

NATURE THAT REMAINS AND NATURE THAT COMES AND GOES: BERNARDINO TELESIO'S IDEA OF NATURAL SELFHOOD

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Abstract: In the three editions of his *De rerum natura* (1565; 1570; 1586), Bernardino Telesio (1509-1588) provided a complex and nuanced account of nature understood as a vital self. I argue that his distinction between a «nature that remains» (*quae remanet natura*) and a «nature that comes and goes» (*accedens recedensque natura*), discussed in particular in the 1570 edition, helped qualify the conceptual tension between matter and force that underlies Telesio's metaphysics. Nature can therefore be seen as a kind of self grafted on to a unique variety of monism, in which the eternity and immutability of matter is reconciled with the impermanent character of life.

Keywords: Nature; Self; Sentience; Matter; Force.

1. Introduction: The Virtual Dualism of Telesio's Philosophy of Nature

Among the many innovative ideas that Bernardino Telesio (1509-1588) introduced in his *De rerum natura*, one of the most original is the assumption that nature can be regarded as a fully autonomous causal agent endowed with a life and sentience of its own. In this article, I argue that Telesio's understanding of nature as a vital self hinged on a sophisticated cosmological view in which the universe was deemed to be held together by the interplay of conflicting powers, constantly adjusting their precarious and changing dominion over the universal substratum of matter. Since the 1565 edition of *De rerum natura*, Telesio distinguished between two types of nature, one immutable, corresponding to matter, and one changeable, corresponding to force. In the 1570 edition, he called them «nature that remains» (*quae remanet natura*) and «nature that comes and goes» (*accedens recedensque natura*).¹ This was no inner splitting of nature on Telesio's part. Indeed, as will become apparent in this article, he introduced the distinction precisely to provide nature with a stronger ontological foundation and to account for the sensible evidence of material change in the universe.

¹ In fact, the interplay of *natura quae remanet* and *natura quae accedit receditque* had already been introduced in the very first attempt by Telesio to revise the text published in 1565. Evidence of this development can be found in the copy of the 1656 edition kept in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Rome (segn. 71.3.D.29), which includes a draft of the new version of Chapters 1-4. See Telesio (2011: 19-33). On this edition, see Bondi (2011), who refers to Gentile (2018 [1911]).

When approaching Telesio's philosophical masterpiece, it is essential always to bear in mind that this work is in fact one and three: the three editions of *De rerum natura* (1565, 1570, 1586), while representing the coherent and unitary development of a lifetime's investigations, also show significant variations, adaptations and reformulations, to be regarded as telling signposts of one long philosophical journey.² Likewise, as I will argue in this article, Telesio's nature is one and three: one as the all-encompassing system of the universe (*universalis natura*) and three as denoting a triad of essential features constituting the core of its complex identity: oneness, force and matter. Telesio was particularly concerned with the possibility that the hylomorphic dualism championed by Aristotle and the Aristotelians might represent itself within its own view of nature.

As an attentive reader of Aristotle's works, he rejected the ontological division of matter and form, thought to be rigid and impractical, and replaced it with a flexible model in which energy and knowledge (*vis* and *sensus*) were described as one reality being constantly adjusted to the supple expanse of matter. I will call this position 'virtual dualism' for the opposition between matter and force, heat and cold, Sky and Earth in Telesio's system presupposes no ontological chasm between substances, but suggests that different stages are at work within the same universal tendency to self-preservation (*conservatio sui*). Descartes would later argue that precisely because a distinction between corporeal and incorporeal substances is conceivable, such distinction should be considered real. For Telesio, the fact that we can conceive (*licet intelligere*) a distinction between matter and force does not allow us to say that this division is real, that is, observable in reality: reality for Telesio is one embodied continuum of energy. Telesio's dualism of matter and force is therefore virtual in both an epistemological and physical sense, since it presupposes the ability of the human mind to envision a conceptual layering of reality (starting with the distinction of being and activity) as well as the possibility that polar differences (heat and cold) are in fact degrees of intensity in one seamless sequence of energy (sentience). Sentience is the one force that the material powers of nature share and unremittingly negotiate in their effort to occupy matter and extend their dominion over it. In fact, their struggles for power and final victory have the unintended consequence of contributing to the unity of the cosmos. Nature as a sentient force exists as the power that remains the same while recognizing the changes affecting its own essence. By being aware of itself, nature is able to preserve itself. Nature as a vital self was Telesio's final answer to the philosophical puzzle of how tying matter, force and sentience together.³

² Bondi (2009: vii-xxi). On Telesio's philosophy of nature, see De Franco (1995); Bondi (1997); Mulso (1998); Bondi (2018).

