

INTRODUCTION

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Italian Philosophy Through The War Years

...ché di ciascuna posizione obiettiva, come di ciascun limite ideale, noi avvertiamo la relatività, la complessa connessione di interdipendenza in un sistema in continua evoluzione

Antonio Banfi, *Vita dell'Arte* 29

1. Introduction

A world-shaping event such as World War Two constitutes a locus crucial to sociohistorical periodization, marking a watershed in the collective lives of peoples that can then inform critical comparisons and perhaps historical rethinking. Many things must be borne in mind when considering the impact the war had on Italian society, including foremost the fall of Fascism and the monarchy, emergence of several political parties that shaped public discourse for the rest of the twentieth century, a constitution, and representative democracy. We must of course not forget the cost in lives lost, maimed, destroyed, disrupted, with consequences for decades to come. Although there is no dearth of official documents (government, bureaucratic, military, etc.) to reconstruct what took place and what were the contrasting positions in the field, not to speak of the critical and creative production of hundreds and thousands of people who, in their different ways, have intervened in their historical present to rebuke or valorize, critique or justify, a truly chaotic reality—especially after September 8, 1943—very little in recent cultural studies has been dedicated to what one particular class of citizens was doing during those years, namely the philosophers.

In this brief sketch I would like to reflect on what I feel were some truly remarkable critical thoughts on the question of the role and task of the philosopher, how to reframe the relationship between metaphysics and knowledge, which new concepts were deemed to be in need of further exploration as fundamental beliefs and habits of

mind, and which were being challenged or actually crumbling down. Though some did throw themselves in the struggle for liberation, and after the war participated actively in shaping the new social and political configuration of the country, in general philosophers tend to look at the big picture, or interpret their immediate reality in terms of the medium and long range period. In my recent work, I have focused on the relationship between theorizing, methods of acquiring knowledge, and their translation into an effective discursive practice that bears directly on how individuals perceive and interpret themselves and their world.¹ In this article, I will focus on the years leading up to the liberation, when present and future were so uncertain, and the only materials to work with were essentially from the past, a past that was unraveling. I will use one privileged source, one beacon among many other possible ones represented by one journal, to scan the panorama.²

2. *Philosophy at the Center of Human Experience*

In April of 1940 Antonio Banfi launched *Studi filosofici* in Milan.³ The opening words signal, much more than a program, an intention:

Philosophy cannot be indifferent to the grave moment that Europe is going through: if philosophy is a human activity, and in fact tends to be the center of human experience, it cannot remain indifferent to human culture, understood as any historical happening of spiritual import: it must assume a responsibility and take a stand. (SF 1.1: 1)⁴

The main concern throughout the life of the quarterly is the status of philosophical thinking at a juncture where in the culture at large, and within academic and intellectual circles in particular, there was at first a feeling of stasis, coupled to a sense that the “bufera” was not long in coming, then the chaos and sense of disorientation when there were two invaders physically in the territory and three governments vying for authority and control, and finally the complex post-war debates that led to the toppling of the monarchy and the birth of the republic. Actions and events of such enormity cannot but force a thinker to question everything and, where there is enough courage and trust in

the human condition even against all odds, attempt to come up with some different perspective, the classic search for a “new beginning” even as the “end” was knocking on the door. In this context, the questions are of growing and profound urgency: What is the status, the role, and social function of philosophy in this atmosphere? What is its relation to knowledge, to understanding social facts, and to history? Have the existing dominant theories prevented us from seeing certain phenomena, from reading certain artifacts, and from exploring given domains? Are new methods and new notions of praxis needed?

It is well known that the dominant currents of philosophical thought at the time—with ramifications in other areas of intellectual research, and signally in education and politics—were Croce’s idealism and Gentile’s actualism. Often, however, not enough importance is accorded to the contemporaneous presence of large though often less vocal currents of spiritualism, mysticism, neoscholasticism, personalism as well as minor currents of neokantians and neohegelians.⁵ It is not that philosophers and critics were forbidden access to what was going on beyond the Alps or the Atlantic, as traditional scholarly books in the humanities were reviewed regularly, especially if written in German. But to dare to propose a new or alternative philosophy or way of doing critique meant risking being shot down from the pages of Croce’s *La Critica* or Gentile’s *Giornale Critico della Filosofia Italiana*. There was, of course, also the *Rivista di Filosofia*,⁶ which featured many anti-idealist interventions; nevertheless it is not a gross generalization to claim that *La Critica* and the *Giornale* served as intellectual filters for many years, unofficial censors (the former more than the latter) to the introduction of some of the challenging ideas that were circulating already in large parts of Europe and the Americas. To gauge the relevance in Italian intellectual history of Banfi’s undertaking one must briefly recall some of the premises of the two dominant philosophical schools on the eve of the greatest human conflict ever recorded.⁷ In brief, we recall the conception of immanent Spirit, eternist in Croce, rooted in the all-encompassing Act for Gentile. Categories of the spirit could not be affected by everyday events or by social upheavals, unless they spoke to or embodied the unchanging character of Spirit. Both had clipped the wings of Hegel’s dialectics, as consciousness did not “develop” through time but maintained its

status of closure. There was no idea of “progress” possible in the acceptance of this concept common since the Enlightenment,⁸ and the empirical dimension was conceived as merely mechanistic adaptation to survive, as serving technique, not thought. Both systems aimed at confirming a higher order, agnostic in one, religious-mystical in the other. A close reading of the foundations of idealism and actualism reveals the theoretical impossibility for these two modes of thought to give ontological valence to, and therefore properly to understand, science, art, or the social struggle.⁹ Above all, the inability to see the connection between method—understood as praxis first, in Marxist terms, *applicatio* later, in hermeneutic parlance, but strong of the use of inference and process—and the status of the object being investigated, and to valorize the process of how knowledge is constructed and obtained, made them strongly dogmatic, rigid, Olympic.¹⁰ However, rather than analyzing the basic tenets of these two schools, which would require a separate study in view of their specific differences and different ways in which they effectively influenced society and legitimated the fascist state—one indirectly, the other by identifying with it—we will follow Banfi and the authors he published to see how they perceive and critique idealism and actualism, and more importantly what they propose as either correctives or alternatives, and what “new” theories and methods are introduced during the war years and prepare the scenario for what was to follow after 1945.

3. Studi Filosofici’s *Philosophical Position*

In the opening article of the first issue, titled “Situazione della filosofia contemporanea” (*SF* 1.1: 5-25), Banfi takes stock of the contemporary philosophical panorama and isolates a few traits that need rethinking. First was the immanence of history. Though acknowledging that philosophical historiography had made substantial gains in the previous half century, he also points out that it had wiped out traditional distinctions between currents, minimized the import of certain schools or thinkers, and ignored or legislated out of discussion the material dimension of the historical process. As emerges forcefully only a few issues down the line, this is due to the different ways in which both Croce and Gentile—hardly ever mentioned by name, incidentally—

banned science, politics, economics, and technology from this branch of research insofar as they did not participate in, save as mere accidents, or were not constitutive of the life of the Spirit. History was conceived of as a verbal art focused on the personality of the historian who sought to explain the struggle to grasp spirit, of which freedom was an essential component. But, as we will see, this notion of freedom was very vague. The second issue was the consciousness of actuality. This may appear a positive point, as Banfi himself in some later articles speaks of the necessity to be constantly focused on the present and real moment. But the prevailing outlook was that philosophy was concerned with generalities, and with practical and pedagogical concerns whose ultimate end is to confirm the truth of the immanent spirit. The third point is a revaluation of the critical consciousness itself, which Banfi believed ought to go beyond the useless old debates between realism and idealism, and focus on the analysis of the dogmatism that pervaded the field. An inquiry into how knowledge is formed reveals how each dogmatic position still bears in its bosom a “*problematicità*”—a word-concept that recurs in Banfi’s thought—and a dialectic that are the principles of its theoretical development (*SF* 1.1: 8). The task of Reason is therefore to resolve these dynamics at some level of transcendental coherence without freezing them once and for all. By the same token, the iron-clad notion of “concept” as theorized by idealism¹¹ ought to be analyzed both as being a rational point of view, a symbol that expresses the whole of the relations embedded in a datum, a concrete universal that unfolds in the system of judgments as knowledge is being shaped; and as being determined in the comprehension and expression of a set of experiences that mark its existence, as an intuitive synthesis “whose structure and inner balance changes on the basis of the perspective of experience, the cultural context in which it first appears, the very tonality of the individual spirit” (*SF* 1.1: 9). Against any static understanding of the role of reason, and its conflation in the act of thinking or feeling, Banfi proposes to see knowledge as a constant dialectic between theory and reality, and holds that all the traditional categories—substance, cause, value, duty, freedom—should be understood as revealing complex dynamics, contradictions, a wealth of possibilities that unfold at different levels and in different directions. Philosophy, he argues, must

take stock of this unsettling state of affairs. He goes on to reflect on the intrinsic need of the interpretive process itself to reconfigure some new way of doing philosophy from among competing, and not all “Italian,” currents, such as relativist empiricism, critical transcendentalism, conventionalism, irrationalism, conceptual realism, psychology and psychoanalysis, and even pragmatism and phenomenology, this last being a school in which he was deeply rooted. All of them point to the exigency of a “rinnovamento del razionale” (*SF* 1.1: 11), the need to dissolve all the “isms” in the face of experience and to reposition their principles as no more than workable hypotheses and speculative directives (12).

