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BEYOND THE EIDETICS OF LIVING BEINGS:
CONTINGENCY, PLASTICITY, INDIVIDUALITY

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1. *The question of plastic form and its epistemological significance*

In *Knowledge of Life* George Canguilhem writes that «[i]t is quite difficult for the philosopher to try his hand at biological philosophy without running the risk of compromising the biologists he uses or cites» [Canguilhem 1952/2008, 59]. At the same time, as if he would like to respond to the objection that «[a] biology utilized by a philosopher» is «a philosophical biology, and therefore a fanciful one», he asks: «Yet would it nevertheless be possible, without rendering biology suspect, to ask of it an occasion, if not permission, to rethink or rectify fundamental philosophical concepts, such as that of life? Can one reproach the philosopher who has taken up the study of biology for choosing, among the teachings he has received, the one that has best enlarged and organized his thought?» [Canguilhem 1952/2008, 59]. It seems to be a rhetorical question which nevertheless exonerates the philosopher as innocent declaring the need of a kind of a *metabiological* approach in the biological problems which can be performed by the philosopher who assumes the task of the inquiry of living reality. In my opinion, such a kind of metabiological duty is achievable through a fruitful dialogue of metaphysics, phenomenology and morphology, inasmuch as each of these disciplines aims at the investigation of life. Establishing such a dialogue I will try here to give preferences to those positions which defend the role of contingency. Therefore, I will follow the principle that *saving (living) phenomena* means saving their contingency and, hence,

their plasticity and their individuality.¹ From this point of view my attempt will focus on two questions which are strictly connected.

The first one concerns the notion of form as plastic. The second one regards the epistemological significance of the question of plastic form.

As concerns the first question, I would like to analyse the question of the form as plastic from an ontological point of view using Franz Brentano's reading of the Aristotelian concept of *eidōs*. In his commentary of the Aristotelian ontology Brentano clearly points out that Aristotle's *eidōs* is never a rigid entity, but a "plastic receptor", bound to matter and distinguished – especially in living beings – by a metamorphic quality. It means that a living being is able to change, to develop – including the self-erasure processes –, if we would try to read the notion of *steresis* in the terms of dynamics of the so-called *idia*, defined by Brentano as *unknown individual differences*. It is the deep synergy between the notion of individual substance (*tode ti*) and that of form which allows Aristotle to elaborate a conception of living beings as absolutely moving, *in fieri*, according to his epigenetic ontogenesis emerging from his biological works. Such a doctrine receives still today the attention of authoritative biologists. For instance Ernst Mayr recognizes that «[a]fter all, Aristotle's *eidōs* had many of the properties we now ascribe to the genetic program» [Mayr 2004, 54],² where the central point is that the genetic program shows us how a teleonomic processuality characterizes living beings, inasmuch they are never given or entirely realized from their beginning as already fully accomplished entities.³ In this sense, I would like to take into consideration the ontological question of plastic form referring to Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and Hans Blumenberg's critique of it, mostly as concerns the limits of Husserl's impressive research on the so called *eidetische Variation*. I will try to

¹ The concept of *sozein* should actually be discussed asking what *saving a phenomenon* means and what a phenomenon has to be kept in safe from.

² In this context Mayr also refers to Jacob's and Delbrück's works [cf. Jacob 1970; Delbrück 1971] according to which the Aristotelian notion of *eidōs* presents characters which are today recognized to be proper of the genetic program.

³ The kind of metaphysics which I let interact with the ontology of living being as emerging from the biological inquiry is far from the paradigm of a rigid preformed identity, even if Aristotle's position is marked by a teleology that today's biology instead abandons.

understand the problem of eidetic variation looking at some theses of biology considered as morphology, namely as investigation of the *form of living forms*.

The second question, which is related to the first one, concerns the epistemological significance of the question of plastic form. Indeed, the assumption of a “mobile” ontological paradigm of the form implies the gnoseological question of the limits of an eidetic investigation, which are also the limits of the concept and of the representation as ways in which we try to grasp a form as a phenomenon that gives itself to us. The crucial gnoseological problem is transcendental since it is the question of the conditions of possibility of the intelligibility of the form. I would say that such a question is definable as a problem of critical epistemology – as Jacques Monod would suggest [cf. Monod 1970/1972, 37] – or as a real *obstacle épistémologique*, according to Gaston Bachelard’s view.⁴ The question of the formal condition of intelligibility of the form as plastic is not so obvious for philosophy in times of new realism and actually it is already a fundamental question of the metaphysical tradition with its conception of form as the intelligible *par excellence*, as the ground founding the epistemic model of knowledge as *scire per causas*. For metaphysics this implies an ontological primacy of necessity over contingency, namely over that which has the nature of plasticity as concerns both the ontological level and the notional one. In short, if we would like to talk about living forms essentially subjected to a continuous morphogenesis never definitely accomplished, then the question – both for the philosopher and for the life scientist – is the following one: what are the conditions of possibility of the knowledge concerning life? We are always in front of the sceptical doubt which insists on the fact that our knowledge is doomed to failure since an a

⁴ Bachelard’s epistemological obstacle does not mean the presence of «external obstacles, such as the complexity and transience of phenomena, or [...] the weakness of the senses or of the human mind» [Bachelard 1938/2002, 24]. It consists rather in «sluggishness and disturbances» which appear «at the very heart of the act of cognition, by some kind of functional necessity» [Bachelard 1938/2002, 24]. In my opinion they are depending on the way of speaking through absolute metaphors (in Blumenberg’s sense) which characterizes the scientific knowledge and those ontological operations which also life sciences perform.

priori knowledge, which is able to “anticipate” (through concepts, representations, deductions) that varied world of changing forms in which life consists, is impossible. Hence, the only heuristic possibilities are a posteriori descriptions which always remain limited and incomplete. In other words, our knowledge can only be a descriptive taxonomy which fails to account for the variation of the form according to the idea of knowledge as a kind of a valid knowing since it is able not only to declare that there are phenomena and how they are but especially why they are in that way.

