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1. From Nietzsche to Heidegger: the reversal of Platonism

Nietzsche's "reversal of Platonism" program was pursued in different ways and along many routes in twentieth Century philosophy. One of its core tendencies is the problematic relationship between the concept of "truth" and the figure of "mask". As Nietzsche says the "secret" of Platonism, i. e. its philosophical core and its undeclared presupposition, is hidden in the bond between two instances, truth and mask. This relationship was investigated by French philosophers in post-war times, with particular regard to the role played by iconic platonic figures such as *eidos*, *idea*, *eikon* and *eidolon*. The problematic connection among these figures expresses one of the main difficulties of platonism: how must the relationship between concept and reality be conceived? Plato's allegories such as light/shadow, original/image, model/copy give some indications, but certainly do not provide an ultimate solution.

Following Nietzsche's footsteps, thinkers such as Foucault, Ricoeur, Deleuze, Mattei, Nancy and Derrida among others, deepened the problematic status of these concepts in Plato in order to uncover what they thought the hidden core of platonism is. Inspired by both Nietzsche's and Heidegger's criticism of Western philosophy's metaphysical ground, these thinkers undertake what will later be called "deconstruction" of Platonism. At the center of this lies the will to unmask platonism as a complex strategy of manipulation and protection. What Platonic philosophical system tries to protect is the concealed foundation of political power through philosophy by posing an absolute reality (the Good) which justifies every tension to truth but remains structurally unattainable. Every human production should be considered an approximation of the perfect reality of the Good which solely through philosophy can briefly be touched and partially conveyed to others. Within this frame, Plato's use of truth-image relation emerges in many of these authors as a problematic feature that must be emphasized in order to check Plato's claim to a philosophical foundation.

According to Nietzsche,[1] truth has a twofold structure: 1. a superficial structure which consists in the possibility for truth to assert itself against masks, alterations, falseness and all claims represented by the so-called "apparent knowledge"; 2. but in actual fact this relationship between truth and mask structurally determines the essence of truth in a much deeper way. According to Nietzsche truth is a mask in itself. Because it is a disguise that conceals the unconfessable scopes which lie behind the surface of the pure search for the truth. The instance of truth as something that is wanted for the sake of itself is the disguise of a well-hidden scope: domination, imposition, strife for power.[2] A hint of this is the identification of the true with the Good, that is with something which is structurally bound to an act of will. It is to a will that the Good appears as something which is worth striving for, as a value. In denouncing the contradictory nature of a value so conceived (something which is subjectively posed as something objectively valid), what collapses is the very possibility of the position of an absolute, and so what declines is the legitimacy of the realm of truth, Being and God. The analysis of the inner structure of truth in its connection to the instance of disguise is thus the ground for the possibility of a reversal which concerns the whole metaphysical traditon since Plato.

So Nietzsche. Out of this basis, from Gilles Deleuze[3] onward French philosophy will deepen this intuition about the self-reversing relationship between truth and mask in platonism and about the dynamics of power concealed in it. Such an evolution would never have been possibile without the intertwining of Nietzsche's position with Martin Heidegger's project of an "overcoming of Metaphysics" and in particular with the role played by his notion of "ontological difference". How do these two components work together along the perspective designed by French criticism of platonism in the twentieth century? Essentially in two ways. First, what is held is the truth-mask game, but that takes place by qualifying this game with the self-concealing structure which animates Heidegger's concept of "Being" as "Difference", that is by submitting it to a radical internal necessity.

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1. See on this NIETZSCHE 1999.
2. See on this GLENN 2004.
3. On Deleuze's reading of Platonism see DELEUZE 1994.

According to Heidegger, Plato himself was the first who, in his dialogues, pointed out the direction of the possible reversal of his system. Heidegger thought the possibility of the reversal is structurally contained in the main core of Platonism and led to the conclusion that Platonism is in its essence the dynamic of a reversal, precisely of the constant inversion between truth and concealing. The truth-mask connection is then read as a necessary historical process, thus submitted to the instance of time. The continuous passage from truth to concealing and backwards is therefore read as a movement that flows in time, the ontological movement of deferring, which is called deferral.[4]

Out of this scenery it is possible to place Deleuze and Derrida, among others, at the crossing between the positions of Nietzsche and Heidegger so described. Of course this is achieved by skipping the numerous other instances which play a role in the bulding of their positions. What determines this crossing is the reading of the internal relationship between truth and disguise/concealing as a movement of difference (Deleuze) and deferral (Derrida) that expresses itself in time.

2. Gilles Deleuze's repetition of Platonism

It was Deleuze the first to think that this movement could be identified as the necessity for truth to produce images, copies and simulacrums of itself.[5] What is essentially truth, wisdom, knowledge? According to Deleuze (like Nietzsche), truth is originally a political force, an instance of domination, of gain and preservation of some kind of power. As a matter of fact, the notion of truth expresses the possibility to establish a hierarchy between the various claims to wisdom; the possibility to select among them and to set an order. Truth expresses the necessity of a series of degrees in the movement of approaching to a first, an origin. But according to Deleuze this "first" has no consistence in itself, since it is arbitrarily generated only to give legitimacy to the possibility of a hierarchy. Rather than being the opposite of the mask, truth becomes the disguise for the instance of selection that could make

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4. On the figure of "difference" as keyword for Heidegger's reading of Plato's metaphysics see Le Moli 2002.