And here surface two important considerations for our reading. First, there is a rehabilitation of the role of judgment, of *libero arbitrio*, which signals a subverting of the dominant metaphysic, from where it had been expunged:

[b]ecause psychology is born and has remained in its empirical aspect under the influence of a spiritualist metaphysics, those categories—knowledge [la conoscenza], will, sentiment in its various expressions—appear as pathways toward the spiritual attainment of the person. It was therefore easy for a spiritualist idealism to resolve in principle the person in the spiritual activity, since from the start it was defined only in those terms; it was in other words easy to resolve the problem of freedom in the concept of this transfiguration, leaving by the wayside the profound problematic of free will [*libero arbitrio*] that even theology had recognized, that Schelling foremost among modern philosophers had profoundly felt, and French philosophy thematized, though without sufficient speculative rigor. (*SF* 1.1: 15)¹²

This concern for a different notion of *actualitas*, that is, one rooted in the immediate givenness of the person *in carne ed ossa*, leads the philosopher to make the case for a return to the existent as a necessary premise for a rethinking of the entire task of philosophy:

But now the person is not to be taken as a negative to be resolved into a spiritual positivity, but as a positive that resolves and seeks

order in spirituality as a function of itself. Before the principle of the autonomy of the spirit there is raised the principle of the autonomy of the person. (*SF* 1.1: 15)¹³

The implications here are profound: philosophy must stop looking at the human condition from the top down, sitting on the grandstand of pure *Theoria*, and deduce everything from there, skipping or ignoring what does not prove its own validity, or Truth as the case may be. Rather, philosophy must start from the endless situations, planes of signification, unpredictability of lived experience and then seek the rules and principles that give it a coherence within an ever open system of signification. The task for Reason is therefore recalibrated, and new challenges to the established ideologies must be looked at, critiqued, verified, developed, integrated, without any preconceived ideals other than those that demand the constant presence of a dialectic of the real. The key point for our inquiry is that Theory is called upon to review its pretenses, and Method becomes an issue of considerable relevance in the exploration and construction of knowledge, a knowledge which is not to be understood in purely ideal or transcendental terms, but as emanating from the course of everyday life.

4. Antonio Banfi's *Phenomenology of Experience*

To understand Banfi's evolving position through the forties and the choice of authors he published, and with that the topics they brought to bear on the Italian philosophical scene, it is necessary to take a quick detour and recount by broad strokes the origins and evolution of the Milanese philosopher.¹⁴ Banfi's first major publication was a long introduction to his own translation of Georg Simmel's *I problemi fondamentali della filosofia*, in 1922 (Banfi, “Introduction”).¹⁵ Here we find the first seeds of his later philosophy. Against all dualisms—“finiteness and infinity, mechanicism and teleology, freedom and determinism, truth and error” and so on—he proposes “not annulling them in the absolute unity of opposites, or the thought of opposites,” a not so veiled attack on Croce's philosophy, “but attributing them a new value through a transposition to a third category or sphere, where their presumptive rigidity can be addressed in terms of their relation”

(“Introduction” 6). The key word here is *relation*. Life itself is replete with these determinations and the task of the thinker is to see how at any given moment they represent a specific position, or even a way of positing something, which can only be analyzed by elevating it to a realm of forms, critically determined. Though using the Kantian notion of criticism,¹⁶ Banfi relativizes it in terms of the constant need, for thought, to keep the infinite manifestations of experience ever in view. In other words, we must pay attention to a phenomenology of experience, “an ideal objectivity” (9) whose specific forms the critical consciousness sets in a never-ending process of evaluation and systematization but without ever coming to a closed system. “Our entire lives are dominated not by one, but by several *aprioris*: they represent the systematization of the real for the person, while their relations are not accidental but intrinsic to reality itself” (10). It is crucial to understand that, in the wake of Simmel, whose book dealt with the issue of relativism in the being-becoming dynamic, Banfi is open to suggestions coming from pragmatism and psychology, where the individual is *ab initio* considered to be in a relation with others, or in relation to an ideal or goal, whether true or invented. This is consistent with the notion that concepts are basically “spiritual evaluations” that go into making the “skeleton of self-consciousness” (20).¹⁷

This leads to his next work, *La filosofia e la vita spirituale*,¹⁸ where, after a study of how scientific thought developed, Banfi states that a “law” of thought is basically “always a coordinating the contents of experience on the basis of a principle of synthesis, or a category of the intellect” (*Opere* 1.14) These laws are always hypothetical, always on the verge of being renewed, they are *necessary idealizations* (18) based on a process that informs historical thought as well (19-22). Thus, “in order for the consciousness of the relativity of the objects of our experience to be elevated to a philosophical principle, it is necessary that they be integrated in the search for a superior certainty of those values which otherwise would shipwreck” (22). But this theoretical demand can only find its effective concretization in developing what I would call a methodics of its possible application. This is in part carried out in his opus, the *Principi di una teoria della ragione*, published in 1926. Of this magmatic work, we need only recall that philosophical Reason must find its anchorage at all times

in three constitutive elements or characteristics, namely, that it be autonomous, universal, and transcendental (*Principi* 77). This is the grounding of what later will be called Banfi’s critical rationalism.¹⁹ All of this often laboriously argued notion is worked out with the constant preoccupation that the irreducibility of experience be respected while keeping at bay the seduction of the “natural tendency” and “common sense” (*Principi* 183, 440 ff.).

But the work that is most accessible both for an understanding of Banfi in the forties and for laying the foundation of his idea of art—which had great influence in the two decades after the war,²⁰—is “I problemi di un’estetica filosofica.”²¹ Reiterating his credo that in order to comprehend the living reality of the work of art in the intrinsic law of its inner development and the weave of its infinite variations, the first claim Banfi makes is that “thought must renounce all pretenses at being normative.” (*VA* 16) Thought can at best aspire to a “rational systematic” of its various viewpoints. Thus avoiding unilateralism and dogmatism, it can search for a pure “methodic unity” which does not merely justify “ideals, norms, and criteria” (*VA* 20) but, rather, makes of them the object of its analyses. This method is “theoretically autonomous” (*VA* 23) yet still capable of ensuring that a coherent link between reason and experience is maintained. It may be that considering method “theoretically” autonomous will reveal itself to be the Achilles’ heel of this philosopher, but we must desist from a premature critique. In Banfi’s understanding of it, methodic activity seeks to allow the interpreting mind to keep track of the orientation of specific arts, the “living reality” of how art actually came to be and explained itself. Much of the same process applies to inquiry into ethics, religion, and history. And insofar as it is a method, or, better, “un atteggiamento metodologico” [methodological attitude] (*VA* 34 ff.) there will be certain constitutive elements it can refer to so it doesn’t lose its way, so to speak.

The first of these is the empirical level, which requires the investigator to actually look at the materials, whether ugly or beautiful, “read them” for what they have to say, and how they were transmitted in the life of a culture, and not whether they meet the criterion of absolute spirit. But, since we do come to a work with “un’intuizione sensibile,” the next thing to do is to recognize a dialectic whose ultimate aim is

to come up with what he calls an *eidetics*, or an idea which allows us to begin to organize meanings. And finally we arrive at an aesthetic principle as the “unitary law of the aesthetic structure of experience” (VA 34).

There is no need to follow Banfi beyond this, as some of the language is understandably replete with references to Kant and Husserl, though he does not import their whole metalinguistic armamentarium. What matters is that between the thinking mind, what I call *Theoria*, and the outside world of objects and events and people, there is now a Method, a dynamic instrument of research that must constantly self-check itself in order not to absolutize either Reason or Spirit, nor reduce and reify actual experience. This is quite a refreshing and liberating critical outlook when compared to idealism, actualism, and various strands of spiritualism. There are germs for a hermeneutic perspective here,²² for to speak of art now will mean to address not only the way the work justifies itself, but also what is being said about it in the culture.²³

In sum, Banfi redefines the terms of the discipline, so word-concepts such as Spirit will now be read and used in the sense of what other philosophies will call Consciousness; and system is not System but rather a “systematic” or a tendency to systematize which is constantly being reformulated or revised, serving rather the needs of what I would call a pragmatics of intellection. The object of inquiry will heretofore be not what something “is” but how it comes to be, what it is at a particular point in time in relation to other expressions of culture (VA 39)—the referents we would call them today—and recognize the “partiality” of any position (VA 49) in view “of the complex connections of interdependence in a system in continuous evolution” (VA 29).

Turning to the need to express a judgment, which we saw is at the beginning of the introduction to *Studi filosofici*, already in the thirties Banfi held that critique could not escape the fact that judgments are made with reference to me and my world, my culture (VA 57-58) and that therefore there is always implicit, besides a partiality or *local theoreticity*, a dialectical connection and comparison with other perspectives and other world-views. For example, in the characterization “Dante is a poet,” which is also a judgment, the

being of the copula means both the presence of an essential relation between the two terms which acquires meaning, or “ideal objectivity” independently of this judgment and also that such a relationship reveals an existence—“esistenzialità”—that partakes of other and infinite determinations, for instance, that it was evaluated differently by different critics through time. In other words, because judgment is informed by a dialectic which is intrinsic to the object or phenomenon or person in question and highlights the specificity of what gives rise to it, its structure will be different if, for example, we evaluate a sentimental or a political experience, since they partake of different articulations or planes of experience.