The “why question” is still open in the field of biology since the most part of the genetic, phenotypic and epigenetic mutations have a casual character. It means that by their nature they escape the rational claim to identify a first principle or cause which explains why things are necessarily going or have gone in a certain way. The point is not that things do not necessarily go in a certain way in the sphere of living beings, but that it can simply happen that things have gone in a certain direction rather than in another one. In *The Epigenetics Revolution* Nessa Carey refers to Audrey Hepburn’s health influenced by the malnutrition which she suffered as a child during the Dutch famine. Carey explains that

[d]ifferentiated cells remember what cell types they are, even after the signal that told them to become kidney cells or skin cells has long since vanished. [...] Imprinted genes get switched off at certain stages in development, and stay off throughout the rest of life. Indeed, epigenetic modifications are the only known mechanism for maintaining cells in a particular state for exceptionally long periods of time [Carey 2012, 236].

Then, what is the epistemological problem? Accentuating the character of dependence between individuals (subsumed under the universal generalities of kinds and species to which they belong) and their specific classes of belonging – according to a model that life sciences import from the classical Aristotelian metaphysics – implies that the individual forms are “watered down”, even if we would like to look at the concrete reality which shows itself to our senses and gives itself to our heuristic reflection. The experience shows us that our knowledge of the individuals is not something wrong since it allows us to “get our hands”

(with all the problems that this obviously entails) on the world of the living, achieving the expected results. It is enough to consider the work regarding the genetic code which, properly deciphered, gives us back the confirmation of an invariability in the life-world, almost surprising in spite of the infinite individualities, each of them irreducible as concerns its own genetic makeup. The fact is that the effectiveness of our forecasts leads us to rely on our knowledge, but such a fact must be justified and understood as an epistemological question which implies an ontological question in itself. The epistemological question refers back to the ontological one, which I would formulate in these terms: if an intelligibility of form is possible for us, what space does contingency occupy in reality, what role does it play in determining the individual being of each living, what does it actually add in more, what does it entail? Is it truly conceivable as that which distinguishes itself from the essential core – and hence as something inessential in the determination of an individual – according to the Scholastic ontological distinction between *substantia* and *accidentia* by which the Aristotelian much more complex and problematic position is summarized? At this point, I would like to face the questions from the point of view that is most congenial to me, namely that of the metaphysical tradition with the help of Franz Brentano's ontological perspective.

2. *Metaphysics, phenomenology, biology in dialogue*

A good starting point may be a question that Brentano poses in his commentary on Aristotelian ontology, *Von der mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden nach Aristoteles*.

In the second chapter Brentano reads the question of the accidental being – one of the senses of being according to Aristotle [cf. *Metaph.*, E, 2, 1026a34] – and he wonders in what way the project of a general ontology as investigation of the being *qua* being is possible in front of the explicit Aristotelian indication that there is no science of the contingent since it is not possible to identify a necessary cause of it⁵ – for Aris-

⁵ The cause of the accidental is an accident itself [cf. *Metaph.*, E, 2, 1027a8] and hence a science of the accident is impossible [cf. *Metaph.*, E, 2, 1026b4 and 1027a19-

total a condition that defines the knowledge specifically as *episteme*. Brentano treats the question sagaciously and his proposal essentially anticipates Husserl's phenomenological solution of the problem of the *eidetische Variation*. During his analysis of the matter Brentano writes:

But did we not just follow Aristotle in determining the peculiarities of the *on kata symbebekos*, and have we not thus subjected it to scientific scrutiny? True enough, but one must make careful distinctions. The concept of the *on kata symbebekos* is not *kata symbebekos* relative to that to which it is attributed, just as the concept of an individual is not itself an individual. Though it is not possible to have a science of individuals, yet the concept of the individual and its relation to species, etc., can be scientifically discussed. An individual in general can be divided into individual substance and individual accident. In the same way the impossibility of scientific scrutiny of *things* which are *kata symbebekos* does not vitiate the possibility of scrutinizing scientifically what *kata symbebekos einai* is [Brentano 1862/1975, 11-12].

We can find a confirmation for the fact that for Brentano it is possible to bypass the ban imposed by Aristotle, as we read in the just mentioned passage, in a very perspicuous notation where Brentano affirms that the ontological relationship – the «close affinity» [Brentano 1862/1975, 7] – between independent being and accidental being follows the same close relationship between kind and difference in the definition, even if accidental being does not constitute the specific difference that is anyway a determination inscribed in «the essence of the other [*scil.* of the kind]» [Brentano 1862/1975, 7]. And about accidental being he adds: «But cases where it serves in a definition in the place of the unknown difference are not particularly rare, and it is often of service when we try to find the latter. The *proprium (idion)* of the *Topics* is in this way united with a being [*Wesen*]» [Brentano 1862/1975, 7-8]. In other words, the individu-

26] since the object of a science is a necessary reality, a reality which is always or for the most part, while the accident is never that. This epistemological criterion implies that we can have an empirical experience of the accident but not an epistemic knowledge.

ality of each individual person worsens, compacts, thickens in the proper features or ontological traits that are often completely accidental, in the sense that they do not change the intimate nature (essence, *Wesen*) of the individual if they change and nevertheless they show the difference – which Brentano defines as *unknown* – existing between individuals belonging to the same kind and the same species. This classic position of traditional ontology actually seems to be aware of the ontological force of accident despite the *chablon* according to which metaphysics would be essentialist at the expense of the contingent nature of reality. With the appropriate differences such a position can also be considered a good philosophical transcription of what biology teach us about the evolutionary processes that lead to final results arising from «an interaction of numerous incidental factors» [Mayr 2004, 33]. In this way, Mayr clearly affirms that «[c]hance with respect to functional and adaptive outcome is rampant in the production of variation» [Mayr 2004, 33]. Perhaps it is not so interesting, given that we consider evolution on a population and non-individual level. But on an individual level the things are not very different since «[d]uring meiosis, in the reduction division it [*scil.* chance] governs both crossing-over and the movement of chromosomes» [Mayr 2004, 33], namely those processes which in the sexual reproduction of the living preside over the emerging of different individuals of the same species, different from their parents and different from each other, even if they are born of the same parents.

