

# Acting and Behaving: The Philosopher in Ancient Greece and Late Modernity

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**Abstract** Around the world scientific output has reached ungovernable levels; far more is written than can possibly be read. Also, there are increasingly clear signs of rampant conformity within the scientific community. Where does philosophy stand in all this? Can we continue to claim that the role of knowledgeable persons and the discourse with which they impart their knowledge are (free, individual) ways of acting? Or should both role and discourse be considered mere modes of (conformist, impersonal) behaviour? By comparing modern practices to models of ancient Greek philosophy, philosophy of language enables us to reflect (especially historically) on the meaning of a life in theory, the role of *logos*, and the praxis within current discursive and philosophical practices. Our thesis is that the doing of the ancient philosopher (his form of life) works as a discourse, and that this discourse is also a discourse on the limits of language.

**Keywords** Agency. Discourse Analysis. Forms of Rationality. Greek Philosophy of language. Greek Philosophical Patristics. Language Games. Forms of Life.

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What has to be accepted, the given, is - one might say - *forms of life*  
Wittgenstein 1953, *PU* II.XI

## 1 States of Affairs

### 1.1 Behaving / Acting

We keep at it, but nothing sticks. For many of us today, life looks like a never-ending to-do list. A list of things that tend to build up without animating our life, things we don't want to do, but must do. The result is that our 'affairs', so to speak, have made room for a new and painful alienation. Even in distal space - where individual existences are attached to community projects, where the affairs of each are integrated into larger social structures - one can sense a widespread inability to act; this leads to a loss of attention span.<sup>1</sup> "Men", Hannah Arendt wrote (1958, 41), apprehensively, in the postwar period, "*behave and do not act* with respect to each other" (my italics). In other words, agency, which the Greeks considered the mark of man,<sup>2</sup> had acceded to mere behaviour.<sup>3</sup> And in a world in which "we behave" without acting, "society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to 'normalise' its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement" (Arendt 1958, 41). Individuals find themselves overwhelmed by procedures and rules that they can neither choose nor refuse, surrounded by a kind of conformity that one contemporary philosopher (Di Cesare 2018, 11-16) rightly called "saturated immanence", where nothing really changes and the difference between what is shared and what is owned, between the business of the *omnes* and the behaviour of the *singulatim*, is no more. If the community in which we now live is modelled on the ontological structures of this bizarre 'quodlibetal

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**1** On the consequences of this apraxia, see for instance Conostas 2017; Della Briotta Parolo et al. 2015.

**2** According to Arendt 1958, 41, the counterposition of behaviour and action, of Greeks and Moderns, determines that "modern equality, based on the conformism inherent in society and possible only because behavior has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationship, is in every respect different from equality in antiquity, and notably in the Greek city-states".

**3** In Arendt's opinion (1958, 40), modern conformism is so compelling that "society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household".

singularity,<sup>4</sup> it should not come as a shock that action has become indistinguishable from mere behaviour. There is no action, just behaviour; therefore, everything risks appearing meaningless. The words of the ancient *Qohelet* come to mind:

What do people get for all their hard work under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth never changes. [...] Everything is wearisome beyond description. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are not content. (*Qoh*, 3-8)<sup>5</sup>

Everything is in motion, nothing takes place. The ancient Greek lyric poets summed up the consequences of this human condition with a single word: τὸ ἀμήχανον, or ‘to be without means’, unable to be able. A widespread feeling of fatuity envelops human things. And that has driven scholars from various disciplines to ask themselves what has happened to agency today; where does it fit into our way of planning for the future and living in the world. We might also ask ourselves – as someone wrote exactly one hundred years ago – whether the world is really the totality of *facts* (“die Gesamtheit der Tatsachen”: Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* §1.1), or whether man is still the proprietor of his own facticity. Answers to these questions are most often sought in the fields of ethics or politics, in artificial intelligence. Posed in the context of a suffering planet and a world makes unreasonable demands of individuals and, often, nations, reason<sup>6</sup> is in a state of *aporia*.

## 1.2 “So machen wir’s”

It bears repeating that modern futility, the ματαιότης of late modernity, doesn’t mean nothing gets done, but that acting is impossible or unachievable; in other words, doing can’t be converted into action. We can call this characteristic of late modernity *apraxia* and observe that it doesn’t only apply to ordinary life (to κοινὸς βίος) but to βίος

<sup>4</sup> The idea of ‘quodlibetal singularity’ is put forward by Agamben (2008). Although I consider Agamben’s analysis sophisticated and highly original, I would adapt his conception to the one condition of social inauthenticity, to a uniform, conformist, mass society. La Matina 2022 argues that quodlibetal singularity, or the *quodlibet ens* of medieval logic (or what Deleuze called ‘une vie’) can exist only in the backdrop of an ontology that still has individuals. Accordingly, it essentially involves valuing the contrast between the individual and the community, so that the *Eigentlichkeit* of the individual has to be maintained in an ontology that rejects Platonic quantification.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all translations are from the Author.

<sup>6</sup> On this debate see two classics: Gargani 1979; Vattimo, Rovatti 1983.