Nevertheless, concerned with how Reason and critique need to be revised, what seems missing in Banfi is a *topica* of how these different planes of existence are articulated and what makes them acquire a certain autonomy or differentiation from one another. But a radical self-critique of their own metalanguage never occurred in the school of critical rationalism, nor for that matter in the other journals of the period. For inquiry into the metalanguage of how rational or scientific analysis is conducted one would have to look at journals of glottology and linguistics, for example. In philosophy, the linguistic debate was by and large limited to questioning and debating the use and abuse of a given single mega-word, such as spirit, transcendental, concept, history, and so on.

5. *The Problem of Existence*

The sketch of Banfi’s philosophical genealogy makes it easier to understand the thematization, near the end of his introduction, of a particular phenomenon in the culture, namely, the growing number of publications about a “philosophy of existence” (SF 1.1: 16), to which we will turn in a moment. Another topic overdue for examination is the status of Knowledge, which we learn is in a crisis because the critical mind is now rethinking the subject, indeed the body, that seeks to know itself. In the first issue the young Giulio Preti, the *enfant terrible* of the Editorial Board, deals precisely with the meaning of the metaphysical problem of knowledge. He finds that the real question to be asked is not whether there is such a thing as right or true knowledge, but

rather to recognize that, first, the implicit dualism or opposition must rest on an *a priori* metaphysics that is found to be no longer credible; and second, that knowledge even when wrong constitutes the stimulus to seek further for a higher and purer knowledge: what matters, he writes, is how knowledge is lived, how it impacts on the experience of the individual (*SF 1.1*: 38). In another article in the same issue, “Crisi dell’attualismo” (*SF 1.1*: 107-121), Preti comes out explicitly to disassemble the philosophy of Gentile himself, and with him of quasi-actualists and spiritualists like A. Carlini, A. Guzzo, U. Spirito, and G. Saitta, a trenchant critique no scholar of *attualismo* should miss. Remo Cantoni addresses “the antinomies of moral experience” by studying those conceptions that actualism seems to wish could be isolated inside a cocoon of inviolable precepts; he attacks Croce for pulling out of history only those concepts which are “good” (*SF 1.1*: 63), whereas what ought to be considered, he says, is how moral choices are made, the risks and responsibilities they entail (62), the fact that morality itself is a never-ending process of self-definition, and finally that “no one possesses the truth, but everyone seeks it, and this search is the very sense of our lives” (77).

But the most important piece is by Enzo Paci, titled “Il problema dell’esistenza.” Bearing in mind that existentialism had been around for a while, as we will see in a moment, it is significant that *Studi Filosofici* picked up the topic, to which a monograph issue was dedicated in 1942, and which was featured in most issues through the post-war period. A scholar of phenomenology, Paci goes to the heart of the problem by facing up to the initial debacle raised by a philosophy of existence, and that is its being aporetic, insofar as “every attempt to resolve it cancels out the premises, and every synthesis of the antinomies resurfaces in its untouchable purity” (*SF 1.1*: 93), that is to say, in its abstraction. If existence is to be absolute, something allegedly “beyond thought,” nevertheless in trying to make sense of it thinking cannot avoid “reducing existence under its own categorical laws” (*SF 1.1*: 93). Going rather deftly to how the problem has been dealt with since Parmenides and through Kant and Hegel, the question boils down to whether there is an intrinsic in-itself, a *nous*, against which to counterfoist an externality, through predicate judgments, the *dianoia*. Dissatisfied with the Hegelian resolution of the dialectic of

absolute self-consciousness, Paci returns to Kierkegaard to underscore the dramatic conclusion: as “there is no longer a possibility of thinking about the person without reducing him to mere thought, and therefore annihilating him, every other philosophical question is transformed into a question about our destiny” (*SF 1.1*: 104).

It is fair to ask, given the climate, whether destiny is the one underscored by political propaganda. Not quite, since idealism, actualism, and spiritualism saw destiny as an eternalist or suprahistorical compulsion embodied either in the State or God. It is more likely it refers to *choice*, to willing a particular state of affairs which automatically excludes all others, with consequent risks and responsibilities *vis à vis* both, the individual and the status of thinking *tout court*. It is not Nietzsche’s *amor fati*, but rather more literally a destination that involves a continuous self-transcending of what one is and what one must do. The end question the still young Paci then asks is the following:

Up to what point is it possible to affirm the existence of beings without the correlative rational need that tends to annihilate existing itself [annullare l’esistere], when existence affirms itself precisely in rebelling against thought? (*SF 1.1*: 104)²⁴

Here, thought, *il pensiero*, must be taken to mean all the grand systems erected to attain and justify conceptions of absolutism, hierarchy, preferential scales of inclusion and exclusion, and value systems elevated so high as to lose sight of the actually living humans, the great multitudes, so far below them.

6. The Case Against Actualism

Opening up to existentialism has broad repercussions. Consistently with the claim that *SF* was not a project, a movement, or an ideology, in the sense that the journal accepted contributions from most schools as long as they showed rigor and asked fundamental questions, the second issue contains an article by Banfi himself on “Filosofia e Religione” (*SF 1.1*: 165-195), where the entreaty is not to look to institutionalized religion for wisdom, and implicitly for panaceas,

given that actualism had become the state religion, but, once again, to conceive of critical thought as unchained to any religion while it focused on the freedom of research concerning what matters to all, to accept the insights coming from empiricism and rationalism, and “cast light on radical problems.” We are not in the same league as a Jean-Paul Sartre yet, but the undertone is explicit enough. The issue of the “vita spirituale,” which I am aware sounds somewhat shrill in the twenty-first century, must be taken in context, and Remo Cantoni deals with this by recalling insights by an older philosopher, Pantaleo Carabellese, who had made the case that if only we see “Spirit” not as the protagonist of history, but “the maligned empirical ‘I’ of the idealists, then we would have as many realities as we have thinking subjects” (1.1: 197), for the object of cultural studies is everything that people consider of value (1.1: 201). In this sense, these reflections are very much valid today as well. The point is that a Theory is now simply a theory, one of many possible viewpoints readers of Nietzsche are accustomed to, “its being forever a perspective that denounces absolute possession... and if this thought is part of the human condition expiating its finitude and historicity, this is not a great evil... it makes it a *meditatio vitae*...” (1.1: 219).

The rest of these initial issues take up once again a critique of actualism by Enzo Paci; the attempt to root metaphysics in empiricism by Giulio Preti; an attack on Romantic ideals by Galvano Della Volpe; and a further critique of “Romantic existentialism” by Gian Maria Bertin. The tenor of the journal is thus established and, in succeeding issues, until the Nazi authorities in Milan forced it to stop publishing in early 1944, *Studi Filosofici* continued its ever more open critique of the untenability of actualism and idealism, introduced perspectives derived from empiricism and American pragmatism, studies and reviews of John Dewey, featured writings on the limits of historical objectivity, and finally on the necessity to reform education, the latter another stab at Gentile’s state-approved “riforma” of the twenties.²⁵

Yet what I think are the most important essays in this first phase are those concerned with the philosophy, indeed the very meaning, of existence. A novel aspect within this complex problematic is the focus on the person as the effective embodiment of the human condition *tout court*, and the choices open to the individual in view

of what is possible. It is important to note that 1943 is the year that represents a peak in the fervor and multitude of interventions on this most crucial of topics.²⁶ I will quickly go through two more of them to highlight how particular it is and how it cannot become part of a general understanding of the movement of existentialism such as we have inherited it, in American culture at least, from the French and the Germans. But at the same time, we will see how the terrain is primed in such a way as to permit, starting in 1946, the explosion of proposals coming from the left.