³ An anonymous referee, whom I would like to thank here for his or her comments, has criticized my notion of virtual dualism in Telesio labelling it a «categoria fantoccio», which in English I would translate as «puppet category». If I understood the remark correctly, just as in a banana republic one

This view of nature as a vital self was elaborated by Telesio while writing and rewriting his *De rerum natura*, with the 1570 edition working as a decisively pivotal point.⁴ Famously, Francis Bacon (1561-1616) heralded Telesio as the first of the moderns.⁵ Bacon was right, although his suggestion has never been taken seriously, at least by past and contemporary singers of philosophical modernity and overzealous compilers of handbooks and companions of the history of philosophical modernity. (Today most historians and philosophers would say that this honour belongs to Descartes and not to Telesio.) My proposal here is to take Bacon's suggestion very seriously and indeed raise the metaphysical stakes by saying that in fact Telesio was so modern that we can serenely view him as our contemporary. By making nature a proper self without feeling embarrassed for having granted the power of sentience to nature and by avoiding trite idealistic solutions that would confine the act of thinking only to human, angelical or divine minds, Telesio can be seen today as the harbinger of more inclusive views of reality in which humans share knowledge with all other beings. The time has come when we can discuss such philosophical perspectives as panpsychism and hylozoism in reasonably civilized manners without fearing of being mocked as speculative ingénues, while the thesis that only humans and gods (or perhaps those fashionable replicas of human thinking known as algorithms) can be considered proper thinking subjects sounds less convincing by the day. With his account of natural selfhood, Telesio can be seen as an earlier advocate of contemporary opinions highlighting the fact that all life forms participate in the knowledge production of the cosmos.

would install a patsy government to bring forward the hidden agenda of the political puppeteer, so I have stealthily introduced a minion concept into my principal argument to validate historiographic regimes of philosophical monism. I think the anonymous referee is wrong on two counts. Whatever he or she means by «puppet category», the notion is redolent of conspiratorial thinking, which is an approach that in general should be avoided in historical investigations and writing, but that is especially unsuitable when dealing with Telesio's philosophy, often embroiled in distracting issues of double-truth strategies and alleged self-censorship. The «puppet category» is also wrong because the kind of virtual dualism I am referring to in this article is central to Telesio's metaphysics and is not a so-called hypothesis ad hoc or a Trojan horse of the mind. In the final analysis, to project contemporary political anxieties back onto Telesio's theory of nature trivializes an actual philosophical question and a real problem with which contemporary thinkers and scientists are still (productively) struggling today in their efforts to make sense of the complex relationships between nature and sentience.

⁴ I would argue that, in his account of nature as vital oneness, Telesio is at his most Parmenidean in the 1570 version of his *De rerum natura*. On Francis Bacon's discussion of Telesian philosophy as a modern appraisal of ancient Eleatism, see Artese (1991); Gigliotti (2020).

⁵ Giachetti Assenza (1980); Garber (2016); Bondi (2019).

2. Three Meanings of Sensus

Of the various aspects that makes the study of Telesio's thought a rather complex business for the historian of philosophy, one should always start with the subtle interplay of continuity and variation that unfolds through the three editions of his magnum opus, the *De rerum natura iuxta propria principia*. Between 1565, the year of its first printing with the simpler title *De natura iuxta propria principia*, and 1586, the year of the third edition, Telesio's book grew and developed like a living organism. In a way, *De rerum natura* is the same book, for the basic principles remain unchanged and no recantation takes place in 1586, even when things started to become problematic from a theological and inquisitorial point of view.⁶ And yet what we have are in fact three different books. The image of the palimpsest, often overused, this time works rather appropriately. Any accurate study of Telesio's philosophy requires that the three works be read simultaneously to appreciate the many fine variations in tone and perspective. For instance, when we investigate Telesio's notion of *sensus* as a natural force, of the three editions, the second one published in 1570 is particularly significant. It's true, the 1586 volume, even only for reasons of sheer size (nine books compared to the two of the previous editions) and because of its systematic character, offers us a more comprehensive and detailed account of sentience in all its manifold forms in nature. In the 1570 edition, however, we are able to follow how the concept emerges while Telesio draws the coordinates of his metaphysical framework. If the 1565 treatise is an outburst of philosophical energy (as Garin rightly suggested),⁷ and if the 1586 version is the summa and encyclopaedia of Telesian philosophy and science, the 1570 edition is the laboratory that reveals to us the thinker busy at work.