Returning to Brentano's analysis, he specifies that in order to understand how things concerning an individual substance are we need the specific difference – namely the species that articulates the belonging of that individual substance to a kind – as well as an even more precise degree of distinction, although changeable, plastic, iridescent, depending on the givenness of unnecessary conditions of being, as concerns the individuation of the traits of the species, but unique and individually embodied so that each individual is distinguished from others of the same species. These traits are not the result of a need that presides over the ontogenesis of the individual, even if they are undoubtedly bound to the genetic belonging of a specimen to one species and not to another.

We can describe this fact ontologically in the following way: being a philosopher does not belong to the *eidōs* of Socrates as a human

being, but being a philosopher is a trait in Socrates that however distinguishes him *essentially*. To anyone who asked what “Socrates” is, without knowing that Socrates is the proper name of a human being, we could legitimately respond: “Socrates is a philosopher!”, bypassing the need to specify that Socrates is a human being. This is because the determination of being a philosopher is inscribed as an ontological possibility in the human being Socrates and Socrates is just a human being and not a horse, who does not have the faculty of philosophizing by nature. Such an example gives a vivid image of what for its part the morphology of the living beings shows us. As a matter of fact, we here move in the sphere of phenotypic plasticity. In their essay *Phenotypic plasticity in development and evolution: facts and concepts* [2010] Fusco and Minelli present the state of affairs to us. The idea of a completely passive condition of living forms as exposed to evolutionary forces must be balanced not only with the self-organizing ability of the living being, but also with its disposition as a system able to self-regulate and to keep homeostasis unchanged as well as with its ability to heal alterations (e.g., epigenetics) which it may encounter in relation to a certain environmental relationship. Such an activity of the living being occurs also at a phenotypic level: the phenotypic evolution depends on the phenotypic variation and in multicellular organisms the phenotypic variation is to be read as «variation in developmental trajectories throughout the ontogeny» [Fusco & Minelli 2010, 547]. Hence, «[a]n individual organism’s trajectory is the result of a unique interaction between its genome(s), the temporal sequence of external environments to which it is exposed during its life and random events at the level of molecular interactions in its tissues» [Fusco & Minelli 2010, 547]. It means: randomness does not play a merely accessory role in the determination of the living being. On the contrary, it is an essential component of the constitution of the living being according to its plastic development. This thesis of the biological inquiry concerning the morphological, physiological and behavioural plasticity of living being does not clash against the ontology of the singular identity pursued by philosophy with its tools.

The ontological perspective emerging from Brentano’s position allows us to underline the sense of a *modus essendi* of the living be-

ing, namely its irreducible plasticity lying at the core of its essence. Its plasticity constitutes the irrepressible element of determination, whose loss would imply the loss of the individual as determined singularity. Nevertheless, such a plasticity does not throw away the aspect of invariance in variation and of unity in the diversity. Such an aspect opens to the epistemological possibility of an intelligibility of form as plastic. On the one hand, a putting in brackets of the contingent is problematic since the contingent binds the form of being of the living form. On the other hand, the presence of the contingency as a reason that supports the plasticity of the living does not however prevent us from observing the form of the living being as the ability to be “stable” and “mobile” at the same time. At this point we are entangled in Brentano’s epistemological question which he resolves by following that path which also Husserl will follow in dealing with the question of eidetic variation.

According to Brentano we could never have an *episteme* in the manner of a science that articulates its content in an aprioristic theory, namely before any empirical experience of the individual contingent, if it is of the individual contingent that we would like to have a science. Thus, Brentano respects Aristotle’s dictate. However, this limitation binding us to the contingent experience *hic et nunc* does not prevent us from knowing *formaliter* what the contingent is and, hence, from recognizing that we are in the presence of a particular case of contingency when we are faced with single cases of it. The identification of the formal determinations or reasons of what the contingent is does not represent an operation in our knowledge that violates the Aristotelian principle of the impossibility of a science of the accidental since we will only describe the characteristics which formally, namely in a pure way and a priori, contingency has and which distinguish it from the necessary. It does not mean determining a first cause, because such an act of knowledge requires that we look each time at the concrete existence of the contingent *hic et nunc*. In other words: this way of proceeding means the possibility of an eidetics of the contingent as such and not a specific doctrine of the accidentals as they give themselves in the world. Brentano seems to be satisfied with this solution which after all follows the canon of the traditional *metaphysica generalis* that is a general, formal ontology. If it is possible to identify the defining characteristics of

the ontological modus of the accidental, this latter can be regarded as the object of an epistemic knowledge in the same way as the substance itself or its principles (*archai*) and elements (*stoicheia*), identified by Aristotle in matter, form and privation as regards the kind of the sensitive substances (*aisthetai ousiai*) [cf. *Metaph.*, Λ, chapters 2-4].⁶

In front of the same question that in phenomenology is known as the problem of the eidetic variation Husserl's position is even more radical, as we can see in one of the most complex volumes of *Husserliana*, namely *Zur Lehre vom Wesen und zur Methode der eidetischen Variation* [cf. Husserl 2012]. As the title of the volume suggests, for Husserl the eidetic variation is not to be understood as an ontological fact, but for phenomenology it is rather a method of knowledge of the phenomena in the sense that the phenomenologist recognizes that each type (*Typus*) is a variation of an *eidōs*, but at the same time it is the individual concretion of the pure *eidōs* which notoriously is an *unreal* and *ideal* (given) phenomenon for Husserl who therefore defines himself as a Platonist.⁷ The articulation of the *eidōs* in *types* has to do with the fact that each *eidōs* manifests itself in the mundane sphere through adumbrations. The *Abschattungen* – that we can also think of as the phenotype of the phenomenon (*eidōs*) as given in flesh and blood – make the ideal purity of the *eidōs* “dirty”. They do not pertain to the regime of the necessity of the *eidōs*. On the contrary, they are given possibly only thanks to the relevance of each of them to the categorical level through which each type is articulated. For instance, the fact that a table has spatial dimensions has to do with the fact that the category of spatiality

⁶ It is interesting that the criterion of variation in a permanent identity is present also in Aristotle as concerns the question of the principles of the individual substances. Indeed, he recognizes that on the one hand the principles are different for the different substances, but on the other hand they are universal and identical for all substances in an analogical way (*kat'analoghian*) [cf. *Metaph.*, Λ, 4, 1070a31-33].