θεωρητικός, to the life of the scholar, to the doings of the scientist.<sup>7</sup> Isn't it true that a lot of today's science appears like a great production chain that fails to affect or handle our problems and instead contents itself with itemising them or furnishing partial and short-lived answers? Isn't it true that many scientists, hemmed in by the rigid 'publish or perish' laws, seem bereft of the freedom which is itself a character of human action? Conformism seems to hold sway over the doings of science, too.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that even a life in theory, for centuries guided by individual intentionality alone, "behavior has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationships" (Arendt 1958, 42). This levelling effect of conformity indicates a stark divide between the way of life of modern thinker and the way of life that flourished in the ancient Greek world. In antiquity, one was under constant pressure to distinguish himself from others; in other words, the public realm was a space reserved for individuality (Arendt 1958, 42). In today's oppressive and confused climate, perhaps the time has come for intellectuals to ask themselves the fundamental question posed by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1097b.24-5): is there an action that can be considered the action of living man? Is there an *ergon*, a *praxis* or the like that can be considered the measure and praxical horizon of a being capable of language?<sup>9</sup>

And what if this human-specific activity were philosophy? If philosophy is *the* human form of life, can today's philosopher refuse to ask himself, and all the sciences, what his business means? Of course not. To someone who asks him to account for what he does, he could not respond with a brusque, 'So machen wir's'. That's just how it's done. Were he to, then it would be difficult to classify the practice of philosophers today as a way of *acting* instead of a way of *behaving* (like a coy and rhetorical language game). It would mean that conformity - which, from time immemorial, philosophy has deprecated as evil - has penetrated the practices that we continue to label philosophical. The job of philosophy today is therefore twofold. On the one hand, 1) *it must analyse scientific doings*. That doesn't mean analysing the stated products of this or that scientific field; it must take a greater interest in the process of scientific practices than in facts. On the other hand, 2) *it must submit its own practices, its own norms, to the same kind of inquiry*. It must reflect on the philosopher's own 'doings', on his aims and the evidence needed to evaluate their importance. But what we're saying is comparable, if philosophers still

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Della Briotta Parolo et al. 2015; see also Power 1997.

<sup>8</sup> See on this the contributions collected in Dal Lago 2013. See also Deneault 2015.

<sup>9</sup> It must be said that the question of what an action means would retain its meaning even if postmodern man's agency were no longer (or never had been) that ζῶν πρακτικὴ τις τοῦ λόγον ἔχοντος about which ancient philosophers spoke.

believe in it, to what Wittgenstein (1980, 16) wrote: that philosophy is really a philosopher's inquiry into himself, into his way of seeing things. That is the only way to flesh out the nature of the philosopher's doings: is it action or behaviour?

### 1.3 Ideals or *Idola Tribus*?

Both tasks present unknown variables. One in particular: which philosophy could tell the philosopher what he's doing? In fact, today we are witnessing an explosion of philosophers and philosophies. In a delicious pamphlet published a few years ago, Italian philosopher Diego Marconi (2010) analysed this question, based on observations that partly overlap with our own. The phenomenology of the contemporary philosopher proposed in the book is very useful: it goes from the specialist philosopher – the professional – to the home-made philosopher and ultimately arrives at the phenomena of media philosophers and popularisers of all things philosophical. Marconi is a proponent of professionalism in philosophy, so what he argues about the difficulty generated by the superfetation of philosophers and self-styled philosophical works is particularly interesting: “Specialism”, Marconi writes, “is imposed by the proliferation of scientific literature, which is itself the consequence of the colossal expansion of higher education which happened in the twentieth century” (2010, 13). Because far more philosophy is written than anyone can read in a lifetime, so the philosopher means to tell us, there needs to be a committee that safeguards real philosophy. Given its methods and tangible results, for Marconi real philosophy closely resembles (though doesn't completely overlap with) analytical philosophy. In one of his most widely translated books, another influential Italian philosopher, Emanuele Coccia (2018, 141-2), takes the opposite view, taking to task the professionalisation of philosophy. Coccia argues that specialism is the product of a “cognitive and sentimental education which is hidden, or, more often, forgotten and repressed”; somewhat unnatural, almost repressive. Consequently, Coccia reckons that specialism is an attitude that:

does not define an excess of knowledge, but a knowing and voluntary repudiation of the knowledge of ‘others.’ It isn't the expression of boundless curiosity in an object, but the fearful and scrupulous observation of a cognitive taboo.

Mention is made of these two independently generated arguments just as a cursory example of the long and heated debate taking place in Europe and the United States, one which interests not only philosophers but scholars from various fields, including anthropology,

epistemology and cybernetics. At play are different discursive models, various – and often incompatible – forms of reasoning. Hence the issue at stake is the following: how to evaluate – in light of this debate about scientific reasoning – discursive practices and language games that are different from the one presently dominant? If the work to be done is the analysis of nature and ways of ‘doing’ philosophy, what sense does, for example, the reference to the philosophy of the ancient Greek language make? In fact, the dominant model, not only in hard sciences, is Cartesian, in which many sides claim to recognise that universality and absoluteness that could even make it the yardstick for every epistemic and discursive practice in the future.

The underlying idea is that knowledge is acceptable only if translated into an impersonal, atemporal and logically *constrictive* scientific discourse (think *Protokollsätze*): it’s the idea of rational reconstruction.<sup>10</sup> The Cartesian model appears ‘objectified’ because it declines to adopt any resource that comes from a context in which the assertions to evaluate have been produced. In semiotic terms, we’d say that it is *insensitive to the instant of enunciation*. That this conception has illustrious and time-honoured forebears<sup>11</sup> doesn’t shield it from attack. Semiotics, for example, has plenty of the presumed objectivity of scientific discourse (and, therefore, of that philosophy considered akin to scientific discourse). Analysing scientific practices, Algirdas J. Greimas, to cite just one of the more important names, called it a type of discursive manipulation capable of producing *camouflage objectivante* (objective camouflage). Here he is describing the mechanism of scientific language:

[To be] accepted as true, ‘scientific discourse’ tries to appear as if it were not the discourse of the subject, but as a pure enunciated of necessary relations between things, hiding, as much as possible, every mark of enunciation. We know that an enunciated like *the earth is round* presupposes constructions like ‘I say that,’ ‘I know that,’ ‘I am sure that’ *the earth is round*... The subject of the enunciation is both eliminated by impersonal constructions and socialised by the installation of ‘one’ and ‘we’... In this case knowledge is manifest as ‘true’ and the hidden subject as ‘false’... One understands why the concept of *truth* is increasingly replaced with the concept of *efficiency* in contemporary epistemology.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The method of rational reconstruction was the subject of a debate also at the recent Conference of the ‘British Society for the History of Philosophy’, by title *Philosophy and Historiography* (3-5 April 2006) at Robinson College, Cambridge (UK). See on this: Santi 2007, 149-53.