By the time the third edition of the book had been published and Telesio had processed Francesco Patrizi's metaphysical objections, *sensus* had become a theoretical postulate in addition to being a result of cosmological and medical reflections, as had been the case in 1565.⁸ In 1586 Telesio stated: «*indendus utrique fuit sensus et manifeste inditus est*: sentience had to be implanted into both active natures [heat and cold] and it has been clearly implanted in them».⁹ The grammatical shift from the gerundive (*indendus*) to the past participle (*inditus*) sums up the epistemological turn. Logical necessity takes priority over factual assessment. If there were no such *sensus*, Telesio now firmly argued, we would not be able to understand (*intelligere non licet*) how nature, taken as an indeterminate substratum (*universalis quaedam natura*), wishes (*velit*) to be a

⁶ Gigliani (2013: xi-xxii).

⁷ See Garin (1961 [1957]).

⁸ See Puliafito (1992).

⁹ Telesio (1586: 10). All English translations from Telesio are mine.

unified cosmos that is present to itself in a continuity of vital operations (*mundus sibi ipsi continuus*).¹⁰

In 1586, the sign that *sensus* had evolved into a metaphysical category is the description of *spiritus* – the most active and responsive constituent of the material universe – as *omniscius omnino*, that is, fully aware of itself and of everything else.¹¹ Spirit is a substance that knows everything and knows that it knows everything. In other words, spirit is absolute consciousness. Here Telesio expands on a point whose metaphysical implications had been rather muffled in the previous editions. In 1565, but especially in 1570, *sensus* is a power of immediate sensory alertness rather than a principle of natural self-identity. As such, it is characterized as the mechanism through which the active natures of heat and cold reinforce themselves when chased and pressed by each other within the cycle of antiperistasis.¹² Once again, the difference from one edition to the other is a shift in emphasis. In the version published in 1570, *sensus* is presented as the only property that heat and cold share and it is the reason why the cosmos lives and operates as one cohesive entity. While in the 1586 edition the argument of universal self-preservation prevails and becomes the premise for a full metaphysical disclosure, in the 1570 edition, the emphasis is on the battle between heat and cold. Here *sensus* is the force of partial and plural self-recognition, and the concept of otherness (*esse aliud*) plays a role that is as important as that of sameness (*esse idem*). The recovery of the notion of antiperistasis from its medical and meteorological uses in Hippocrates, Plato and Aristotle allows Telesio to explore forms of homeostatic balance in nature.

From what said so far, it is not much of a surprise that many forms and degrees of sentience are recorded in Telesio's universe. We can distinguish at least three of these forms: the original *sensus conservationis*, which acts as the ultimate principle of ontological cohesion; the probing and discerning abilities inherent in the active natures (heat and cold); and the cognitive power that is variously enacted by the senses through their specific organs. Albeit related, they are different expressions of the life of nature: the first is its foundational core (*natura universalis*); the second its differentiating power (*natura agens*); the third, finally, is its reactive and responsive faculty. The *sensus* that is the keeper of the universal self-preservation of the cosmos is based on the absolute identity of nature as self-active power. I will call this conative *sensus*: there is absolutely no difference between inner and outer, similar and dissimilar parts within nature understood as one power, and therefore there is no vacuum.¹³ The second type of *sensus* is a

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 22: «Nam, ut universalis quaedam natura et quae mundum sibi ipsi continuum esse velit, quae scilicet inane vacuumque pati nequeat et ne usquam id fiat provideat, itaque ad recedendum entium locum quae proxima sunt perpetuo impellat, intelligere non licet».

¹¹ On Telesio's notion of the spirit as *omniscius omnino*, see Giglioli (2010).

¹² Telesio (1565, f. 4r); Telesio (1570, f. 50r); Telesio (1586: 128); Telesio (2009: 34-37).

¹³ Telesio (1565, f. 4r); Telesio (1570, f. 2v); Telesio (1586: 10); Telesio (2009: 6).

more specific kind of sentience that belongs to the active forces of heat and cold as these are able to discriminate between what is similar (identity) and what is dissimilar (difference). There is a certain asymmetry – quantitatively speaking – in this level of sentience, for the *sensus* animating the force of heat is stronger and sharper than the one possessed by cold (but this is also further evidence that the distribution of *vis* and *sensus* in Telesio's universe is a matter of degrees, not of essences).¹⁴ I will call this *sensus* the antiperistaltic *sensus*. There is finally the *sensus* understood as the sensorimotor stage in the cognitive development of living organisms. This kind of *sensus* can be called the neural *sensus*. Human beings share this type of sentience with the rest of the animals. A fourth meaning of *sensus*, the epistemic one, is related to neural *sensus*, for in human beings the animal *sensus* is capable of developing an extra layer of reflexive knowledge.

Through their senses, humans go backward, as it were, and cognitively retrace all the different phases in nature's development. In this way, by relying on sense perception as a cognitive function, they build their knowledge of nature, both physical (the antiperistaltic *sensus* and the *naturae agentes*) and metaphysical (the conative *sensus* and the self-identity of nature).