⁷ Cf. Husserl 1913/1983, 40-42. According to the distinction between «object» and «something real», an *eidōs* (or *idea*) can be defined as an (ideal and hence unreal) object and it is «an atemporal being». Such a distinction implies for Husserl an «abyss» between consciousness, and therefore, its eidetic object and reality: «Here, an adumbrated being, not capable of ever becoming given absolutely, merely accidental and relative; there, a necessary and absolute being, essentially incapable of becoming given by virtue of adumbration and appearance» [Husserl 1913/1983, 111].

concerns the material existence of the table, but not its existence *idealiter* as an essence that inhabits a material. In a sense, the adumbrations are determinations which do not articulate the eidetic categories. They are only typological determinations, and for this reason they can, according to Husserl, easily be left out and put out through the *epochè* so that each type can be reduced to the *eidōs* under which it is to subsume. Then, the effective reality does not seem to have any real power of determination of the content of the *eidōs*, whose formal determination derives from the work of the transcendental eidetic reduction through which it becomes an immanent object of a consciousness as given to consciousness. Indeed, *eidōs* in Husserl's phenomenology represents an absolute purification from the contingency depending very closely on the way in which the transcendental reduction constitutes every given phenomenon as intentioned by a conscience. The *eidōs* appears and has a phenomenal status only if it enters the sphere of a consciousness. The entire ontology which Husserl builds in the first book of *Ideas* and which he presents as the general ontology at the base of the different regional eidetics grounding the various corresponding empirical sciences [cf. Husserl 1913/1983] makes sense only if the *eidōs* is grasped by the subject's gaze.⁸

Certainly, Husserl is convinced that what is identical (the *eidōs*) in different types is a universal which is responsible for the principle of unity of all single phenomena that otherwise would only be scattered among their shadows. The types, according to a Hegelian terminology that Husserl uses, are "moments" of the eidetic general being in the sense of an identity that is shared between the various single concrete moments [cf. Husserl 2012, 14], defined by Husserl as *die strenge Identität des Allgemeinen*. The fact that the *eidōs* is a correlate given of consciousness does

⁸ I have not here the possibility to discuss whether the position which poses the ego as condition of possibility of the phenomenality of phenomena and therefore of the *eidōs* should be defended or not according to the counter-positions that seek to free the phenomena from the transcendental subjectivity, as for instance Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of donation proposes [cf. Marion 1989; 1997; 2001; 2005]. However, there is no doubt that the question of the ontogenesis of a phenomenon seems to concern exclusively its relationship with an intentional subject and not the problem of its own constitution by itself.

not mean that it has not an ontological consistency, even if it is an incorporeal object. It is a given that fills the eidetic intuition or that which Husserl also calls the “ideation as act of grasping the essence” (*«Ideation als Wesen erfassender Akt»*) [cf. Husserl 2012, 29]. The givenness of the essence is attested through or in the specific act of the ideation, but for Husserl there are various degrees of evidence. The apodictic evidence, in which an essence is fully manifest in its indubitable truth, is almost a sort of borderline case. However, the *eidōs* is always that to which the types refer in approximation. Husserl calls this approximation *variation*: *«In der Variation habe ich Selbiges, das seine wechselnden Varianten hat. [...] In der Veränderung habe ich ein Individuelles, das durch eine Zeitdauer hindurch fort dauert und in verschiedenen Phasen dieser Dauer wechselnde Zustände hat, es ist in jedem Moment dasselbe, aber in jedem Moment anders»* [Husserl 2012, 219].

What is unsatisfactory in such a dialectic of sameness and change? The problem is not that it seems to violate the principle of non-contradiction, but that it assumes two ontological levels: one is that of an invariance and the other is that of a changeability of traits that have then necessarily to be assumed as unstable and transient traits and therefore as discardable in the act of ideation. This is precisely the result of a method by which reality is read and interpreted. On the one hand, Husserl’s phenomenology recognizes the importance of an effective reality, namely the contingency determining the variations. On the other hand, this variation is irrelevant for the purpose of grasping the essence, the *eidōs* as the invariable in the variation. In this sense, such a phenomenological position can be considered as essentialist and every kind of essentialism is notoriously viewed with very little sympathy. Nevertheless, not every phenomenologist is an essentialist, which can be exemplified with Hans Blumenberg who outspokenly criticizes Husserl’s position.

3. Life-world: Blumenberg’s revisited phenomenology in dialogue with Goethe’s morphology

In the essay *Lebenswelt und Technisierung unter Aspekten der Phänomenologie in Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben* Blumenberg gives us an extraordinarily lucid analysis concerning life-world. His departing point is

the following fact: «*Alles, was in der Lebenswelt wirklich ist, spielt in das Leben hinein, wird genutzt und verbraucht, gesucht und geflohen, aber es bleibt in seiner Kontingenz verdeckt, d.h. nicht als auch-anders-sein-könnend empfunden*» [Blumenberg 1981/2012, 23]. Hence, a philosophy that wants to be faithful to life-world needs to open up the accidental element characterizing life. Blumenberg's critique of Husserl's *Wesenslehre* concerns quite evidently its reduction of the *Lebenswelt* in its "potentiality to be something other" to an "object distinguished through ideality" («*durch Idealität ausgezeichneten Gegenstand*») [Blumenberg 1981/2012, 25]. Indeed, in this way Husserl proposes a limit-concept of life-world (*Grenzbegriff der Lebenswelt*) which is themed as a well determined invariable object inasmuch as it is regarded by the "phenomenological eye" only as an *eidos* at the expense of its ontological wealth, which is instead contingent and multiform. Hence, Blumenberg is very explicit in declaring the loss in the *Wesenslehre* and in the method of the eidetic reduction which "gains" a limit-representation (*Grenzvorstellung*) of life-world as an ahistorical (*geschichtslos*) reality: «*[D]ie Ungebundenheit der eidetischen Variation [wird] zurückgeführt auf die Methodik der Beschreibung*» [Blumenberg 1981/2012, 25]. In other words: the various and unpredictable content of life-world is assumed as a noetic object of possible *cogitationes* described purely and a priori according to the method of the eidetic description. The consequence is then the loss of the concrete human being (*der konkrete Mensch*) in its infinite and open morphogenesis of its Self, always susceptible to metamorphosis, since such an eidetic doctrine chains the human being to a static and rigid figure, namely to an invariable eidetic representation.⁹

