Rational Palintropy, or: The Productive Tension of the History of Ideas

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abstract – This is a short paper that spells out the sources of inspiration of my work as a historian of philosophy, namely a non-metaphysical version of Heraclitus' theory of the unity of opposites, and aims to clarify the key ideas of this methodology through four case-studies that are either at an advanced or early stage. I will summarize my investigation into the following philosophical traditions, or unities of (apparent?) opposites: (A) atomistic theology (= unity of materialism and spiritualism); (B) religious hedonism (= unity of hedonism and religion); (C) the scientific poem (= unity of science and poetry); (4) rational theories on performative arts (= unity of reason and performance).

Keywords: de-polarization – methodology – poetics – religion – science

> «... διαφερόμενον ἑωυτῶι ὁμολογέει· παλίντροπος
> ἁρμονίη ὅκωσπερ τόξου καὶ λύρης
> diverging, it accords with itself: a palintropic
> harmony, as of a bow and a lyre»[1].
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> (Heraclitus, *On Nature*, fragment 22 B 51)

1. Introduction

The choice of a line of research implies a commitment to a principle of unity. Most of the time, this unitary factor could coincide with the chosen topic of inquiry, within a larger field. For example, although scholars of literature use distinct methodologies, make recourse to various styles of argument, study more authors or topics, differ in their goals (some might be more theoretical, other historically-philologically focused), the principle of unity of each researcher could indeed be thematic. One scholar could dedicate one's entire life to define the verse-form, another to the intersection between the genre of the novel and history of art, another to the criteria that allow us to understand when a text could be qualified as 'literary' and how to distinguish it from 'non-literary' texts, and so on. This unitary direction allows to find in even the most unsys-

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[1] In H. Diels - W. Kranz (eds.), *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratierk*, Berlin, Weidmann, 1956 (from now on just DK) = fr. 9 D49; A. Laks - G. Most (eds.), *Early Greek Philosophy*, 9 vols., Cambridge MA - London, Harvard University Press, 2016 (from now on just LM).

tematic researcher a coherent direction, rather than the abandonment to disorder and chaos.

My general principle of unity is surely the large spectrum of the history of philosophy or ideas, with a special interest in the ancient period (5th century AD-6th century BC) and its reception in the Renaissance / early modern eras (14th-17th centuries AD). In this respect, the philosophical dimension is the thematic object of my inquiry, although the use of philology comes first. Indeed, before expressing any personal opinion, I reconstruct as objectively (or better: impartially) as I can what ideas were defended by a philosopher, a group of philosophers, or an intellectual movement, basing my reconstruction on existing evidence. This allows me also to define what the term «philosophy»[2] really meant for these thinkers who may have not considered themselves as philosophers, like the so-called «Pre-Socratics»[3]. After such a philological enterprise, I move to the actual interpretation of these philosophical doctrines and ideas, for example by evaluating their consistency, their weak and strong points, but especially if they can still dialogue with the present. Sometimes the outcome may be that these philosophers are still interesting because they are very different from us, namely they address contemporary problems in ways that might challenge our certainties, our prejudices, or what we consider 'intuitive', if not 'natural'. In the footsteps of what Bertold Brecht argued (e.g.) in *A Short Organum for the Theatre* about the theatrical stage, I call this process a «distancing effect» (*Verfremdungseffekt*)[4].

However, if I am asked to specify my line of research more in detail, I would answer that I run into a sort of paradox. I am especially intrigued by what could appear *prima facie* impossible: to unify opposite areas, concepts, and lifestyles. The paradox is then that my unity consists in fascination with disunity, or in finding a bridge between remote spheres of inquiry under the theoretical and the practical levels.

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[2] Which is still controversial. Cf. T. Nagel, *What Does it All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988.

[3] L. Rossetti, *La filosofia non nasce con Talete (e nemmeno con Socrate)*, Bologna, Diogene Multimedia, 2015.

[4] J. Willett, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1964, pp. 179-205.

