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Not only infinity: Poverty and ‘minutiae’ in the philosophy of Giordano Bruno

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Abstract

This paper develops two perspectives. On the one hand, it analyzes and reconstructs the relationship between wealth and poverty as addressed by Giordano Bruno in the *Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, both against the backdrop of the new geographical discoveries and mercantilist theories and in relation to Bruno’s project of ethical, political, and religious renewal. On the other hand, it recovers Bruno’s passages on the ‘minuzzarie’ as a key concept to redress ‘ontological poverty’ by locating in every aspect of reality, even insignificant ones, a center of vital energy. At the beginning and at the end of the paper, mention is made of some Heideggerian writings that reveal some common assumption with Bruno’s ideas.

Doing much with little

The theme of the fragment runs through various areas of contemporary culture. The names of Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin come naturally to mind, as they conceive marginal details, the ‘minutiae’, as valuable memory tools that help stem oblivion (for example, for Warburg the fragment helps identify how 15th century artists transformed Moira, a destructive figure, into Venus – an eternally awakening natural divinity [Warburg 2008: 918]¹); they also see them as tiles that help reconstruct the dispersed mosaic of reality. Hence, a focus on the fragment does not mean surrendering to the incompleteness of thought, but rather working to keep its field of action open (Benjamin 1998: 28–29)².

¹‘If we tried to describe, even tentatively, the result we have reached, we could roughly see it as an illustrated chapter in the history of the self-education of European humanity. In addition, we tried to conceive the memory of ancient expressive values, either written or figurative, as an energetic function of the Europeans’. See Kany (1985).

²‘Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum [...] The relationship between the minute precision of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole demonstrates that truth-content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter’.

Fragments are not merely what remains after experiencing the impossibility of embracing the whole, that is, after the experience of poverty. If it is true that 'God is in the details'³, we also see fragments as a place for unexpressed energy, as the opportunity to start over, to preserve, as Benjamin claims, the spontaneity of a new beginning: 'to begin from the new; to get by with little; to build from little' (Benjamin 1977: 216)⁴. This intertwining of detail and poverty, fragment and lack, appears not only in the works of leading 20th century essayists (Adorno and Canetti in addition to Benjamin) but also in the writings of Martin Heidegger. In the wake of Germany's defeat in 1945 and inspired by a passage by Hölderlin, Heidegger came to consider poverty as the original essence of man, which he understood not as mere deprivation but as 'being without' all that is superfluous: 'Be-ing poor means to be exclusively deprived of what is not needed; it means belonging of old to the unrestrained that liberates; it means residing in a relationship to that which liberates' (Heidegger 2011:7)⁵. Being poor entails a relationship with the center, or rather 'a relationship that is the center, the midpoint, that is everywhere as the midpoint of a circle whose periphery is nowhere' (ibid.: 6). By lacking nothing, Heidegger notes in a way that dismisses the material dimension of existence, we own everything in advance.

Poverty and Philosophy in Giordano Bruno

The connection between poverty and philosophy proceeds from afar. If we owe the famous verse '*Povera e nuda vai, Filosofia*' to Petrarch (*Canzoniere*, VII)⁶, Cesare Ripa in his *Iconologia*, a stunning catalogue of allegories and a barometer of late 16th century culture, recalls how poverty 'tries to untie its bonds with its teeth', in a way that stimulates human industry, sagacity, and art production (Ripa 2012: 483)⁷.

The link between poverty and ingeniousness is widely developed by Giordano Bruno. In the *Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, Bruno's discourse on poverty follows a complex and multi-layered philosophical argument, which requires some knowledge of the economic changes that took place in the 16th and 17th centuries. The lengthy section devoted to Poverty follows the one on Wealth, ordained by Jupiter to abandon its celestial home and 'wander eternally from place to place and from region to region' (Bruno 1964: 156)⁸. Wealth finds itself without a definite home since its main feature

³The expression has been variously ascribed, but its actual source is hard to identify. See Sassi (1983: 86–89), who traces it back to Hermann Usener's *Philologie und Geschichtswissenschaft* (1983: 86) or in some of Dilthey's writings owned by Warburg (1983: 88–89).

⁴See Tiedemann (1999); Schiavoni (2007).

⁵See Heidegger (1994: 9). See also Heidegger (1995: 195, written in 1929–30): 'What is poor here by no means represents merely what is "less" or "lesser" with respect to what is "more" or "greater". Being poor does not simply mean possessing nothing, or little, or less than another. Rather being poor means being deprived'. On poverty in Heidegger, see Winkler (2007), Agamben (2002).