⁹ Cusinato highlights the problematic nature of an eidetics of the living being, whose «identity cannot be thought as substance which remains always the same» [Cusinato 2018, 33; all the quotations from this work are my own translation]. The science, which has an eidetic constitution as epistemic knowledge, has the limit of «focusing attention on the general, the repeatable, the reversible, excluding the singular, the unpredictable, the irreversible» [Cusinato 2018, 33]. On the one hand, Cusinato shows the "positivity" of Husserl's eidetic variation since it is a restriction for the variation which is not posed by the subject, but which is «given objectively by the phenomenon itself» [Cusinato 2018, 122]. In that sense, such a constraint constitutes the essence of the real, concrete phenomenon. On the other hand, Cusinato points out that the living being, and specially the person, is the transgression of the variation since it is an «open *destination* [...]

The most relevant problem, however, is that Husserl's eidetic variation considers contingency only in relation to the need for the position of a given *eidōs*. In this way contingency does not count as an ontological manner of phenomena free from any eidetic determining pre-giveness (*Vorgegebenheit*). Despite the aim of revealing life-world in its irreducibility to the order of the necessary, Husserl presents the *Lebenswelt* as the object of a theoretical description which implies the *epochè* of contingency that is precisely the trait of the unpredictable variability in life-world impossible to be deleted according to Blumenberg. Since for him a radical phenomenology should lead to a *Forcierung der Kontingenzenz* [cf. Blumenberg 1981/2012, 48] he promotes a revision of the Husserlian concept of life-world which would be a betrayal of the spirit of phenomenology as openness to the phenomena as such inasmuch as Husserl's concept of life-world is the result of the methodical instrument of reduction which seeks the "unbreakable sameness in the otherness" of the general essence,¹⁰ namely the invariable form of each phenomenon (including world and life) purified from any accidental character.

Blumenberg's revision seems to be much more generous to the concrete, effective life-world than Husserl's methodological path, but it poses us again in front of the question of the conditions of possibility of a knowledge of life that could be able in some way to mend the tear with the reality that the essential eidetic nature of the scientific model of knowledge produces. In a sense, the epistemic knowledge of life cannot renounce its eidetic structure since that element of invariance, of stability, is proper of reality that is not limited to being a confused self-con-

non-deductible from an already accomplished *eidōs*» [Cusinato 2018, 124]: «It is possible to develop the concept of identity by resorting to Husserl's eidetic variation. In this case, identity becomes a material constraint for the possibilities of variation of the Self. Nevertheless, a personal singularity is just that which can overcome such constraints by a self-transcending. In this way it can express its own physiognomy» [Cusinato 2018, 12]. From an epistemological point of view such an ontological condition means that our knowledge of life has to consider the variation as free from ontological, strictly determined rules. In his critique of a pure eidetics of life Blumenberg underlines the impossibility of previsions concerning the variation because of the contingent character of the variation itself and the role of the chance in it.

¹⁰ Blumenberg's interpretation of Husserl's phenomenology outlines Husserl as an essentialist thinker.

tradiictory chaos. Every phenomenon shows itself in its essence. This main thesis in phenomenology determines its eidetic approach to the phenomenal world. Nevertheless, at the same time, in order to be on the side of life-world, our knowledge must take into account that variable rhythm which is proper to the life and which emerges from the nature of living beings, as Blumenberg points out. We can for instance refer to those processes of speciation which represent an ontological dynamic of development in the life-world between permanence and uniqueness. Such processes give us a vital and moving image of living reality which structurally is always open to a constant novelty as well discussed by Sean B. Carroll, who summarizes such a matter of fact with the following motto: «Existing genes and structures provide the means for innovation» [Carroll 2005, 288]. In other words: in force of their nature – which is the element of invariance – living beings are structurally forms of givenness ontologically new, unexpected and unpredictable.

What we are facing here is a delicate balance analysed by Monod in his famous book *Chance and Necessity* – a work which is today outdated as regards some assertions, but not as regards the ontological paradigm proposed by him. According to it living reality gives itself between the existence of structures endowed with the “property of invariance” and the “occurrence of perturbations” in these structures [cf. Monod 1970/1972, 29]. Certainly, our point of view about life and living beings is today quite different from the claim underlined by Monod in the seventies: «We would like to think ourselves necessary, inevitable, ordained from all eternity. All religions, nearly all philosophies, and even a part of science testify to the unwearying, heroic effort of mankind desperately denying its own contingency» [Monod 1970/1972, 44]. Instead, today the prevalent perspective is opposite, if we consider the “principle of weakness” lying at the base of the different disciplines. For instance, theology has become weak in order to save human contingency and finiteness; philosophy centralizes the role of contingency and otherness as well as the plastic nature of life;¹¹ the life sciences have

¹¹ The notion of plasticity plays a fundamental role in the book by Catherine Malabou with the paradigmatic title *Ontologie de l'accident. Essai sur la plasticité destructrice*, where reality is seen in its constitutive contingent plastic nature [cf. Malabou 2009].

since long abandoned “orthogenetic” visions and liberated the evolutionary processes from the teleologic criterion by pointing out the presence of an irregular zig-zag movement in living beings. Manfred Eigen and Ruthild Winkler highlight this in a volume with an emblematic title: *Das Spiel*. They warn us that the game is a «*Naturphänomen, das in seiner Dichotomie von Zufall und Notwendigkeit allem Geschehen zugrunde liegt*» [Eigen & Winkler 1975, 11]. There is a clear Goethean morphologic perspective that lies at the core of this ontological vision of natural life between necessity and contingency. As is well known, Goethe considers metamorphosis as a “venerable” but at the same time “dangerous gift” («*höchst ehrwürdige, aber zugleich höchst gefährliche Gabe*» [Goethe 2000, 35])¹² since it is tension, “game” between two forces, namely the *vis centrifuga* and the *vis centripeta*, the “subversive” one which destroys the form (and hence the knowledge) and the “conservative” one which is like a tenacious resistance that on the contrary preserves the form. Such an image of metamorphosis as a dialectic between the tension towards destruction and dispersion and the tendency to persistence can be described referring to Eigen’s and Winkler’s analysis of the form of living beings:

