

Introduction to the First Issue

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In his 1967 book *The Politics of Experience*, the anti-psychiatrist R. D. Laing opined that “few books today are forgivable.”¹ Today, many in the academy might think it more appropriate to point at journals as fitting more neatly into this category of inexcusable publications. Such is the surfeit of journals we see around us, some of them excellent, some predatory, some simply surplus to needs. Whether or not *this* journal is a worthwhile venture can only ultimately be answered by seeing what it does. After all, the legitimacy of any enterprise will eventually be substantiated—or not—by its fruits. Yet such a claim is too easy to make, hinging as it does on an as-yet unwritten future. It is no real answer to defer the question; we need to say more about what we hope will validate this journal as a worthy—we daresay even necessary—contribution.

To this end, we hope to explain how we understand the legitimacy of this undertaking by dividing the question into three different but interrelated sub-questions. First, how might introducing a new journal into an already congested environment make sense? Second, what is it that unites the pieces that have been selected for inclusion, i.e., how do they *cohere*? And third, what might the journal and the work that it represents actually *mean* both to and for philosophy? We begin with the special question of this particular issue, into which we will fold considerations of the other questions posed.

What then can we say of the structural coherency of the pieces assembled here, works which in effect represent more than seventy years of diverse and oftentimes divisive philosophical thought? On the face of it, these are

1. R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 11.

markedly heterogenous texts: not only do they engage with a wide range of ideas, approaches, foundations, and traditions—and to different ends—but they also take place in equally distinct arenas, having been originally given in the form of essays and book chapters, interviews and conversations, presentations and responses, lectures and even “radio conferences.” The seeming disunity on offer here is further compounded by the fact that these texts have been variously delivered in French, German, Italian, and English—both spoken and written—and for audiences that range from the general public to the philosophical academy.

The variety of forms here is no accident and indeed this openness to such a variety is intended to be one of the hallmarks of this journal. Not all of the texts in this issue—or, for that matter, in future issues—are systematic essays constructed with publication in mind. While the current law of academic publishing dictates a certain way of “doing” philosophy, we do not believe that these conventions should be taken to exhaust the real possibilities for philosophical expression. Against this current governing custom, we want to suggest something possibly controversial—though it ought not to be—namely, that philosophy is also carried out in interviews, in correspondence, in informal talks and general discussion, in dialogue or aphorism, in narrative fiction and poetic verse, and so on. To this end, philosophy need not be forced to submit itself always only to the laws and ingrained practices of academic publishing.

The first thing to say about this issue then is that the broadness of thematic range and stylistic forms in the essays here is deliberate, and functions in many ways as a better indication of the guiding intent driving this journal than anything else that could be said. In the *Journal of Continental Philosophy* we aim then to be genuinely open to themes, to styles, and to approaches, and while it is true that we are working within and directed toward what is loosely defined as the “continental” tradition, the single and sole “orthodoxy” to which we hope to hold ourselves is that we are interested in promoting genuine thinking, honest and rigorous reflection, and careful scholarship so far as we can. This defines the ideal of what we take to be the measure of real quality. Given that it is impossible to seize reason in advance and prescribe what future forms it must entail, the journal is obliged to reflect this most basic of facts: thought that allows itself the luxury of orthodoxy risks becoming a lazy form of thought, where the danger always presents itself that our thinking is already done for us in advance; that our task is merely to fill in the details. Our hope is to remain open to thinking that does not submit itself to any such straightjackets.

Nonetheless, there are some conventions that are helpful and so we begin here with an overview of each piece before moving on to what—if anything—enjoins them. Thus in her essay, Simone Weil undertakes a meditation on the idea of “reading,” which she thinks can shed new light on a diverse range of conceptual and experiential “mysteries,” especially with respect to our existential responses to the world. A central concern of hers is how we ascribe meaning and respond to phenomena. She argues that, for the most part, our reading of the world and the things in it are immediate, not subject to “interpretation,” at least as this is regularly conceived. Further, Weil says, our readings of the world are invariably tied to particular kinds of valuation, of ethical assessment and orientation, which appear to us as both obvious and immediate. This immediacy of reading, however, does not entail that our readings cannot be changed or challenged—only that such a change or challenge requires a particular kind of labor.

In her article, Simone de Beauvoir defends a conception of literature as a kind of unveiling of something that exists outside itself, a mode of action which reveals certain truths about the world. What we call “literature” is eminently capable of grasping the world—a world which de Beauvoir, following Jean-Paul Sartre, conceives of as a “detotalized totality”; one that is real and independent of us, which exists for all, but is only graspable through our own projects and our perspectives. Yet far from keeping us stranded within our unique subjectivities, literature restores to subjective experience its generality; it allows us to “taste” the world as it exists for others. We can communicate through literature because in it our world, our languages, and our projects overlap. Ultimately, for de Beauvoir, literature is what allows us to see the world as others see it—all the while remaining, irreducibly, ourselves.