<sup>11</sup> I refer here to the so-called ‘postulate of objectivity’ as shown in Schrödinger 1948.

<sup>12</sup> Greimas 1980, 110-11. In many pages of Ludwig Wittgenstein one can find observations on phenomena related to linguistic enunciation. The topic would require a spe-

It's quite evident that contemporary philosophy is experiencing a tension between different practices, each of which relies on rules of discursive efficiency that other philosophers find distant and often, even, incompatible. This tension runs through philosophical discourse and binds it to two instances: respect for the discursive regime of its representative community and respect for the 'context of discovery'. It is not important how the tension is resolved; the question remains: what evidence can I put forward to show that what I do when I believe I am practicing philosophy is my own action and not mere behaviour? Some, I imagine, might object that the idea of someone saying to themselves 'what I'm doing now is an action' is an illusion, since every action is also the result of social and environmental conditioning. It's a valid objection, but in this case misses the mark. One of the jobs of philosophy has always been to render the philosophising subject aware of conditions that he cannot see. Just to stay within the boundaries of the ancient Greek world, think of Plutarch, *De profectibus in virtute*, where the discourse search for evidence useful for assessing the philosopher's progresses; in contrast to the opinion of the Stoics Plutarch (76b) speaks explicitly of a consciousness of change (τὴν συναίσθησιν [...] τῆς μεταβολῆς), which he describes as a sensation of emerging from some abyss (ὥσπερ ἐκ βυθοῦ τινοῦ ἀναφερομένοις). As we shall find later on, that was the exact purpose of the 'philosophical exercises' of Hellenistic schools.

#### 1.4 Being Right in Ancient Greece

In a well-documented and original essay, the Hellenist Andrea Cozzo (2001) argues against the dominant Cartesian model, casting a light on the existence of extremely different forms of reasoning in the Greek world, from Homer to late antiquity, capable of stimulating a more ample reflection on the meaning of the practices of science and philosophy. I'll limit myself to summarising a few of its aspects. As early as the age of Homer, the Greeks debated the problem of the politics of discourse; their debate was not limited to the level of the enunciated, which is to say the forms of argumentation, but included forms of conversing and thinking. From Cozzo's patient reconstruction, there emerges an historic phenomenology of 'forms of being

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cial essay. Here I will only mention two texts where Wittgenstein draws attention to the asymmetry between the first-person grammar and the third-person grammar: (1) the *Notes for Lectures on "Private Experience" and "Sense Data"* and (2) *The Language of Sense Data*, presumably written between 1934 and 1936. Perissinotto 2007, XXII-XXIII, clarifies the basis for this asymmetry and discusses the so-called 'metaphysics of the first person', showing how it lays the foundations for the 'First Person Authority', which is much discussed in the philosophy of language.

right' in a discursive context: not just one model, but many models. In Homer, for example, there is an aristocratic management of ways of speaking, governed by a traditional hierarchy (2001, 25-83). In modern terms, we might say that arguments accepted in that context are what Nelson Goodman (1979, 94-5) would call "well entrenched": the connection between speakers is strong and capable of stimulating a persuasive (*peithein*) or coercive (*peithesthai*) acceptance. On the contrary, in fifth century Athens the word is decontextualised and there emerges a discursive model charged with mediating between different social and ethnic groups. A type of *logos* begins to surface, one that is not well entrenched in *mythoi* but capable of exemplifying formal nexuses that break from tradition. This new *logos* is increasingly presented as the privileged site for convergence (*homonoiā*, *harmonia*) and confutation (*elenchos*).

If narrow attitudes toward models of reasoning which depart from the dominant model are what we call 'dogmatic', then clearly forms of dogmatism dotted the panorama of Greek thought. Cozzo (2001, 266-301) writes lucidly about the crisis of the second century AD, when a dogmatic model was taking shape that assumed it could act as judge and jury of *logos*. Sextus Empiricus witnessed the debate between dogmatists who sought to establish criteria for evaluating scientific and philosophical discourse (and, in some cases, lifestyles) on the one hand and, on the other, people who rejected the existence of any absolute criterion. What emerges in the attitude of the dogmatists, argues Cozzo (2001, 269), is "the violent force of *logos*, its universalist claims" – manifest in the claim that one can play the game and referee it at the same time. What happened then bears a striking resemblance to what is happening today, when a single model of reasoning has become normative and functions, so to speak, on two levels: as a *disciplinary discourse* (of a given science, of a given philosophical school) and as a *discursive discipline* (of science as a whole, of philosophy as a whole).

Where dogmatists – ancient and contemporary – err is in their flat-out rejection that they belong to a community and tradition, or sometimes just a standard of preferences. It is precisely when one rejects their belonging that the discursive regime can trigger behaviours of mimetic gregariousness. Whereas when we recognise that we can never completely shirk the weight of tradition, when we admit our debt to our forebears, we forge a means of suspending dogmatism, often via *epoché*, or the suspension of judgment. In both the Hellenistic and Imperial periods, Greek schools of philosophy were a hotbed of dogmatism and its antidotes. So, I should like to dedicate the last part of this article to the forms of Greek philosophy that come closest to rejecting their own and others' dogmatism. It may come as a surprise that among these schools of thought were movements then adopting the name Christianity, which would give rise to what we now call Patristics, or the philosophy of the Fathers of the Church.



## 2 Forms of Life as Enunciation-Games

### 2.1 Stop Behaving

Michael Frede (2005, 6) once wrote:

[Nowadays], when we study ancient philosophy, we are guided by our present-day conception of philosophical practice. We can easily lose sight of the fact that the ancient philosophers we're studying had a much different idea about what they were doing.

