Guido Cusinato

Periagoge. Theory of Singularity and Philosophy as an Exercise of Transformation

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Guido Cusinato's book represents the development of a work published in Italian in 2014 under the title *Teoria della singolarità e filosofia come cura del desiderio* (Theory of Singularity and Philosophy as a Care of Desire), and is part of the Brill series "Philosophies as a Way of Life. Texts and Studies", directed by Michael Chase, Eli Kramer, and Matthew Sharpe. As is stated right from the Introduction, this book was born from the need to better understand a particular experience that the author had when he was a young student who had just begun to study philosophy at the university. The author first referred to this particular experience "with the expression 'promising void', and later 'auroral void'. It occurs as a consequence of a crisis, and at the termination of a process of emptying and of radical detachment from my own self-referential self. The auroral void is not a void to be filled; it must not be understood by means of the category of lack" (p. 1). This experience is then recounted in detail in a later chapter (pp. 250-253). It is hence a text of philosophy that nonetheless starts out from a first-person lived experience, that is, an experience of transformation caused by the violent impact of a crisis. The intent is to identify the possible phases of a possible exercise of transformation designed for personal and emotional growth. And this in an era such as the current one, characterized by a reigning narcissism that has in fact removed the great questioning of the meaning of existence. In doing so, instead of directly describing this experience of transformation, the author chooses "the 'longer' path, which proceeds through confrontation and dialogue with the philosophical tradition", searching for traces of this experience of transformation in some of the major philosophers of the West. And what mostly strikes the author "was the very famous one in which Plato, in the Republic, dwells on the movement carried out by the prisoner in the cave, immediately after she had been freed" (p. 1). This is the very famous passage of *Republic* in which Plato describes the movement of the head with which the prisoner of the cave, as soon as she is freed, turns and shifts her gaze, which until then had been fixed upon the shad-

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ows cast on the wall of the cave. It is the technique or art of periagogic conversion (*techne tes periagoges*) (see R. VII, 518d) that also gives the book its title.

The fundamental novelty of *Periagoge* with respect to most of the studies devoted to the theme lies in the rethinking of the ancient theme of spiritual exercises, proposed once again by Pierre Hadot at the end of the last century, not within the perspective of immunization from the world (as withdrawal from exposure to the perturbations of the soul, isolation, impassibility and imperturbability, obliteration of *perturbationes animi*, *anakorein*, *apatheia*, *ataraxia*), but within the perspective of an openness to the world made possible by the emptying of the ego and by a care of desire. This reference to the emotional sphere must not be intended as regression to subjective, individual, or intimist feeling. Indeed, the entire *Periagoge* aims to highlight the transformative potential of practices of "emotional sharing" and to shift the focus from the axis of individualistic feeling to that of the sharing of feeling, so much so that practices of emotional feeling are placed at the basis of human relations and social ontology.

Drawing on phenomenological terminology, the author proposes to rethink the philosophical exercise of transformation not as a bracketing of the world, but as an epoche of the ego. The basic thesis is in fact that the philosophical exercise of transformation necessarily presupposes an exercise of emptying – a genuine "ego-dissolution" – capable of opening up to the experience of a void, not as a lack to be filled, but as a "promising" or, better, "auroral" void, since it is capable of making space for something that has not yet arisen. It is only by passing through this experience of ego-dissolution that it becomes possible to give rise to that uncompleted "fragment of truth" that is hidden in the depths of our soul, and which indeed coincides with our vocation and our desire.

In the background of Cusinato's analyses is not only Pierre Hadot's pointing to the practical dimension of ancient philosophy and to the tradition of philosophical "spiritual exercises", but also Max Scheler's phenomenology and his crucial contribution to philosophical anthropology, accompanied by the idea that philosophy can and must justify itself as an exercise of transformation. Scheler forms the central node of a broad network of references that includes, among others, the biosemiotics of Jacob von Uexküll – which Scheler introduced into the German philosophical debate – and Schelling for his conception of the succession of levels (*Stufenfolge*) of the organic, for his discussion of the ex-centricity (*Excentricität*) of the human being, and, above all, for the presuppositions and implications of the conception of Spirit (*Geist*) as "hunger to be born (*Hunger nach dem Seyn*)".

The position of human beings in the cosmos is thus characterized by the fact that they come into the world without having finished being born, under the banner of a finitude and an incompleteness that fuel a peculiar "hunger to con-

tinue being born". It is in relation to this hunger that our most significant possibilities for *transformation* unfold, going far beyond the levels of *change* that involve conformist adaptation to particular states of affairs. And it is in relation to this very hunger that philosophy can set the theme of anthropogenesis, formation (*Bildung*), and the care of desire, proposing itself as an exercise of transformation, a modality of elaborating its own possible self-transcendence.