⁶Attention was recently drawn to a passage by Marc'Antonio Zimara, who in the *Problemata Aristotelis* asks: '*Propter quid nudam esse Philosophiam praedicant?*' (Zimara 1579: 146–147), see Sarteschi (2017: 97–98). On ontological poverty and the incompleteness of humans as creatures, see Gilson (1952: 418–419); for poverty in the Franciscan world, see Tocco (1910), Mollat (1974), and Lambertini (2000).

⁷Ripa's work was first published in Rome in 1593; then in 1603, with illustrations. For its various editions, see Ripa (2012: CXVII ff).

⁸In this dialogue, among Bruno's longest and most influential ones, we are told of a council of gods convened by Jupiter to expel vices from heaven and reinstate virtues in their place. The scene takes place in the second part of the Second Dialogue.

is mobility. It depends on those who dispose of it; it may make truth esteemed or support liars, silence the law or make it reign, value wisdom or squash it. By describing a neutral instrument, in itself devoid of value, Bruno (1964: 156) is outlining an ambivalent interpretation of wealth. Only in appearance is it good and useful; in fact it turns out to be a pernicious agent largely associated with dishonest men from whom it receives a perverse shade: Wealth, you 'caused Truth to be banished out of the cities into the deserts, have broken the legs of Prudence, have embarrassed Sophia, have shut the mouth of Law [...] and have made all most cowardly' (Bruno 1964: 156).

The neutrality of wealth, along with its ability to be 'good with good people and very bad with the wicked' (ibid.), puts it at the mercy of whoever uses it – devoid of shame and honor and doomed to wander ceaselessly from hand to hand, from region to region. Bruno ascribes this fickleness to his uncertain time, alluding to the wars that devastated Europe, ruining buildings and countryside, and to the insecurity of maritime trade that was then expanding to the new continent⁹. He sees the source of wealth in fortune, not in work: by no coincidence fortune inscrutably opens and closes its hands to distribute reaches and indifferently reach here and there, uncognizant of merit, blind to those who prudently look for it and deaf to those who invoke it (ibid.: 168)¹⁰.

When Wealth is sent off on her wanderings by the celestial assembly, Poverty comes forward hoping she would take her place. This raises the opposition of Momus: wealth and poverty are not symmetrical opposites, since what is denied of the former may not always be affirmed of the latter (Bruno 1964: 158). Thus, Poverty should also 'go walking through those squares on which Wealth is seen wandering', and 'come and go through the same countryside'; yet they are incompatible with one another and one 'must succeed the other only into places which she leaves', so that one would 'always be at the other's shoulder' (ibid.: 159) and never come into contact with one another. To some extent, the dynamic of Wealth and Poverty as described by Momus reflects the permanent mutation – the 'vicissitude' – that according to Bruno rules over universal life at all levels; but it also embodies the change and social dynamism brought by the new mercantile economy, since Wealth and Poverty play the same tragedy or comedy in the theater of the world (ibid.). They permanently replace one another, with some differences to distinguish them. Poverty is 'winged, dexterous, and swift, with feathers fashioned like those of an eagle or vulture'; but her feet are heavy 'like an old ox who drags the heavy plough with which he digs deeply into the veins of the earth'. Wealth is 'perpetually blind', has 'slow and heavy wings, adapting to herself the wings of a goose or swan'; but her feet are like those 'of the swiftest steed or deer'. Poverty walks barefoot and has injured feet; Wealth is hindered by the weight of its load, which impedes its wings from flying (ibid.: 161). In this description of Wealth and Poverty, Bruno aligns himself with traditional iconography. As Cesare Ripa explains, in Aristophanes' *Pluto* Wealth is depicted as blind and 'she knocks at the door of unworthy men'

⁹See Bruno's sharp ideas on trade in the *Ash Wednesday Supper* (2000d: 27; 2018: 33). See also Papi (1968: 235–358).

¹⁰See also Bruno (1964: 157): 'And may you beware of ever becoming friendly with those men of too much judgment, who seek you; and may those men see you less who pursue you with more snares, traps, and nets of providence. But may you ordinarily go there where are found the most senseless, mad, negligent, and foolish men'.