7. Italian Existentialism

Italian philosophers had addressed the issue of a general rethinking of the notion of existence since the mid-thirties. In a 1940 article Luigi Pareyson (“Genesi”) traces the official origins of existentialism to 1919, to the publication of Karl Barth’s *Römerbrief* and Karl Jaspers’ *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*.²⁷ Both had delved into the tormented thought of Kierkegaard, with his reflection on the concept of existence and the exasperated singularity of man naked before God. Both had great influence, the first in introducing the theology of crisis, the second by opening up the tense relation between individual and thought. In 1927 Martin Heidegger published *Sein und Zeit*, introducing the analysis of *Dasein* and the notion of death as the anxiety of the end of all possibilities. The same year Gabriel Marcel published his *Journal métaphysique*, developing some ideas of Henri Bergson in an anti-idealistic track. The basic concerns that emerged related to the ontology of man, that is, the Being of the human before or independent of experience, before history, before the infinite, and given that actual living beings were considered to be living inauthentically, in the desolate monism of the “They.” And what is philosophy doing about it? Heidegger maintained the posture of fallen man for decades, with his idea that we have “forgotten Being,” but other existentialists focused on the ontic side of the question, the being of the existent. Though in 1932 Jaspers published the three volumes of his *Philosophie*, and introduced the notion of “fundamental situation,” it is French existentialism that continued to grow and develop, with the appearance of the journal *Recherches philosophiques* and two years

later of *Philosophie de l'Esprit*, promoted by René Le Senne and Louis Lavelle. They introduced the notion of “felure,” the crack or rift in existence, which will reappear in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*—written, as we know, in 1943 in occupied France—as “lack,” as the incompleteness of the human who must therefore appease this anxiety by relating to others: Being-for-itself cannot exist without, and finds its ontological complement in, being-for-others.²⁸

While recounting and illustrating these early stages of existentialism, Pareyson, who had published his own volume on the subject, *La filosofia dell'esistenza e Carlo Jaspers*, in 1940, introduces the notion of “esigenza personalistica” (“Genesi” 11), according to which the individual must be interpreted in his enclosed autarky, in his being unique, a “person” with axiological values, positive because whole in his particularity, absolute in his singularity, universal in his individuality. From this new theoretical viewpoint, when looking at the ideas proposed by his precursors on the other side of the Alps, he accepts the call of transcendence (not, as in the French, self-transcendence), the role of necessity, and that of contingency. Some of these aspects will be developed in his hermeneutic writings of the fifties. But he also falls into the trap of dualistic thinking: “individual and absolute existence is the effective encounter between finite and infinite, temporal and eternal” (“Genesi” 21). And he also yields to the lure of the anxiety of influence for, in a second article, “Idealismo ed esistenzialismo” (*SF* 2.2: 151-169), where Pareyson explores further this tradition by attempting to link it to the teachings of his own maestro, Augusto Guzzo (who had introduced a “third” form of idealism on the Italian scene in the twenties), and even seeks connections between Gentile and existentialism. This on the grounds that the Act—*l'atto*—is “concreteness and interiority of the life of the Spirit” (*SF* 2.2: 164).

The article seems strained, as if written to make things fit at all costs.²⁹ Nevertheless, it is useful to compare his idea of the person to that being sketched by Antonio Banfi during the same years, but unpublished until after his death. Banfi writes that:

[t]he person is neither a moment or an instrument of cultural life understood in a naturalistic or idealistic way, nor is the person instrument or expression of a transcendent order of

values: the person is the independent principle of a negative or positive absolute, the true reality of absolute existence whether positive or negative... the concept of person is the theoretical limit of coincidence and integration of intuitive givens, and in everyday experience (as with all empirical knowledge) it is always determined as *the function of a partial synthesis*, that is, by the special direction or particular equilibrium of that lived participation, or in the relation of the I with itself or with others.³⁰ (*La persona* 35, 93; my emphasis)

Clearly, there are some theoretical differences between the two philosophers, but what is of noteworthy here is that the person, the entity whose mystery, sanity and relevance to thinking is being probed, is finally up for investigation. And the task is now to link its absolute givenness, which can be either positive or negative, with its inevitable partiality, with the fact that in its relatedness or sharing it cannot express but a side or aspect of itself. On the same wavelength, and much more useful, from a historiographic standpoint, is the article “Panorama dell'esistenzialismo” (*SF* 2.2: 193-204),³¹ in which Pareyson states that, besides German, French, and Russian currents, we can now speak of an “Italian existentialism” (*SF* 2.2: 202).³² He suggests, with all due caveats, that one can speak of a current on the right, represented by the spiritualists, and one on the left, much closer to German *Existenzphilosophie*. Again, he suggests that there are links with Gentile, for example, in the work of Ernesto Grassi.³³ He then briefly acknowledges the importance of contributions by Enzo Paci, Antonio Banfi, Galvano Della Volpe, and Nicola Abbagnano. In the end, he himself in his later work will lean toward the spiritualist current, but not without some serious revisions on the basis of his studies of German idealism.³⁴

What Pareyson brings out of these early writings into his more mature post-war years is the development of the idea of *persona*, which embodies a synthesis of receptivity and activity, singularity and universality. In a later collection, *Esistenza e persona*,³⁵ he clarifies the sense of some key terms in view of a new ethic. Pareyson claims that “personalism” must be understood in an ontological sense, wherein the condition of finiteness marks a limit but is not necessarily

negative, whereas as a positive trait alone it is insufficient. The human being exists indeed as being situated, but the mainspring that gives value to existence is that s/he is a work (*opera*), the result of ongoing activity, responsible to him/herself primarily because, in a sense, s/he shapes his/her own person through the forming involved in any activity. In this context, notions of “subjectivity” and “individualism” are not useful and at any rate do not cover the entire range Pareyson gives to this new conception. He stays clear of the metalanguages that define these two key terms for most other thinkers. For the Turinese philosopher, what is “particular” of a person does not coincide with what is “personal.” He states that “in man the part is superior to the whole and the individual [il singolo] is above the species.” (*Esistenza e persona* 15) He finally reiterates that individuation and selecting, or what goes into knowing, are also intrinsically interpretive actions. This is quite a characterization, and some of these ideas will go into, and are developed fully, in his general philosophy in the fifties.³⁶ However, there is no outlook for a specific social or political engagement, perhaps due to a fear that it would lead back to overarching or dogmatic systems, or hierarchy³⁷ and diminish the radical uniqueness of the individual “persona.” Still, he continues to explore the possibilities of “an existential Christianity” (*Esistenza e persona* 129-137). In conclusion, though, we have the preliminary material for an idea of interpretation that roots theory and method together in the individual person and lays the foundation for a future hermeneutic in which the act of judgment is validated; in fact, as it will be developed in the post-war years, judgment anchors the critical mind.

8. Nicola Abbagnano's Existentialism and the Problem of Being

The other philosopher published in *Studi filosofici* who proposed an original interpretation of existentialism was Nicola Abbagnano. In “*Esistenza e sostanza*” (*SF* 1.2: 113-133), he writes of the “vital reasons” why this movement is the “main path for philosophy” insofar as it is an “attitude” that appeals to, and in fact employs the critical instruments of a long line of developments in all areas of human activity: “nothing human is foreign to it: science and religion, art and politics, all find their foundation in the effective existence to which it

is now turning” (*SF* 1.2: 113). He then goes on to prove the limits of one-sided approaches based only on objectivism or subjectivism. Then he states that “by existing, I stand out from nothingness in order to move towards Being; but if I were to reach Being and became Being, I would cease to exist because existing [l'esistere] is the search or the problem of Being” (*SF* 1.2: 116). This is the premise of the illustration of what he considers the two dominant positions at the time, that of Heidegger and that of Jaspers, so that he can finally submit his own. In the first case, the foundation of existing is rooted in the fact that it detaches itself from nothingness, so that nothingness, or nihilism to other thinkers, determines the nature of existence. But since existence is never detached from nothingness insofar as it can never identify entirely with Being, it is thus defined “by the impossibility that it is not nothingness [impossibilità che essa non sia il nulla]” (117). In the second case, that of Jaspers, the salient trait of existence is its rapport with Being, its volition or aptitude to transcend itself towards Being. But “because the rapport with Being that existence seeks to attain is that of never achieving Being and identifying with Being, existence is ultimately defined by the impossibility that it is Being [l'impossibilità che essa sia l'essere]” (117). At this juncture, Abbagnano states: “[but] I can also consider as the salient trait of existence the relation itself.... In this case, existence is defined by the possibility that it is the rapport with Being [possibilità che essa sia il rapporto con l'essere]” (117). Here, in a nutshell, is the resolution of the anxious dilemma of the existential nihilists. The key is to overcome the mental habit of juxtaposing Being and nothingness as if they were two logical statements only one of which can apply to existence, and focus instead on the correlation between them as something which is possible. Philosophy then has a new focus: the possibility of a possible relationship.

Thus, new horizons are disclosed because existence is no longer understood as the recognition of what has already been decided, nor does it have to acknowledge it is slave to necessity, or worse yet view freedom as undeterminable and therefore elusive. Existence, in other words, does not anchor its ontological status on the experience from which it issues, namely nothingness, nor does it gain its legitimacy from that towards which it yearns, namely Being,

rather, says Abbagnano, existence needs “solely itself while realizing itself in the relation with itself” (118), which is to say in relation to the ways in which time and again it defines itself. This is very liberating, and it will become known as a positive existentialism grounded upon the possible. Once again, the question is not “what ‘is’ Being,” because the very question presumes something that is already given, a condition or state; rather, the question is how man can rebel or escape from this pre-given and unconquerable Being. By the same token, the emphasis can now be shifted on the being, the “ente,” called man. To this being for whom Being is a problem there can be an answer, in fact there must be some form of response since being is now defined by its indeterminacy. “Indeterminacy [l’indeterminazione] is the same problematic of the rapport between being and Being” (120). In other words, in terms of this constitutive indeterminacy of beings, Being is to being a possibility.” As Pico della Mirandola had written in the “Preface” to the “900 Theses,” in the document that came to be known as *The Oration on the Dignity of Man*, the human being is “indiscretae opus imaginis,” a work of indeterminate form (4).³⁸ The human existent is therefore now “free”—relatively—to either raise himself to the stars or lower himself in the baseness of the appetites. In terms of our inquiry, the fact remains that thinking and knowledge are relocated strictly in the hands of the existent, who must now choose and, ascertaining the limits imposed by the external world, decide how to interpret not only the past but more cogently how to define and redefine his or her own condition, social, political, and personal.