5. See on this Deleuze 1983. orig, in Deleuze 1969. Now also in Deleuze 2004.

peace between the many pretenders to wisdom. A political strategy thus lies at the very heart of Platonism.

Deleuze argues it by analyzing the role that Plato confers to the notions of image, copy and simulacrum in their relation to the truth. According to its very notion, truth is a movement of selfrevealing that occurs in time. What is (or was) originally true can never be attained in its pure origin, in its belonging to a past. It can only be reconstructed, remembered, repeated as it once was. The platonic description of the status of an idea gives structure to this notion of truth. As idea, truth needs to be repeated in order to obtain its identity. But the shifting of time causes the paradoxical consequence that the repetitions of an idea are different from the original one, just like every reconstruction of truth, even the most accurate, remains in its essence different from what has really happened.

Deleuze's thesis is that the necessity for truth to produce images in order to keep itself identical exposes the truth to a movement of difference that consumes it right from the start. Even for Plato, truth in its pureness is declared unattainable. What men pursue is a so-called "second sailing" that departs from the images instead of looking directly into the origin. Men belong to the realm of images, they move in it trying to make out the images that can give them the second best access to the truth they have always lost.

A political feature thus seems to rule the notion of *deuteros plous*. Images are subjected to truth, are in its service, but in the way that they are produced as a reminder that a truth has once been. According to Deleuze, this appears out of the fact that in the Platonic view images can also divert from truth, they can deceive and mislead men from the right path. They can even be used to deny the very possibility of truth instead of pointing at it. This means an image is the opening of a space in which one can decide to follow the truth or revolt against it.

This is what the sophist does, in Plato's description. What makes a sophist different from a philosopher is the different use of the images in their power to recall a . A sophist uses images to lead away from the truth. Aristotle refers to this alternative as a *proairesis tou biou*, a choice that concerns one's own way of life. The formation of an image is thus the opening of a space of freedom in which what differentiates the philosopher from the sophist is the ethical decision about the possibility to recall a lost truth.

According to Deleuze, then, the copies' ability to deceive and the explicit foundation of knowledge upon Ethics, allow this hidden structure to emerge. Copies and images are distant from the truth, but they can recall it, evoke its lost presence. This may arouse the suspicion that truth exists only as a pole generated from the movement of difference, as something to which an image should structurally be referred. This movement activates itself when something that we previously held as a real thing is now conceived as image of something else, that is when it expresses a power of significance that overcomes its status of self-consistent being. In this way what can be observed is not the presence existence of beings, truths and objective knowledges, but only a movement of constant shifting from things out of their ability to become signs, to lose their status of present beings and be deferred, exposed to the movement of difference.

3. The poisoning (of) Platonism: Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida too sees the truth-image pair as an optimal observation point to uncover the problematic core of Platonism. Two texts, which in their sequence form a large part of Derrida's book *Dissemination* (1972),[6] describe Derrida's deconstructive attitude towards these concepts in Plato. The first, *Plato's Pharmacy* (1968), stems from an analysis of Plato's *Phaedrus*. The second one, *The double session* (1970), reads in its first part a section of Plato's *Philebus* as a confirmation of the previous text's critical conclusion.

In these texts the notion of "image" carries a phenomenological feature which must be emphasized. According to Derrida a new relevance must be given to the physical, material aspect of an image. What is at work in the formation of an image is a translation of something ideal in terms of time and matter. This translation follows the physical law of an inscription act and can then be conceived as a "writing" process. Derrida's point of departure in Plato's Pharmacy is therefore the platonic criticism of writing as a means to gain knowledge. According to Plato writing neither contain, nor can excite any real knowledge. Knowledge is defined as a living speech (*logos*) of the soul with itself. What is written (*gramma*) is no longer alive. What is written cannot

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6. Derrida 1972, eng. transl. Derrida 1981.

be questioned because it will not answer anymore. It doesn't utter any sound, has lost the lively power of *phone*, which, at this stage of Plato's opinion, is the direct expression of the living thought.

What Plato seems to build in the *Phaedrus* is then, once more, a hierarchy that departs from the living thinking, which occurs in the present of one's life, and goes through the articulated voice and speech to convey its contents to oneself or to others. Voice and speech would then be direct expression or sign-substitute (*symbolon*) of one's present thoughts. What is written shall no longer have anything more of the living force that moves actual thought. Written speech does not belong to anyone in particular, it can be repeated, copied, pronounced by someone different to the one whose thoughts were "originally" expressed in it. This lack of life is what makes writing akin to painting (*Phaedrus*, 275 D). Both are inadequate reproduction forms (*mimesis*) of something that once was lively and real. Painted figures cannot move, as written discourse bears only an apparent resemblance to someone's living thought.