3. Matter and Force

After having outlined the principal meanings of *sensus* in *De rerum natura*, in what follows I will continue my investigation on Telesio's sentience by focusing on the way in which the notion of nature is connected to other central categories such as matter and force.

In Telesio's universe, the forces – heat and cold – can only be found in a state of physical embodiment, for there can be no force that does not inhere in some portion of the universal substratum of matter. Embodied heat is Sky (*Coelum*), embodied cold is Earth (*Terra*). In their state of embodiment, forces (*naturae agentes*) can be said to be *substantiae*.¹⁵ In Telesio's account, matter as mass (*moles*) and force as activity (*vis*) always trigger this process of mutual incorporation. Matter and force are divided in the mind of the philosopher. They are never divided in actual reality, for nature is one embodied entity. The dualism

¹⁴ Telesio (1565, f. 4v): «Calor videlicet longe exquisitissimus [sensus datus est], ut videbitur, ut qui tenuitate gaudens et in tenuitate existens, multo patiatur promptius et multo promptius malum declinet, et quem servari etiam oportebat magis, longe, ut itidem videbitur, obscurissimus frigori, et longe ignavissimus, a densissimo satis munito densoque subiecto, et malum aufugere longe ineptissimus, et quod etiam servari oportebat minus, quod igitur stupidum videri queat et demortuum, propria immobile natura, et longe obscurissimo datum sensu».

¹⁵ Telesio (1570, f. 8r); Telesio (2009: 32): «subiecto cui [calor] inest ita unum factus, ut unum omnino idem illi factus videri possit».

of matter and force is virtual in that it belongs to the exploring and observing strategies of the human intellect.¹⁶

In *De rerum natura*, the interactions of the forces of heat and cold are described in great detail. The *naturae agentes* have an irrepressible tendency to expand in every direction; consequently, they assimilate everything that happens to be in their way. Inevitably, they also clash with each other. Since their actions are complementary and yet at odds with each other, heat and cold alternatively chase and flee each other. Everything that fails to flee is assimilated. The process through which the assimilating power turns something into itself mirrors the process through which the assimilated thing turns into the essence of the assimilating power. Force as a whole – that is, *natura agens* – is therefore a coordinated cycle of actions and passions.¹⁷ In this case, too, force is one reality: the mechanism of antiperistasis prevents force from splitting into two essences or *res*.

Natura agens produces *actiones* and *opera*. *Actiones* are transformations of reality resulting from energetic oppositions between heat and cold. *Opera* are all the natural *res* issuing from this exchange of energy. The principal *actiones* issuing from embodied heat are thinness (*tenuitas*), light (*lux*) and motion (*motus*). The principal *actiones* coming from embodied cold are thickness (*crassities*), darkness (*tenebrae*) and immobility (*immobilitas*). More specifically, the two opposing pairs of three *actiones* express three defining characteristics of the embodied forces: variations in the degree of thinness and thickness determine the *dispositio*, that is, the internal arrangement of the bodily parts; variations in the relationship of light and darkness result in the production of *species*, that is, the visible appearances and the various forms of the bodies; the interplay of motion and motionlessness, finally, ends in *operatio*, that is, the way in which nature produces concrete and material effects.¹⁸

While heat and cold constantly change in their perennial battles, the material substratum they occupy remains always the same. The difference between force and matter is clearly defined: «All beings are produced by two natures, by the one that is subject to generation and decay, and by the other that persists as always the

¹⁶ Here it is worth pointing out that in Telesio's metaphysics the human intellect is a feeble instantiation of natural sentience. The mind conceptualizes a reality that is in itself alive and sentient.

¹⁷ Telesio (1570, f. 21r); Telesio (2009: 92): «non siquidem ob aliud vel agunt vel agere possunt naturae agentes, nisi ut se ipsas amplificent inque iis in quae agunt constituunt, et quae ab aliis patiuntur non aliud ab illis pati videntur nec pati omnino aliud possunt, at in argentium transeunt naturam».

¹⁸ Telesio (1570, f. 9r); Telesio (2009: 36): «Licet igitur et tenuitas et lux et motus caloris sint et frigoris crassities obscuritasque et immobilitas, non eodem tamen modo vel huius vel illius omnia, sed tenuitas ut propria caloris sedis dispositio, lux ut propria perfecti caloris species, motus ut caloris operatio, eodemque pacto his opposita frigoris omnia».

same». ¹⁹ In its quality of receptive structure (*natura suscipiens*), matter can be defined as «the abode and receptacle of the active natures». ²⁰ Being common to both heat and cold, matter is the universal «nature that persists as one». Although it is «devoid of any action and operation», it «receives and preserves the active natures». ²¹

