

Arthur Danto:  
Philosopher of Pop



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by

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*For my father*



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## INTRODUCTION

### GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK 2010

I returned to the Guggenheim this winter having visited last year in the springtime. To tell the truth, I returned primarily to see Frank Lloyd Wright's building once again; its bare, dry beauty emerging between the old buildings of Fifth Avenue is something absolutely extraordinary. Equally enchanting in all seasons (even the most melancholy) is the view from inside the building of Central Park and the older skyscrapers.

In the large circular space of the entrance (invaded by light, despite it being the middle of a chilling New York February) two artists, who from their appearance could have been two ordinary visitors, were putting on an unusual performance. The two moved about mutely, wearing jeans and charcoal grey t-shirts, miming an amorous encounter, an encounter of bodies and souls. They performed the pantomime and corporeal communication through infinite repetitions, telling the story of two bodies chasing one another, grazing then embracing one another; a story of souls that come together, touch and, in the end, look to one another in an effort to not lose one another—to not forget. They told a story made of slow movements—the same movement, infinitely—almost transposing the eternal return of the identical in gestures because, in the end, every love encounter reproduces the same essence, even through infinite particular variations.

Having overcome the initial temptation to move along, I began to observe the repetition of those gestures, and to think about how the meaning of our deepest relations was incorporated in those movements. It was all there, wordlessly expressed by those bodies. And there was more: what most counted in the account that I was weaving with the work was the fact that, in that precise movement, I was able to connect those movements to the words that I chose; to my own words. I could fill what I was watching with meaning. Someone had started a work for me—showing me the essence of love that had been sung by Catullus and Ovid, Dante and Shakespeare, Baudelaire and Proust—and I was about to bring it to completion.

I had finally comprehended not only the meaning of the theory that you shall read in the following pages, but also what that theory speaks of: works of art.

Time and sensibility are needed to reach the heart of things. Time is also needed to understand time itself because, occasionally, the world in which we live can be most distant if not focused upon appropriately. If a theory is able to fill the space that separates us from our understanding of the things of the world, then I believe it is a good theory.

Grazie mille, Arthur.

# CHAPTER ONE

## ANALYTICAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE SPACE BETWEEN ART AND LIFE

### 1. Analytical Philosophy According to Danto

#### The Philosophical Program

Arthur C. Danto was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1924. Raised in Detroit, he spent three and a half years serving in the army, after which he went on to study history and art at Wayne State University. He earned his research doctorate from Columbia University in New York, having abandoned a somewhat successful artistic career, and ultimately dedicated himself to the study of philosophy. Beginning in 1948, he studied with the famous philosopher of science, Ernest Nagel. His classmates were Norwood Russell Hanson, Patrick Suppes and Marx Wartofsky. He was profoundly affected by Suzanne K. Langer, who taught for a short at Columbia and was the first to recognize his talent. From 1949–1950 he studied in Paris under the guidance of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and in 1952 received his doctorate from Columbia, where he would continue to teach throughout the course of his career.

Danto had a strong connection to New York from the very beginning, a place rich in cultural stimuli and energy, and home to one of the oldest American universities. In few other cases has a philosophy been so intimately tied to a city, to an historical period and to a university, so much so that, almost certainly, Danto's thinking would not have been the same in a place other than New York, in a time other than the 20th Century and in a university other than Columbia.

New York finds in Manhattan a heart that pulsates continuously, almost frenetically, if it is true that, as the famous song goes (and as Danto does not fail to note) “if I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere.”<sup>1</sup> One would be mistaken, though, to suppose that this heart is uniform: the Upper West Side, where Danto has lived at length and where, at the corner of 114th Street and Broadway is found Columbia University, is an elegant residential area flowing at a somewhat slower rhythm than central

Manhattan. The less aggressive and more joyful Harlem begins in these streets, and can be sensed from the urban feel of neighborhoods that tell you you're not just anywhere; it is there, more than anywhere else, that Blacks and Whites attempted to coexist and to live beyond reciprocal distrust. In many ways, Harlem is a frontier neighborhood.

Now, take a map of Manhattan and try to look at it with a little help from your imagination. You will see the elongated shape of the island and, in the middle, Central Park, the vast green lung of the city. Looking to the left of the uppermost limit of the park you will find the Hudson River marking the border with the state of New Jersey. Those of you who have never seen Manhattan may proceed on our tour relying upon a bit of fantasy.