Can the same be said of the philosophy of language? Actually, philosophy only began to find an expression in physics, logic, and ethics with the Hellenistic schools; otherwise, it was not organised in a rigid fashion but 'smeared', like an assumption or ingredient, over scientific, theological and poetical discourse. Nevertheless, says Hadot (1995, 56), there was an immense gulf between generically philosophical assumption that inform (literary, scientific, etc.) texts and the activity which Hadot himself would be willing to label "authentic philosophy". In fact, authentic philosophising always involves a break with what philosophers call βίος, i.e., ordinary life.

Some will argue that, as a rule of thumb, we could recognise something as an ancient philosophy (and philosophy of language) just by enumerating the writings that have been preserved by tradition as philosophical (philosophical-linguistic). But such an operation would force us to recognise as philosophical only that which has already been accepted as philosophical by those who came before us.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, it would not help us to recognise as philosophical something that is not accepted, but that, let us imagine, was by the ancients. Philosophy can't be recognised only in the corpus of texts that have been handed down to us, nor can the practice of philosophy be preliminarily defined on the basis of textual production alone: the *af-faire* Socrates teaches. On the contrary, recognising something as a "philosophy" by the ancients – beyond grasping a certain number of conceptual contents or identifying some texts as philosophical – involves recognising a philosopher's *break* from κοινὸς βίος; a caesura that sets the philosopher – ever a potential hermit – apart. Mario Vegetti (2003, 34) described this rupture, which he believes starts with Socrates, as the withdrawal of the philosopher/subject from the

<sup>13</sup> Saying that parameters and standards of judgment can undergo drastic changes is not trivial. Who would have thought that, in recent years, colleges in the United States North American would have cast doubt on Ludwig Wittgenstein's status as a real philosopher? And yet, if the rumours are to be believed, that is exactly what is happening. (Luigi Perissinotto, personal communication).

traditional values of the City. As a consequence of this break, the subject develops an “authentic ‘I’” that “no longer coincides with the ‘external,’ socially recognizable subject”. This fracture recalls Wittgenstein’s thought on the limits of language, a thought that Hadot (2004, 23) interpreted in a ‘Delphic’ way:

If he [i.e. Wittgenstein] insists so much on the limits of language, it is because after all he wants to allow a glimpse of a state of silent wisdom, attainable by those who have gone beyond the propositions of the *Tractatus*.

Therefore, the ancient philosopher is in the first place a subject who, saying ‘I’ in this hermetic way, makes reference to the act of singular enunciation. A philosopher is someone who says ‘I’ in this way, before anything philosophical has even been said.<sup>14</sup> One could say that ancient philosophers draw the attention of their fellow citizens to language itself, putting themselves in the position of *showing* (*Zeigen*) even before that of *saying* (*Sagen*). So that, independent of having written texts handed down to us as philosophical, we should begin our search for the style of ancient philosophical practice with the action of indicating oneself, of presenting oneself as an indexically relevant, separate person. The reference to saying ‘I’ (actually present in every expression of θεωρητικὸς βίος) reveals a polarity between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ of the City; and it leads the subject of the enunciation to produce a form of life (εἶδος, or μορφή βίου) that will be increasingly bound up with a *discursive style*, likely manifest in speech or in a series of acts. Diogenes is a case in point.

## 2.2 Philosophical Agency as an Adverb Modification?

The break between subject and community and this new discursive style are clearly related to a distinction drawn by Pierre Hadot (1995) between *philosophical discourse* and genuine *philosophy*,<sup>15</sup> but the former doesn’t overlap with the latter, as we will see. I’d like to make two observations on this topic, developing Hadot’s intuition as it relates to the distinction that I will try to draw between acting and behaving and as it relates to the fact that something may provide evi-

<sup>14</sup> It seems correct to quote Hadot 1995, 45, who, about the Socratic dialogue, said: “In the Socratic dialogue, the question truly at stake is not what is being talked about, but who is doing the talking”. See also Hadot 2004, 74-82. Some scholars see in the reference to the existential dimension of *Zeigen* a concern common to Wittgenstein’s philosophy as well as to Heideggerian hermeneutics. See Gier 1981.

<sup>15</sup> A polyphonic exploration of the meaning of ancient philosophy for moderns can be found in Andò, Cozzo 2002.

dence to determine when an action is philosophical. First, I'd like to note that Hadot's move has the virtue of discerning a relationship in ancient philosophy between a level of action and a level of conceptual discourse. As mentioned above, there are discourses that prior tradition has canonised as 'philosophical writings on language': some of Plato's dialogues, like *Cratylus*, *The Sophist*, and, especially, *Phaedrus*; the works of Aristotle collected in *The Organon*; and, later on, the Stoic writings on logic, of which accounts and fragments still exist. But there's a lot more than that. There is a *corpus* that can surely be classified as the manifestation of – shall we say – a philosophy of ancient language. But identifying a philosopher of ancient language's practice with his 'textualist' *côte* or *decontextualised* propositions is often insufficient and sometimes misleading: indeed, done light-heartedly, we'd be committing a fallacy that projected our concept onto that of the Greeks, as Frede earlier reminded us.<sup>16</sup>

We're looking for a criterion, not a literary canon. We're looking for forms of philosophical action, not some sort of verbal assertion that we can stick the label philosophy of language onto. To arrive at an answer requires analysing philosophical practice and a few concepts of a philosophy of action. It is philosophical action and how it differs from behaviour that we have chosen as a field of inquiry. And in this study, the boundaries and subdivisions between disciplines (moral philosophy, epistemology, philosophy of language) would only present obstacles to a correct understanding of the phenomena under examination. It's worth remembering what Donald Davidson wrote in a weighty article about the study of action in Aristotle:<sup>17</sup>

The study of action, along with other contemporary seismic shifts, will continue to contribute to the breakdown of the administratively ordained boundaries between the various fields of philosophy. Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume and Kant, to pick a few winners, recognized no lines between metaphysics, epistemology, moral philosophy, psychology, philosophy of language, and the history of philosophy, and neither would we if our universities and colleges didn't often compel us to think of ourselves and our colleagues as belonging in one or another field. (Davidson 2005, 291)

One must first consider all of ancient philosophy, and not just a text, as a style, a τρόπος or a εἶδος of praxis of someone who is acting. Don-

<sup>16</sup> Similar conclusions, though through different perspectives are reached by Detienne 1967.

