

POSSIBILITY

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Hylas. Dear Philonous, it’s been ten years since our last encounter.¹ Do you remember? The ontological issue, Manzoni’s ‘metaphysical subtleties’, particles making up tables and jam... Much water has flowed under the bridge!

Philonous. Water flows continuously, dear Hylas, but the river under the bridge remains the same.

Hylas. Back then we spoke about what there is and what there is not, ontology and metaphysics. Today I would like to move our focus, just a little bit, to something else: what *there is* and what *there could be*. What do you say? I will be the realist and you will be the supporter of possible worlds. Which is a contraposition, surely, but not as strong as many believe it to be.

Philonous. We most certainly agree on this. You know my motto: we are not what we could be, but we could be what we are not!

Hylas. And yet reality is often set against possibility and regarded as inherently negative, only able to resist. Now, undoubtedly the real shows itself like that. But this resistance is also a possibility. Think of this table: its resistance pro-

¹ Maurizio Ferraris and Achille Varzi ‘Che cosa c’è e che cos’è’, in VV.AA, *Nous* (Lecce: Milella, 2003), pp. 81–101. See also Achille Varzi, *Il mondo messo a fuoco*. (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2010), pp. 5–27.

vides a positive possibility: that of using it as a support for cutlery or as a shelter from rain (and maybe even from rubble during an earthquake). In survival manuals they always mention this possibility or positivity of the table, which follows directly from its *unamendability*. Nobody would advise you to take shelter under a ‘theoretical umbrella’, to use an old-fashioned expression. And a non-theoretical umbrella offers good shelter from rain, but not from rubble.

Philonous. Wait, one step at a time. I certainly agree when you say that it is wrong to oppose reality to possibility. Not only because the first has a resistance that determines the second; there is also the fact that the real is already *soaked* with possibility. Possibility – and, if you like, impossibility – is already part of what is present, real. If we are here today it means, among other things, that we can participate in certain events but not others; if our salary is what it is, it means that we can afford certain expenses and not others; if we have an appointment, it is important because from that appointment could arise certain developments. Every possibility is an opportunity. In all that exists, in everything that happens, lurk the germs of what could be and what will be, what can happen and what will happen.

Hylas. This is not very different from what I meant when talking about positive resistance. In any unamendability lie opportunities – what Gibson called ‘affordances’ – and even narrative plots: since we mentioned umbrellas, consider how many stories revolve around lost or found umbrellas. Derrida managed to write an entire lecture on the fragment by Nietzsche “I forgot my umbrella”...

Philonous. In fact, what you say of the table is absolutely right: we can use it in different ways, within certain limits (we cannot use it as an umbrella to shelter from a meteorite, or from a storm of criticism). But there are also resistances imposed directly by the possibilities, and not only in the sense that if something is not possible it will never be actualized. You’ll probably agree that there is no need to witness an earthquake to be afraid of it, just as there is no need to experience happiness to wish for it. Although they are not actualized, possibilities play an active role in our lives, in our moods, in our judgments (and prejudices).

Hylas. However, giving too much importance to these things one may risk being unable to live, like Musil’s man without qualities. He never said ‘No’, but he always said ‘Not yet’, and so he never moved a finger while the world around him was falling apart.

Philonous. Ulrich represents pathology. One can exceed in possibilism just as one can exceed in realism. Even Peer Gynt got lost in daydreaming, wandering for most of the time without doing any good. The fact remains that the ‘sense of possibility’ is the lifeblood of philosophy, and I’m not ashamed to confess that in my case it was the reading of Musil that directed me towards this profession. Philosophers are not only concerned with how things are (they are as much as everyone else, from physicists to sociologists); they also deal with how they *could* be. They do not only look at the real world; philosophers look at all possible worlds, wondering about what they are. It is precisely for this reason that philosophy can be a powerful tool of empowerment, both individual and social: because our ability to work for a better world is a function of our ability to conceive of a different world – another way in which our world could be. If we just worship reality – and here I move to theoretical umbrellas – nothing new would ever happen.

Hylas. This is a delicate point. For me too, philosophy is the art of the possible; I do not set my realist stance against those who are capable of inventing possible worlds, but rather against those who merely say that the real does not exist. Or that it is an invention. In short, what Kant called ‘*ignava ratio*’, and I guarantee that there’s a lot of it. For too long have philosophers been professionals of antirealism, convinced as they were that science had taken possession of all reality, and that the only way to be philosophers consisted in declaring that reality does not exist. That said, for me it is not about worshipping reality, but about not denying it.