From here, traveling south, you are but a walk away from Midtown, the central area of the island. If, instead, you choose to proceed westward and head toward the Hudson, you will cross Broadway and there you will find Columbia, after which you will reach Riverside Drive and Riverside Park. As you walk these streets, you find yourself thinking not only about the history of American philosophical thought, but also about the numerous movies that have been filmed in these spots. Around the corner from Riverside Park, for example, among a jubilation of colorful flowers, the final scene of *You've Got Mail* unfolds before you. The moment in which she, who doesn't know him, meets him (and his dog), who does know of her ... and both live happily ever after. All of this and much more is Manhattan, and all of this, as we will soon discover, enters deeply into Danto's thinking. Beyond New York and Columbia University there is one more fundamental element that must be emphasized to focus on Danto's theoretical personality: from 1984, and for 25 years, Danto had been the art critic of *The Nation*, one of the oldest and most prestigious liberal magazines in the United States.

So far, we have illustrated a rough point of departure; let us now analyze the theoretical and philosophical contexts. This work will be, essentially, a brief compendium in which Arthur Danto delineates the comprehensive sense of his philosophical program by elaborating on the reasons for his criticism of certain epistemological theories:

It is instructive that the effort to keep the theory of knowledge segregated from a theory of the world seems consistently frustrated when we address the classical philosophers. And perhaps we should pause to underline the lesson this implies. There are no isolated moves in philosophy. Every move activates an entire system, so that the slightest contribution to the theory of understanding commits one to a theory of knowledge and finally of the world (Danto 1989, 174).

The commitment of a philosopher, as a man of knowledge, must therefore be, above all, towards the world and towards other men. This may seem banal but, as we will see, it is not at all. Jürgen Habermas (1999), for example, emphasizes how analytical philosophers tend to be scientific experts rather than public intellectuals or therapeutic mediators. Habermas' observation holds some truth, and Danto's career has been marked by a profound passion for life and by polyvalence, a fact that for an analytical philosopher is in itself quite extraordinary.

Unlike Rorty, with whom he shared a passion for continental philosophy, Danto was able to be eclectic without shedding the clothes of an analytical philosopher, due to a very personal understanding of his work. His books never intend to give proof of technical virtuosity, but are rather born from the will to use philosophical competence as a means to the comprehension and the resolution of a problem, functioning as a metaphysical and descriptive analysis of reality (Danto 1965, 1–5).

It sometimes is said that the task of philosophy is not to think or talk about the world, but rather to analyse the ways in which the world is thought and talked of. But since we plainly have no access to the world apart from our ways of thinking and talking about it, we scarcely, even in restricting ourselves to thought and talk, can avoid saying things about the world. The philosophical analysis of our ways of thinking and talking about the world becomes, in the end, a general description of the world as we are obliged to conceive of it, given that we think and talk as we do. Analysis, in short, yields a descriptive metaphysics when systematically executed (Danto 1965, viii).

### **Danto as Analytical Philosopher**

Danto exemplifies the analytical model but in a very personal manner, applying to it a soul and a vocation that is exquisitely pop. The first point to keep in mind is that there exists an analytical philosophy *according to* Danto: as we will see, he has been able to model the analytical method in a particular way that allows it to assume both a non-traditional opening and curvature.

Analytical philosophy according to Danto is a scientific discipline (capable of falsifying its own answers and producing synthetic knowledge), whose duty is to bear upon the lives of people, as well as society, because, we might say, life is much greater than a mere definition. In other words, on the one hand philosophy, as understood by Danto, is to be looked at as a science, and on the other is the embodiment of a popular soul essential to

it, and which must guide the choices of philosophers in a precise direction. Let us consider, in the meantime, the realm that is typically scientific:

Somewhere along the line it dawned on me that the entirety of philosophy is somehow connected with the concept of representation—that human beings are *ens representans*—beings that represent the world; that our individual histories are the histories of our representations, and how they change in the course of our lives; that representations form systems which constitute our picture of the world; that human history is the story of how this system of representations changes over time; that the world and our system of representations are interdependent in that sometimes we change the world to fit our representations, and sometimes change our representations to fit the world (Danto 2008, 16).

If to live, as we shall soon see, means to elaborate a representation of ourselves, of the situations that concern us, of the facts of history, of the things of the world and the meaning of these things, it follows that a philosopher must take it upon himself to clarify the ways of representation, a work that will make it possible to construct a philosophy dealing with that which makes us human. An extensive program of profound ambition: “it would be a philosophy of history, of knowledge, of action, of art, and of the mind” (Danto 2008, 16). A grand system, in short, that is able to find the exact arrangement of the totality of all things.

This is the first move, in obvious conflict with mainstream analytical tradition. At a time in which extensive undertakings were regarded with suspicion and philosophical reputation was based on brief articles published in specialized journals, Danto conceived an ambitious theoretical project in which he displayed a particular and profound passion for words, considering that a systematic philosopher is essentially a sort of architect of words.

It is in this spirit that Danto published, in 1965, *Analytical Philosophy of History*—re-edited with additions in 1985 with the new title of *Narration and Knowledge*—and in 1968, *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge*, and in 1973 *Analytical Philosophy of Action*.