In order to clarify my case, it could be useful to briefly recall the precedent of Heraclitus, quoted in the epigraph of my essay[5]. Despite some surviving attempts to attribute to him the theory of the continuous flux or constant change of things, which was instead defended by his pupil Cratylus, it is today clear that he argued, on the contrary, that our world is a stable and coherent whole, which he qualifies as a «harmony» of conflicting appearances. If we affirm that reality is multiform, it is because we do not recognize this unifying or harmonical principle that lies beyond what we falsely divide and distinguish. For instance, cold and hot are unified opposites, for they are different extremes of a whole that continuously transform and yet remains identical, i.e. temperature. Heraclitus also claims, according again to the maxim quoted in the epigraph, that this harmony produces a productive tension: the transmutation of the appearances is «palintropic» (παλίντροπος), namely its direction (τρόπος) goes back and forth (παλίν). Finally, he compares this tension to the one found in a bow and a lyre. These two objects are not chosen arbitrarily, but especially the second. For a lyre can produce a beautiful harmony precisely because its strings continuously produce opposites tones.

Without accepting any metaphysical and ethical implications of the Heraclitean doctrine, like the identification of this harmony with God (B 67 DK, D48 LM) and the divinization of conflict (cf. B 53 DK, D64 LM: «War is the father of all and the king of all»), I tend to find this perspective quite inspirational under the methodological point of view. It can be possible that, after a close inspection, many concepts, lifestyles, and so on that we tend to oppose could be harmonized, hence brought to a productive 'tension' and used to challenge our ordinary preconceptions. And since my research activity concerns the history of ideas, I tend to do more precisely historical-philosophical inquiries that show that these oppositions have been often already denied/criticized in the past. The goal of my unitary principle of study would consist, in other words, to reconstruct and reenact some minor or even neglected intellectual traditions.

Of course, such a research direction can raise further questions. If the distinction between opposites is illusory, then when and why was it created? Is a false opposition either an error of the mind and a cultural construction, or is it the outcome of an overinterpretation of some elements grounded on reality? What benefits (cognitive, ethical-political, etc.) are bestowed by replacing the unity of some opposites to their separation? And many others.

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[5] For more details on this thinker, cf. C. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

I would go much beyond the limits of this paper, if I tried to give an abstract answer to these questions, as well as an exact discussion or definition of complex words like «opposites», «reality», and «harmony». In what follows, I prefer instead to summarize four case-studies that are still under investigation, with the hope that this synthesis will at least clarify some parts of my general 'Heraclitean' methodology.

2.   Materialism and Spirituality

Marx's definition of religion as the opium of the people[6] is an excellent example of the present opposition between a spiritualistic worldview and a materialistic one. Materialism *per se* seems to be the enemy of spiritualism, for it destroys the pillars of all spiritual beliefs, such as the immortality/incorporeality of the self, the conception of a providential God who rules everything with intelligence/love, and the human capacity to transcend the spatial-temporal sphere. In this respect, if one is a materialist, then she/he is an atheist. Conversely, if one is a spiritualist, then she/he shares a non-materialistic conception of reality.

There are two ways to try to unify the opposites of spiritualism and materialism. On the one hand, a spiritualist could argue that matter is spiritual, for instance could claim that the material self is immortal, or that one can find the presence of God even in the most irrational and ugly phenomena of the human world. I have not yet explored this alternative, although it seems that such a view could be endorsed by pantheists and mystics that interpreted the spirit as a form of special matter, such as Anne Conway[7]. On the other hand, it is also promising to proceed in the opposite direction, namely to study the possibility for a staunch materialist to recognize the existence of some divinity and a form of transcendence. In this latter case, the necessary co-implication of materialism and atheism will turn out to be false, or at least not grounded.

I think that this line of research can find promising material in Hellenistic Greek philosophy (4th-1st centuries BC), especially in Epicureanism. This movement was founded by the philosopher Epicurus, who was a materialist who defended atomism, or the reduction of everything to atoms and void, thus implying that the soul/self is also atomic and will not sur-

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[6]   Cf. here e.g., E. Pedersen, *Religion is the Opium of People: An Investigation into the Intellectual Context of Marx's Critique of Religion*, in «History of Political Thought», 36, 2015, 2, pp. 354-387.