<sup>17</sup> Davidson's interest in the logic of action is evidenced by a number of essays written over a long period of time (see the following note) and by his constant references to the treatment of action by a philosopher he greatly admired, Anscombe (1957). According to Davidson, it is the most important treatment of action since Aristotle.

ald Davidson might appreciate a formulation such as: *The philosophy of the ancients is what would introduce into the sentence describing the philosopher's action a type of adverbial modifier*.<sup>18</sup> Pursuing the metaphor further, this would be an adverbial modification of the action, describable in any language, even non-verbal language, as long as it is equipped with the expressive resources that permit the language to refer to an action. For convenience, we usually imagine such a reference as a matter of *denotation*: a proposition of language describes an action, shows its logical form, articulates its meaning. And yet nothing impedes us from considering the description of an action as performed using not a verbal sentence but the action itself (another or the same), just performed with a metalinguistic intention. It would involve choosing an exemplificational language instead of a denotational language. Exemplifying, as per Nelson Goodman's (1968, 59) studies, is to all effects a way of reference and is involved in a large number of symbolic practices connected to human gestural or praxic intentions.<sup>19</sup> If exemplification has not often been studied in depth, it is because it concerns more the signifier than the meaning of languages and symbolic systems.<sup>20</sup> It's worth mentioning that the notational poverty of gestural languages<sup>21</sup> – with the partial exception of artistic languages – is not an argument against the validity or possibility of developing a praxic logic to be applied to human action and its various forms of gestures. What else could the philosopher Epictetus have meant if not an adverbial modification when, turning to the young philosopher hanging on his words, he said:

Remember that you are an actor in a play, the character of which is determined by the Playwright: if He wishes the play to be short,

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**18** Of course, I refer to Davidson's well-known analysis of sentences containing verbs of action presented in Davidson 1980, 293 and 296. His idea is that "adverbial modification provides a lead for understanding what actions and events are" and consequently "adverbial clauses are correctly perceived as predicates of events". This analysis highlights the link between action, adverbs and ontological commitments.

**19** Nelson Goodman 1968, 59, enumerates among the cases of exemplification the gestures of gym instructors or orchestra conductors, as well as the actions of mimes. For the American philosopher, exemplification is a mode of reference in which a sample refers to the label, or predicate, by which it is denoted in a given context. The major difference with denotation comes from the fact that what exemplifies in a given context must be something denoted by the predicate or label. An action can be completed to exemplify some of its traits. In that case "a symbol that denotes itself also exemplifies itself, is both denoted and exemplified by itself". See Goodman 1968, 59.

**20** The dominant paradigm is a meaning-oriented one. On the marginalisation of the signifier-oriented theories of symbols, see for instance La Matina 2020.

**21** Scholars such as Greimas, Koechlin, Fabbri, Rastier and others talk about this poverty in a collective work on action and its logic: Greimas 1968. Greimas 1968, 20, relates the relative poverty of studies on gestures to the theoretical difficulty of separating the sentence-level and the enunciation-level.

it is short; if long, it is long; if He wishes you to play the part of a beggar, remember to act even this rôle *adroitly*; and so if your rôle be that of a cripple, an official, or a layman. For this is to your business, play *admirably* the rôle assigned you; but the selection of that rôle is Another's. (Epict. *Encheiridion* 17)<sup>22</sup>

Like an actor in a play written by other people, the subject who lives according to philosophy is called on to play the role assigned to him adroitly and admirably. The contribution of his philosophical being is a *modal* contribution to the action, and nothing more.

### 2.3 Philosophising as an Intransitive Action

As a second point, I would like to turn my attention to another affirmation that strikes me as particularly significant to the present argument. In his first lesson at the *Collège de France* on February 18, 1983, Pierre Hadot (1995, 28) considered philosophising as a continuous act, a permanent act, to be identified with life: an act that must be renewed moment to moment. Let us linger briefly on this definition. Philosophising, he affirms, is a *continuum* and, at the same time, something that should be carried out again and again. Therefore, the features of philosophy that emerge are continuity and perishability: that which is continuous is continuous because it is incessantly performed. Continuity and perishability emerge as features of the philosophy. We are in the presence of two aspects of time, where philosophy is simultaneously tasked with creating a transit space or threshold that renders the motion of change constant and with measuring that change by dividing it into segments and, because it differentiates between segments, visible to the subject as a novelty that is given in its time.

We can picture the practice of the philosopher as the production of a constant split between a before and an after. Aristotle (*Phys.* 220a.25) defined time as “the number of motion in respect of before and after”. Paraphrasing his definition, we can push ourselves to say that philosophy is the quality that measures the motion (splitting) of time that emerges in respect of a before and after of the subject who finds him or herself at the centre of the enunciation. If that is true, then philosophy is not ‘done’, like a ποιεῖν that produces an object; like a product. Instead, it acts, like a πράττειν that keeps producing a new subject, or rather, something new in the subject that acts. To make our case by adapting the words of Emile Benveniste, we could say that philosophising is more intransitive than transitive action: it sheds light on the subjectivity of the philosopher in a new and surprising way:

<sup>22</sup> We quote from: Epictetus 1928, 479-80. Italics added.

Ici le sujet est le lieu du procès [...] le sujet est centre en même temps qu'acteur du procès; il accomplit quelque chose qui s'accomplit en lui. (Benveniste 1966, 172)

According to my hypothesis, we must initially recognise that the process of the 'doings' of ancient philosophy takes place within a subject that says 'I'. That construction of the subject happens thanks to the reiteration of a particular act of enunciation, which generates a polarisation between an indifferent 'you' (the City) and the person who says 'I'; it thereby puts forward two differences: (a) a difference between the self and the City, where life is only behaviour; and (b) a difference between the earlier self and the self that is reborn with each simple act of saying 'I'. Saying, then, is really doing.