The plot therefore begins to unfold: Danto discusses our way of knowing, of constructing representations of the past and, finally, our way of acting. In order to first be able to understand and then to elaborate the system, he utilizes one of the most typical strategies of analytical philosophy—a sort of analysis of concepts that is applied to different terms that become part of the system.

At this point, it is worth anticipating one aspect that we will eventually touch upon at length: the philosophy of art. This part of the system for

which Danto is most well known is but a small part of the general picture, but it is not possible to understand the philosophy of art fully if we lose sight of the totality of the system.

What is evidently missing from all of the above is the presence of what Hegel defined as Absolute Spirit, and in fact Danto had planned to write a volume that would have been entitled *Analytical Philosophy of Art*. In reality, this work would never be published; in its place he would publish a book in 1981 with a rather unique title, compared to the works that preceded it: *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. A Philosophy of Art*.

This is an important turning point in considering the popular front of philosophical reflection, which Danto had inaugurated with his book dedicated to the philosophy of Nietzsche, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, published in 1965. This is the philosophical key to the meaning of Danto's work and, as we will see, one that he will now not abandon.

### **The Analytical Philosophy Preferred by Continental Philosophers**

Before penetrating the details of Danto's system I believe it is necessary to say a few words with regard to the particular connection that unites Danto's philosophy to Europe and, markedly, to the Italian philosophical context. It is important to emphasize two points in particular, both critical to understanding the comprehensive meaning of Danto's work as well as the peculiarity of the interpretations of his thought developed in a continental environment.

It was not long before Danto was translated into Italian. His *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965) was edited by Pier Aldo Rovatti, with an introduction by Antonio Santucci in 1971. It is therefore significant to note how the context of reference of this first book is not that of the analytical community but rather that expressed by continental philosophers, students of Nietzsche and Heidegger, but also of philosophy of history. Within this context, but in a theoretical direction that suggests a detachment from a Heideggerian interpretation of Nietzsche, the centrality that I have bestowed on *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (1965) comes to life in a work of mine published in 1999 entitled *Il volto americano di Nietzsche (The American Face of Nietzsche)*. Specifically, the interpretation proposed by Danto will radically contradict the interpretations of the Heideggerian school, dominant in Italy in those years, by proposing a reading that places strictly epistemological questions at the center of the investigation and that does not fail to point out Nietzsche's interest in metaphysics and science.

More recently, between 2007 and 2010, when the majority of Danto's works on the philosophy of art were published, following the conferral of the degree *honoris causa* on Danto from the University of Turin, yet again the principal context of reference is not analytical but continental. In perfect harmony with European debate, Italian aesthetics regarded the research on the definition and nature of works of art to be relatively extraneous, orienting itself towards historical research or even towards more classical questions of Kantian or Hegelian roots. Within this context Danto's philosophy of art opened a fruitful debate with positions that, conversely, place the Baumgartenian and Kantian idea of aesthetics as a theory of perception at the center of theoretical reflection.

For Danto aesthetics is indeed perception, but on the other hand, as we will find out, aesthetics cannot answer the question of the nature of a work of art. In other words, researching the functioning of our sensibility is not sufficient to allow us to understand the subtle unbroken line that connects works like the Parthenon, the *Venus de Milo*, Botticelli's *Primavera*, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Edvard Munch's *Scream*, Vincent Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* and even Bill Viola's *Reflecting Pool*.

And so we reach the first point, something which appears unusual—an analytical philosopher who is appreciated and studied initially by the non-analytical community. This demonstrates the strength of Danto's approach, based on the profound harmony it shares with the spirit that guides the grand visions of the world elaborated by European philosophers.

This brings us to the second point discussed above. I believe that the question at hand, that which marks a substantial difference in the conception of the function of philosophy and the duties of a philosopher, is this: Descartes, Hume, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, to cite just a few of the philosophers most dear to Danto, all expressed a comprehensive vision of human nature and of the world. In other words, they elaborated systems. Even Nietzsche, who appears to be the most critical towards metaphysical systems, in reality held the conviction that only great systematic explanations, with their limits, are capable of making sense of different planes. A system takes into account the diverse spectrum of meanings that compose the world—physical, historical, social reality and, consequently, our ways of knowing the world and of changing it; our capability, therefore, of operating in a theoretical environment just as in a practical one.

It is this very dimension of attention to the complexity of the human sphere that continues to define itself as the distinctive element between a strongly specialist approach typical of Anglo-American analytical philosophy,

and a more generalist approach typical of continental philosophy, an environment in which the theoretical realm is often accompanied by a profound historical awareness.

In this perspective, so far as a philosopher is and remains a specialist in regards to research methods, he is and must remain a man of culture, capable of grasping the moods and ideas of his very time and capable of elaborating them into grand visions. This is precisely Arthur Danto's intellectual stance, one that analytical philosophy has often failed to appreciate.