Whereas de Beauvoir argues primarily on behalf of “committed literature,” Michel Foucault’s interview with Madeleine Chapsal presents us with a vivid portrait of engaged philosophy. Here we see a strident clarity in Foucault’s embracing of the role, which had been suddenly thrust on him by the reception to his 1966 book *The Order of Things*, of anti-existentialist *par excellence*. In this text Foucault allies himself not only with “French structuralism”—naming as major influences leading lights of the movement like Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan (even while refusing, as usual, to use the appellation)—but also with natural science, specifically genetics. Of particular note is his seeming embrace of scientific realism, that “the scientific and technical world [. . .] is our real world.” Foucault here situates

his search for “systems” precisely as the appropriate contemporary task for anything that calls itself philosophy.

Contemplating systems of a different kind, Hannah Arendt’s “Difficulties of Understanding” addresses familiar territory, namely her analysis of “totalitarianism,” in a new or unexpected fashion. Here we do not find Arendt the Cold War Warrior, defending republican institutions against their totalitarian rivals. Rather, Arendt orients us towards the totalitarian impulses inherent to modernity as such. The threat, she claims, is the desire to reduce understanding to knowledge—to confuse the limitless, even useless, searching and probing of the former, with the effective but meaningless calculation of the latter. Her motivation is explicitly Kantian. Subsuming particulars under universals, or experiences under established concepts, is the definition of stupidity, Arendt claims. Spontaneously inventing new concepts in an attempt to make sense of new experiences is the unique imaginative capacity of the human. Totalitarianism is not a discrete political form that we might now safely historicise or relegate to the tragedy called the twentieth century. It is the new concept that Arendt invented to describe the modern tendency to extinguish, precisely, the invention of genuinely new concepts.

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s lecture on the topic of pain, delivered before physicians at the Orthopädische Universitätsklinik Heidelberg, centers on the overwhelming—and perhaps overbearing—role of technology and chemical pain management in the treatment of pain in contemporary professional medicine. Instead of treating pain as something external to the patient—as something to merely be “numbed” or eliminated—Gadamer returns the demands of pain to that which directly and immediately concerns the patient. Through a discussion of the birth cry, his own lifelong experiences with pain, and what it means to “recover” from it, Gadamer suggests an intimate relationship between the role of pain and a certain conception of hermeneutic experience.

This hermeneutic experience is reconceptualized by Gianni Vattimo, who argues that an identification of interpretation and transformation lies at the center of Gadamer’s work. Yet this identification can only be fully grasped by “pressing” the latter’s thought in a particular direction, such that his claim in *Truth and Method* that “being is *language*”² is read in the most radical sense: hermeneutics requires a profound revolution in ontology, which should take its leave of the idea of being as a given object “out there.”

2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 481.

Vattimo then puts Gadamer's thesis into dialogue with Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, arguing that an object's "objectivity" is given only in the frame of an inherited horizon, toward which the interpreter must assume an explicit responsibility, concluding that a coherent philosophy of interpretation, conceived as a call to transform the objective reality of things "out there" into truth—namely, into language and project—actually can change the world.

By contrast, Luigi Pareyson's piece considers the shifting trajectories of both Heidegger's and Karl Jaspers' post-World War II thought. Beginning with Jaspers, Pareyson argues that two conflicting and equally strong tendencies co-exist in his philosophy—an essentially religious sense of the transcendence of Being; and a sensitivity to the worldly realizations of the human being—and that what characterizes his thought is his ability to indissolubly unite these two tendencies such that each finds its true significance only in the other. For Heidegger, however—so Pareyson contends—the question of the inseparability of existence and transcendence becomes still more acute, in so far as he maintains that it is not the human being but rather Being itself that figures as the protagonist of the philosophical scene. Heidegger thus invites us to a meditation that neither renounces the world nor disregards time, but rather aims at preparing their authentic renewal. In detailing these distinct yet complementary lines of thought, Pareyson maintains that the greatness of both philosophers lies foremost in their allowing the voice of Being to be heard.

Finally, Alain Badiou revisits the aesthetic thought of Hegel in order to tease out the finer points of their respective philosophical systems. Here, Badiou embarks on a close reading of Hegel's *Aesthetics* to investigate how his own recently developed concept of the "index"—designating the crucial point of mediation between finitude and absoluteness, or the means by which finite works "[take] on, if only for an instant, an attribute of the absolute"³—might figure therein, as well as to explore what Hegel would have made of cinema, had he lived to experience it. After first examining the various ways that this "index of absoluteness" functions in the Hegelian conception of art—both according to its canonical forms (sculpture, architecture, painting, music, poetry, and theatre) and its historical classifications (classical, symbolic, and romantic)—Badiou proceeds to investigate whether Hegel's aesthetic system could (and even should) have foreseen the eventual birth of cinema, before finally considering whether this new

3. Alain Badiou, *L'immanence des vérités: L'être et l'événement*, 3 (Paris: Fayard, 2018), 526.

development would ultimately refute or confirm the latter's famous thesis on "the end of art."