[7]   On which cf. J. Borcherding, *Loving the Body, Loving the Soul: Conway's Vitalist Critique of Cartesian and Morean Dualism*, in «Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy», 9, 2019, pp. 1-36.

vive death[8]. Yet Epicurus did not deny the existence of the gods and even transcendentalism. Indeed, his whole theology attempts precisely to show that the gods exist, are infinite in number, are eternal despite being atomic compounds that constantly emit atoms that 'touch' our minds, enjoy a blissful life, and can be emulated by humans, who will then reach their same blessedness and a sort of immortality. This last puzzling point is grounded by the fact that philosophy bestows a sort of 'changelessness' to its adherents, such as the immunity to fear, the self-sufficiency that descends from the rational control of desires, or the independence from external events[9]. The perspective also explains the mutual veneration between Epicureans as divine beings, exemplified by the fragment of a letter of Epicurus to his pupil Colotes[10].

One could object that the Epicurean gods were also conceived as detached from human affairs (*Her.* §§ 76-77, 81), that therefore Epicureanism destroys providentialism, and that the positive role of divinity is limited to the incarnation of a model of happiness. The answer to the difficulty is that this denial of providence is not the consequence of atheism, but rather an element that was reread under a different conception of the spiritual life. It is interesting to consider the case-study of the prayer, which Epicurus and his followers continued to perform to know the essence of the gods and to receive their atoms (cf. here Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, book I, §§ 43-49 = fr. 352 Us.), thus achieving a better understanding of divine blessedness and learning how to recreate it in the human sphere. In this respect, there is a kind of providence even in Epicureanism. If the gods did not exist, we would not receive their atoms and we would have no knowledge of the divine which allows us to discover the essence of / the means for our happiness.

I have argued at length in favor of the seriousness of Epicurean theology[11]. My next move would be to try and study in much greater detail its connection with politics, hence the sphere of action that an ordinary materialist finds incompatible with any form of spiritualism. It would be interesting to attempt the reconstruction of the social-religious activity of the «Epicurean priests», namely Epicureans that were responsible of the cult of some

8   Cf. e.g. his *Epistle to Herodotus* (from now on just *Her.*), §§ 63-68, in F. Verde (ed.), *Epicuro: Epistola a Erodoto*, Roma, Carocci, pp. 51-53.

9   Cf. the entire *Epistle to Menoeceus*, in G. Arrighetti (ed.), *Epicuro: Opere*, 2nd revised edition, Torino, Einaudi, 1973, pp. 106-117 (from now on just Arr).

10   Fr. 141, ed. by H. Usener, *Epicurea*, Leipzig, Teubner, 1887 (= fr. 65 Arr).

11   E. Piergiacomi, *Storia delle antiche teologie atomiste*, Roma, Sapienza Università Editrice, 2017.

traditional deities – that were indeed conceived as providential – and contributed to the spiritual guidance of the community. Some of these characters have been already identified by the French scholar Renée Koch[12], but it would be worthwhile to ascertain in concrete terms what religious duties they performed, how they put them in agreement with the conception of the detached gods, and especially what their positive political contributions were. This research would also reinforce the claim that one can identify a form of 'providentialism' even in Epicureanism.

3.   Hedonism and Religion

Close to the tradition that I have finished to summarize is what I tentatively call the «religious hedonistic» movement. This flourished especially in the Renaissance period thanks to the work of some Christian philosophers and theologians who attempted to unify two apparent opposites: religion and hedonism. Today, indeed, these two dimensions are often spontaneously separated. According to the ordinary conception, the religious agent will despise pleasure as sinful and avoid all worldly pleasurable temptations (food, sex, wealth, etc.), while the hedonist will search for these things only and find unpleasant the ascetic/retired lifestyle of those who are completely or mostly dedicated to God.