## 2. The Pop Face of Analytical Philosophy

### The Philosopher's Duties

I once read a text in which Wittgenstein was portrayed as making merry at the expense of those—I suppose he had Bertrand Russell in mind—who believe that all philosophical questions have to be solved at once. Wittgenstein of course felt that no philosophical problem could be solved but only dissolved, since none of them is real, philosophy in his view being nonsense through and through. My own view was and is that all truly philosophical problems are genuine and that they must indeed all be solved at the same time, since they form an interconnected whole. And since the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical problem, calling for a philosophical solution, if Wittgenstein was wrong about philosophy itself, he must be wrong about everything in philosophy, not counting the poetic obiter dicta that ornament his books. To do philosophy at all means doing all of philosophy at the same time. That means that philosophers cannot be specialists (Danto 2008, 15–16).

There is a hint of the spirit of classical thinking in these lines, the hint of the idea that maintains that philosophy is tied to the sciences, having at its disposal a vision of unity that gives it the possibility of understanding the human being in an utterly peculiar way—ways of knowing, feeling and evaluating—and to orient these actions within the private sphere just as the social one. In this sense, then, a philosopher cannot be a specialist for at least two reasons: he would lose the ability to operate that original synthesis that departs from science and ultimately come to something different. Moreover, his ability to impact on culture would vanish, and this, for Danto, would be a grave mistake.

The duty of philosophy is, therefore, to remain deeply connected to life in order to attempt to resolve those problems that are never matters of secondary importance; they are, as Thomas Nagel would call them, clear and simple “mortal questions.” The answers must then be illustrated to the

scientific community, because this is the sense of research in all of the fields in which it is expressed. Above all, these answers must be divulged universally so that they may modify the representation as much as the understanding of reality, and ultimately so that the answers may modify their own behaviors in a consequent fashion.

Analytical philosophy's pop side, therefore, is measured by the ability of a philosopher to effect his own Copernican revolution in such a way that it can be shared, discussed and criticized, in order for it to be newly useful to whoever desires it.

Danto is aware that intellectual adventures are perilous, yet he is not fond of the minimal approach: "At some point I had decided that my task as a philosopher must be to compose a theory of representations, which would be a philosophy of what it is to be human" (Danto 2008, 16). In a sort of counter movement, compared to the typical mode of analytical philosophy that justifies, examines, motivates and itemizes certain positions, Danto chose not to embrace caution and instead decided to elaborate his own system, outlining his vision of things.

The core of this system is undoubtedly provided by epistemology. It is necessary first to understand how our vision of reality and our understanding of the world are arranged. It is equally necessary to understand to what extent representations of ourselves, of the events that compose the history of the world and of the things of the world, have to do with truth. Philosophical work for Danto, a good descriptive metaphysician, consists of tracing boundary lines: boundaries between the things and the categories of things that form the world, in order to depict the fundamental species of what exists. In achieving the mapping of all that exists, it may be necessary to move a boundary or cancel it all together. This is typically the duty of philosophy, which far from being residual, is irreducible to any other science.

Within this particularly crowded world Danto pays particular attention to certain products of the human spirit: works of art. The relation between art and philosophy is as ancient as philosophy itself, but in the particular case of Danto there exists one particular characteristic worth reflecting upon: in his youth Danto was an artist who practiced a fairly traditional idea of painting. During the early 1960s in New York, the cradle of Modernism and of Abstract Expressionism, this must have been a rather peculiar perspective. Danto had not the least bit desire to become a pop artist, and it was most likely this very fact that allowed him to become a pop philosopher:

I would have had no interest whatever in being a Pop artist. At the same time, I found the art of the mid-1960s—Pop Art and Minimalism—

fascinating philosophically. But the figures that engaged me—Andy Warhol preeminently, but also Roy Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenberg in the Pop movement, and the sculptors whose work was shown in the important 1966 exhibition, ‘Primary Structures’, at the Jewish Museum—would have been almost totally unfamiliar to most aestheticians, even the rare figures among them who knew much about Modern Art. The truth is that the ideal reader would have had to know a great deal about contemporary philosophy as well as a great deal about contemporary art, in order to follow me as I attempted to cut a path for the philosophy of art in the late twentieth century. But obviously it was its essentially pioneering spirit that gave the book its interest and its excitement (Danto 2008, 18).

The art of the “intractable avant-gardists,” and in particular of Andy Warhol, marks an extremely deep fracture within the canon of art history and Danto quickly grasped how this chasm would require a philosophical thematization. In his opinion, Warhol’s operation is marked by a significant philosophical trope that traditional aesthetics systematically ignored.