Das Erscheinungsbild der Wirklichkeit ist stark strukturiert. Konservative Kraftwirkungen frieren den Zufall ein und schaffen beständige Formen und Muster. Dynamische Ordnungszustände entstehen aus der zeitlichen Synchronisation physikalischer und chemischer Prozesse unter ständiger Dissipation von Energie. Die Ordnung des Lebens baut auf dem „konservativen“ wie auch auf dem „dissipativen“ Prinzip auf. Die Gestalt der Lebewesen, die Gestalthaftigkeit der Ideen, sie beide haben ihren Ursprung im Wechselspiel von Zufall und Gesetz [Eigen & Winkler 1975, 87].

¹² Cf. Goethe 1988, 43: «The idea of metamorphosis deserves great reverence, but it is also a most dangerous gift from above. It leads to formlessness; it destroys knowledge, dissolves it. It is like the *vis centrifuga*, and would be lost in the infinite if it had no counterweight; here I mean the drive for specific character, the stubborn persistence of things which have finally attained reality. This is a *vis centripeta* which remains basically untouched by any external factor».

At this point, how can we read life-world in front of the aporia of the intelligibility of an order which escapes an aprioristic eidetics since it is essentially determined in a part by chance, but which cannot be reduced only at the level of an empirical variable because of the presence of a certain permanent necessity? The question of the legibility of the world is expressly posed by Blumenberg who asks whether «phenomena can “be read”, reality can be spelled as if it were exposed in an open book, whose characters await only to be deciphered» [Bodei 1984, ix].¹³

We could proceed in this way, if living reality were marked only by the order of necessary rules and by the trait of generality. But we are discussing on forms of life that are structurally marked by their own accidental singularity. Blumenberg offers us a *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit* which has its strong point in a “weak” idea of concept. Exactly this is the fertile and epistemologically fruitful aspect of his thought which allows a use of metaphors in front of a reality which eludes every rigid conceptual determination. Blumenberg explains that a concept must be undetermined enough to grasp the concrete with its novelty in comparison to that which is already met and experienced.¹⁴

It is a significant change in the idea that concepts are able to catch reality according to a vision which believes that concepts are ways to fix things against their dispersion and their escaping from our gaze. Blumenberg, however, is aware that the concept is the result of an *actio per distans*, inasmuch as it is operative in the distance from its object as a kind of its replacement. By its nature as a substitute – which reminds of Heidegger’s meaning of phenomenon as *Erscheinung* in the sense of *das Meldende* [cf. Heidegger 1927/1993, 29-30]¹⁵ – a concept is as an im-

¹³ All the quotations from Bodei’s essay are my own translation.

¹⁴ Cf. Blumenberg 2007, 11-12: «*Der Begriff muß genügend Unbestimmtheit besitzen, um solche herankommenden Erfahrungen noch so erfassen zu können, daß entsprechend zweckmäßige Einstellungen auf sie auch dann bezogen werden können, wenn im Detail in der vollen Konkretion Abweichungen von vergangenen Erfahrungen bestehen*».

¹⁵ According to Heidegger, phenomenon as *Erscheinung* means that the thing (the proper phenomenon in strict, “original” meaning) never shows itself by itself, but through something other which makes it known («The expression “appearance” itself in turn can have a double meaning. First, *appearing* in the sense of making itself known as something that does not show itself and, second, in the sense of what does

age or a representation, actually «*das Instrument [...] der entspannten Vergegenwärtigung des Nicht-Anwesenden*» [Blumenberg 2007, 27]. In this way, as a substitute open to the novelty of reality the concept is above all «*das Instrument einer Anwartschaft auf neue Gegenwärtigkeit, neue Anschauung*» [Blumenberg 2007, 27]. In short: without concepts we cannot observe anything, neither in the first nor in the second moment (namely in the time of the experience and in that of reflection) since the concept performs the same phenomenological function that Heidegger attributes to the *logos* as *deloun*.¹⁶ The concept is a kind of manifestation. But it is a manifestation of manifestation, given the phenomonic character of reality. It means that the possibility for a concept to reveal reality lies in a prior availability of the latter to be a phenomenon, to give itself to us in a manifestation. Because of this primitive openness of reality to us the concept can be a sort of facilitation for the «*Verfügbarkeit des Gegenstandes [...] abrufbar zu machen*» [Blumenberg 2007, 28].

This phenomenological thesis corresponds to Goethe's trust underlying the morphological project and in a way still grounding life sciences today. It is a trust not in the cognitive human possibilities, but rather in the phenomonic ones of natural life. Blumenberg is careful to refer back to Goethe's words in the *Ergänzungen zur Farbenlehre* – (a phenomenon means: «*in seiner ganzen Einfalt erscheinen, seine Herkunft aussprechen und auf die Folgerung hindeuten*») which he comments in this way: «The Goethean pragmatics of knowledge is determined by the belief that man does not force his way into nature as an intruder but always already enjoys the richest communion with truth from the midst of nature and by virtue of its favor» [Blumenberg 1960/2010, 29].

the making itself known – what in its self-showing indicates something that does not show itself» [Heidegger 1927/1996, 26]). In this way the concept *Erscheinung* marks the presence of an absence and the necessity of a substitute for the phenomenality. In a way, Blumenberg's metaphorology depends on a similar dialectic of presence and absence in phenomenality, as I will try to show.

¹⁶ Cf. Heidegger 1927/1996, 28: «Rather, *logos* as speech really means *déloun*, to make manifest “what is being talked about” in speech. Aristotle explicates this function of speech more precisely as *apophainesthai*. *Logos* lets something be seen (*phainesthai*), namely what is being talked about, and indeed for the speaker (who serves as the medium) or for those who speak with each other. Speech “lets us see,” from itself, *apo...*, what is being talked about».