#### 2.4 Attentiveness, or προσοχή: An Enunciation-Game

If what has been said thus far is plausible, then we can attribute to the act of philosophising among the ancients that which modern linguistics attributes to the act of enunciation: perishability (*semel-natif*). It will help to cite the passage we're referring to here, which comes from the theory of enunciation elaborated by Emile Benveniste (1971, 224):

The 'subjectivity' we are discussing here is the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as 'subject'. [...] 'Ego' is he who says 'ego'. That is where we see the foundation of 'subjectivity', which is determined by the linguistic status of 'person'.

By saying that "'Ego' is he who says 'ego'", Benveniste removes the presence of the subject the moment he installs himself into the discourse. At the same time, if we're right, the ancient philosopher is someone who says 'I' while withdrawing from the polis. His relationship with language is not connected to the contents that he could write or has written; initially, it is the relationship of a speaker who constructs himself via a constant practice of commanding his enunciation. Thus constructed, subjectivity is, however, perishable. It demands constant upkeep, a continuous effort to stay within the bounds that the 'I' seeks to construct. Before staking out any propositions, the ancient philosopher must ensure he will have the floor and keep it. This explains why a philosophical life requires that the ancients carefully tend to their words, performing exercises to preserve the attentiveness of this 'I' and avoid unconsciously being swallowed up by the inauthenticity of a life based on mere behaving. The act of saying 'I' was what distinguished acting from behaving.

The Hellenistic period and, more so, the Imperial Age saw the flourishing of language games that we shall call games of attention

(*prosokhè-games*).<sup>23</sup> They introduced various linguistic formulas: *πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ* (pay attention to yourself), *πρόσεχε τὸν νοῦν* (pay attention to something), *πρόσεχε μή...* (be careful not to...) and *προσοχή* (Beware!). There are significant nuances in the ways that modern languages translate the verb *προσέχειν*, in its various syntactical constructions: 'Be careful', 'Carefully observe yourself', 'Beware', 'Take care'. The point of the game is to take account of something, and it is encouraged in philosophical schools throughout the Hellenised Mediterranean. The Stoics, for example, practice them a lot. Mention is made of them by many authors. Epictetus and his disciple Arrian introduce these expressions over and over again or allude to them in important ways;<sup>24</sup> Marcus Aurelius, too, reminds himself to *προσοχή*; reference to taking such cares is present in the New Testament and in Latin authors like Seneca. According to Hadot, attention (*προσοχή*):

is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self-consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit. Thanks to this attitude, the philosopher is fully aware of what he does at each instant, and he wills his actions fully. (Hadot 1995, 84)

Arrian, who compiled the writings of his master Epictetus (Epict. *Dissert.* 4.1.1-12.5), speaks to this in a chapter titled *Περὶ προσοχῆς*. Firstly, he describes *προσοχή* as (a) an attitude that one cannot take up at will once it is lost (*μὴ τοῦτο φαντάζου, ὅτι, ὀπόταν θέλῃς, ἀναλήψῃ αὐτήν*); (b) which is hampered by behaviour (*ἔθος τοῦ μὴ προσέχειν ἐγγίνεται*); (c) and also delayed by behaviour (*εἴωθας ὑπερτίθεσθαι ἀ[ρ]εὶ δ' εἰς ἄλλον καὶ ἄλλον χρόνον*); (d) that is rejected by habit (*ἔθος τοῦ ἀναβάλλεσθαι τὴν προσοχὴν*). We find here a split between *behaviour* (*ἔθος*) and the *act* of attention (*προσοχή*), between everyday living and choosing to act. Based on these notations, we can imagine that the utterance of one of the aforementioned formulas – *πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ*, *πρόσεχε τὸν νοῦν*, *πρόσεχε μή* – triggers an indexical activity, an act of positioning that in some cases was aimed at an element present in the context, but in other cases took up as a point of application the very action that the subject was performing. Games of attention were exercises used in philosophy schools to heighten sensitivity. This falls within our field inquiry, given that a philosopher like Charles W. Morris considered 'taking account of something' as the basis of the process that governs the function of signs, which he calls *semiosis*.

<sup>23</sup> I dealt with the topic of *προσοχή* in a seminar held at the Classics and Ancient History Department, at the University of Durham (3 March 2016), entitled *Paying Attention to Prosokhè: An Inquiry into Pagan and Christian Philosophy*.

<sup>24</sup> On Epictetus' works see Dobbin 1998. On his discursive style see Wehner 2000.

The most effective characterization of a sign is the following: *S* is a sign of *D* for *I* to the degree that *I* takes account of *D* in virtue of the presence of *S*. Thus in semiosis something takes account of something else mediately, i.e., by means of a third something. (Morris 1938, 4)

In ancient philosophy taking account of ‘something’ becomes taking account of ‘oneself’. The comparison gets at something relevant: προσοχή triggers a language game through which one thing takes into account something else, giving rise to a process of semiosis. Still, for the utterance “πρόσεχε!” (Be careful!) to achieve its desired effect, something has to function as a sign. But what? The texts we hope would provide us with an answer leave various possibilities open: Epictetus invites his disciples to construct, before an action, a kind of script (*Encheiridion* 4); Plutarch urges us to pay attention to the discourse of a sophist or philosopher, more than to their performance (*De recta ratione audiendi*, 37b); the author of the *Life of Antony* (*Vita Antonii*, 26.921.20 ff.) tells monks to write their own lives, in order “to be in the presence of themselves”;<sup>25</sup> Philo of Alexandria refers to the faculty of learning from discourses (*De cherubim*, 102, line 2). There are plenty of similar examples. To categorise them, we could say that the game of attention has three segments:

1. *a trigger point* (the command given either by somebody else or to oneself: πρόσσεχε!). This command can be expressed in language or by pointing;
2. *an application point*, in the region of “take care”: in Greek Imperial philosophy, it is found in what depends on us (τὰ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν), especially psychism. Finally,
3. *an insurgence point* (what Nietzsche called *Entstehungspunkt*),<sup>26</sup> the conquest of the self by means of others; the introduction of a life that, although it has yet to take shape, will become the main content of the philosophy of the period.