Abbagnano had been on this path from very early on, since his first publication in 1923, titled symptomatically “The irrational sources of thought” (*Le sorgenti*). He dedicated a book to art, then to American and British idealism, the philosophies of Meyerson and Ockham, the new physics and the basic principles of metaphysics.³⁹ He was one of the most open, during the *Ventennio*, to stimuli coming from outside of Italy, and was well heeled in science and technology. In 1939 he published *La struttura dell’esistenza* and in 1942 *Introduzione all’esistenzialismo*. Unlike his colleagues, who by and large, with the exception of Pareyson and to some degree Banfi, tried to explain what the existentialists were propounding and often sought to match them with the Italians, a useful if often dubious undertaking, Abbagnano

had developed his own philosophy and stood fast to his original formulation in the postwar war period as well, obviously refining it as new problems arose.⁴⁰ The main tenets of his idea of existence include the fundamental principle that “the essential property of that which is possible is that it needs something else to make it actually exist” (Langiulli xliii).⁴¹ The philosopher can thus now focus on the sentient being as he or she looks about and attempts to grasp the sense and pulse of the social world in its broader complexity. As a choice is possible, then the human agent is further invested with the moral and ethical responsibility of determining its general value, as well as whether it is positive or negative, a success or a failure. But the very meaning of the human agent’s life, even in view of an ineradicable lack or incompleteness owed to the non co-occurrence of Being with being, will lie precisely in this effort to find a link, to attempt to construe a conscious relation, to pursue a determinate goal: each an aspect of possibility.

From the *Dizionario* we learn that the meaning of the possible can be sought in four different areas or fields:

- a) in mathematics and physics, where existence is defined as “possibility of construction” and “possibility of verification;”
- b) in empiricism, that recognizes the possibilities of experimentation and observation;
- c) in phenomenology, which by definition is an analysis of possibilities; and
- d) in all those philosophies that question how humans relate to the world, beginning with Kierkegaard and on to those who thematize “situation,” “condition,” “relationships,” and thus dynamics between systems or policies.

In this framework, for instance, the idea of freedom quickly triggers the question: freedom from what? and freedom for what? thus instilling from the very first a necessity to admit, ponder, and analyse the other pole of the relation. The question of freedom cannot be asked in terms of its *ipseità*, undetermined with respect to something else. *If man himself is ontologically undetermined, then in asking the question of freedom he enters into a relation that will define the determination; he*

cannot be indifferent, that is, indifferent to something/someone else, because that would betray the supratemporal, metaphysical purity of values that have time and again proven to be dogmatic and inevitably authoritarian. So freedom implies choice ultimately because it is the possibility of choice, so even if the choice made is bad or limited, there exists implicitly the possibility of recoil and correction. In this view, political freedom is one that ensures not only the immediate practical freedom to move about, but the one that ensures that citizens have further choices.

What applies to freedom applies to interpretation as well, to the processes of determining the meaning and value of a given work. This does not mean that everything is transient or immanent: quite the opposite; my very interpretation of Abbagnano's thought rests on the view that mine is one free interpretation which now must enter the circuit of other interpretations, in which some survive and establish themselves, while others vanish. But I have the freedom to try again and maybe get it right next time. From these synthetic statements about the basis or theoretical presuppositions of Abbagnano's philosophy, it stands to reason that in evaluating any problem or meaning of an event or item, there is a great deal of methodological flexibility, and indeed methods of inquiry multiply and require a built-in mechanism for self-correction. Abbagnano develops this years later, in a paper delivered at the Italian Philosophical Society in 1955.⁴² The empowered individual can now test his or her hypotheses, not bound to an axiomatic image of the universe, but taking stock of the fact that every commitment to truth, to a truth, entails a commitment to a specific method of inquiry. The explosion and revolutions of theories and methods of inquiry that characterized the post-war period already had in Abbagnano's philosophy of critical existentialism the premises of its legitimacy, the clearing of the ground.

9. *Studi Filosofici and Hegel's Phenomenology*

If we go back to *Studi filosofici* and reflect upon the contents of the issues published before it was suppressed by the occupying Nazi forces in the summer of 1944, we will find an intensification of contributions that exacerbate the uncomfortable pressure of closed

systems, and a similarly anxious tendency to bring thinking out into more circumscribed but more concrete, contingent, and consequently more immediately relevant aspects of what to think about, what matters. In June of 1942, the journal dedicated a double issue to Hegel (*SF* 3.1-2). It seems a radical confrontation could not wait any longer, as Hegel's thought loomed like a huge mountain that had acquired a life of its own since the days of Francesco de Sanctis and had planted itself in the heart of the Italian peninsula, at once the most influential and the most restrictive philosophy of the first half of the twentieth century. Banfi struggles to see the continued relevance of Hegel by stressing the value of the *Phenomenology* (1807), wherein every idea achieves its truth not as representation of an objective reality but as the limit of the process of the synthesis of experience (*SF* 3.1-2: 11). In other words, Banfi leaves out the final necessity of Spirit to achieve and transcend itself in Absolute Self-consciousness, of which he, like many others, had perceived the intrinsic dogmatism, and "saves" the methodological aspect, "since consciousness is but the immediate phenomenological reflection, in the sphere of personal subjectivity, of the autonomy and universality of spirit or of reason" (*SF* 3.1-2: 11). In this fashion he can maintain the long theorized autonomy of reason but at the same time he keeps it in constant contact with the "real world" of intuitions and experience. There is a way in which Banfi attempts an "instrumental" interpretation of Hegelian dialectic by placing it within a Kantian paradigm, but that would require a separate study to untangle.⁴³ In the same issue, Enzo Paci speaks of the "necessity of a purification of Hegel's system of what it contains that is dogmatic and metaphysical" (*SF* 3.1-2: 36), a clear reference to the versions offered up by Croce and Gentile, both of whom had "corrected" the dialectic of the German,⁴⁴ and the obligation to reread the master after the existentialist critique, at whose center there is precisely a critique of Hegelianism. But Paci also struggles to come clean. Between Hegel the "romantic" and "cosmic-religious" and Hegel the dialectician of the completion of history, the only way out is to basically truncate a part of the system: "the phenomenology is possible if it recognizes at its base the plane of existence, that absurd which is revealed by the antinomy of the Absolute... every philosophy is an experience of the absolute but does not exhaust the Absolute in itself" (*SF* 3.1-2:

49). The triadic structure of Hegel's philosophy "can fairly be brought to the triad thought, existence, and value" (53). In the same vein, Giulio Preti, in an attempt to allay the terror before the *mysterium tremendum* that Hegel represented for so many, advises that after all he is a man who worked out a complete system, and when that system is no longer viable, we can and should read him in order to extract what is still valuable, contemporary, and subject to development. The main value would then reside in the appropriation of that "principle of systematicity" (*SF* 3.1-2: 55) crucial to the reorganization of thought in light of the challenges of existentialism, which is close to what Banfi had been trying to do himself. Many books on the topic were reviewed, and it appears that the methodological concern is slowly coming to the forefront, and Theory is pushed in the background. In the third issue of the same volume papers deal with a critique of Logic as propounded by the likes of Guido Calogero, and the need to bring it down to the actual statements made by the subject in specific contexts. In this "aversion to logic," A. Pastore sees the positive aspects of Abbagnano's proposal to have logic begin from the actual experiences of people and not the other way around, where truth values are based on validity and consistency with pre-given rules (*SF* 3.3: 130 ff.). In another article, which in translation reads: "Truth as a logical problem" (*SF* 3.3: 187-207), Mario M. Rossi tackles the exigency of unshackling thought from formal or propositional logic and states that "the attempt to ignore the logical impossibility of applying the same criterion of truth to different systems by postulating an ideal system leads to the recognition that truth has to do with difference rather than with analogy and identity" (194). Not surprisingly, we find a "Rassegna" by Preti on the Vienna circle in the same fascicle. In *SF* 3.4 the journal hosts papers on pathology, psychology, and Banfi on philosophical aspects of biology. Once again in a long "Rassegna" on the scientific panorama of the day, with incisive comments on Einstein, Heisenberg, Reichenbach, Planck, Addington, and others (*SF* 3.4: 308-341), Preti concludes that the value of physics and the philosophy of science to philosophy in general is the "*apporto metodologico* [methodological contribution; my emphasis]" that can well douse the rhetoric against the "polyvalence of knowledge" (340) The appearance of Ludovico Geymonat (*SF* 4.1) is also symptomatic of this growing aperture to a different ways of doing critique.