Hence, the notion of concept as *deloun* gives us a fertile heuristic possibility, inasmuch as we recognize that concepts “constitute objects”¹⁷ and are “representation of representation” («*Vorstellung der Vorstellung*»),¹⁸ i.e., reduplications that reveal a transcendental opening of subjectivity to reality – of course, with all the problems that the openness of the knowing subject to the world as its object of knowledge implies. However, the thesis relevant for us is the fact that the presence of concepts – as Blumenberg suggests us – marks the absence of phenomena¹⁹ and this is a stalemate for us since it is the fundamental question on the validity of our knowledge. Such a question is typical of each theory that comes after the mere empirical experience of phenomena. In order to get around it Blumenberg offers us an epistemologically important use of metaphor. Since the metaphor «*nutzt [...] eine Stelle schwacher Determination aus*» [Blumenberg 2007, 61], it dribbles the restrictions of too strong determinations such as the concept of an essence as a marker of a closed and immobile identity.²⁰

Indeed, Blumenberg is convinced that the metaphorical way can be helpful for establishing «a more friendly and trusting relationship» with nature [Bodei 1984, xix]. In this manner it would be possible for us to «discover a hidden and forgotten wealth of meanings» and create «a new way of relating to the world» [Bodei 1984, xix]. From this point of view, then, our language as well as our concepts, our images and our representations are not merely a means between us and the phenomena. They have rather a heuristic function in continuity with the human,

¹⁷ Cf. Blumenberg 2007, 40: «*Begriffe beruhen nicht nur auf Gegenständen, sondern Begriffe konstituieren auch Gegenstände*».

¹⁸ Cf. Blumenberg 2007, 40. If a phenomenon shows itself through a representation, then a concept is a representation of a representation according to the logic that a concept is itself an object of representation.

¹⁹ Actually, it is so also for Husserl, who considers that the object in the eidetic intuition is given as if it would be present in flesh and blood, even if it is not materially in this way. That is not only since it is impossible for a material phenomenon to be literally contained by the “space” of the consciousness in its extension, but rather since the power of the concept is to “recall in presence” a phenomenon which is not *hic et nunc* in front of us.

²⁰ I do not completely agree with Blumenberg on this aspect since in my opinion a lot depends on the content that the concept brings in itself.

albeit in a sense impossible, desire that the world can reveal itself in the exact predictability of its phenomena, giving itself generously and gratuitously in the complex of its meaning as «a totality of nature, life and history»:

Der Wunsch, die Welt möge sich in der anderen Weise als der der bloßen Wahrnehmung und sogar der exakten Vorhersagbarkeit ihrer Erscheinungen zugänglich erweisen: im Aggregatzustand der ‚Lesbarkeit‘ als ein Ganzes von Natur, Leben und Geschichte sinnspendend sich erschließen, ist gewiß kein naturwüchsiges Bedürfnis, wie es das der Magie ist, über unbeherrschte Gewalten Macht zu gewinnen. Dennoch gehört dieser Wunsch zum Inbegriff des Sinnverlangens an die Realität, gerichtet auf ihre vollkommenste und nicht mehr gewaltsame Verfügbarkeit [Blumenberg 1983, 10].

Our desire is nothing more than our request to reality to which we ask not only to become visible to us, but to give us its sense according to that kind of principle which Erich Rothacker defined as *Satz der Bedeutsamkeit* and which Blumenberg takes up as the matrix of our desire through which we establish our relationship with phenomena. There is again something of Goethe’s logic in this hermeneutic phenomenology: nature, defined by Goethe as a *lebendiges Buch*, may still not be understood (*unverstanden*), but it is not incomprehensible (*unverständlich*).²¹ It means that the order of significance is not merely phenomenal in the sense of a relationship of a simple mirroring of the phenomena in our theories. Rather it is a much more problematic relationship. The problem is not that things do not manifest themselves, or that they do it only partially. For Goethe, who often seems to be a hard, more Husserlian phenomenologist than Husserl himself, saying that a thing does not indicate what it is, is affirming that it is not what it is.²² Nevertheless, is the opposite possible?

²¹ Cf. Goethe’s verses in the poetic letter *Mein altes Evangelium* to Johann Heinrich Merck, later published with the title *Sendschrieben*: «Sieh / so ist die Nature in Buch lebendig, / Unverstanden doch nicht unverständlich» [Goethe 1950, 393].

²² Cf. Goethe 1952, 629: «[E]ine Sache zeige nicht an, was sie sei, heißt ebensoviel als sagen, sie sei nicht, was sie sei».

Actually, phenomenology teaches us that *der Schein* is also a case of phenomenality, but the transit from the being (essence) of the phenomenon to its appearing is interrupted by a sort of manifestation that turns our gaze away from the truth of the phenomenon. However, without opening these specifically phenomenological questions, it is important to underline that according to Blumenberg the metaphor is not a dissolution of the limits of our sensible and empirical perception of the givenness of natural phenomena, but rather it is the “device” for a kind of self-recovery for our language (and hence for our rational commitment) whose scarcity and weakness we do constantly experience. Overcoming the ancient, blind, epistemological trust in the «perfect congruence of logos and cosmos» [Blumenberg 1960/2010, 2] since «for antiquity, the logos was fundamentally adequate to the totality of what exists» [Blumenberg 1960/2010, 2], we discover indeed that the poverty in our relationship with the phenomena is the poverty of our language emerging from the way in which the language forms itself before a reality whose givenness is chaotic and irreducible to static models: «*Die Armut unseres Wirklichkeitsbezuges (inmitten des Reichtums unserer Möglichkeitsbeziehung) ist nicht erst eine Armut der Erkenntnis, der Wahrheit, der Theorie, sondern schon eine solche der Sprache, die sich innerhalb des lebensweltlichen Horizontes der nichtmodalisierten Gegebenheit ausbildet*» [Blumenberg 2007, 88]. Our use of metaphors is not a mere arbitrary game, but rather a kind of cure, a remedy that allows us to meet reality, also in its dispersion and its disappearance. In epistemological terms, the use of “metaphorical devices” is precious because of its power of safeguarding the contingency. In this sense, the metaphorical method seems to be an alternative to the eidetic one which purifies reality from its dirty matter through the transcendental reduction. The fact is that our scientific theories, hence also the biological ones, resort to the device of absolute metaphors, that is, of those metaphors that «prove resistant to terminological claims and cannot be dissolved into conceptuality» [Blumenberg 1960/2010, 5].²³ Obviously, metaphors neither express a complete, strict truth nor offer definitive answers, but they help us to inhabit the “texture” of reality as a totality

²³ Eigen’s and Winkler’s game as well as the idea of a cyphered reality or of a codex of life are examples of absolute metaphors.

which as such is never «nonexperienceable, nonapprehensible» [Blumenberg 1960/2010, 14].