Out of this arises the planning of Danto’s most important work, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), in which he expresses his intention to write a philosophy of art directed more towards artists and art-goers than towards professional philosophers.

On the outskirts of this systematic structure we find the books dedicated to Nietzsche (*Nietzsche as Philosopher*, 1965) and Sartre (*Jean-Paul Sartre*, 1975). These are marginal monographs in relation to the nucleus of Danto’s system, yet they represent two pillars: the attention that he reserves for important philosophical ideas, no matter the argumentative structure in which they are expressed, and his passion for fine writing. Both Nietzsche and Sartre were masters of literary style, often to unparalleled degrees. Since philosophers are necessarily involved with words it is necessary that they learn to use them with workmanship and care. In this sense, writing is not merely useless tinsel, but rather intrinsic to philosophy and to its identity.

The two books are surprisingly similar. Beyond the idiosyncratic structure of Nietzschean reflection and the obscurity of works like *Being and Nothingness*, for Danto philosophy is concealed in at its most authentic when writing unfolds in its most mature form. *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, particularly, had the great merit of uniting the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition to Nietzschean philosophy, reducing, in a sense, the separation between the two western philosophical traditions—the “analytical” and the “essentialist” (in Danto’s terminology), and the analytical and the continental (as we would say today). It would not make sense to engage in philosophy while keeping this separation open, because to be devoid of meaning is the very chasm itself:

The ideologized division of philosophers into analysts on one side and existentialists or phenomenologists on the other is silly and destructive. For we are all doing the same thing, pursuing all the same structures, whether the ostensible topic of our investigation is language or consciousness. And to show this is to bring a further, essential degree of self-consciousness to the philosophical undertaking as a whole (Danto 1975, xiii).

The periphery of the system can, in this case, tell us a few things regarding its center, particularly through a comparison with European culture. Let us embark on our analysis of Danto's system beginning with his reflections on the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche.

### **3. A Look at the Continental Tradition: Nietzsche as Philosopher**

#### **The Occasion**

If we were to set a conventional date to mark the moment in which Arthur Danto's journey as analytical philosopher began to be colored by the idea of a popular soul it would be 1965, the year *Nietzsche as Philosopher* was published. This is the book that would allow our author to establish two moves that would become typical of his philosophizing: the first consists of introducing topics to the dimension of analytical research which did not belong to it. Analytical philosophers used to discuss problems more than they discussed the philosophies of other philosophers and, above all, they were not fond of dealing with philosophies of such little canonical form, both in language and in method, as that of Nietzsche.

Danto's idea is different: not only, from his point of view, does a good philosophical method allow one to face any problem or any author, but above all, interesting philosophical problems are everywhere, even when the majority—in this case the majority of analytical philosophers—are not searching for them. This perspective matured and became fully acknowledged ten years later, in a study dedicated to Sartre.

As Danto himself notes (2005, 18–19), the occasion on which he became interested in Nietzsche was, in the beginning, editorial. The opportunity was offered by Paul Edwards, professor of philosophy at New York University, and editorial consultant of the publishing house Macmillan. Among his various projects, Edwards had one in store that was extremely ambitious—an Encyclopedia of Philosophy. According to Edwards' plan, it was to be an imposing scientific cathedral whose task

was to delineate both a new and personal vision of the field. The Encyclopedia was indeed encyclopedic, containing both educated discussions of specific philosophical questions and portraits of major figures in history. Besides this, and in the wake of the success achieved by Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy*, Edwards was working on *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, edited by multiple individuals. The chief editor of the project was English philosopher D.J. O'Connor, already the author of a work on John Locke. The authors were called upon to express the principal theories of the history of philosophy, in the exact order in which they had evolved, and to evaluate them critically in the light of more recent philosophical findings. Furthermore, they were tasked with describing the extent of philosophical authenticity those theories contained. Edwards therefore asked Danto to write the chapter on Nietzsche and, as is sometimes the case, an actual book was born from an overly extensive chapter:

And what I found was that Nietzsche was a treasure house of analytical thinking—that he wrote stunningly and with stunning originality on the very topics that engaged me and my contemporaries—and made contributions to the philosophy of language, of logic, of science, and the philosophy of mind. Internationally famous as Nietzsche had become, I felt his contribution to philosophy was largely unknown. That explains the title of my book. I felt as if I had stumbled into an immense mine of pure philosophy. I felt, indeed, that more than most past thinkers, Nietzsche was one of us. Indeed, I found that Nietzsche's famous ideas were his least interesting ones. Doubtless that was an exaggeration. But my training in analytical philosophy put me in position to read Nietzsche as if for the first time (Danto 2005, 20).