Considered as the nature which «persists» and «receives» everything, being everywhere one and the same, matter is therefore unlimited pliability. On the other hand, nature as a whole – *natura universalis* – is active and sentient throughout. This is possible because sentience as a universal active power is the only property that is shared by heat and cold, the two *naturae agentes*. Heat is endowed with a specific *sensus* that alerts it against possible onslaughts by cold, and the same is true of cold. This means that there are two principal distinctions to be made in the study of natural phenomena: between matter and force in general, and between the two types of force, heat and cold. Telesio's philosophy rests on a largely monistic view of nature that is grounded in a form of virtual dualism. As I mentioned in the introduction to this article, I call this type of dualism 'virtual' in that the conceptual polarity of matter and force (*moles* and *vis*) never manifests itself in nature as a real difference. In actual nature the active and sentient powers of heat and cold are always embodied in matter. As already noted, they are, respectively, Sky and Earth. Nature taken as the whole cosmological system (*natura universalis*) is one autonomous power capable of regulating and conserving itself (*conservatio sui*): reality is one

I have already hinted at the fact that universal self-preservation is the reason why there cannot be a vacuum in the universe. The whole cosmos is held together, as it were, by separation anxiety. One may object to my use of the word 'anxiety' in this context. In fact, there is no anthropomorphic projection in the way in which Telesio resorts to this explanation, for the principle of cohesion is stronger and more original in nature than any human tendency to congregate in society. Just as the human intellect is for Telesio a by-product of the primordial power of *sensus*, so human will and love are effete manifestations of the original self-appetite of nature. The self-identity of the *sensus* – the primordial conative *sensus* – is what turns *natura* into a *mundus*, i.e., a cosmos (*natura mundum sibi ipsi continuum esse velit*). ²² Through acts of self-recognition, the boundless suppleness of matter, the propensity that the active natures have to spread indiscriminately in every

¹⁹ Telesio (1570, f. 4r); Telesio (2009: 14): «Coelum et Terram in sese mutuo agendi vi praedita esse, et entia omnia e duplici natura constituta esse, ex altera quae generetur et corrumpatur et e remanente altera, et ab hac molem corpusque, ab illa vero speciem atque ingenium entibus praeberere».

²⁰ Telesio (1570, f. 12r); Telesio (2009: 52): «domicilium enim receptaculumque agentium naturarum existens materia».

²¹ Telesio (1570, f. 5r); Telesio (2009: 18): «Naturam quae remanet unam esse universam, et actionis ipsam operationisque omnis expertem agentes operantesque naturas suscipere et servare».

²² Telesio (1586: 10).

direction and a whole array of different motions coalesce into material configurations and specific faculties, but, above all, into unity. If nature is ultimately one seamless continuum of everlasting life, the reason is that *sensus* is at the root of nature's self-identity. No break in continuity is allowed. No wonder, then, that *sensus* for Telesio is first of all touch. His notion of nature's selfhood is based on touch and contact understood as primeval manifestations of sentience.²³

This point brings me to the next conclusion. In Telesio's nature, despite the fierce opposition between heat and cold, mutual enjoyment prevails over conflict, as is witnessed by his frequent use of such verbs as *fovere* ('to cherish'), *gaudere* ('to rejoice') and *oblectare* ('to delight in') when describing the inner life of nature.²⁴ The sense of pleasure that all the parts of the world feel at being united with each other is therefore deeper than separation anxiety. What should we make, then, of the implacable and internecine war that divides heat from cold and all the parts of matter they incorporate? Here is where the difference between the conative and the antiperistaltic *sensus* comes especially to the fore. While matter is indifferent and forces are too different (they differentiate matter precisely because they are implacably different from each other), the identity of a *natura* that is unremittingly and eternally present to itself mediates – and in the end reconciles – corporeity with incorporeity, inaction with motion. Antiperistaltic *sensus* mediates the actions and operations between the two opposing forces of heat and cold, while conative *sensus* mediates between matter and force. There is a sense of perpetual peace deep in Telesio's nature which is due to the all-inclusive disposition of matter.

We can conclude this section by reiterating that Telesio often refers to matter (*materia*) and force (*vis*) by using the word *natura*. One might object that this is a source of misunderstanding and confusion. In fact, as I am going to argue, the opposite is true: the way in which Telesio connects *natura* to *materia* and *vis*, and, in the final analysis, to *sensus*, is the reason why nature can be legitimately and convincingly regarded as a self. The kind of identity that defines nature is the result of a perpetual tension within the principal attributes of its being, that is, matter and force.