But the criticism of writing as "dead letter" is only one side of the complex Platonic position towards images. Within the Platonic conception of image lies the "secret" (so again Derrida) of metaphysics as the origin of the process of signification. Derrida's point is that the truth-image nexus is the root of the very possibility of metaphysics. The recognition of something as image represents indeed the birth of the signification process in which something gains a referential, differential value that it does not have when conceived as present being. In being seen as image it becomes significant, which means it is dispossessed of its own reality and submitted to a relation of deferral. As an image, its main ontological feature is no longer its own essence as material thing, for example, but its reference to something else, its function as visible reproduction of an absent model. The opening of such a differential space which dispels any presence brings out the eventuality that the signification will not work, or that it will work in a deceptive way, producing mere resemblance of signification. Thus in Plato the need emerges for a criterion which allows to differentiate between a nexus of signification which is effectively working and one which only apparently works, deceiving those who are not skilled in distinctions. Plato will then distinguish between the case of something that is recognized as an image because it carries a clear reference

to something else, and the case of an image which can conceal this reference, deceiving the observer and pretending to be something signficant on its own.

Once more what thus emerges is an instance of selection. A hierarchical drive seems to bring Plato to the final distinction between a good way of making images and a bad way. The criterion serves to guarantee the existence of a special type of image: one that can effectively lead to the truth, thus making the process of signification a working one and legitimating the distinction of two realms of being.

According to Derrida, the alternative between the good and the bad image in Plato is a real one, i. e. it is the effective possibility to choose between one option or the other. The two alternatives are both experience belonging to a same order of the absence of an origin. That happens because, as one might deduce from many clues in Plato (the theory of knowledge of the *Theaetetus* included) truth presents itself as already lost. Plato interprets not only the written speech as something detached from the original pureness of truth, but also living voice and actual thinking as something which is inscribed, written in the physical substratum of memory. Plato describes everything that pertains to the realm of human soul (thought, voice, memory) as something already deferred, originally shifted from the actual pureness of truth. According to its notion, truth happens in the present. It happens and happens without losing its pureness, maintaning itself in the sphere of an eternal present. But all faculties of the human soul are originally left out from this realm of eternal presence. They pursue their lives in the running of time. The contents of memory are present reminders of past thoughts, the sounds of the voice are present symbols of past memories, the written *logos* is a current and material reminder of the sounds of a lost voice. And so on.

As described in the *Philebus*, memory, the first inscription in the soul, starts the corruption of a supposed original pureness of the truth. The consistence of truth reveals itself, at the end of the deconstruction, derived from the movement of signification, from the deferral that makes written *logos* shifting from itself towards a living voice that should be its root. The spoken voice shifting from itself towards a living thought that comes from a previous impression on memory, and so on.

The supposed present pureness of truth thus derives from the hermeneutical gesture that reads something present as image of something past, as a trace. In the process of signification something loses its own being, is deferred to something else which, from this time onwards, will be deemed as its lost matrix. The recognition of an image represents the birth of the signification process in which something gains a referential value. This process does not have a beginning. It happens continuosly and has always happened.

In Derrida's reading of Plato, Metaphysics is both the recognition of men's living functions as inscribed in this signification space and the effort (or the will) to anchor this eternal flow to a first, a principle. But the continuous gesture which opens the space of signification by overcoming the simple presence of a being subdues this effort to a law which disavows its claims. According to this law simple presence, Being, is a condition which needs to be overcome to make our signification devices working: thought, memory, voice and speech. In letting the root of the signification emerge, Metaphysics thus converts itself in its opposite. Rather than being the ultimate demonstration of the existence of ideas as the eternal essences of things, Metaphysics reveals the notion of "eternal presence" as something which structurally needs to be left behind to let the signification process work. In this self-reversal of Metaphysics even the ideas – for Plato the eternal causes of everything – are shown as something caused, effects of the movement of difference.

4. Conclusion

Much could be said (and much has been said) about the limits of the Deconstruction and the legitimacy of its claims. But still it is not strange that in many ways this criticism seems to work effectively on our comprehension of Platonism as historical experience. Perhaps this "apparent ticking" is based on something solid, albeit problematic. According to Derrida the reason why this "suspicion structure" claims to be working on Plato's thinking is that since its origins, Metaphysics has had something to do with it. By studying the birth of Philosophy until Plato, Derrida may repute Metaphyiscs is a suspicion structure as well. A suspicion cast on the ordinary world, on the realm of what was later – after Metaphysics – called "the world of appearances" (*phe-*

nomena). Following Derrida, Metaphysics may in rather a convincing manner be conceived as the instauration of the space of signification, the opening of a hiatus – and so of a connection – between two worlds. This would actually happen in Plato by seeing something no longer in itself but as sign, image, trace of something that – here the intervention of Derrida – offers itself only as pole of the deferring relation, i. e. finds its consistence in the difference and never as present being. One may dispute the soundness of this last argument, but cannot deny that, in diverting the natural attitude towards experience in the search for a principle which shall lie beyonds and cannot be grasped by senses, Metaphysics justifies with some plausibility the hypothesis to be "the root of every suspicion".

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