### **Nietzsche as Pop Philosopher**

In those years, the analytical community did not consider Nietzsche a worthwhile philosopher; to be quite honest, it never even considered him a philosopher *tout court*. Even so, Danto was struck by the fact that Nietzsche had become a philosopher through the extraordinary hold his writings had taken on ordinary people. This had not been due to the decision of just any academician, as much as the works of Martin Heidegger (1961) and Walter Kaufmann (1950) had been decisive in their respective scientific communities<sup>2</sup>. Nietzsche was simply one of the first pop philosophers in the history of philosophy: a beloved author, extensively read and discussed by ordinary people. His philosophy impassioned the masses, reaching places where most academic philosophical reflection normally would not. Nietzsche's pop spirit did not, however,

touch on the substance of the things that he had written, some unforgivable and unacceptable, others philosophically interesting. These very things would construct the main material of reflection of *Nietzsche as Philosopher*.

The book attempts, above all, to answer two questions: why and how to read Nietzsche. Danto's hermeneutics are clear from the very first pages:

Nietzsche's books give the appearance of having been assembled rather than composed. They are made up, in the main, of short, pointed aphorisms, and of essays seldom more than a few pages long; [...] Any given aphorism or essay might as easily have been placed in one volume as in another without much affecting the unity or structure of either. And the books themselves, except for their chronological ordering, do not exhibit any special structure as a corpus (Danto 1965a, 19).

However, against this criticism of the philosophical method, important reasons of theoretical order advise its reading: Nietzsche breaks away from traditional metaphysics and is consequently equated with analytical philosophy (Ivi, 14-19). The task of the interpreter is to organize Nietzschean speculation around a strong theoretical center, with the intent to eliminate, where possible, the logical inconsistencies to make the speculation homogenous with the analytical approach.

The interpretative core is decided. It would seem to relate to a singular pathology: the pride of the analytical philosopher who attempts to bring back the most diverse things to his own vision of the world. In part this is probably accurate, but in the end there is a deeper theoretical understanding that belongs to what Danto had been elaborating in the field of philosophy of history (*infra*, ch. 2 § 1). In 1965, Danto released his *Analytical Philosophy of History* and, upon closer inspection, the Nietzschean essay reveals itself as a sort of installation of his ideas on narrative descriptions. In other words, Danto offers a narrative description that has as its subject Nietzschean philosophy (we will soon see what this means) allowing him to treat himself to a few hermeneutic liberties.

## An Externalist Epistemology

After revealing the plan on interpretative choices, narrative description looks at a fundamental point of Nietzschean philosophy: the examination that subsists among knowledge, language and truth. According to Danto, there are two objections which the German philosopher stands by within the theme of knowledge. First, the problem of self reference: if we consider valid the Nietzschean refusal of truth (that is, not only the refusal of the classical theory of *adaequatio*, but, more radically, of the idea

itself), it is possible to raise against Nietzsche an objection that, logically speaking, could prove devastating. If the Nietzschean theory were true it would contradict its premises (when he affirms that no true theory exists), and Nietzsche would have committed himself to sustaining a contradictory position. If, instead, his position can be deemed coherent with the premises, and therefore false, then it is clear that there exists no good reason to examine it. In order to resolve the matter, while confirming the idea that Nietzschean criticism invests the theory of truth as conformity, Danto maintains that Nietzsche formulates a theory of truth in pragmatist thought:  $p$  is true and  $q$  is false if  $p$  is useful to life and  $q$  is not. Moreover, anticipating Wittgensteinian themes and standpoints, Nietzsche would attribute a therapeutic objective to philosophy: it is necessary to identify the origin of problems in order to overcome them, while the attempt to resolve them would be worthless (Danto 1965a, 70–72).

In what could be the opening of an essay by John Austin, Danto points out how, losing sight of its therapeutic mission, philosophy in the Nietzschean diagnosis would have become distracted both by the examination of ordinary language as well as by the observation of ordinary meaning. From the core of this theoretical horizon, so confused and minimalist, there derives a progressive decadence of the discipline as a whole.

Thus, although the traditional model of truth as *adaequatio* presents difficulties that Nietzsche considered philosophically decisive, it is also true that Nietzschean subjects remain at the center of epistemology, insofar as it outlines an externalist perspective:

Nietzsche, in a way, is an externalist about knowledge: knowledge describes the way creatures of a certain sort represent the world. Descartes, by extreme contrast, is an internalist. Knowledge, for him, is something that must be sought for from within consciousness and from among its presuppositions" (Danto 1989, 153).

The difference between externalists and internalists (Danto thinks paradigmatically of Descartes) is greatly profound, although they share a common theoretical starting point: both maintain, in fact, that knowledge is a true belief that is made true by that which causes it.