(Ripa 2012: 513) whom she would not approach were she able to see them; in turn, it blinds them to the knowledge of good. Poverty is portrayed in Ripa's *Iconologia* with her right hand tied to a stone and her left hand attached to a pair of open wings: the poor who aspire to virtue are oppressed by necessity, however much this may make them industrious and wise (Ripa 2012: 484–485).

In Bruno's writings, we find no praise of poverty. Instead, poverty appears as an opportunity to start acquiring what is lacking, either materially or intellectually. We observe here a long-established model¹¹ which emphasizes the ambivalent nature of poverty: Ripa himself, after borrowing the aforementioned image from Alciato's *Emblemata*, recalls Theocritus' comment to Diophantus according to which it is poverty that inspires the arts (Ripa 2012: 483)¹².

For Bruno, the dissymmetry between Poverty and Wealth belongs to the realm of knowledge. As Saulino remarks in reply to Momus, the wisest persons are not the richest because, as we know from the Stoics, they are satisfied with little and are devoted to more worthy activities than running after erratic Wealth and Fortune (Bruno 1964: 157). Poverty and Wealth obey to different motions: while Poverty and Wisdom move along a vertical trajectory, Wealth and Fortune expand on a horizontal one. Poverty's gaze is directed at an extra-mundane dimension as represented by the outstretched wings tied to its arm; the horizon of Wealth is entirely worldly.

All this does not imply a primacy of Poverty, who cannot remove Wealth from the place it has reached after having overcome all sort of difficulties and having acquired its own dignity. Bruno expects individual merit and work to be recognized. He endorses the new social and economic movement that puts goods and money back into circulation, and in which a balanced alternation of wealth and poverty is grounded in their 'closest friendship and familiarity' (Bruno 1964: 162)¹³.

If the two motions are in substantial balance in the worldly sphere, things change when it comes to the capacity of poverty to attain a superior kind of wealth. A rich man who longs for knowledge remains chained and ensnared by his possessions because 'riches offer an impediment to philosophy' (ibid.). There can be no contemplation where 'a throng of many servants stands about', where a multitude of debtors and creditors, the computations of merchants, 'the intrigues of so many thieves, the eyes of avid tyrants, and the exactions of treacherous ministers are importune', so that 'no one can relish that which is the spirit of tranquillity unless he be poor or similar to a poor man' (ibid.)¹⁴.

It is here, and only here, that an unbridgeable gap opens between Poverty and Wealth, and that the former starts holding the latter in contempt. Poverty can break the cycle of material desire driven by an inexhaustible thirst for worldly goods and help us align with the law of nature that makes us crave only for what is required by our

¹¹See, for example, Cicero (1948: VI), Seneca (1934: 5.6), Machiavelli (2000: I.3, III.25), Brucioli (1537: I.34, 132–136).

¹²Unlike Ripa, Andrea Alciato insists on poverty's stifling action (Alciato 2009: 103–104). The reference is to Theocritus, *Idylls*, 21.

¹³The *Supper* (Bruno 2000d: 27; 2018: 33) encompasses a criticism of transatlantic trade, but Bruno is less targeting exchange and enrichment than he is decrying the exploitation and use of violence to subjugate new populations.

¹⁴The Stoic lineage of Bruno's reasoning can be seen in Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae morales*, XVII, 5, and to some extent in Boccaccio, *De genealogia deorum*, XIV, 4.

subsistence. Meanwhile, Wealth deteriorates into Poverty, since it is unable to placate its greed, as nothing ever satisfies it.

If the fatal mechanism of wordly desire leads Wealth to decay to Poverty, in the intellectual world a growing sense of inquiry helps escape from Poverty. The process of acquiring knowledge differs from the appropriation of material goods. The final lines of the proemial epistle of the *Infinite Universe* emphasize their contrast: 'thus not in vain is that power of the intellect which ever seeketh, yea, and achieveth the addition of space to space, mass to mass', because the restlessness of the human mind is capable of contemplating the divine infinity that permeates countless worlds, of undoing its chains, and of reaching 'the freedom of a truly august realm', leaving behind 'an imagined poverty and straitness' to grasp 'the myriad riches of so vast a space, of so worthy a field, of so many most cultivated worlds' (Bruno 1950: 246). Poverty takes us to unbounded knowledge and to an infinity of worlds.

Bruno does not immediately adhere to a pauperistic vision of Stoic origin. He develops a twofold reasoning. On the one hand, he considers the economic aspect of material life, where Wealth and economy play an important, although not exclusive, role; on the other hand, he considers those areas of knowledge where the balance of Poverty and Wealth is at stake, with a particular focus on desire – which, for lack of being satisfied by the accumulation of goods, seeks its fulfilment through the quest for the actual infinity of knowledge.