10. *For an Anti-authoritarian Philosophy: Studi Filosofici's Last Volume*

The immediate social reality, however, was getting unbearable, Milan would soon be the epicenter of the Nazis' last attempts at holding Italy. Amidst strikes, confusion, rebellions, and resistance, polarizations even within families, a new propped-up Republica di Saló with all the trappings of a hysterical vocation to hold on to what had long since been lost, maintaining a semblance of regular life and even going to work turned out to be a challenge on a day to day basis. Still, devotion and persistence is the hallmark of the intellectual. One can sense that the last three issues of volume four were "affrettati," and in fact they came out together in one volume. Almost in defiance, Banfi dedicates the issues to German thought, with a long article by Nicolai Hartmann (*SF* 4.2-4: 84-124) expounding his "critical ontologism," a post-Kantian, scientific-oriented philosophy that implicitly sees through the anthropocentric metaphysics of his countrymen, and in-depth expositions by Remo Cantoni, Kate Nadler, and Secondo Boggio. In a review of a book by Walter del Negro that champions the instrumental view of biological determinism at the service of the state, and the concurrent pruning of certain schools from the tradition, Banfi writes: "the life of a nation is in its spiritual tradition, and tradition is both tension and development of complex motives which are often contrasting: it is liberty, in other words, and not destiny... what would we think, in fact, of a tradition of German culture and thought from which, as Krick [summoned by Del Negro to make his point] argues, we exclude Leibniz, Kant and Hegel, and a philosophy whose aim is to exclude them once and for all" (*SF* 4.2-4: 216). The self-abnegating editors of the journal put out another issue, in the spring months of 1944 (as Anno V, numbers 1 & 2). I would like to conclude with a remark on the very last piece in this volume, by the irrepressible Giulio Preti, titled "Bios Theoretikos." After a prologue on the venerable tradition of the reflective life, the most appropriate for a thinker, Preti slowly edges into the unsustainability of this topos and social habitus. He then quotes John Dewey (without giving the specific source) to the effect that "generalizing the acknowledgment that the true means the verifiable and nothing more entails imposing on people the responsibility to

abandon their political and moral dogmas and to subject to proof and consequence their most cherished prejudices. Such a change implies a great shift in the basis of authority and the methods of social action” (SF 5.1-2: 63). The plan is clear: traditional metaphysical conceptions are “the natural grounding of an authoritarian government: in fact authority has no other moral foundation” (SF 5.1-2: 63). Indeed, “in idealism the truth is posited as an originary condition, whereas today the truth is what is posited by a subject that determines it for itself” (SF 5.1-2:63). Although he attempts to credit philosophizing with always being prone to idealizing in some guise, something we might call the inevitability of the action of the *theorein* (SF 5.1-2: 64, 66)—what elsewhere I called the spontaneous theory, or viewpoint, or pre-judgment any critic brings to bear upon any object of inquiry⁴⁵—Preti is less gentle with logicians, who end up being swallowed up by the premises of their own metalanguage. Either a theory is explained in terms of another theory or else it must admit to its “atto di arbitrio per cui viene scelta una Logica piuttosto che un’altra” [the arbitrariness on the basis of which one Logic is preferred over another] (SF 5.1-2: 65). What must be remembered, he writes, recalling some of the key words we have seen emerge, is the problematicity, the partiality, and the will behind any one decision to philosophize, or what we may call the act of interpreting. The third part shifts the terrain of the discourse: “the different forms of culture, and philosophy too, tend today to assume, in both organization and methods, the form of labor” (SF 5.1-2: 68). We might call this another example of how the thinker has finally left the court and stepped onto the street. At this juncture Preti veers toward a critique of capitalism and the void it can create in the ordinary citizen, followed immediately by the claim that the pursuit of happiness and self-contentment is inscribed already in Aristotle’s ethics. But, alas! We are in 1943, we cannot expect him to express things we would feel comfortable in reading from one of our postmodern thinkers: he retrieves the notion of the Platonic *bios theoretikós* as “the working man who is a person, person among persons, a limited being who only through the modifications of his environment and by sharing achieves his ends” (SF 5.1-2: 69), which is in league with some of the other existentialists we have seen above. This wonderful disclosure is not, however, brought to its fullest consequences—and the reference to

Plato should have given it away—as he concludes by saying that enjoyment of the person is confirmed not through the “individual [singolo]” or the “unique [l’unico]” but as “the One [l’Uno].”

II. Conclusion

As we said at the beginning, there are other possible routes to travel to reconstruct Italian philosophical thinking leading up to the Second World War. The somewhat long itinerary conducted was made necessary by the fact that today the issues and debates treated seem far from what we consider relevant or urgent, considering them a matter for “specialists,” as if they were *überwindet*, “sorpasati,” or no longer “attuali.” But a sound historiography requires not only that we examine the original texts in terms of their immediate contexts, which it would be an understatement to term problematic and uncertain, but also in terms of what are the compelling questions of our day, which have witnessed during the postmodern age a complete breakdown of any and all general theories of interpretation on the basis of a demonstrated untenability of principles rooted in Enlightenment axioms or beliefs such as metaphysical foundations, the idea of progress, the emancipation of all people, and supratemporal notions of truth clearly in collusion with the idea and execution of power. The concurrent breakdown of the truth-claims made through methodologies imported from the science has also added to the general disorientation in doing critical and historical work. In some quarters there seems to be a *nonchalance* in dipping into the historical bin to draw out statements suitable to make a point without concern for contextual coherence or some form of methodological consistency. Many a postcolonial critic often forgets to study the different colonialisms that have actually existed and have been contested and reappraised for decades. The problem goes back to a mis-appropriation of the great postmodern thinkers.⁴⁶ In any event, the suggestion made here is that the postmodern crises that crested in the decade following 1968 have their distant roots in the years leading to the second World War, and that much has been obscured by the developments that occurred during the early decades of the Cold War. What is perhaps in order, now that we have a clearer historical distance from the World War II years, is

a serious rethinking of what at the time were inquiries into the human condition *tout court*. Whereas political discussions had a place in terms of immediate considerations, as philosophers our authors were trying to gauge a dimension which is all-pervasive, beneath or above (owing to its trans-disciplinary nature) more localized and pragmatic concerns. That a philosopher speaks of the meaning of existence and the value of what a human being is or might be years before Hiroshima and Auschwitz means that perhaps, much like some poets, they had perceived that the great bourgeois project was running aground from an involution of its inner inconsistencies. It has often been remarked that World War II was the end result of nationalisms exacerbated beyond their original formulations and reasons for being. This does not make it easy for anyone to say who were the good guys and who were the bad ones. Some will argue, as Norberto Bobbio (“Di un nuovo esistenzialismo” and *La filosofia*) did after the war, that existentialism is ultimately a philosophy of decadence, while others such as Galvano Della Volpe,⁴⁷ more courageously given there was a war going on, held that existentialism is ultimately rooted in romanticism and represents “the last desperate myth of the Privatmensch,” which sets the premise for his writing, after the war ended, that “only the best Marxism is the royal path for an existentialism worthy of its name” (*La libertà* 184). It is understandable why the culture in general, both in Italy and the rest of Europe, was not ready yet to renounce the entire Enlightenment project, and thus radically question Rousseau, Kant, and Marx as they had Hegel, and the positive sciences of the XIX century. Despite the critique of all philosophizing that existentialism had ushered in, the questioning of all transhistorical principles and the necessity to refocus on the choices made available to, and by, the individual citizen, the chaos, destruction, and resentment felt in Northern Italy during the occupation⁴⁸ makes it understandable why Palmiro Togliatti, in launching *La Rinascita*,⁴⁹ in June of 1944, expresses himself in these terms:

We have above all the duty to furnish our best militants of the working class and of the people the possibility to master the *indispensable theoretical notions required* not only to understand the reasons of all we say and do, but *to apply in all fields* with

spirit of initiative the politics that best answers the interests of their class, of the people and of the country... [and] break every attack to the reborn and promising Italian socialist and communist movements. (99; my emphases)⁵⁰

The call was to a concerted action in the midst of uncertainty, fear, and general chaos, but the need of theory and method remains. The one huge difference, again, considering the situation at hand, the specific context, is that method had become praxis, concrete application, translation of ideas into immediate facts. This would be a hallmark of critical debate in the “lungo dopoguerra,”⁵¹ and requires a separate analysis, but one can sense that, given these very objective premises, existentialism would have to change and develop some of its premises, basically by incorporating some of the ideas coming from the left, or else remain in the realm of philosophical reflection pure and simple. Not just Della Volpe, but Paci in particular attempts to find a common terrain in the postwar years. The discussion from this point on cannot be separated from what their counterparts on the other side of the Alps were also trying to work out, and of which Sartre’s *Existentialism is a Humanism* constitutes a key point of reference. Nevertheless, we should not forget that socio-historically existentialism surfaced after the other World War, compelling so many to look at the very ontology of the human condition: we have ample proof of that in literature, theatre, the plastic arts, and of course in philosophy.

Returning to Banfi, in a paper published during the liberation,⁵² he makes it clear that metaphysics, big general Theories, are out, and that philosophy must now contend with the facts on the ground. This can be achieved by shifting the focus to the specificity of methods required to deal with particular aspects of research, with what I call the regional ontologies of specific forms of knowledge. Though inquiry requires that method be informed by a legitimizing theory, when the evidence and data demand that the methods change (in this we are on Baconian territory), then we are compelled to conceive of the procedure of knowledge as critique which questions the assumption of the theory itself. A theory of reason, he concludes, can only offer a criterion of rigor for evaluation and judgment, but it must be flexible to adapt as the input from the methodologies of specified fields of

understanding reveal that there exists no universal, transhistorical, eternalist conception of either reason or the understanding.