4. Three Meanings of *Natura*

Let us recall the various meanings used by Telesio to denote *natura* in his work. *Natura* is presented as a most general entity which is characterized by the fundamental attributes of self-sufficiency and self-activity. As we have already seen, both aspects – *materia* as the embodiment of self-sufficiency and *vis* as the embodiment of self-activity – are also signified by Telesio through the noun

²³ Ivi: 32, 316.

²⁴ Ivi: 277-278, 362, 385.

natura. At first glance, this may appear rather unsettling because, as is well known, the Latin word *natura* is already pregnant with meaning owing to its long history as a philosophical term. To add to the complexity of the picture, it should be pointed out that Telesio adopts the philosophical habit – both classical and scholastic – of using the word *natura* to signify both the cosmos (*universitas rerum*) and the essence of things (*essentia rerum*). Despite this initially alarming overuse of *natura* as a technical philosophical term, three distinct meanings of nature can be extrapolated from Telesio’s philosophy: nature as the whole system of divinely created things and processes, including the laws that govern their actions and operations (*natura universa*); nature as the substance of things; nature as the activity of things. First of all, nature means the universe as governed by a self-regulating order. Nature is also the universal substratum that is always the same, that is, matter. As mentioned in the previous section, Telesio calls this feature «receptive nature» (*suscipiens natura*) or mass (*moles*). Finally, nature is the principle of changeability, that is, force (*vis*). This third meaning of nature can be further qualified by characterizing the activity of nature as the unremittingly battling powers of heat and cold, also called *naturae agentes* by Telesio. We can label the three meanings of nature as *natura universa*, *natura suscipiens* and *natura agens*. *Natura agens*, as already noted, is in fact dual, for it manifests itself as heat and cold. *Natura universa* (the cosmos) is therefore made up by the *naturae agentes* (forces) thoroughly coalescing with *natura suscipiens* (matter).

In the 1570 edition of *De rerum natura*, Telesio has yet another way of expressing this interplay of meanings denoting nature. He distinguishes between nature that remains (*natura quae remanet*) and nature that comes and goes (*accedens recedensque natura*). The first nature is matter, the second is force. The nature that remains, being one universal substratum, extended and pliable, is always the same (*eadem*), and yet it is uniquely supple in that it is capable of receiving all possible changes within itself. It is pure affectability (*suscipiens natura*) and absolute identity (*materia eadem*). Differences in nature are produced by the specific differentiating active nature, which, by permeating the undifferentiated and supple body of matter, can make any thing out of any thing (*ex ente quovis quodlibet ens*).²⁵ On its part, matter is always eager to perform its role of receptacle and to lend its substance as the universal stage where the active natures of heat and cold play their relentless internecine strife:

the nature that remains (*quae remanet natura*) seems to be absolutely one and the same throughout. It does not shun or hate any active nature (*natura agens*), but it is equally common and specific to all of them. It willingly joins and agrees with all of them alike, and receives and preserves them all by turning

²⁵ Telesio (1570, f. 5v); Telesio (2009: 18): «si veluti naturae agentes materia itidem diversa ad diversorum entium constitutionem necessaria sit, nequaquam ex ente quovis quodlibet constituatur ens, at id modo quod e materia eadem constitui queat».

itself, as it were, into their seat and dwelling place. Therefore, from this nature, which is one and the same, very different beings are produced.²⁶

Matter, understood as an unchangeable and all-embracing receptacle, is so deprived of energy and motion that it is as if it were dead. It is the «nature that comes and goes» that brings activity and life to – and therefore differentiate – the *demortua natura*:

the receptive nature (*suscipiens natura*) appears not to be endowed with the power to act or to operate, but to be completely inactive and inoperative (*iners desesque*), as if it were dead (*veluti demortua*). All the actions and operations, therefore, seem to derive from the nature that comes and goes (*accedens recedensque natura*), and when this nature penetrates matter (which is always the same) as something other from matter, different actions and different operations are produced, for the nature to which action and operation belong has been received in matter. The receptive nature provides therefore only a mass (*moles*) to the active natures, acting as their dwelling place, and there they abide and are preserved.²⁷

Here is where what I have called the virtual dualism of Telesio's metaphysics comes clearly to the fore: the nature that remains eternally the same and embraces everything is corporeal, the nature that comes and goes and differentiates everything while running through the whole gamut of force degrees is incorporeal. Extended and pliable matter is the support that in the created universe underpins life in all its changeable transformations, for, as Telesio continues, the *naturae agentes*, constantly attacking each other and retreating from each other, cyclically expanding and withdrawing, «absolutely cannot subsist or be by themselves», as they need a body in which to inhere. In Telesio's metaphysics, to be incorporeal is a lessened being. Life and activity need the support of matter to be real and effective. Telesio's following conclusion is the focal point of his metaphysics:

²⁶ *Ibidem*: «At quae remanet natura una esse omnino atque eadem videtur omnis, agentem nullam aversata neque exosa, sed aequae omnibus communis propriaeque, et quae illis omnibus aequae libens coeat congruatque, et omnes suscipiat servetque illarum veluti domicilium facta et sedes; e qua igitur una existente eademque longe diversissima constituentur entia».