Such an opposition relies at least on two hidden assumptions that are challenged by Christian hedonists. On the one hand, the ordinary conception supposes that religion and hedonism differ because of their object: the former searches for God, the latter for pleasure. But the religious hedonist actually admits that she/he searches for the divine or the supernatural because she/he finds in it «satisfaction», «joy», «love», «sense of fulfillment»: something that can ultimately be read as a hedonistic principle. The disagreement between the religious agents and the hedonistic ones exists in words only, not in deeds. So, for instance, the religious hedonist Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457) represents in book III of his dialogue *On Pleasure* a speech by the Franciscan Antonio da Rho, who claims that Christians receive pleasurable reactions when they love God:

«Loving itself is delight, or pleasure, or beatitude, or happiness, or charity, which is the final end or goal for which all other things are. Hence, I do not agree that God ought to be loved for his own sake, as if love itself and delight existed for the sake of an end and were not themselves an end»[13].

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12   R. Koch, *Comment peut-on être dieu? La secte d'Épicure*, Paris, Belin, 2005, pp. 226-230.

13   M. de Panizza Lorch, *A Defense of Life: Lorenzo Valla's Theory of Pleasure*, Paderborn, Fink, 1985, p. 275.

On the other hand, the opposition religion vs. pleasure is based on the questionable assumption that one cannot enjoy at the same time spiritual joy and non-sinful worldly delight. It is also possible, according to the Christian hedonists, to attempt to achieve both by exercising reason and some religious virtues[14]. Here, the strategies for finding both spiritual and worldly pleasures could differ, depending on how one conceives this virtuous activity. To return once more to Lorenzo Valla, or more precisely to the speech of Antonio da Rho, his idea is that renouncing worldly foods, beauties, wealth, and so on enables to achieve a transcended or spiritualized version of these delights. Here is one of the many passages:

«... the body and blood of our Lord and King, Jesus Christ, will be ministered to us, even from his very hands, in that most honorable, celebrated, and in truth Godly banquet. This food and drink will be of such sweetness that I might almost say the sense of taste will conquer the other senses. We shall never be satiated with this nourishment; it will not permit hunger and thirst to return, but will leave a continuous sweetness in our mouths ...»[15].

Another example is provided instead by the religious views of the Christian hedonist Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655)[16]. His *Syntagma philosophicum* (or *Philosophical Synthesis*)[17] attempts to put religion in agreement with hedonism not by appealing to transfiguration, but by affirming that both spiritual and worldly things deserve attention. God providentially created the world so that we can have many pleasurable experiences (SP II, 661a-662b, 678b-679a, 700b-702a, 710a-b) and promised to us that, after death, we will be supremely happy in contact with the angels and other incorporeals (SP II, 635a, 651b). This means that a true Christian will try to maximize the delight both in the temporary existence in this world and in the eternal future life. If she/he will aim only to one extreme of the spectrum, she/he will have a lesser pleasure, when she/he could have had a greater one.

A major problem of this tradition is that one cannot exclude that «religious hedonism» was sincerely defended by these thinkers. Indeed, Valla and Gassendi are presented by some scholars as atheists and libertines who used the religious language/conceptualization in order to

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[14]   On this topic, cf. now L. Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense. Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy*, Harvard, I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History, 2009, spec. chapter II.5.

[15]   M. de Panizza Lorch, *A Defense of Life*, p. 301.

[16]   Cf. in general M. Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy. Gassendi and Descartes on Contingency and Necessity in the Created World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

[17]   Now in T. Gregory (ed.), *Pierre Gassendi: Opera omnia*, 6 vols., Stuttgart - Bad Cannstatt, Frommann, 1964, vols. 1-2 (from now on, just SP).

hide their all-too-human hedonistic ideas and thus avoid prosecution for defending the latter too openly. This is also proven by the fact that their arguments create many tensions and problems, which suddenly disappear if we present these thinkers as non-religious[18]. I am not convinced by such a reading, for it is based on an implicit projection of our present assumptions onto the past. Since we think today that no unity between religion and pleasure is possible, then Valla and Gassendi could not have really believed in a religious foundation of the life of pleasure. Finally, the tensions and problems opened by their arguments can be actually read positively. These should generate the above-mentioned «distancing effect» from our certainties and induce us to reconsider what we consider intuitively true.