As for our inquiry, key concepts that will have to be kept in view from this point on are the notions of “problematicità del sapere” [the problematic nature of knowledge], a much needed “atteggiamento metodologico” [methodological attitude], the critique of metaphysics (especially in its formation as idealism, actualism, and spiritualism), choice as expressing the *libero arbitrio* of the individual, and possibility as a critical-creative ontological component of the social actor who struggles to understand its ontic reality. Finally, it will no longer be possible to do any philosophy, any critique of society, without paying serious attention to what is happening in the sciences.

I would like to end with this prophetic quote from literary critic Francesco Flora, who kept a “public journal” during the war: “Questa guerra ha dimostrato che i cosiddetti popoli guerrieri, anacronistici quanto sono disumani, non possono più vincere se non battaglie sanguinose e sterili: non possono più vincere le guerre” (92-93).⁵³

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ENDNOTES

¹ Carravetta, *Elusive Hermes*.

² This article is the first part of the first chapter to a work in progress on the problem of method in the interpretation of contemporary Italian culture, a continuation of the book in note 1.

³ The entire run of the journal has been reprinted in four volumes in 1972 by Arnaldo Forni Editore, in Bologna, under the patronage of the Centro Antonio Banfi, Reggio Emilia. Introduction by Eugenio Garin. The journal, which ran to Vol. X, ceased publication in 1949. It was also forced to suspend publication in the years 1944-45 by the Nazi authorities.

⁴ All references to *Studi filosofici* (Banfi) incorporated in my text will be to the 1972 Forni edition, indicated by the abbreviation *SF*, followed by volume year, and issue number, and page(s) where appropriate. All translations are my own except where otherwise indicated. [Il grave momento che l'Europa sta attraversando non può trovare la filosofia indifferente: se la filosofia è un fatto umano, ed anzi tende ad essere

il centro dell'esperienza umana, non può essere indifferente all'umana cultura, e per cultura s'intende ogni avvenimento storico che abbia significato spirituale – di fronte ad essa ha una responsabilità ed una posizione]. All translations in the text are mine.

⁵ For a reconstruction of the often harsh debates going on in academic philosophy, especially after 1929, and the great number of figures now mostly forgotten redefining and casting “isms” at every major conference, see *Cronache di filosofia* by Eugenio Garin.

⁶ The *Rivista di Filosofia* was directed beginning in 1927 by Luigi Fossati (upon whose death, in April, 1945, the journal was suppressed), and influenced by a thinker unduly forgotten, Piero Martinetti (who died in March, 1943). The role of the *Rivista di Filosofia*, directed by Norberto Bobbio when it restarted publication in 1946, will be examined in the continuation of the present article.

⁷ According to Brzezinski (17-18), the estimate of people killed as a direct and indirect consequence of World War II is over 50,000,000.

⁸ Cf. Abbate (127 ff).

⁹ Cf. Rossi (30): “The identification of the pure act with philosophical self-consciousness and the thesis of the superiority of the thinking thought [pensiero pensante] to thought that has been [pensiero pensato] led Gentile to consider every form of cultural life as something ‘abstract’ and ‘unreal’ that needed to be ‘integrated’ or ‘resolved’ in philosophy, the latter understood as “the highest and at the same time most concrete form of spiritual activity.” By contrast, Croce still conceived of philosophy as an attempt to resolve problems and offer insight into given situations; faced with “specific problems issuing from artistic, scientific, historiographic, pedagogical, and juridical activities, Gentilian actualism had in effect no possibility of offering an answer: it could only insist on the abstractness of those specific problems, affirm the necessity of a possible resolution in philosophy, and repeat the thesis, valid at all times before any circumstance, of the superiority of the thinking moment over what has passed and of the act over the datum” (30-31).

¹⁰ For a good synthesis about and comparison of the two thinkers, especially in terms of their ideas of history and the political process under Fascism, see Michael Curtis's introduction to the reprint of Benedetto Croce's *Historical Materialism and the Economics of Karl Marx*.

¹¹ Cf. Croce, *Ciò ch'è vivo* (6): “Il concetto filosofico è universale, e non già meramente generale: non è da confondere con le rappresentazioni generali, come ad esempio ‘casa’, ‘cavallo.’” In other words, the concept subsumes distinctions, being “an organism in which all forms are enjoined with the others and with everything... it is universal” (8).

¹² [E poichè la psicologia è nata ed è rimasta anche nella sua forma empirica sotto l'influenza di una metafisica spiritualista, quelle categorie – la conoscenza, la volontà, il sentimento nei loro vari momenti – appaiono come le direzioni della risoluzione spirituale della persona. Era facile perciò a un idealismo spiritualista risolvere di principio la persona nell'attività spirituale, perchè fin da principio la definiva solo in funzione di quella; era facile risolvere il problema della libertà nel concetto di questa

trasfigurazione, lasciando cadere la problematica profonda del libero arbitrio che pur la teologia aveva profondamente sentito, che Schelling per primo tra i filosofi moderni aveva riconosciuto e la filosofia francese discusso senza sufficiente approfondimento speculativo].

¹³ [Ma ora la persona sta non come un negativo da risolversi nella positività spirituale, ma come un positivo che risolve e ordina in propria funzione la spiritualità stessa. Di fronte al principio dell'autonomia dello spirito si leva il principio dell'autonomia della persona].

¹⁴ Banfi was born in Vimercate, just outside of Milan, in 1886. In 1904 he attended the Reale Accademia Scientifico-Letteraria and graduated in 1908, under Francesco Novati, with a thesis on Francesco da Barberino. He earned a second laurea in philosophy under the tutelage of Piero Martinetti, with a thesis on Boutroux, Renouvier and Bergson. Eugenio Garin points out in the introduction to Banfi's *Socrate* (xiii), from which most of this biographical note is derived, that he studied history of philosophy with Giuseppe Zuccante, who published in those very years a substantial volume on Socrates, an author crucial to Banfi's thinking. The following year he went to study in Berlin and took courses with Georg Simmel, another author who influenced him and whom he translated in the early twenties. After teaching for various years in different *licei*, he obtained his *libera docenza* in 1924, taught as an adjunct in different universities until he obtained the cattedra in history of philosophy at Genova and the following year he started teaching in Milan, where he remained until his death in 1957. Important moments in this biographical sketch are his meeting Husserl in 1923, with whom he maintained a correspondence until the latter's death in 1938. Banfi was a signatory of the "Manifesto Croce" in 1925, though since his early years he felt distant from the Neapolitan philosopher. In the twenties and thirties he published monographs on Galilei and Pestalozzi and editions of Plotinus and Böhme, and befriended young liberals and Calvinists who published in the journal *Conscientia*, where there appeared many pages by Kierkegaard, Simmel, Troelsch, and Gobetti. At the end of 1944 he reached out to the Communist party, participated in the Resistance, and contributed to the "Fronte della gioventù," but significantly for a theoretician he emphasized the practical side of his intellectual commitment. He later became a member of the City Council in Milan and Senator of the Republic, on the Communist ticket; he contributed numerous articles to the party newspapers, and as the years went on his philosophical production diminished precisely in view of social concerns and his teaching.

¹⁵ Republished in *Opere* (1: 275-300). For studies on Banfi's intellectual biography and specific aspects of his work, see Mazzotta; Salemi; Costantino; and Scaramuzza. For the first major retrospective on his thought, see Battaglia, Cantoni and Pellegrini.

¹⁶ Kant was a constant frame of reference for Banfi. See Banfi's *Esegesi e letture kantiane*.

¹⁷ The reader is reminded of the broad historical-semantic envelope of the word "spirito" in Italian, in some ways as complex as the counterparts in French, *esprit*, and German, *Geist*. There is clearly some overlap with the use made by Croce and Gentile, and as a key term in philosophical metalanguage "spirito" did hold a sort of

privileged currency in cultural circles. Though it was not used in a religious sense (except, perhaps, in the later Gentile and in Ugo Spirito), with critical rationalists such as Banfi and the existentialists its value was markedly different from that of the idealists and actualists.

¹⁸ Reprinted in *Opere* (1: 5-92).

¹⁹ For a critical synthesis of Banfi's philosophy, see Rossi (92-107).

²⁰ Banfi's co-editors of the journal and some of his graduate students will later be referred as the "scuola di Milano," to juxtapose to the "scuola di Napoli" of the neoidealists. Members of the Milanese school include Enzo Paci, Luciano Anceschi, Remo Cantoni, Dino Formaggio, Livio Sichirollo and others who will go on to develop their own aesthetic and political theories through the fifties and sixties.

²¹ This long essay was published in two parts in *La Cultura*, Vol XI, 1932, fasc. IV, ottobre-dicembre, pp. 750-774, and then in Vol. XII, 1933, fasc. 1, gennaio-marzo, pp. 174-188. It was republished in the volume *Vita dell'arte* (13-93), from which we will cite using the abbreviation VA. It is also reprinted in *Opere* (5: 5-55).

²² Albeit a transcendental hermeneutic, which was attempted by Karl Otto Apel and Rüdiger Bübner thirty years later.

²³ These critical apertures will be explored by two of his students, Luciano Anceschi and Dino Formaggio.

²⁴ [Fino a che punto resta possibile l'affermazione dell'esistenza senza la correlativa esigenza razionale che tende ad annullare l'esistere, quando l'esistenza si afferma proprio nella ribellione al pensiero?]