The relevance of poverty is also core in the work of Marsilio Ficino, the epitome of a Renaissance philosopher and an important source of Bruno's philosophy. In one of his most influential works, a commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, Ficino discusses several passages of *Symposium* 203b. In the seventh chapter of the sixth oration, he recalls that love – the vital link that binds all things, the bond that creates cosmos from chaos and reveals the relationship between God and the world – is born from *Poros* and *Penia*. *Poros* represents the divine ray, *Penia* the lack of light that, 'by some natural instinct' (Ficino 1987: 127), makes the angel turn toward the divine source of radiation – where, as in an original seed, the reasons for things are preserved. The bond of love, the bedrock of cosmic reality, originates from a lack, from every entity's drive to know and to relate to the whole and its origin.

These well-known lines have been recalled because Bruno addresses these very themes in one of his most complex and possibly least studied works, the *Lampas triginta statuarum*. This lengthy text dates to the late 1580s; it was first printed at the end of the 19th century. It can be seen as a discourse on the method to attain and organize knowledge, explained through figures representing statues. In the section *de statua cupidinis*, devoted to the will, Bruno explains that Cupid, conceived of as will and appetite, is ungenerated and serves as a cause and principle of the primordial matter (cause as will and principle as appetite); on the other hand, the appetite inherent in the secondary matter – the composites – belongs to imperfect, diverse subjects torn by the struggle of opposites and who aspire to peace, quiet, and tranquility. Unsurprisingly, Bruno quotes the poet Sappho (fr. 132), for whom Cupid is the child of Heaven and Earth, 'alluding to the will and appetite by which – almost as by a bond of love – the superior bodies provide protection, influence, and cohesion to the inferior realities, who in turn follow and support them' (Bruno 2000c: 1266–1268). Considering Plato's *Symposium*, where wordly love is depicted as the union of *Poros* and *Penia*, and building on Ficino's commentary, Bruno ingeniously discusses not only the possibility of identifying the

unitary plot of the world, but also its countless differences and peculiarities, down to the minimal ones. Cupid is then construed as a spell, or *incantatio*: a word borrowed from the lexicon of magic that Bruno uses in the *Lampas* to designate the slow, spiral motion associated with the lingering of thought. Much alike enchanters, who rely on occult and mysterious principles, the lingering of thought prompts a harmonious yet arcane principle by which we love without knowing why, even though we try to explain it by focusing on facial traits or physical features. The strength of love ‘is born from a deep and indefinable nucleus of individuality’ and it is as inscrutable as the sweetness of a musical harmony (Bruno 2000c: 1272)¹⁵. Just as matter may take countless forms, the human soul is ready to receive new feelings, in a structural and dynamic correspondence between universal life and the human being.

Bruno’s discourse on poverty in the *Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* was inspired by a ‘quasi-mercantilistic’ approach that brought to light an ontological play of opposites which permeates reality. In *Lampas*, Cupid acts in a reality pervaded by differences and distinctions, thus revealing the heterogeneity and imperfection of individual entities.

Minutiae and Minimals

While experienced as dispersed and fragmented, reality contains the sparkle of an ingrained divinity, a ‘Divinity latent in Nature’ that works differently in different subjects and makes them participate in ‘her being, in her life and intellect’ (Bruno 1964: 237). Here we find a key principle of Bruno’s philosophy, i.e., the value assigned to every single element of reality, however small and apparently insignificant. Bruno uses the term *minuzzaria*, an uncommon Italian word¹⁶. In Bruno’s lexicon, it acquires a specific meaning. It indicates the thing, no matter how infinitesimal, that serves as testimony to the principle operating in nature and allows, depending on the state of matter, to ‘see in any thing – however small and exiguous – a world, and not a mere simulacrum of the world’ (Bruno 2009: 258). The order of the world rests on *minutiae*, in conformity with a providential law that cares for ‘minimum matters’ as for the important ones, ‘inasmuch as very great and important things do not have worth without insignificant and most abject things’ (Bruno 1964: 137).