<sup>25</sup> Athanasius counterposes behaving (which is an unreflexive doing) and acting. For a behaviour to be assumed as an action by the subject, it must be able to be fixed in a written description. In this way - we can say - the doing is received by its subject from the outside. In Athanasius’ words: Πολλάκις γὰρ καὶ ἑαυτοὺς, ἐν οἷς πράττομεν, λανθάνομεν. [...] Ἐκαστος τὰς πράξεις καὶ τὰ κινήματα τῆς ψυχῆς, ὡς μέλλοντες ἀλλήλοις ἀπαγγέλλειν, σημειώμεθα καὶ γράφωμεν. The expression ‘being put into the presence of oneself’ is a Michel Foucault’s one. In Foucault (1983) the relation between language-games (as *parrhesia*) and truth is stressed.

<sup>26</sup> The notion of ‘insurgence’ (*Entstehung*) was elaborated by Friedrich Nietzsche in the field of his famous project focused on the *Genealogie der Moral* and was re-elaborated in a historical perspective by the theologian Franz Overbeck (1837-1905) in his framework for the study of the Church Fathers; see Overbeck 1996. On the Christian notion of προσοχή, see Basilii Caesarensis, Ὁμιλία εἰς τὸ Πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ, XXXI, 198C-217B Migne.



One could also say that προσοχή is a device that activates a space without filling it with contents. ‘Beware!’ – ‘Of whom? Of what?’ The order to pay attention deactivates one’s surrounding circumstances, my familiarity with the space I am accustomed to. Customary things are replaced with their absence. And the subject stands at a remove from the self. To put quotation marks around the self is to deactivate it. Προσοχή produces a dystopic time, not the present. The philosophical exercise involves repeating (or listening to someone say) πρόσεχε! Beware! Pay attention! The game of attention produces the ‘I’ itself, which in one sense is there and in another is not there yet. Προσοχή is an invitation to build oneself by getting distance from what is customary. It is a threshold, a liminal space that must be crossed. As the great philosopher Gregory of Nyssa (*De Vita Moysis* 2.34) will go on to say, the ‘I’ presented with itself, but brought by others, can pay attention to itself and know itself as if it were self-generated. This birth is not a natural process; it doesn’t spring from nature (from φύσις), which is estranged from the dominion of the self and has no philosophical content. Instead, this birth is generated by a voluntary impulse (τὸ δὲ οὕτως γεννᾶσθαι οὐκ ἐξ ἄλλοτρίας ἐστὶν ὁρμῆς [...] ἀλλ’ ἐκ προαιρέσεως). This way, only by applying our attention, we father ourselves (ἐσμεν ἑαυτῶν [...] πατέρες).<sup>27</sup>

### 3 Conclusions

To conclude, briefly: we have tried to jettison the belief that an agreement or relationship between the ancients and moderns can be established on the propositional contents of some pivotal philosophical texts alone. Taking a cue from Frede and another from Hadot, we have shifted the attention from the sentence level to the enunciation level. There’s no doubt that, if we linger on the former, it is hard to find a complete and autonomous ‘philosophy of language’ among the ancient Greeks. But if we investigate the process of enunciation, we note a germinal act (the act of paying attention, of noting, of presenting oneself as an I that says ‘I’) that characterises the work of the philosopher as a ‘doing’ or practice and saves him from lapsing into mere behaviour, ever obsequious to the *idola tribus* – as seems to be happening in some parts of the overcrowded academic world.

<sup>27</sup> See *Vita Moys.* 2.34.11.

### 3.1 Philosophising in a New Age of Anxiety

We aren't proposing rules or paradigms, except to refer to a philosophical style that we consider still feasible: philosophy as a way of life, or a form of it. It should be clear that talking about a philosophy of an ancient Greek philosophy of language means speaking of a form of life and not merely of a corpus of texts; it is expedient to quote here Wittgenstein who, while rejecting Russell's (1914) distinction between *hard* and *soft* data,<sup>28</sup> argued that "What has to be accepted, the given, is - one might say - *forms of life*" (Wittgenstein 1953, *PU* II.XI). This is not about building a totem but about utilizing linguistic and semiotic resources to return modern philosophising to its origins. For us, these origins are a fundamental game for every branch of philosophy: to take account of 'something'. A game that places the subject in his own practice and thereby positions him to grasp himself externally through the reference to a sign, to a trigger, which prompts him to react, to reawaken, to sever himself from the *Uneigentlichkeit* (inauthenticity) of the social world. Schools of philosophy in the Hellenistic and Imperial periods offered a few ideas, which there was not room here to elaborate on. In the eyes of the subject the world changes its appearance. To paraphrase Wittgenstein again, we could say that the real 'given' for having a philosophy as an action (and not as a mere behaviour) is finding a form of life capable of constituting itself as a discourse and a *logos*. In ancient times philosophy is always oneself life. Thus, one would conclude, there is a way to make sense of Wittgenstein's saying in this context as well, by saying that the limits of someone's βίος mean the limits of their λόγος.

However, by now the only limits I can see are those of the present paper, which has only been able to hint at certain issues that will have to be developed and dissected later. Indeed, approaching theoretically this digging out requires much more extensive work than that carried out so far. We know that Hellenistic and imperial philosophical schools offer many more data than the ones mentioned here. In a future rethinking of ancient philosophy - taken as an action and as a mode of enunciation - the study of Greek patristics should play an important part. The Greek fathers used and described προσοχή-games, organising them, and even integrating them into liturgical life<sup>29</sup> (think of imitation in mystagogy). It is no surprise that, especially in the fourth century, Greek Patristics envisioned a phil-

<sup>28</sup> Author's Italics. On this point I am obliged to Perissinotto 2002, XV.