Philonous. In fact I’m not saying that one should deny it. God forbid. Reality is everything, literally. The anti-realism you’re talking about does not convince me either, and those philosophers are much worse than the man without qualities: they do not merely say ‘Not yet’, they say outright ‘No’. I am only saying that we cannot rely on reality as if it were a book already written. But maybe we’ll come back to this later. I think that at this point we must first clarify our ideas on the underlying issue. Tell me, Hylas: What is reality for you?

Hylas. A million dollar question, or at least a hundred taller one. For me, reality is made essentially of two things that are separate, but related. The first is what I would call ‘ ϵ -reality’, meaning ‘epistemological reality’, what the Germans call ‘*Realität*’. It is the reality to which Meinong refers when he says that there is a sense in which even square circles are real, or Quine when he says that “to be is to be the value of a bound variable”. The same holds for a young German

philosopher, my friend Markus Gabriel, when he says that everything exists in its specific field of sense – Peer Gynt in the field of sense of dramatic fiction, atoms in the field of sense of physics – and that the only thing that doesn't exist is *the everything*, since there is no field of sense capable of hosting the totality of all things.

Philonous. In this case the singular would be out of place: it seems to me that there are *many* ϵ -realities, one for each field of sense. Which is to say that those are possible realities, let's say epistemically possible, unless you embrace relativism in all areas. I do not think these ϵ -realities are so 'hyletic' after all.

Hylas. Sure, but as we have already seen, the fact that my name is Hylas does not mean that I am unable to see how real possibilities are in our lives, how they matter, how they act, how they determine our world. In this sense, I feel very pragmatic in the sense of William James and his 'will to believe'. Despair is a very real thing, which depends on the fact that the openings of passivity are closing in front of us.

Philonous. And it is not always our fault ...

Hylas. Exactly. This is something that existentialists did not consider, thinking that possibility, as such, depends essentially on us and not on the world. There is something ironic in Sartre's saying that "we are condemned to be free": I do not see all this freedom, neither in me nor outside of me. However, the problem with ϵ -reality (I continue to use the singular for sake of simplicity) is that it is not enough. According to ϵ -reality it is not strictly possible to distinguish physical causality (A produces B) from consequential logic (from A follows B) – and this is but one example among many.

Philonous. Not sure I understand. Causality is a relation between events, things that happen; the consequentiality of facts, or if you prefer of propositions. It would be enough to be clear about this distinction.

Hylas. Yes, but to be clear about this distinction we must be able to draw a distinction between external and internal world – a distinction given by perception, unamendability, the world that exists primarily because it resists. Otherwise there would be no way to distinguish between the fictional world of Ibsen and the world of physics. It is true that in *Peer Gynt* the faithful Solveig vows to wait for our wanderer until he comes back to her in the hut, and it is true in the world of physics that material bodies attract one another with a force directly

proportional to the product of their masses. But there is a difference between these two kinds of truth.

Philonous. In the sense that there is a difference between the two ‘fields of sense’ that determine them?

Hylas. Precisely. Fictions are one thing, facts are another. For this reason, next to ϵ -reality I also place ω -reality (meaning $\acute{\omicron}\nu\tau\omicron\varsigma$, I use the omega just to make a distinction): namely, ontological reality, what the Germans call ‘*Wirklichkeit*’. It manifests itself precisely as resistance, unamendability, and even, as we said a moment ago, as possibility. In short, ‘Real’ for me is the combination of ϵ -reality and ω -reality, working together. The trick of the sceptics is to use the first (not even too imaginatively) to deny the second, but it is a futile activity, because ω -reality has no intention to be set aside.

