

# Editor's Introduction: On the Turning Against

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This second issue of the *Journal of Continental Philosophy* was initially conceived as a special issue on the subject of “controversy,” with particular attention given to the controversial nature of philosophy itself. While this plan was soon frustrated by the emergence of Covid-19 and subsequent global pandemic, the original controversial premise nonetheless remains a marked feature of the work collected here, constituting a kind of underlying, and hence unifying, logic.

In a way, this is testament to the strength of the original premise. Indeed, it would be difficult for these essays *not* to engage with the subject of controversy. After all, the history of Western philosophy is in many ways a history of controversy, from Socrates—who was of course put to death not only for “corrupting the young,” but also for “not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things”<sup>1</sup>—right up to the present day. We could even say that the art of controversy is intrinsic to the philosophical process itself. It is easy to see how the famous dialectic, for example, from Plato through to Hegel, can be understood in controversial terms, namely, as a process whereby apparent controversies are progressively resolved or “sublated” (only to generate new, more complex controversies)—a correspondence that has hardly passed by without comment.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Plato, ‘Apology’, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 24b–c.

2. Gideon Freudenthal for one observes how the concept of *Aufhebung* perfectly captures the conceptual development involved in the resolution of a controversy, while the celebrated German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer even went so far as to develop his own “controversial dialectic.” See Gideon Freudenthal, “Controversy,” *Science in Context* 11, no. 2 (1998), 159; and Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Art of Controversy and*

More than this, it is the peculiar fate of philosophy that, when certain of its claims eventually cease being controversial—that is to say, when a philosophical proposition finally comes to be widely accepted, or is recognized as having been definitively proven—it will no longer be considered philosophy *per se* but instead becomes something altogether different, something that closer approximates, or even constitutes, science.<sup>3</sup>

That philosophy exudes such a controversial character ultimately comes down to the fact that its proper dimension is that of *thought*, as (strictly) opposed to knowledge.<sup>4</sup> The philosopher's function is not to *know* but to *think*, where every instance of real thought is equal part invention, equal part critique. As Donatella Di Cesare observes in her contribution to this volume, "philosophy points an accusing finger against what is self-evident," and to this end cannot help but appear, at least initially, as being "controversial, devoid of any ambiguous criteria, and without stringent proofs."<sup>5</sup> The philosopher is then quite literally a controversial figure in so far as their *modus operandi* is that of "turning against"—*contra-versy* (or *-versus*), as Justin Clemens reminds us<sup>6</sup>—received wisdom and dominant opinion by appealing to new or un-known concepts and ideas; in short, by *thinking for themselves*. So controversial is this genuine act of thought that it can be perilous for the thinker: as Plato clearly understood (having himself witnessed it firsthand), in turning against received knowledge, the philosopher may even risk death itself.<sup>7</sup>

Much of the work contained here is either explicitly or implicitly informed by this idea that in turning against established knowledge and em-

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*Other Posthumous Papers*, ed. and trans. T. Bailey Saunders (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1896), 4.

3. The best-known proponent of this view is of course Bertrand Russell, who held that "as soon as definite knowledge concerning any subject becomes possible, this subject ceases to be called philosophy, and becomes a separate science," Bertrand Russell, *Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 155.

4. Here we might once again cite Russell and his definition of philosophy as "consist[ing] of speculations about matters where exact knowledge is not yet possible," leading to his knowingly simplistic (but broadly workable) determination that "science is what we know and philosophy is what we don't know," Bertrand Russell, *Bertrand Russell Speaks His Mind* (New York: Bard Books, 1960), 9.

5. Donatella Di Cesare, "It is Time for Philosophy to Return to the City," *Journal of Continental Philosophy* 1, issue 2 (2020), 208–209.

6. Justin Clemens, "Contraversion in the Nursery; or, A Brace of Basterds," *Journal of Continental Philosophy* 1, issue 2 (2020), 233.

7. See Plato, 'Republic', in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 517a.

bracing real thought, philosophy marks itself as a site of intense controversy. It is precisely this idea that underlies Alain Badiou's attempt to overcome our dominant (and dominating) conception of the real—an undertaking that he acknowledges carries with it the threat of violence—as well as Donatella Di Cesare's consonant demand that philosophy renounce its comfortable status as handmaiden of democracy to once again take up a critical position within the walls of the city. Likewise, we can recognize this same basic logic at work in Barbara Cassin and Michel Nancy's challenging reevaluation of the scandalous “other” of philosophy, sophistry, and in particular, its contemporary incarnation in the figure of the psychoanalyst<sup>8</sup>—a configuration that Justin Clemens takes to its extreme in his own exploration of the endless controversies unleashed by psychoanalytic thought.

Yet we can equally discern its presence in Drew Hyland's careful re-interpretation of the Heraclitan fragments (and in particular his attention to the subtleties of the key terms *polemos* and *eris*); in Nicola Abbagnano's conception of a “positive existentialism” which would provide coherent criteria to aid us in making “correct” (if outwardly contentious) choices when faced with different existential possibilities; and in Jeff Malpas's meditation on Johann Gottfried Herder's concept of *Zeitgeist* as a means of navigating our dis-oriented world, where the horizons of place and time increasingly dissolve into an undifferentiated space. So too do we find it in the background of Reiner Schürmann's meticulous analysis of the role of mysticism (in particular that of Meister Eckhart) in Heidegger's thought; in the “madness” (with its triplicated “s”) of Georg Trakl's *Hölderlin*; and in the very drama of philosophical and moral (in)action that plays out in Gabriel Marcel's theatre.

Whether they do so intentionally or not, all of these texts cannot help but grapple with the controversial nature of the task they are undertaking, which is nothing more nor less than philosophy itself. That philosophical education is a controversial enterprise is a given—just ask any philosophy major (or their parents). That it is necessarily so, and that this may even be its principal virtue, is contrariwise a matter of further discussion.

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8. As Lacan himself remarks, “the psychoanalyst is a sign of the presence of the sophist in our time, but with a different status,” Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XII: Problèmes cruciaux de la psychanalyse*, Seminar of May 12, 1965.