Let us suppose that in the midst of a long journey in the desert my water supply finishes. In the distance, I make out an oasis, which leads me to believe that I should deviate from my path and head directly towards that possible source of provisions. This belief may be true (and not just a mirage) only if, after having arrived in the place in which I thought I had seen the oasis, I indeed find it to be the case. Only the external world can

either confirm or nullify my conjectures. Many species managed to win their struggle for survival precisely because they were able to formulate correct representations and hypotheses whose correctness was then confirmed by the world. For this very reason, it is worth clearly distinguishing between factual beliefs and moral beliefs: the former can be either true or false—depending on if they find a confirmation in the world or if, from the world, they are nullified—the latter, normally, are neither true nor false<sup>3</sup>.

For the most part, authors possess beliefs without reflecting on the fact that they have them or that they have formed them. It is not necessary that I reflect on the fact that, when I see an oasis in the distance, I formulate a hypothesis that in that oasis I can find the water that I am in need of. I simply act accordingly.

According to Danto this is the fundamental difference between Nietzsche's externalist position and Descartes' internalism. Nietzsche considers certain assumptions evident: that there exists a world outside of the subject and that this world is made available to human beings through the mediation of the organs. Additionally, Nietzsche ascertains the fact that the majority of man's mental acts do not reach awareness at all, because there is no need from the point of view of the conservation of life. Our conscious life is somewhat limited and peripheral considering how much remains unknown to it.

Conversely, Descartes concedes much value to the act in which the subject reflects upon himself and his beliefs, considering that we only know that of which we are fully aware. To know, in this sense, is to have awareness of that which we know, after having doubted everything that comes from the external world. Nevertheless, from the internalist perspective, there remains the difficulty of explaining how we are able to separate true beliefs from false ones:

Both parties accept that knowledge is a true belief justified throughout being caused by what makes it true. For the externalist nothing further needs to be said. For the internalist everything remains to be said. For the internalist everything remains to be said, for the question is how we are to tell, from a reflective consciousness of our beliefs, which if any of them is true. For the externalist there is no problem and for the internalist, unless something remarkable takes place, there is no solution. The externalist perceives us as in a world that rains stimuli on us. The internalist finds the very existence of what the externalist takes for granted the deepest problem there is, namely whether there is a world external to ourselves to whose existence our beliefs can testify (Danto 1989, 153).

The important point, that will recur, is that philosophical epistemology,

according to the internalist model, retains that knowledge draws its very legitimization from the act of introspection of the subject after he has doubted the existence of the external world. The internalist, however, can never return to that world in any way, not even postulating the existence of God, unless he does not consider the ontological argument a well-founded one. Danto maintains that Kant's arguments regarding this topic are crucial.

Let us return to the question of truth. If Nietzschean thinking maintains that "truth" is that which becomes useful to the human species for survival, what could be more true than common sense, functioning in such a distinguished manner for millenniums? And on what basis do philosophical systems believe they can replace it? In reality, Nietzsche believes that philosophical systems are dually false: first because they do not correspond to reality, and second because rather than favoring life in its natural development they castrate life's instincts, paving the way to decadence. Language is the instrument through which philosophers have conducted this operation for millennia, and that is why it should be taken for what it is: not something that entertains a preferential rapport with truth, but rather an instrument that helps our species play the game of survival.

*Nietzsche as Philosopher* is essentially a narrative description of Nietzschean philosophy, and it is this very approach that allows Danto to make a move that will prove significant for the development of the Anglo-American response to Nietzschean thinking: he emphasizes Nietzsche's positive philosophy, accrediting to it even a role in the metaphysical realm.

His analysis deals with two matters in particular: the concept of the will to power and the idea of eternal return<sup>4</sup>. I will focus briefly on the latter idea as it successfully expresses the sense of novelty that was to reach the continental reader, already accustomed to it through mediation in, for example, the books of Karl Löwith (1978).

The fundamental question is in large part this: for what reason did Nietzsche want to believe that our world—how we know it, or ignore it, in every single detail of its history—should return? Had he in mind a myth, to toughen personalities and moral choices, or was he simply foreseeing how things would go in order to tell us that the world, if we were to think of it in a superhistorical dimension, cannot but return cyclically, because it is composed of a limited matter in quantity and its possible combinations are inevitably finite.

From an externalist perspective, like that Danto attributes to Nietzsche, the important philosophical point is to verify if the idea of return of the identical can be proven scientifically; it is only in this case that the

Nietzschean thesis may bring forward legitimate pretenses in a cosmological sphere. Obviously this is a type of demonstration that cannot be performed from within the theory: if one were to demonstrate that all of the worlds that return exhibit the exact same properties, what will return will not be different worlds, but rather always the same one. And, obviously, I will not be able to prove this affirmation unless the solutions are arranged in a scientific field.

