic philosophy.

As for Brandom and McDowell, while their work has had some impact on so-called continental philosophers and on some analytic folks, their positive influence on the analytic camp at large has been controversial. Some of the best analytic philosophers – people like Tim Williamson or my former boss in Scotland, Crispin Wright – have engaged with their work, but in a sharply critical way and in order to essentially dismiss it.

I understand why Rorty would have *wished* analytic philosophy to follow a path from Kant, through Hegel, and, possibly, into post-Hegelian and possibly relativistic thought. But nothing of the sort seems to me to be happening. This is what is actually happening, according to Tim Williamson's 2007 *The Philosophy of Philosophy* – he speaks of:

[...] the liveliest, exactest, and most creative achievements of the final third of the [20th] Century: the revival of metaphysical theorizing, realist in spirit, often speculative, sometimes commonsensical, associated with Saul Kripke, David Lewis, Kit Fine, Peter van Inwagen, David Armstrong, and many others [...].

On the traditional grand narrative schemes in the history of philosophy, this activity must be a throwback to pre-Kantian metaphysics: it ought not to be happening – but it is. (p. 19)

As for *my* going in the non-Rortian direction, that's purely accidental: I was initially raised a continental, and heavily trained in the history of philosophy. I discovered analytic philosophy later. And I have had a lot of fun doing analytic philosophy, continental philosophy, anything in the middle, and also any philosophy I've done that I wouldn't know how to label.

While the English-speaking world was once again interested in the Hegelian thought, in your *Che cos'è la dialettica hegeliana?* [*What is Hegelian Dialectic?*] you point out that the Italian community continues to believe it best to avoid even reading it. How do you explain this lack of interest? I guess you mean the community of Italian philosophers who consider themselves to be *analytic* philosophers. I think it's because the infamous analytic/continental divide is felt more strongly in the countries with a robust continental tradition, and Italy is one such country. I have experienced a somewhat similar situation when I was working at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. You may imagine the early analytic Italian folks from the Seventies and Eighties, trying to establish themselves as a research community, and the people surrounding them: neo-idealists, Hegelians, wannabe-Heideggerians, postmodernists, and so on. Not that analytic philosophers in the US or UK spend their whole day reading Hegel. But they never had a strong continental counterpart, in their own philosophy departments or in their national cultural milieu at large, against which a cultural reaction was called for.

When you were a student you have explored the work of Emanuele Severino, to whom you often recognize your intellectual debt. Do you consider his dialectic as an evolution of the Hegelian dialectic? And would you wish for a reception of his thought on the part of the analytic tradition similar to that of Hegel? I'd say that are various common points between the way I can make sense of Hegel's dialectic, and a view Severino labels as "dialectic" in some core chapters of (what I take to be) his most beautiful book, *La struttura originaria*. Not sure if it's an "evolution", for this may mean too many things. Certainly, Severino's dialectic helped me to understand Hegel's.

I don't think there will be any "analytic reception" of Severino's thought. This is due to various issues, one being that Severino's works are accessible almost only to an Italian readership and Italian is, regrettably, not a very important language from the viewpoint of top-level international research. Another issue is that Severino himself is usually recalcitrant when one tries to propose similarities and affinities between his thought and someone else's; this has to do partly with his own philosophy, partly with the man. It's a pity, but I don't think I can do a lot about this.

By way of consolation, consider that many young analytic philosophers were raised in Venice, firstly exposed to Severino, still admirers of his work, now pursuing brilliant careers of international profile: people like Elia Zardini, Roberto Loss, Matteo Plebani, and others.

Last question: can we learn something in advance on *Existence as a Real Property II* and the book you would like to write on Wittgenstein, if it does/will exist in the actual world? Ha! Whether ERP II is to remain an unactualized *possibile* or not depends on my finding the time to work on that stuff again, and this is something I cannot predict at the moment. You know what Iris Murdoch once said? No philosophy book is ever finished: it is only abandoned.

I'm not sure I ever expressed the wish to write a whole book on Wittgenstein (maybe I once did, but I forgot). If I do, I hope I will manage to follow Wittgenstein's own recommendation, according to Malcom's memoirs: I hope it will be a philosophical book entirely composed of jokes.

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