It is evident that here we are in front of the bottleneck between the option for what Canguilhem defines «a crystalline (i.e., transparent and inert) intellectualism» [Canguilhem 1952/2008, xvii] – which is for instance the method of an unmitigated eidetics – and the abandonment to the blind mistrust that there is no constant in life-world since contingency is a strange, dark and inaccessible entity which guides life as it pleases. Nevertheless, when Canguilhem warns us that «[l]ife is formation of forms, knowledge is the analysis of in-formed matter» [Canguilhem 1952/2008, xix], he perhaps offers us the hope of reconciling the needs of a knowledge that feeds on the aprioristic claims of a transcendental perspective and those of all scholars who point out that without experience we have nowhere to go. *Knowledge as the analysis of in-formed matter* means that we must not dismember life-world in rigid conceptual forms. Rather, our duty is an inquiry able to look at living in-formed matters as «totalities whose sense resides in their tendency to realize themselves as such in the course of their confrontation with their milieu» [Canguilhem 1952/2008, xix]. According to this methodological principle Canguilhem can therefore affirm that living forms «can be grasped in a vision, never by a division» [Canguilhem 1952/2008, xix], namely not through a rigid determination of their definitory content, which does not consider all variability of their existence *hic et nunc* proper of each living form in its milieu, historicity, etc. In phenomenological terms, it means the necessity to face every singular living form in its individuality according to the different ways through which each form shows itself by itself in its being a form of counter-intentionality. All that implies consequently that the rational commitment in our knowledge of living reality has to respect life as an original phenomenon that as such always precedes the knowledge about it that we can elaborate. Recognizing the dependence of the living being on something other than its own essence (like contingency and variable alterity) is a decisive step in order to understand how living beings are a complex relational plot, which can be neither simply reduced to the model of a pure subjectivity nor hypostatized in the ontological one of an immobile substance whose components must be studied. In other words: each liv-

ing form cannot be described as the mere sum of its parts. In this sense, Canguilhem's observation about the nature of the organisms used for medical or biomedical research is very precious: «Within a given living species, the principal methodological difficulty concerns finding individual representatives capable of sustaining tests of addition, subtraction, or measured variation of a phenomenon's supposed components, tests instituted in order to compare an intentionally modified organism to a control organism, that is, an organism left to its spontaneous biological fate» [Canguilhem 1952/2008, 12-13].

Such a state of affairs would have an absolute ontological legitimacy, namely even outside the rooms of a laboratory, if the living forms were closed, monadic systems, but, as we said, the complexity of the living being makes it an open system, that is, an organism – as Mayr would affirm – «constituted in such a way that additional information can be incorporated during a lifetime, acquired through learning, conditioning, or other experiences» [Mayr 2004, 54]. Among these “other” experiences I consider also the continuous ones of birth of the Self and of its metamorphosis, according to the plastic character of the living being. Still, Canguilhem is very careful to note that often the object of our knowledge is not exactly what it is as a given in nature. Taking the example of the science of crystals, he emphasizes that crystals undoubtedly present themselves as a given object:

Ainsi l'objet cristal a, relativement à la science qui le prend pour objet d'un savoir à obtenir, une indépendance à l'égard du discours, ce qui fait que l'on dit l'objet naturel. Cet objet naturel, hors de tout discours tenu sur lui, n'est pas, bien entendu, l'objet scientifique. La nature n'est pas d'elle-même découpée et répartie en objets et en phénomènes scientifique. C'est la science qui constitue son objet à partir du moment où elle a inventé une méthode pour former, par des propositions capables d'être composées intégralement, une théorie contrôlée par le souci de la prendre en faute [Canguilhem 1968, 16-17].

Such a remark is crucial. The object of life sciences is not the pure vital in itself or life as such, *physei*, as Aristotle would say. Elsewhere, Canguilhem affirms that in biology now «[l]a vie est étudiée au plus près

de la non-vie, à l'état maximum de dénuement de ses attributs traditionnels» [Canguilhem 1977, 115]. There is, therefore, an inevitable and perhaps even in some cases aporetic discrepancy and fracture between what is for us and what is by nature and there is no doubt that living phenomena actually risk to be not protected and saved at all by the ravenousness of our cognitive desire, of our absolute claim to truth. Nevertheless, in my opinion, there is no way to absolutely avoid this danger, if not precisely by providing control tools for the totalizing and dictatorial power of the eidetics as a strong, constitutive and fruitful structure of epistemic knowledge. It is the intellectual honesty that Bachelard calls *l'engagement rationaliste* [cf. Bachelard 1972] in which, perhaps, the very role of philosophy is played according to its critical nature in its dialogue with the eidetics of life. As Canguilhem humorously affirms, «*la fonction propre de la philosophie est de compliquer l'existence de l'homme, y compris l'existence de l'historien des sciences*» [Canguilhem 1977, 139] and, I would add, of the life scientist.

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Keywords

Form; Plasticity; Individuality; Contingency; Living Being

Abstract

Saving living phenomena means saving their contingency, their plasticity, their individuality. A fruitful dialogue between metaphysics, phenomenology and morphology can be of help to investigate the ontological question of form, giving us the possibility to investigate the question of form and its epistemological significance providing a revision of that eidetic approach which instead is in danger of losing the sense of the continuous plastic morphogenesis of living beings.

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