Philonous. I have no difficulty in recognizing that what you call ω -reality can limit and restrict ϵ -reality. I can think of using a screwdriver as a bottle opener, but not as a glass. In a sense, your insistence on *Wirklichkeit* recalls Quine’s criticism to his colleague Nelson Goodman, who insisted in giving the same dignity to literary worlds and the world of physics, and so ended up putting fiction on the same level as facts. In principle I agree with you as I agree with Quine. But we cannot ignore the challenge of Goodman: where do we draw the line? For me this is not the usual challenge of the sceptical philosopher, as easy to formulate as it is generic. I believe it is a matter of understanding, case by case, if and when we are faced with a resistance – an ‘unamendability’ – that really lies in the facts rather than in fiction, i.e. in our *version* of the facts, in our ways of describing and presenting things. Provided that these are distinct spheres, even if connected, you will agree with me that there is nothing worse than passing off as ω -real what in hindsight is only ϵ -real.

Hylas. And vice versa. Look, the world is full of surprises, that’s the point. Wittgenstein said that the world is everything that is the case, and I would add that everything that is the case is all the more the world as it happens by surprise, in derogation of our expectations and our conceptual schemes. I already said this ten years ago quoting Hamlet: there are more things between heaven and earth than we dream of in our philosophies. Today I could repeat it with perhaps an even better quote taken, this time, from a beautiful text by Walter Siti, *Il realismo è l'impossibile* [Realism is the impossible]: “Realism, as I see it, is the anti-habit: it is the slight tear, the unexpected detail, opening a gash in

our mental stereotype – it questions for a moment what Nabokov (...) calls the ‘rough compromise of the senses’ and it seems to let us glimpse the thing itself, the infinite reality, formless and unpredictable”. Fiction is a leisurely activity; possible worlds can just be lazy variants of the real world. Reality, ω -reality, in this case, often surprises us for its improbability or cruelty. To make an example linked to these days, who would have been able to imagine even remotely the literary farce of Berlusconi?

Philonous. Few. But this is precisely the problem: if our capacity for imagination is so poor, it means that our sense of possibility is severely limited. And when you find yourself with a reality that you had not even contemplated – when ω -reality does not match any ε -reality – it’s hard to come to terms with it, because you are unprepared. In my opinion this is the deep meaning of Hamlet’s admonition: between heaven and earth there are a lot of possibilities that our philosophies (and our politics) cannot even imagine. Emphasizing the importance of our conceptual schemes does not mean treating them – provincial as they are – as unamendable, otherwise we would bid opportunities farewell. Of course, the opposite is also true, and here I quote Lichtenberg: there are philosophies (and politics) that have imagined things that are neither in heaven nor on earth.

Hylas. Indeed.

Philonous. So the key question concerns the interaction between ω -reality and ε -reality. As I said, for me one should be very careful not to mistake the second for the first, and I fear that in many cases we tend to do just that. In many cases we want to take for objective or natural some ‘resistances’, as you call them, that actually reside primarily in our heads and in our practices, let’s say in our conceptual schemes, and therefore ultimately in our judgments and prejudices. Think about the rhetoric used by those opposed to relationships between people of different colour, or between persons of the same sex, stating that they are not ‘natural’.

Hylas. I totally agree: honour to Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze, heroes of my twenties, as Carducci said of Carlo Alberto. I grew up in the belief that the so-called natural is often cultural in disguise. All that, with time, I added to this belief, is the awareness that this statement cannot be absolutised by arguing that the natural is *always* cultural in disguise.

Philonous. I see your point, even though the heroes of my twenties were differ-

ent. Even my heroes today are different, to be honest.

Hylas. I suspect that today we have more heroes in common, and that many of them have been dead for centuries. Anyway, I agree that this is the crux of the matter. But I'm afraid I disagree on your inclination to treat *all* resistance as if it could be our invention, a fiction. Traffic lights and customs are introduced by us, but the people who introduce the lights and customs are rarely the same ones that then have to observe them. The world, as well as logic, sets certain limits and we cannot pretend that we have set them instead. Here I quote our friend Paolo Bozzi, the great realist psychologist and philosopher, who left us a decade ago, just when we began to discuss these things: "If there is a black rock on an island, and if all people on the island have come to believe—through elaborate experiences and intensive use of persuasion— that the rock is white, the rock is still black and those people are idiots."

Philonous. Touché. Paolo knew how to say things! Note, however, that my scepticism about the objectivity of your 'resistance' does not imply a waiver of a solid and sturdy notion of truth, as it were enough to agree on what is true and what is false. This would actually be an idiotic thing to posit. For me it is just a matter of recognizing that the truth largely reflects the categories we rely on and the conventions we decided to adopt, and these things belong to what you call ϵ -reality. After all, I hope you admit that the colour of a rock is not the best example of objective property.