4.   Science and Poetry

A third case-study that can challenge a present opposition is the historical tradition of the scientific poem. Nowadays, indeed, this would sound as a contradiction in terms. With 'science', one generally refers to firm and impersonal/objective knowledge of reality, through rational methods and repeated experiments/observations. The term 'poetry' apparently refers, instead, to qualities placed at the opposite side of the spectrum. For poets are the champions of subjectivity, who describe their personal feelings and precarious visions of the world, making recourse to images and expressions that are beautiful but also arbitrary.

However, if the unity between science and poetry sounds today absurd, in the past it would have sounded as plain and familiar. At the beginning of Greek culture, poetry was considered the principal way for transmitting in an oral form the scientific knowledge of the time, as one can see from the Homeric poems, defined by Eric Havelock as «tribal encyclopedias»[19], and the works of early philosophers-poets like Parmenides, Empedocles, Lucretius. This form of communication soon had to compete with the written prose of medicine and science, but continued to survive throughout the centuries and until today.

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[18]   *Mutatis mutandis*, cf. F. Gaeta, *Lorenzo Valla: filologia e storia nell'umanesimo italiano*, Napoli, Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici, 1955; R. Pintard, *Le libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVIIe siècle*, Paris, Boivin, 1983.

[19]   Cf. the seminal book of E. Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, Cambridge MA - London, Harvard University Press, 1963, *passim*, but spec. pp. 66-70.

And although there exist some contemporary attempts at scientific poetry[20], they remain a minority.

Now, in order to attempt a sort of 'return to the past', or into this coalescence between science and poetry, I find particularly intriguing a focus on the work of Girolamo Fracastoro (1478-1553). This Italian poet, philosopher, and practitioner wrote numerous works, including the scientific poem *Syphilis* (1530)[21] and the dialogue on poetics *Naugerius* (1549)[22]. Both these texts contain explicit and implicit arguments that defend poetry's fusion with science, hence a foundation of the scientific poem. On this occasion, I will limit my analysis to three points.

The first can be derived from Fracastoro's reflection on admiration and beauty. The character Naugerius that gives the name to the dialogue affirms that one of the poet's duties is to create beautiful speeches that generate a sense of marvel toward the universe. He also adds that a poet is not necessarily one who writes in verses:

«... if there were no poets, no one would know the beauties of the world, for the nations without poets are without refinement, without urbanity, without beauty. Moreover, I give the name of poet not only to one who writes and makes verses, but to one who is a poet by nature, although he writes nothing; and the poet by nature is one who can be seized and moved by the true beauties of things, and who, if he happens to speak, is able to speak and write through them» (*Na.*, p. 71).

The reference to the «poet by nature» hints, in my opinion, also at the scientist, who can generate this same sense of marvel and beauty during a scientific inquiry. In the scientific poem *Syphilis*, Fracastoro himself says that studying the dangerous and horrific essence of contagion implies a marvelous contemplation of the power of nature (Sy. p. 172, vv. 259-260: *super omnia miram / naturam*). Therefore, poetry and science can be united, because they produce the same ecstatic and even 'quasi-religious' awe towards the universe.

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[20] See for instance, in Italian culture, the attempts of A. Anedda, *Geografie*, Milano, Garzanti, 2021, and F. Buffoni, *Betelgeuse e altre poesie scientifiche*, Milano, Mondadori, 2021. For more extensive references, cf. the brilliant book of S. Illingworth, *A Sonnet to Science. Scientists and Their Poetry*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2019.

[21] G. Fracastoro, *Opera omnia*, Venezia, Giunta, 1555, pp. 170-185, from now on just Sy.