²⁷ Telesio (1570, f. 5v); Telesio (2009: 19): «Et nulla agendi aut operandi vi praedita apparet suscipiens natura, sed penitus iners desesque et veluti demortua; neque actio igitur ulla neque ulla operatio ab ente ullo edi videtur, quae non accedentis recedentisque naturae propria sit, et alia ea materiam eandem subeunte alia actio et alia itidem editur operatio, quod nimirum alia assumpta est natura cuius et actio existit et operatio, molem itaque praestans modo et veluti domicilium agentibus naturis cui haereant et in quo serventur». The notion of *demortua natura* appears already in the revised four chapters of the 1565 edition kept in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma. See Telesio 2011: 24.

in the natural phenomena (*ea quae natura fiunt*), whose substance and essence (*ingenium*) we are investigating, all observable actions and operations are produced by an incorporeal substance that is attached to a body. Therefore, the nature that remains appears to be one and universal, devoid of any action and operation, and yet capable of receiving and preserving the active and operating natures.²⁸

Telesio's account of nature is remarkably nuanced. *Natura* is self-identical (*unum et idem*), but also dual (*duplex*). It is *unum et idem* insofar as it is considered as the one universal active principle, everywhere and every time the same. It is *duplex* insofar as it is distinguished, firstly, into matter and force, and secondly, within the domain of force, into condensing and rarefying forces. This means that eternal and all-encompassing nature (*universa natura*) constantly feeds on oppositions: between permanence and transience, contraction and expansion, motionlessness and motion, pain and pleasure.²⁹ According to Telesio, the identity that characterizes nature cannot be absolute and unchanging oneness, without inner differentiation and change. All beings in the universe – all the *species* and all the *res* – derive from an *aliud* and end in an *aliud*. *Alietas* is an integral part of a notion of *identitas* that Telesio conceives as being intrinsically dynamic. This is also the reason why, in the final analysis, in Telesio's universe there are no *generatio* and *corruptio* from and into a state of non-being, but only *immutaciones* of pre-existing and eternal matter. Forms may come and go, matter remains. Matter, in turn, despite being almost *demortua*, is perpetually imbued with life by the pulsating conatus of force, the universal conveyor of diversity and otherness.

As a brief coda to this section, it should be emphasized that the noun *immutatio* and the adjective *demortuus* are keywords in Telesio's lexicon not only

²⁸ Telesio (1570, f. 5v); Telesio (2009: 19): «Etenim incorporeae (ut dictum est) cum sint, per se subsistere aut esse omnino minime possunt, id vero vel inde intelligere licet, quod in iis quae natura fiunt, quorum nos substantiam ingeniumque inquirimus, neque actio ulla neque ulla spectatur operatio quae ab incorporea nullique corpori affixa substantia edatur. Natura igitur quae remanet una esse videtur universa, omnis ipsa actionis omnisque expers operationis, at quae agentes operantesque suscipiat servetque».

²⁹ Telesio (1570, f. 4r); Telesio (2009: 14-16): «Et nec Terra nec Coelum etiam ipsum ipseque Sol, aut ens aliud omnino ullum vel summe simile summeque simplex atque unum conspectum vere simplex vereque unum esse, sed e duplici natura composita omnia e remanente nimirum altera et ex altera pereunte; quoniam enim nec Sol nec agens omnino aliud ullum e non ente constituere quid videtur, at ex alio ente omnia; et quae corrumpuntur nequaquam in non ens corrumpi videntur ulla, sed in aliud ens omnia, ut nec generatio nec corruptio entis cuiusvis vera entis totius generatio vel corruptio sed eius immutatio videri possit; quod generatur nimirum ens non universum nihil praeeexistens generari enascique, sed praeeexistens novam speciem assumere, et quod corrumpitur non universum perire, sed eius species modo atque ingenium, moles vero corpusque remanere; nequaquam vere simplicia (ut dictum est) et e natura unica constituta videri possunt entia, sed ex altera quae generetur et corrumpatur, et quae ingenium indat speciemque entibus et ex altera remanente usqueaque et quae molem praestat corpusque».

for the role they play in the *De natura rerum*, but also because they were later borrowed by, respectively, Campanella and Bacon. In the first half of the seventeenth century, they will be the most flamboyant Telesians in Europe. For Campanella, *immutatio* is the link that connects nature's universal sentience to his metaphysical theological doctrine of the primalities of being (power, knowledge and desire). For Bacon the *demortua natura* becomes one of the cornerstones of his general metaphysics of life and death.³⁰

5. Conclusion

Given its central role, I would like to end this article with a few terminological considerations about the word *natura* in Telesio's work. I have suggested that nature is the true self in the created universe and, following Telesio's cue, in the preceding pages I have been using the word *natura* in various ways. I should say that Telesio's texts allowed me to do so, for, as noted, he employs the word in many different senses that in the end converge towards a general definition of nature as a vital and sentient self.