²⁵ For a synthesis of Gentile's role in reframing the entire Italian educational system so it reflected the ideals of the Duce, see for example Lo Schiavo (111-119). The bibliography on this topic is vast.

²⁶ For a complete bibliography up to that point, see Bellezza.

²⁷ See the first edition of Pareyson's *Studi sull'esistenzialismo*, which came out in 1943. The article, originally titled "Genesi e significato dell'esistenzialismo," first appeared in the *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* in 1940, 5:326-337. For an English translation, see Pareyson, *Existence, Interpretation, Freedom* (35-44).

²⁸ Cf. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (Part Three). It was Sartre who had addressed explicitly what some of our thinkers here were alluding to or searching for, that is, that knowledge is a type of *relation* between the For-Itself and the In-Itself, and it is upon this relation that the individual can build a concrete rapport with others, whether in terms of language, love, desire, hate, indifference, etc.

²⁹ Not surprisingly, when in 1950 Pareyson republishes all his studies on the subject in the augmented and definitive edition of *Studi sull'esistenzialismo*, this article is expunged.

³⁰ The MS was written in November 1942 and then reworked in November 1943, while he was writing his *Socrates*. [...la persona nella sua esistenza non è né momento o strumento della vita culturale, naturalisticamente intesa, né strumento o espressione

di un ordine trascendente di valori: la persona è un principio autonomo di disvalore o di valore assoluto: essa è la realtà vera, assoluta esistenza negativa o positiva...Il concetto di persona è il limite teoretico di coincidenza e di integrazione di quei dati intuitivi, e nella coscienza comune e nel sapere empirico è sempre determinato in funzione di una loro sintesi parziale, cioè di una speciale direzione o di un particolare equilibrio di quella partecipazione vissuta, cioè dei rapporti dell'io con se stesso o con altri].

³¹ Reprinted in Pareyson, *Studi sull'esistenzialismo* (23-43), retitled "Esistenzialismo 1941." The most thorough study of Italian existentialism is *Esistenzialismo e filosofia italiana*, by Antonio Santucci.

³² Reprinted in Pareyson, *Studi sull'esistenzialismo* 40.

³³ Cf. Grassi, *Vom Vorrang des Logos*, 1939. This book and its Italian version were reviewed positively by Sofia Vanni-Rovighi in *Rivista di filosofia neoscolastica*, and by Cesare Luporini in *Giornale storico della filosofia italiana*, both in 1940.

³⁴ Pareyson wrote monographs on Kant, Fichte, Schiller, and Schelling. For a complete bibliography, see Pareyson *Existence, Interpretation, Freedom* 26-27.

³⁵ The first edition dates to 1950. Compare his theoretical description of the person with that of Banfi, below, note 43.

³⁶ Cf. Pareyson. *Estetica*. Three chapters from this masterwork are available in English in Pareyson, *Selected Writings* 95-140. For a critical reading of the *Estetica*, see Carravetta's "Form, person, and inexhaustible interpretation."

³⁷ Cf. the chapter "Il problema filosofico del marxismo," in Pareyson, *Esistenza e persona* (97-110), where he holds that marxism assumes philosophy resolves itself entirely in praxis as the only meaningful process of history and political action. This will be picked up in the continuation of this study.

³⁸ Italian translations have "opera di tipo indefinito" (Cicognani, cited in Pico della Mirandola, *La dignità* 75n); or "opera di natura indefinita" (Garin, cited in Pico della Mirandola, *La dignità* 75). I have long held the view that Pico could be read through the lenses of existentialism, and will return to this "possibility" in a work in the near future.

³⁹ Other important books by Abbagnano that show his range and breadth are: *Il problema dell'arte* (1925); *Il nuovo idealismo inglese e americano* (1927); *La fisica nuova* (1934).

⁴⁰ Cf. his *Esistenzialismo positivo* and *Possibilità e Libertà*. His *Dizionario di Filosofia* is an unquestioned classic in the genre.

⁴¹ Nino Langiulli's "Editor's Introduction" to Abbagnano's *Critical Existentialism* is a really good introduction to Abbagnano, and the translation—which includes essays up to 1960—is excellent.

⁴² This talk was published as chapter 10 of *Possibilità e Libertà*. For an English translation, see *Critical Existentialism* (168-188).

⁴³ See Banfi's *Incontro con Hegel*, cf. *SF* 3.1-2: 17-18.

⁴⁴ Cf. Croce, *Ciò ch'è vivo*, and Gentile, *Riforma*.

⁴⁵ *Elusive Hermes* (Ch. 1).

⁴⁶ I am only going to refer to one and at this point fundamental text, Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, though one can look up the works of Jean Baudrillard, Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo, and Michel Foucault. For a critical assessment of the many "crises" of our contemporary—especially American—culture, see my *Del postmoderno*.

⁴⁷ Of Della Volpe, who was at first receptive of Heidegger, see *Crisi critica dell'estetica romantica, Discorso sull'ineguaglianza, con due saggi sull'etica dell'esistenzialismo*, and "L'esistenzialismo in Italia." A closer reading of Della Volpe's thought will constitute a chapter of this work-in-progress.

⁴⁸ Among many other possible accounts, see Salvatorelli and Mira (2: 438-596); and Ginsburg (3-91).

⁴⁹ The article was removed in the first issue of 1945. Cf. Alatri (12).

⁵⁰ [Abbiamo prima di tutto il dovere di dare ai migliori militanti della classe operaia e del popolo la possibilità di conquistare le nozioni teoriche indispensabili non solo a comprendere le ragioni di tutto ciò che diciamo e facciamo, ma ad applicare in tutti i campi con spirito d'iniziativa la politica che meglio risponde agli interessi della loro classe, del popolo e del paese, di respingere ogni ingiustificata critica diretta contro di essa, di spezzare ogni attacco al rinato e promettente movimento comunista e socialista italiano].

⁵¹ For the concrete problems on the ground, as it were, see Lanaro (11-42).

⁵² See Banfi, "Appunti per una metodologia critica," in *Analisi. Rassegna di critica della scienza* (Milano), Dasc. 1, 1945 (1-10). He writes: "In its unitary structure, the object of philosophical research is a critical methodology that presupposes a descriptive, precise, differentiated methodology, one that can be derived solely from [critical] consciousness and the concrete methodological experience of the researchers from specific disciplines." [Ma la metodologia critica che è, nella sua struttura unitaria, oggetto della ricerca filosofica, presuppone una metodologia descrittiva, estremamente precisa, differenziata, che può sorgere solo dalla coscienza e dall'esperienza metodologica concreta dei cultori delle discipline particolari] (6).

⁵³ [This war has shown that the so-called warrior peoples, anachronistic as they are inhuman, can win only bloody and sterile battles; they can no longer win wars]. Flora also wrote a passionate critique of totalitarianism, "Gli scrittori e la dittatura," in *Arethusa*, 1944, I, 2 (51-67), which incidentally follows a "Diario politico" by Alberto Moravia (41-50). Though writers were more vocal in their condemnation of Fascism, philosophers preferred to look deeper to the very structure of human thinking and ponder what is this obsession with and mythography of knowledge and metaphysics, if they brought us to this unimaginable hecatomb. Though the limits of Modern Thought had been announced earlier, it is World War Two that signals the beginning of the Post-Modern Age, as I have argued elsewhere.

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Arte italiana e transizione istituzionale: il contributo della scultura alla difficile rinascita

Troppo umana la statua
per raggiungere l'anonimo
Arturo Martini, *La scultura lingua morta*
(Martini e De Micheli 135)

Il presente articolo intende studiare le fasi che portarono ad una rinascita della scultura italiana dopo il primo conflitto mondiale. Lo studio inizierà con una breve analisi della produzione scultorea di regime al fine di chiarire le condizioni in cui operarono gli artisti durante il Ventennio e negli anni della guerra. L'indagine si soffermerà, in seguito, sulla campagna di distruzione delle opere plastiche e monumentali fasciste da parte delle forze partigiane; l'obiettivo di questa sezione della ricerca sarà di dimostrare come la scultura italiana subì pesantemente le conseguenze degli eventi bellici prima di poter rielaborare un linguaggio nuovo e originale. La parte centrale del saggio studierà la scultura del Dopoguerra, approfondendo alcuni casi esemplari; l'analisi permetterà di comprovare come gli scultori attivi all'indomani della Liberazione riuscirono a conciliare la propria sensibilità creativa con i mutamenti storici sopraggiunti, dando vita ad un rinascita artistica, evidente, in particolare, nei monumenti alla Resistenza.

Dopo la destituzione di Mussolini ad opera dell'intesa tra i gerarchi e Vittorio Emanuele III e la fine del fascismo, l'arte italiana visse un periodo di incertezza e di profondi cambiamenti, diversamente da quanto era accaduto all'ombra delle istituzioni di regime. Queste avevano infatti operato, soprattutto nel corso degli anni Trenta, un certo controllo nei confronti della creazione artistica, riuscendo ad imporre una linea di condotta generale anche nel campo culturale, evidentissima per quel che concerne i mezzi di comunicazione quali radio e cinema. Anche se non si può parlare di una vera e propria arte di stato imposta dall'alto, paragonabile a quella elaborata nella Germania hitleriana, è chiaro che anche il mondo delle arti fu soggetto ad una forma di inquadramento, che rese la produzione artistica conforme ai