[22] R. Kelso (ed.), *Girolamo Fracastoro Naugerius, sive de poetica dialogus*, with an introduction by M. Bundy, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 1924 (from now on just *Na.*). On its content, cf. S. Pearce, *Fracastoro on Syphilis: Science and Poetry in Theory and Practice*, in P. Antonello - S. Gilson (eds.), *Science and Literature in Italian Culture from Dante to Calvino*, Oxford, European Humanities Research Center, 2004, pp. 115-135.

The second argument has contemporary relevance. Poetry is a way to disseminate science, namely to teach how to express in a clear and attractive way the theoretical knowledge of the world. A scientific poem has then the capacity to communicate the discoveries of scientists and, extensively, to put them into useful practice:

«… it is evident how useful the poet's style is, so far as style is concerned. For in itself it means knowledge of all the excellencies, all the beauties in every form of speech … For the same reason, if the poet imitates the things which belong to the intellect he will teach more because he omits no beauty which can be attributed to things, while all the others are limited, inasmuch as they seek not all, but only some of the beauties» (*Na.*, pp. 67-68).

The third and final argument in favor of the coalescence between poetry and science is that the poet will have to acquire scientific knowledge and the scientist will need to become poetic, if both intend to translate intellectual contents in good form. In other words, the unity between the two fields is desirable because it will bring to a perfect exposition of ideas. A scientific poem appears to be a way to translate into concrete/vivid language the abstract and difficult theories of science:

«If men wish to know about agriculture, natural science, philosophy, and any other subjects that the poet has written about, they will go to the poet, not those who wish to know the bare and in a way rude facts, but those who desire to see objects, as it were, alive, perfected and adorned with their appropriate beauties» (*Na.*, p. 71).

«Therefore the poet too if he writes of agriculture, or of nature, is ignorant of these things to the extent that he is a poet and skilled in writing, but knows them to the extent that he has learned them. Besides, it is necessary to know, if one wishes to teach. It is not necessary to know a great deal, but to know exactly» (*Na.*, p. 73).

Ideally, then, scientists and poets should try to cooperate in writing a scientific poem, for this will boost both rational inquiry and efficient dissemination. Poetry and science can aspire to the same goals – i.e., knowledge and beauty – with their dedication to a unique literary genre.

5.   Reason and Performance

One last case-study that I would like to consider is the potential unity between reason, or inquiry through controlled practice and argument, with the performative arts. At a first sight, this could appear a repetition of the problem posed by the scientific poem. Performance is indeed a form of poetry, while reason is the human faculty used in philosophy and science. In reality, although performative arts are akin to other poetic productions because they pursue beauty and wonder, they are also different since

they try to evoke on the scene something that cannot be fully expressed in words, and hence is more mysterious and can only be foreshortened through the performers' bodies in action[23]. It follows that, if it is true that all performances are poetical, the reverse claim that all poems are performative is not equally valid.

Providing that we accept the distinction between the third and fourth case-studies, one can again perceive as puzzling the attempt to unify those opposites. Reason tries to ground everything on logic and argument, but performance strives to achieve something that cannot be logically argued. However, in my project *Teatrosofia* [24], I try precisely to bridge these two extremes that seem to be refractory to any dialectical synthesis. This apparent impossibility could be overcome through two complementary strategies: a reflection on the mysteries of the performative arts and an attempt to add a performative quality to rational argumentation. I call the former «theatrical philosophy», the latter «philosophical theater».

The first strategy is explored with the study of the conceptions of the performative acts in ancient philosophers. These tried to explain the dynamic of the scene, its psychological and cognitive effects, its sources (whether a specific technique, or inspiration), its impact on the sociological and political spheres: all things that somehow give a linguistic and logical expression to the essence of an artistic event that cannot be expressed linguistically, or logically. The unity between reason and performance is then found through a paradoxical theoretical move, namely through reasoning about the impenetrable.