The form of singularity that our existence can assume depends on how we elaborate our hunger to continue being born every day. That being the case, we could introduce a variation on Seneca's famous formula (*Epistulae ad Lucilium*, XXIV, 20) – an original declension of his *meditatio mortis* – according to which "we die every day (*cotidie morimur*)", adding that at the same time *cotidie nascimur*, since we are born or, better, we can continue to be born every day because of our incompleteness and openness to the world. In the perspective outlined by Cusinato, moreover, the two levels of learning to die and living converge, for *learning to die* is part of the *ars vivendi* (p. 259), so much so that, as we have seen, the connection of each person – *qua* singularity – to her past cannot be described in terms of *identity*, *continuity*, or *coherence*.

This aspect can be clarified with reference to Fontana's work (*Concetto spaziale, Attesa, Rosso*, 1965) and to the art of *kintsugi*, bearing in mind that, with examples such as these, the author shows how philosophy can find, outside itself and its own history, useful images, metaphors, and keys for thinking about the possibilities of human beings, for interpreting their condition, for refining their mode of feeling, and for modifying their mode of seeing themselves and their openness to the world. It is also through such reorientation of gaze and feeling that philosophy becomes an exercise of transformation, since we continue being born in relation to how ready we are to feel, to see, and to interpret what happens to us. Fontana's slash, therefore, "represents the wound of the other that opens to the personal dimension" and makes possible the act of self-transcendence that "enables the singularity to experience the dimension otherwise inaccessible to the two-dimensionality of the self" by making possible "a new level of attunement with the world, in the sense of *Weltoffenheit*" (p. 47). Perhaps where the concept of personal singularity is best made explicit, however, is in reference to the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, a term composed of "gold" and "to bind, to connect". According to Cusinato, a personal singularity is like a vase put back together through the art of *kintsugi* (p. 49). By putting the shards of the vase back together, the vase is reborn thanks to a precious metal and becomes a unique work of art that bears the marks of its history, as testified by the gold veins that reconnect its fractures. In the same way, a personal singularity expresses who she is as she faces the crisis, rises up from the fall, and puts her pieces back together. The key question is that the personal singularity

is reborn only in the encounter with another singularity. In the vase put back together through the art of *kintsugi*, there is an alien element that was not there before: gold. This gold, which acts as glue, is represented in the personal singularity by relations of care and practices of emotional sharing made possible by the encounter with the other.

Right from the title and the first pages of the book, the Platonic theme of *periagoge* turns out to be central: that is, those themes of changing direction of the gaze and "converting" the entire *psyche*, enabling the beginning of the ascent of the freed prisoner in the cave described in the seventh book of the *Republic* (R. VII 518d3-7). Cusinato proposes to interpret this path not as a process of conforming and straightening out to the world of ideas, but as a process of deviation and severance from the customary perspective, and therefore not by starting from the final moment when the prisoner, once out of the cave, seeks to look at the Sun (R. VII 515c-d), but from the beginning, that is, from the movement of the *periagoge* (R. VII, 518d). This movement cannot be motivated either by the will alone of the one who carries it out – as if everything proceeded from the "inside" of the prisoner who changes position – nor by the vision of the world of ideas, which are not visible from the inside of the cave. At the basis of *periagoge* is instead an encounter that calls into question the certainties with which the person was previously "filled": "it is the consequence of a disturbance, a dialogue, or an encounter that challenges the certainties and images that had filled my existence until that moment" (p. 2).

What triggers *periagoge* can be, for example, an encounter with a person charged with "exemplarity", such as Socrates, an *authoritative* promoter of the differentiation and singularity of his interlocutors, and therefore a figure at the antipodes of contemporary *influencers* who instead present themselves as a *model* to be conformed to, as an *authoritarian* promoter of uniformity. More generally, the question of *periagoge* is crucial because "the periagogic turn" is the starting point of every personal singularity, and philosophy can be conceived as "the art of periagogic conversion" (p. 13) and, as such, "it serves to learn to exist" (p. 14).

The protagonist of the *periagoge* is the person insofar as she transcends what Cusinato calls the "little self", that is, the self-referential subject who says "I" and seeks self-affirmation and recognition in others. However, the transcendence of the little self to which many traditions of philosophical and spiritual practice allude does not necessarily occur, as Simone Weil suggested, with the "obliteration of our individuality in the whole" (p. 4), but rather with a repositioning brought about by the impact of the events and encounters that the world has in store for us and which make us experience our finite and incomplete individuality: "The personal singularity is the form that an individual's existence assumes when she

is reborn in the space offered by an exemplarity, once her own little self has been transcended, and, subsequently, in taking care of the other, she herself become a space to be offered for the growth of the other" (p. 4).