Hylas. So you're asking me to tell you what truths (and falsehoods) do not depend on us in any way. Well, I would distinguish three types of objects. For a start, *ideal objects* are completely independent of us, at least if we adopt the Platonist perspective that I'm personally fond of.

Philonous. Bad start. I hope you don't think I'm a Platonist...

Hylas. No, but I am. However, let me tell the whole story. For me ideal objects, for example mathematical entities, exist and have properties independently of our practices: $2 + 2 = 4$ is an autonomous truth, even if, for example, the signs by which it is expressed were invented by us. Secondly, *natural objects* are also independent of us. Neither humans nor dinosaurs depend on us. Sure, a sentence like 'Dinosaurs lived between the Triassic and the end of the Cretaceous' depends on the language we use in the periodizations 'Triassic' and 'Cretaceous'; but what makes it true (that is, the *fact* that dinosaurs lived in that particular period, when human beings did not exist yet) is what it is regardless of

our language. Finally, there are obviously some truths that depend very heavily on us: those related to *social objects*. For example, that one euro equals (if I remember correctly) 1936 liras is undoubtedly a truth that we have established ourselves, but this does not make it more negotiable than others. This is both because the ‘we’ who established that equivalence does not correspond to neither you nor me nor anyone we know, and because the ungovernability and opacity we see in the economic world – a world in principle completely dependent on humans – are not different from what we see in the natural world.

Philonous. I want to clarify what I said: I think we do not establish any truth. We set the facts that determine certain truths rather than others. However, in principle, your tripartite division is fine by me, as I’m fine to say that natural objects are not dependent on us.

Hylas. So?

Philonous. So our disagreement concerns, if anything, the amplitude of the three categories. In particular, I believe that, if we start to get into the details, I would rank among social objects many things that you consider natural (including humans). This is where you play the game. We have learned to say that the ontological question ‘What exists?’ only admits one answer, that is, ‘There is everything’ (since it would be contradictory to suggest the existence of something that does not exist). In the same way the question ‘What objects are unamendable?’ can be answered at first with ‘natural objects’. But just as Quine’s answer to the ontological question does not solve the problem, since we may not agree on the extent of that ‘everything’, so the answer to our question does not solve the problem, since we may not agree on the extension of ‘natural’.

Hylas. But in this way you’re unfair to the very concept of ‘natural’. It is not something we can agree on – this contradicts the idea of naturalness itself.

Philonous. Do you know another way to establish the extension of this term?

Hylas. The attention to objects corresponds to the primordial need to recognize obstacles and locate prey. To talk about natural objects – including humans – is not a way to pass off fictitious conventions as objective facts; is a good approximation for an effective, economical, robust solution to the problems of survival that I mentioned at the beginning. I would say that is the only reasonable approximation. It is ω -reality: that world full of things of medium size that do not change and cannot be amended, hitting and binding us, placing constraints and

offering possibilities.

Philonous. I see the point. But what you've just offered is an *argument* in favour of a certain way of drawing the line of demarcation, a certain way of determining what falls under the category of natural. And as you know I have serious doubts about it. For me our primordial need for survival says a lot about how we are made, not on how the world is made. Again, that's fine to say that natural objects do not depend on us, but the game is played right here, in determining what objects fully fall under the category of 'natural'.

Hylas. If you want to say that the category of 'natural' is itself cultural, I agree. But I won't insist. It is still a good step forward, isn't it? At least we know what we should focus on in our debate.

Philonous. Indeed. After all, that's how we concluded our discussion on the ontological question as well.

Hylas. But at least let me add this. There is no doubt that certain resistances that we believed were in the world are actually in our heads. Becoming aware of this and being able to prove it is really a great achievement, and coincides, literally, with a process of emancipation. Enlightenment, in a word, is this. However, it is not just a matter of philosophical arguments, and it is not just logic and cognitive sciences that keep me from placing everything in our head. I speak not only of dinosaurs or humans. Honestly, there are times when I wish that the moral law were only in me, and instead I have the impression that it is also outside of me, in the judgments of people, in the laws of the state, in the length of my life and that of others. And even if I were given the opportunity to commit an immoral act with the assurance that no one would ever know it, I'm not so sure that it would commit it (obviously, I'm not sure of the contrary either). Why? Because I would think it would be unfair, I would have remorse, etc. These things are undoubtedly located in the head and not in the foot, but they do not depend entirely on me, but rather on a great and powerful 'we' that is in me, of which for the most part I am not conscious. So, long story short: even when it comes to what apparently is only in my head, liberation is not so easy. The clients of psychoanalysts know something about this.