This order is based on universal ‘vicissitude’, whereby everything ‘no matter how minimal, is under infinitely great Providence; all minutiae, no matter how very lowly, in the order of the whole and of the universe, are most important: for great things are composed of little ones, and little things of the smallest, and the latter, of individuals and of minima’ (ibid.). In these lines of the *Expulsion*, Bruno discloses the actual presence of the divinity, that at once and together rules the diversity of the world: ‘Divine cognition is not like ours, which follows after things, but is before things and is found in all things’ (ibid.).

The recurrent use of the term *minimum* takes us to one of Bruno’s last works, the poem *De triplici minimo et mensura*. Here Bruno presents his theory of the *minimum* as the substance of all things; everything derives from it – the monad, the atom, and the spirit – and since ‘the *minimum* vivifies all things’, it cannot be ‘considered a trifle to be overlooked’ (Bruno 1889: 139)¹⁷. Bruno identifies three types of *minimum* (metaphysical

¹⁵‘Est incantatio generaliter dicta, quae sequitur ex commentatione’.

¹⁶See *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* (1961–2004), *ad vocem*; Catanorchi (2014).

¹⁷See de Giovanni (2023: 82–84).

⇒ monad; physical ⇒ atom; geometric ⇒ point); he explains that the *minimum* is spherical in shape (there are no *minima* of different shapes) and that by permeating everything, it constitutes the universal matter, the efficient cause, and totality. Everything that is *maximum* proceeds from the *minimum* and unfolds it; opposites coincide in the *minimum* because in it 'all opposites are identified – the even and the odd, the much and the little, the finite and infinity; therefore, the *minimum* is the *maximum* and everything between them' (Bruno 1889: 147).

Thus everything is determined by the expansion of a *minimum* just as the center expands in the circumference. It is a higher concentration of energy than any mass that proceeds from it by aggregation (Bruno 1889: 142); Bruno calls 'area of Democritus' the smallest of such masses – a circle surrounded by six other circles tangent to each other and to the central one. Ontologically, the *minimum* represents the source of life and vigor, the point of *maximum* energy and vitality that permeates Bruno's infinite universe in perpetual motion. Bruno's omniscientism¹⁸ is grounded more in an ontological reflection on the inexhaustible vitality of the universe than in a geometric consideration of the infinite sphere. Every *minimum* is the center of a circle of life, of impulses, passions, knowledge, and affections; it is a soul that diffuses everywhere through a circular motion as all things 'tend toward the sphere, then they gather again from the sphere to the center' (Bruno 1884: 338). Bruno's polycentric universe pulsates with life that unfolds from the center to the circumference, then returns to the center without having lost any of its energetic power¹⁹.

This complex thematic cluster is encapsulated in the poems *De minimo* and *De monade*, where Bruno builds on clearly identifiable philosophical positions²⁰. It is also underlying a key page of the *Heroic Frenzies*. The fourth dialogue of the first part discusses the complex relationship between intellect and will, and it provides an account of Actaeon's feelings while he is pursuing Diana driven by love for his prey. The intellect desires what it cannot understand: 'by its own light it is moved onward to consider that which contains within itself every kind of intelligible and desirable thing, until, with his intellect, the heart comes to perceive the superiority of the wellspring of every idea, the ocean of every truth and goodness' (Bruno 2013: 117). Yet intellect and will cannot attain the absolutely beautiful and good, but only what participates in beauty and goodness: 'it is neither natural nor appropriate', writes Bruno, 'that infinity be contained, or passed off as finite', because it would no longer be infinite; it can however be endlessly pursued, by a motion that Bruno qualifies as *metaphysical* and which 'circles through the degrees of perfection, to arrive at the infinite centre, which is neither formed, nor form itself' (ibid.). For Bruno, though, this classical image is not sufficient to illustrate the quest for infinity; on the contrary, it reveals how difficult it is to reach the center by traveling along the surrounding circle, because the eternity of the center cannot be reached through endless motion along the circumference. If it is true

¹⁸See Spirito (1977).

¹⁹See Bassi 2014, 2014a, 2014b.

²⁰The Neoplatonic sources of the image of the center and the circumference, along with its Pythagorean origins, are well known: see Plotinus, *Ennead*, VI.8,18; Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*; Boethius, *De consolazione philosophiae*, IV.6. The Neoplatonics used the center and the circumference to illustrate the simplicity of divine nature which occupies the center of the universe, to contrast the unity of the intellect and providence with the diversity of things and fates, and to describe the polarities of eternity and time, of being and becoming. See Belli (2011).

that infinity does not destroy the knower's own agency, it is as true that Bruno sees an insurmountable boundary between infinity and the subject; metaphysical motion represents the subject's effort to erase this limit and fill the lack inherent in every cognitive act – as the 'frenzy' man knows all too well.