<sup>29</sup> For an attempt of analytic approach see, for instance, La Matina 2015. As to the historical and philosophical context see Dodds 1965. On the practice of language-games in Christendom see, e.g., Locker 2009.

osophical exercise that not only could trigger the making of a philosophical life, but a powerful instrument that ensured that this new subjectivity was generated through the mediation of Biblical stories. The biblical narratives, reinterpreted in the context of Eastern mistagogy, are listened to as if they contained – as, for instance, a Greek father expresses – (Greg. Nyss. *In Cant.* 756.5 M) “a philosophy hidden in words” (τὴν ἐγκεκρυμμένην τοῖς ῥητοῖς φιλοσοφίαν).<sup>30</sup> These stories (ιστορικά διηγήματα) do not matter for their denotative content, but because they describe actions that the scholar of philosophy will have to transcribe (μεταγράφειν) in his own life.<sup>31</sup> Such a transcription realises the transition from the third-person narrative (μῦθος) to the first-person life (βίος), as well as from a *wortbar*-language to a wordless language. This latter is prompted by the philosophical approach to the unsayable (ὁ λόγος [...] δι’ ἀπορρήτων φιλοσοφεῖ: *In Cant.* 772M; GNO 6.23.14). In Gregory’s terms, a true philosophy lies in the transition from *the other’s life* (the life of Moses, of Christ) to the *one’s own life*. Let me quote a significant passage:

These things, o Caesarius man of God, on the perfection of the virtuous life [περὶ τῆς τοῦ βίου τοῦ κατ’ ἀρετὴν τελειότητος] suggests [ὑποτίθεται] our brief discourse; setting [ὑπογράφας] Moses’ life before you as a model [πρωτότυπον] in the form of beauty, so that each of us, through the imitation of any convenient aspect, may transcribe in himself [ἐν ἑαυτοῖς μεταγράφειν] the character [τὸν χαρακτήρα] of the shown beauty. (Greg. Nyss. *Vita Moys.* 2.143.19-144.3)

### 3.2 Gregory of Nyssa’s *De Vita Moysis*

Similar remarks could be found extensively in the patristic literature. This means that Bible narratives are usually interpreted by the fathers as lives the subject should receive from the outside: the proclaimed sacred texts are signs that trigger new lives. The most interesting philosophers in this respect are the Cappadocian fathers: Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, three philosophers educated in pagan philosophy who were able to reframe many questions in light of their Christian vision of language.<sup>32</sup> This article can touch on just the following aspect of their account. In the interpretation of the Biblical stories and characters,

<sup>30</sup> See the parallel formulation in Greg. Nyss. *In Cant.* 6.3.5: ὥστε διὰ τῆς καταλλήλου θεωρίας φανηρωθῆναι τὴν ἐγκεκρυμμένην τοῖς ῥητοῖς φιλοσοφίαν.

<sup>31</sup> Another parallel passage is in *In Cant.* 6.6.5-8.

<sup>32</sup> For more on this philosophical position of Gregory’s, see La Matina 2010.

the Cappadocians emphasise a notion of philosophy that stands as the dividing line between two ways of reading the Scripture. The facts narrated, they say, may be either true ἱστορικῶς (i.e., denotatively) or true τυπικῶς (that is, exemplificationally).<sup>33</sup> In the first, the biblical sentences are true to the facts, while in the second reading they are true a different way.

For example, no listeners of Gregory's *De Vita Moysis* (*Vita Moys.* 1.6.8-14) could choose to live the life of Moses: there are no Pharaohs or Chaldeans or golden calves in the fourth century. Then, how to imitate the life of Moses and achieve perfection,<sup>34</sup> provided that this is the primary philosophical task for the fathers? Gregory encourages to pay attention (προσέχειν) rather to the truth conditions than to the meaning of text.<sup>35</sup> Truth is not only a matter of fact, for God might speak every time to everybody listening to Him. Accordingly, if truth does not belong only to the past times, then the *Bible* sentences admit of a supplement of effectiveness. It is in this sense that Gregory exhorts his listeners "to make Moses a sample of life": Μοῦσῆς τοίνυν ἡμῖν εἰς ὑπόδειγμα βίου προτεθήτω τῷ λόγῳ. *Vita Moys.* 1.6.24-5). Exhortation like this do prompt each listener to play the attentiveness-game.<sup>36</sup> The προσοχή is used to replace the third person (the person ἱστορικῶς) by the first one. Now, translating these notions into a language close to modern philosophy, one could say that the ancient listener is somehow requested of removing the historical names from the story and filling in the blanks in the predicates by using their own proper noun. Each of them can thus become another Moses.

Besides, didn't Aristotle say in *Poetics* that, when one reads the life of, say, Alcibiades, it is not what happens to Alcibiades that is philosophical, but the possibility of converting Alcibiades' actions into actions that can be performed by those of us listening to them at the theatre or reading them on our own? To act ἱστορικῶς and to act τυπικῶς: the kind of philosophy that we're looking for requires a semantic explanation of action, and maybe that explanation, too, is hidden between adverbs and games like these.

<sup>33</sup> See Greg. *In Cant.* 6.6.5-8. The origin of the ἱστορικῶς vs τυπικῶς dichotomy is in St Pauls' *1 Cor* 10.11.

<sup>34</sup> Here you are the paradoxical condition of the listeners: they are invited to (but do not really can) imitate the perfect life. See e.g. *Vita Moys.* 1.6.4 (πῶς μιμήσωμαι;) and also 2.47.5 ff. (ἀδύνατον δι' αὐτῶν τῶν πραγμάτων [...] μιμήσασθαι).

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. *Vita Moys.* 1.2.22-3.

<sup>36</sup> See again at the end of *Vita Moys.* 2.144.17-20: ὦρα σοι [...] πρὸς τὸ ὑπόδειγμα βλέπειν [...] ἐπὶ τὸν ἴδιον μεταφέροντα βίον.

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