As regards the second strategy, by studying this same tradition I attempt to show that some ancient thinkers recognized performative elements even in philosophy itself. One may think of Xenophanes of Colophon (570-478 BC), who attempted to substitute the performances of rhapsodes – who recited Homer's poems that represented the gods as engaging in vicious/evil conduct – with new verses that describe moral and invariably good deities (frr. 20 B 10-26 DK = frr. 8 D7-21 LM). It is also possible to focus on Plato's philosophical dialogues, whose true meaning can be expressed not by a character who argues in favor of a specific rational thesis, but by the general evolution of the discussion and some interesting scenes that might even contradict what is explicitly said by Socrates, or the protagonist of most Platonic texts. A good example is passage 505c of

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23   C. Morganti, *La grazia non pensa. Discorsi intorno al teatro*, Imola, Cue Press, 2018, pp. 25-28.

24   E. Piergiacomi, *Teatrosofia*: https://www.teatroecritica.net/tag/teatrosofia/.

the *Gorgias*[25], where the Socratic defense of justice as intrinsically worthy of choice is implicitly presented on the scene as powerless to convince Callicles: a man that declares that a selfish search of personal utility must be pursued on any occasion, even at the expense of the laws and the well-being of the community. The sign of Socrates' failure is that, in this extract of the dialogue, he does not find people available to speak with him and he is forced to develop his apology of virtue alone. Therefore, his words express a certain message, but are contradicted by his isolation and by the passivity of the other characters, hence by an act of performance and not explicit philosophical reasoning[26]. To conclude, another way to unify performance and reason is to stage a philosophical dialogue and to show how often the actions of a performance can signify more than what is explicitly said.

If it is then plausible to conceive such a unification, it will follow that a rational message may be conveyed through non-rational means. Reason becomes extremely powerful when it is embedded in a performance, and conversely a performance becomes even more fascinating or mysterious if one tries to describe its essence through intellectual speculation.

Conclusions

In this essay, I have tried to present my research as an historian of ideas who attempts to work at an interdisciplinary level, focusing on the interactions between many areas of inquiry. In my investigations, I find particularly attractive the goal to try to unify perspectives that are normally considered to be incompatible opposites, mainly through historical reconstructions of thinkers or philosophical traditions which had already challenged a specific opposition. Given this approach, my job essentially consists in re-discovering theories of the past. Hence, I am less of an original inventor and more of an erudite who tries to apply his knowledge of ancient/modern philosophy to contemporary philosophical discussions.

Moreover, I tried to clarify my goal through a brief consideration of four case-studies. The first is the atomistic theology of Epicurus, which shows that materialism and spiritualism can be unified with the belief in gods that do not intervene in human affairs and cannot reward us with a bless-

25   J.M. Cooper - D.S. Hutchinson (eds.), *Plato: Complete Works*, Indianapolis - Cambridge MA, Hackett, 1997, p. 850.

26   On the performative elements of the Platonic texts, cf. e.g. the collection of essays of F. De Luise (ed.), *Il teatro platonico della virtù*, Trento, Università degli Studi di Trento, 2017.

ed life after death, but nonetheless can be venerated and imitated as perfect models of blessedness. The second one consists in the tradition of Christian hedonism, whose adherents argue in favor of the unity of religion and pleasure either by transfiguring the pleasurable things of the world into their spiritual counterparts, or by inviting to search for the delights of the spirit. The third case-study is represented by the scientific poem, which I am starting to examine with a special focus on Girolamo Fracastoro, who gives three sound reasons for pursuing this peculiar literary genre (generation of the sense of marvel, effective dissemination of science, and the capacity to translate abstract ideas into very vivid-concrete expressions). The fourth and last tradition that I have isolated consists in ancient philosophical theories on performance, as well as in the writings of some philosophers that tried to stage either the victory of reason over false beliefs (Xenophanes), or on the contrary the limits of philosophical inquiry (Plato). This allows me to conceptualize the hybrid nature of theatrical philosophy and the philosophical theater.

All these oppositions can be just illusory, or they can be much more nuanced than it is usually believed. The history of ideas shows that opposites can mutually transform into each other and have a dialectical interaction, in a way that is very similar to the «palintropic» harmony described by Heraclitus. For sure, unification can result in 'tensions' and raise many problems, doubts, and objections. But this – I believe – is one of the reasons that make these four traditions or case-studies particularly worthy of analysis and attention.