The Neoplatonic tradition could only partially serve Bruno. In the 19th century, Bertrando Spaventa observed that the intellectual intuition which Bruno refers to is not immediate apprehension, but discourse and motion that proceeds neither from finite to finite nor from finite to infinity, but from infinity to infinity. This is not a rectilinear or progressive motion; nor is it a circumference. It forms a circuit, instead – and yet Bruno is unable to explain how circling can eventually lead to the center: 'If you do not mean that pursuing infinity is like searching for the centre by circling around the circumference, I have no idea what you mean to say' (Bruno 2013: 117). Bruno points at what Spaventa portrayed as 'the eternal process of the spirit', i.e., 'an advance that is also a return, a going that is a going back [...] a departure from the self to return to the self' (Spaventa 1867: 254). Bruno cannot rely on supernatural intuition (which he clearly rejects in the *Furori*), but neither does natural knowledge suffice for him, since its object is aware of its infinity.

Spaventa effectively argues that Bruno is in search of 'an infinity that prompts an eternal act of infinity'; this infinity does not only belong to the object, but it somehow involves the subject. According to Spaventa, Bruno could not explain the unity of the absolute power and absolute act – 'the true infinity that is eternal problem and eternal solution at once' (Spaventa 1867: 228) – because dogmatism (the solution without a problem) and skepticism (the problem without a solution) will need to wait for Spinoza and, respectively, Kant to unfold their distinctive features. This reconstruction has prompted fiery historiographical debates; it certainly provides an insightful and uncostumary reading of the *Frenzies* and beyond, which does not exclusively draw on Neoplatonic forms.

Back to the beginning

Bruno's claims about motion around the center and along the circumference build on a momentous debate that took place during the 16th century, particularly among Jesuits and Dominicans. The dispute was mainly concerned with the simultaneous coexistence of divine infinity and reality, and on the relationship between human condition and God's providence and foreknowledge; in the background, the theological controversy known as *de auxiliis* focused on grace and confronted the conceptions brought in by the Reform. The debates made large use of the circle and the circumference, an image borrowed from the Neoplatonic tradition and reinforced by the revival of Boethius' *De consolazione philosophiae*: scholars have extensively studied the circulation and diffusion of Boethius' work during the Renaissance and the early modern age, from Valla to Pomponazzi and from 16th century theologians to Leibniz²¹.

This image returns not only in Heidegger's text on poverty, but also and more accurately in Heidegger's 1929–30 seminar. At that time, the research that Heidegger carried out after he returned to his chair in Freiburg addressed metaphysical questions

²¹See, for example, Belli (2011); Courcelle (1967); Marenbon (2003).

from the standpoint of the actual dimension of biological life, thus leading to a wide-ranging reflection on the relationship between the human and the animal. Heidegger starts by considering what is life, what is peculiar to living beings – why a plant dies, and a stone does not – to warn that his movement of thought will be circular because ‘this is an indication that we are moving within the realm of philosophy’ (Heidegger 1995: 180), unlike scientific thinking which proceeds along a straight line towards its goal. What distinctively belongs to circular thinking is not just what would be commonly thought of it, i.e., proceeding around the circumference; rather, it is all about looking at the center, ‘for the centre only manifests itself as such as we circle around it’ (Heidegger 1995: 180). The center only manifests itself in relation to its surrounding motion: to argue that this kind of reasoning would ultimately lead to a vicious circle is to do away with philosophy. It belongs to the common intellect, Heidegger argues, to align things in a straight line and call it progress (Heidegger 1995: 187). But philosophy does not advance in this way; it does not feel self-conscious when, moving along the circumference, it returns to its starting point, because its aim is to look at the center from every point of view. For all the historical encrustations it has been stripped of²², the image of the circumference returns in the work of a foremost author of the 20th century to underline the peculiarity and irreducibility of philosophy; it sets an alternative methodological proceeding with respect to science and leads to critically rethink the concept of progress that largely informs modern philosophy.

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²²‘All great and genuine philosophy moves within the limited sphere of a few questions which appear to common sense as perennially the same, although in fact they are necessarily different in every instance of philosophizing. Different not in any merely external sense, but rather in such a way that the self-same is in each case essentially transformed once more. Only in such transformation does philosophy possess its genuine self-sameness’ (Heidegger 1995: 175).

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