Nature 1 is *universum*; Nature 2 is *materia* or *quae remanet natura*; Nature 3 is *vis* or *accedens recedensque natura*. When Telesio uses the Latin word *natura*, he draws important philosophical considerations out of these principal meanings as an experienced musician would do by playing a few but essential chords: nature as the one reality of the cosmos (that is, being as opposed to non-being); nature as indestructible and eternal matter; nature as force, shaping matter into transient forms (*species*). The common denominator is the meaning of nature as the ultimate principle of identity. As such, it is the real self: it is «always completely in agreement with itself; it always acts in the same way and always makes the same things».³¹

For this reason, there cannot be a vacuum in the universe. The argument is of a metaphysical more than physical order: if vacuum were real, nature would become irredeemably different from itself. Although it undergoes a whole spectrum of actions and oppositions, nature cannot separate itself from itself. That would be the same as to say that nature can inflict harm (*inferre vim*) on itself, that is, self-destruction.³² The absence of a vacuum in Telesio's cosmos also explains the importance that the sense of touch has in his philosophical investigations. If nature is one seamless continuity of actions and operations, sense is first of all touch. In this respect, one might say that Telesio's discussion

³⁰ Here I refer to Giglioni (2020), where a few relevant aspects of the Telesian legacy in both Bacon and Campanella are discussed.

³¹ Telesio (1570, f. 2v); Telesio (2009: 4): «summe sibi ipsi concors idem semper et eodem agit modo atque idem semper operatur».

³² Telesio (1570, f. 2v); Telesio (2009: 6).

of nature's selfhood is based on touch and contact. As argued in Section 3, this primordial sense explains why, despite all clashes and discords, in the end mutual enjoyment prevails over conflict in Telesio's *natura: fovere, gaudere e oblectare*. Matter embraces everything.

Another central term in this discussion is *sensus*. *Sensus* and *natura* denote multifaceted concepts which are closely interrelated. Throughout *De rerum natura*, they confirm both the natural character of sentience (all reactions are natural) and the sentient power of nature (all beings perceive). In its three different instalments, Telesio's *De rerum natura* can also be read as a book about *sensus*. *Sensus*, as we have seen in this article, can be understood in metaphysical (*conatus*), medical (*antiperistasis*) and epistemological terms (*genus nervosum*). Ultimately, the *natura agens* or *accedens recedensque natura* is sentient energy that assimilates and shapes the supple and workable substance of matter. Force cannot exist without being embodied in matter and matter cannot act without being pervaded by force. In a way, both force and matter become real and operative only when they are combined together. When matter is animated from within by the opposite forces of heat and cold, *sensus* and *materia* turn into one same *natura*.

Natural selfhood depends therefore on a nexus of indelible sentience (*nunquam proprii ingenii oblita*), unceasing action (*nunquam agere cessat*) and perpetual conatus (*summe appetens summeque contendens*). Through this interdependent connection, all beings of nature become aware of each other and, in doing so, they secure the self-preservation of the whole universe.³³ Once the notions of sentience, matter and force are properly coordinated, it is then possible for Telesio even to say *natura velit*, «nature wants», without turning the cosmos into a giant person. His idea of selfhood does not rely on notions of human personhood. *Natura* is an 'it'; up to a certain point, it is a 'they'; certainly, it is not a 'she'; least of all, it is a divine 'he' (a soul), deemed to be the exclusive representative of the only 'He' who created everything. Being an 'it', nature is for Telesio the principle of absolute identity. I will sum up this notion of nature as a self with a statement that sounds more like a riddle than an actual reasoning: nature is one and three; force is one and two; matter is one and only one. My hope is that to the benevolent reader who has had the patience to follow me up to this point this numerological conclusion premised on the virtual dualism of Telesio's natural philosophy makes sufficient sense and can be used as a practical mnemonic and epitomizing device.

³³ Telesio (1570, f. 9v); Telesio (2009: 38): «qualiscunque enim existit natura agens quaevis nunquam proprii ingenii oblita nunquam agere cessat, sed vel similes cognatasque oppugnat deturbatque, ut in earum se ipsam sedibus amplificet qualiscunque est talis esse servarique et diffundi amplius atque in subiectis produci omnibus summe appetens summeque contendens».

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