Philonous. Who would have thought you were so passionate about this topic! And I really appreciate the spirit of these considerations of yours, *Hylas*. Moral weakness is an evil beast. Probably when it comes to interacting with the world around us and to deal with our conscience you and I are driven by the same

scruples and by the same values. The differences relate to the underlying metaphysics. For you there are a few things that only reside in our heads; for me they are the vast majority (provided that we mean those things whose identity conditions depend on our categories and our practices; we are certainly not talking about imaginary objects, as in the case of literary fiction). When I say that humans are among the latter, I have in mind for example the debates on abortion and euthanasia, which I think demonstrate how the world itself decides neither the beginning nor the end of our lives: *we* decide, and as much as we can rely on biological science, the criteria by which to make this decision are an expression of our beliefs, our convictions, our theories. Moreover, it is said that it is difficult to define what 'life' is. And as you know, I would make a similar argument also with respect to the *identity* of human beings, meaning our terms of persistence over time and through change. In this regard Hume spoke literally of 'fiction', denying the existence of an objective link between our temporal phases, and I think he had a point. And then for you it is important that the moral law be an external foundation, in the reality of things, while for me it is important to recognize that its basis lays first and foremost in our agreements and collective choices. It seems more than enough to protect it from the 'anything goes' ideology of those who do what they want, when they want. This is because the constraints imposed by membership in a community are no less important than those imposed by membership in the natural world, provided that one recognizes its importance. As you suggested about the economy. The difference is that if we find out that those constraints are wrong, if the community evolves and we realize that we have drawn the lines in the wrong places, then we can change them assuming all responsibility for it (rather than blaming the world). We can do this because it is we that put the constraints, the lines, ourselves.

Hylas. But the world will not let you draw the lines where you want. We said it before: reality circumscribes the possibilities.

Philonous. And on this I still agree. It is only a matter of understanding where and how. And I also agree on what you said earlier: breaking free from the things that are in our heads and in our practices is not easy. Psychoanalysis shows this, and even politics!

Hylas. I still do not understand how you can move so easily from one domain to another. I've already said it many times: your conventionalism is like pre-Kantian empiricism. At this rate you'll end up denying the existence of substan-

tial differences between the laws of nature and the economy. More: between the laws of nature and timetables!

Philonous. But timetables are not drawn at random, or so we hope. They are born out of the need to *solve*, in a conventional but effective manner, coordination problems that are far from trivial, and which may seriously interfere with our activities. From my conventionalism it does not follow that all biological taxonomies (for example) are on the same level: it is obvious that some are better than others, and are better just because they better support the ‘laws’ that govern the coordination game of biology (variation, selection, organic evolution, population growth, and so on).

Hylas. Very well. However, it is this diversity in terms of efficiency that I think you cannot explain in purely pragmatic or conventional terms, without appealing directly to the structure of reality (and I obviously mean ω -reality). This is what makes the difference.

Philonous. I know. But of course I say that the burden of proof is on you, not me. Linnaeus’ *Systema Naturae* – the bible of all classic taxonomies – was steeped in realist essentialism, and the result is that there was no place for the platypus. Darwin, by contrast, did not hesitate to say that ‘species’ is a term “arbitrarily given for the sake of convenience to a set of individuals closely resembling each other” (his words). You will agree with me that his theory works a bit better.

Hylas. I think that there is still much to discuss... But I would say that we have taken another big step forward. Now we know that it a matter of reasoning case by case. Am I wrong?

Philonous. You’re not wrong. It certainly is not a trivial matter. Where do you want to start? I propose to set aside screwdrivers and dinosaurs and start from something less important. Do you want to talk about my colour blindness?

Hylas. No, because I know that you will try to convince me that I am the colour-blind one... Let’s talk about *Peer Gynt*. Tell me, Philonous: do you think it is true that Solveig is the symbol of redeeming love?

Philonous. A million dollar question, or even a million euro one...