Using the analogy of the cave as a useful explanatory reference point to illustrate the terms of the question, the repositioning that can be associated with the "hunger to continue being born" is not a reversible *change* that can be determined as a reaction of adjustment to facts (such as a new relationship with the usual shadows cast on the cave wall), but a *transformation* that involves the experience of a crisis and the passage to a new equilibrium, to a new way of seeing oneself and things (*epistrophe* and *metanoia*), to a different way of feeling one's own connection to the world and to others.

In transformation, there is the emotional intensity of the "oceanic feeling" of Pierre Hadot, which is also expressed in those spiritual exercises of the ancients that call for a view of the world and human affairs from above, that is, the adoption of a "cosmic" perspective: by adopting this perspective, one grasps one's own being as a non-self-sufficient part among the parts connected to the flow that involves all things. What becomes significant here is the concept of *fibrillation*, about which Cusinato writes: "This fibrillation represents the moment of transition in which the order of the heart is affected by the rhythm of the world" (pp. 196-197). Our existence assumes the form of a singularity when the world "touches" us, depending on how we direct how we act, starting from the awareness of the emotions produced by this being touched and moved: recognizing that she is not enough for herself and cannot self-referentially ground herself upon the self, the person as conceived by Cusinato can only grasp herself beyond the Cartesian perspective by saying "I am moved, therefore I exist" (p. 197).

The proposal made by Cusinato in this book requires a reinterpretation of philosophy in the sense of an exercise of transformation. Perhaps this is one of the weaknesses of the work, since it would have been interesting to devote more space to explicating the relationship between the theoretical and the historical-philosophical levels. While the author finds clues in the classics under analysis (Socrates, Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Scheler, Bergson), he leaves others, mentioned at most briefly, in the background (Epicurus, Plotinus, Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Augustine, Meister Eckhart, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein). Yet it is true that a single book would not suffice for such an operation.

It has been said that philosophy is seen here above all as "the art of periagogic conversion" (p. 13). This can happen because it is at the same time "an exercise of emptying, not filling": more precisely, the "generative moment is in emptying oneself in order to open oneself up to the new, while adipose satu-

ration represents the passive, the repetitive, and conformist moment" (p. 254). Once again, Plato helps to clarify an essential point of this perspective: emptying points back, for example, to the purification (*katharsis*) and liberating effect of the Socratic *elenchos*, the refutation that allows one to "purge" oneself of false opinions and to emerge from that condition of ignorance (*amathia*) that consists in not knowing with the pretense of knowing, associated with the self-referential cult of the little self, egotism, and excess of *philautia* (cf. Plato, Leg. 731e-732b).

From this perspective, far from being a fruitless impasse, the Socratic aporia can fulfill the function of an antidote and openness to wonder. More generally, it is not a matter of emptying oneself of desires, but rather of "craving for recognition". The exercises of dis-tension that are useful for this purpose "aim at suspending the will and the affective structure of my little self, with all the burden of pretenses, worries, and intentionalities that characterize it" (p. 273).

However, different attitudes are possible on the part of those who have a potentially illuminating and transformative experience. Cusinato makes this point by comparing and analyzing some pictorial works, such as *The Supper at Emmaus* by Tintoretto contrasted with those of Matthias Stom and Rembrandt, or the *Cestello Annunciation* by Botticelli with the *Annunciation* by Titian. In Tintoretto, for example, the possibility of distraction and lack of attention to what is being sought is represented at the very culminating moment of an opportunity for sharing and transformation, while in Botticelli's Mary, the decisive instant of twisting is depicted, in which the loss of balance and its recovery coexist, accompanied by a gesture (that of the angel's fingers) that gives a non-authoritarian orientation and seems to offer support from below. Once again, a choice is to be made between, on the one hand, the drive for self-transcendence and the breaching of equilibrium that come "from deep within" contingent interactions with the world and with others, according to the dynamic illustrated by Hokusai's *Wave* (pp. 80-82), and, on the other hand, the imposition of orientation from above, according to the model of authoritarian verticality captured in Climacus's *Ladder* (pp. 71-74). The analysis of these paintings allows Cusinato to illustrate from multiple angles the fact that the hunger to continue being born involves pain and continuous breaches of equilibrium, because it requires stepping outside the limited contours drawn by self-referentiality, within which one could only repeat oneself. This approach also leads to an emphasis on the social dimension of the formation of singularity – understood as a process of self-transcendence and transformation – which runs the risk of being relegated to the background in some classical representations of philosophical exercises, where, for example, coming out of the Platonic cave seems to be a solitary endeavor, or where the Stoic sage is said to be sufficient for himself. A careful analysis of the texts actually shows

that what Cusinato calls “generative sharing” between singularities is always presupposed to some extent, and this book has the merit of insisting on the inescapable centrality of the dimension of community that accompanies the experience of transcending one’s own little self, starting from the generative, pre-philosophical, anthropogenetic, and revolutionary act of “generative sharing of consumer goods” (p. 342).