In addition to these more standard academic works, we end this first issue with the edited transcript of a series of discussions that were held at Western Sydney University in November 2019. These discussions were motivated by our sense that the specialized worlds to which we have committed ourselves—the worlds of the university, of publishing, of the humanities, and more specifically of the idea of philosophy—are confronting radical challenges today and that we need to address this historical moment and its crises directly. To that end, four panel discussions were organized with our international group of the College of Fellows, leading administrators at Western Sydney University, as well as philosophers and other members of the university community. The resulting discussion and the level of engagement which is evident in the transcript here is offered as an opening to what we hope will be an ongoing and serious debate about the future direction of the world that this journal hopes to represent.

All of which returns us once again to the question of what exactly it is that brings these works together, or of what makes them "coherent"? Clearly, taken on their own, each represents markedly different kinds of philosophies, and even, in some instances, diametrically opposed systems of thought. Read sequentially, however, multiple lines of association inevitably begin to take shape; conceptual pathways that sketch out something like a recent history of contemporary continental philosophy. Thus, as we pass through the texts, the concept of reading opens directly on to the meaning of literature, the philosophy of existentialism cedes (some) ground to the "science" of structuralism, intimate experience leads to the transformation of reality, and the voice of being is raised louder and more insistently toward the absolute.

Yet these apparent connections may in the end prove to be less a common binding agent than a function of montage; a fortuitous (if not apophenic) *result*. To this end, rather than adding the works together in an attempt to conjure up an overall coherency, the better approach is instead to isolate them even further; to strip them down to their basic elements and see what they really have to say. In point of fact, it is this very same "subtractive" strategy that the texts adopt themselves. For despite their apparent divergences in terms of language, history, approach, audience, content, and more, we can nonetheless identify in these collected works a clear *intentional* point of unification, even a common purpose, in that they each ultimately represent concerted attempts to communicate or "get across"—through the

best means available—the very *simplest* of meanings. To be more precise (and precision is very much the name of the game here): irrespective of their occasional complexity, the ultimate aim of all of the assembled pieces is nothing less than the *simplification of meaning*, where “simplification” is understood not only in its immediate elucidatory or clarificatory sense, but moreover in terms of purification and even absolutization.

We could in fact go so far as to say that this intellectual simplification is what foremost distinguishes them as genuine philosophical works, regardless of their sometimes unconventional form, and hence what qualifies them for inclusion here. For if philosophy (at least as it is classically understood) marks out the impassioned pursuit or love of knowledge, then its highest ambition must be as much the generation of meaning as its subsequent revelation, to the extent that philosophical practice is inseparable from the distillation and the transmission of the very knowledge it produces. Indeed, this elementary business of communication—or more accurately: this business of *elementary communication*; of “sensible” disclosure that aims at being at once ideal and absolute—lies at the very heart of what we take to be proper philosophical “conduct” (in the behavioral and organizational as much as the transmissive and transferential senses of the word). Outside of this—that is to say, outside of its “correct conduct” (which bears no fealty to mere convention)—philosophy would seem to be as vain as it is *in vain*.

To be sure, it is precisely this radically “simple” conception of philosophy that is on display in the works gathered here, not only at the level of form (in their organization and address, or their basic “conduct”) but equally at the more general level of content. From Weil’s reflections on the mysterious meaning of “reading” and de Beauvoir’s championing of the fundamentally revelatory power of literature, through Vattimo’s elucidation of the fundamentally transformative dimension of a philosophy of interpretation, up to Gadamer’s deeply personal considerations on the underlying meaning of pain and Badiou’s reassessment of Hegel’s aesthetic writings in light of subsequent artistic developments (as well as his own philosophical thought), each and every one of these texts can be seen to engage—in different ways and to different ends—with the simple idea of elementary communication as being constitutive of proper philosophical conduct. In a word these are all texts that determinedly—and each in their own particular way—practice what they preach.

In bringing these texts together, we hope to have established a particular standard—and tone—in the first issue of this journal; one that reflects the kinds of commitments articulated above, not only concerning the conduct

of philosophy (over and above its academic conventions) but moreover the catholicity of our approach: our openness to a variety of perspectives and kinds of writing. While we do not deny that the thinkers represented here are “big” names that have behind them established bodies of work, this should in no way be taken to indicate an already-existing reputation as being a precondition of inclusion. Rather, we see these works as echoing our fundamental conviction that philosophy equally takes place outside of the “authorized” channels; channels that even these most celebrated thinkers have found constrictive and ultimately prohibitory. Under increasing threat in the academy, it is high time for philosophy—and the humanities more generally—to be genuinely open to new perspectives and forms of thought, to embrace the kind of complex novelty that includes as much the current philosophical avant-garde as the “newness” of work that has been submerged or ignored by virtue of the vicissitudes of time and fashion. In short: to truly practice what we preach.

Finally, while this has been in many ways a collaborative effort, we especially want to acknowledge the very important and significant contributions of our philosophy postgraduate team, singling out in particular Jacinta Sassine, Joshua Visjnic, and Timothy Marshall. It would also be remiss of us not to express our deepest gratitude to George Leaman and Diana Malsky of the Philosophy Documentation Centre, without whose guidance, perseverance, and, perhaps above all else, patience, this journal would not exist at all.