The scientific strongholds of the Nietzschean thesis, in Danto's opinion, can be reduced to three points: (1) the total sum of the energy of the universe is finite; (2) the number of the “positions” of energy is finite; (3) energy is conserved. These are manifestly independent postulates. The truth of (3) is compatible with the truth and the falseness of (1), and vice versa, and (2) can be false even if (1) and (3) are true. Moreover, Nietzsche seems to consider (2) as implied by (1), but this is not so (Danto 1965a, 206). If then a naturalistic significance is accorded to the three Nietzschean answers, there is the chance that (1) and (3) will be true and (2) false, in which case the thesis would be manifestly unsustainable.

In order to better understand the sense of Danto's thinking, we must imagine a conservative system equipped with a quantity of established energy—let us suppose, for the sake of simplicity, that even the energy in question amounts to a finite number; six, for example. Let us continue to postulate that one part of the energy is kinetic and that a decrease in potential energy corresponds to a growth in kinetic energy. The variations lead us to think that while the potential energy nears zero, the kinetic energy approximates six. The two limits can be approximated asymptotically without ever being reached. It is now presumed that the “positions” that Nietzsche speaks of correspond to the amount of kinetic energy plus the potential energy in every given instant; it would follow that “there could be an infinite number of Lagen, then, and no Lage need ever recur” (Danto 1965a, 206). The argument, as it is formulated, does not work.

It can and has been discussed that if Nietzschean theoretical objectives were indeed those attributed to him by Danto, we may maintain with Löwith, for example, that Nietzschean interest was oriented towards myth rather than cosmology. If we were to counter Danto's general thesis with a benevolent eye, we would have at least two arguments at our disposal: while it does not bear much importance if Nietzsche was most fond of myths or scientific perspectives, one cannot discount his interest in the sciences.

What is important to remember from a philosophical perspective is that a good argument must have a consequential structure: this way, while the

criticism of truth as *adequatio* works and its pragmatic theory of truth is a good one (sustainable within a general theory of externalist nature), eternal return is a bad theory, because its arguments contain some weak elements. Assuming then that an externalist epistemology intends to speak to us of the ways in which we know the world and of the world that we know, it would be reductive to consider the eternal return a semi-fantastical theory. It is rather, and more simply, a theory that does not respond well to its purpose.

The second argument, on the other hand, anticipates the thesis of the philosophy of history and, therefore, we will only be able to fully comprehend it once we have discussed this part of Danto's philosophy (*infra*, ch.. 2, § 1). Meanwhile, though, we can formulate it in the following manner: the best description of one event, as accurate and complete as it may be, is never exhaustive compared to the coeval understanding of the story that is interested in reconstructing it. That which separates chronicle from history is the possibility of integrating the latter with what those who reconstruct the facts "from the future" know: historical facts are charged with consequences that are yielded and that are only fully known long after they have been verified. The great narrations—of facts, events, entire historical periods or, even, the great visions of the world that exhibit an intrinsic narrative character—must take this into account. It is thus worth reflecting upon the teachings of the strange event of the *Ideal Chronicle*.



# CHAPTER TWO

## THE GUIDELINES OF A SYSTEM: THE WAYS IN WHICH WE REPRESENT THE WORLD

### 1. Analytical Philosophy of History

#### Between Cambridge and Saint-Germain-des-Près

To the age-old question of whether history is science or art, Danto would respond: neither. It dwells, rather, in a region between Cambridge and Saint-Germain-des-Près.

Nietzsche said that to be excessive with history or with historical feeling is negative as an excessive historical awareness normally results in the disappearance of the lightness and imprudence necessary for any intellectual adventure.

Applying this Nietzschean suggestion to the young American philosophical culture would appear useless, as it is often intent on creating new solutions to old questions. The philosophy of history, and history in general, is not normally a topic that particularly involves analytical philosophy. What often interests analytical philosophy, conversely, is science within a theoretical setting that defines itself in opposition to the Dilthey model. According to Wilhelm Dilthey and German historicism, the science of nature and the science of the spirit constitute two irreconcilable vocations that are, at the same time, constituent of the human world. Philosophy, in this partition, is a fundamental discipline of the science of the spirit.

In *The Function of General Laws in History*, a work from 1942 received as a crucial contribution to the philosophical program of logical positivism, Carl Gustav Hempel elaborated a unified program of the sciences, in contrast to that achieved by German historicism.

Notably, the historicist program had identified two different types of laws, one which characterized the scientific explanation, the other the

historical. In other words, the “explanation” (*Erklären*) and the “comprehension” (*Verstehen*). A natural phenomenon—universal gravitation, for example—is explained by illustrating a general law, while a fact that belongs to the realm of the spirit—such as the assassination of John Kennedy—is characterized for its typicalness, an element that makes it impossible to examine using the logic of scientific explanations. What follows is that we cannot explain historical facts in the same way in which we would explain a fact of nature and, therefore, we must attribute a modality of specific explanation to history, since in history laws are not imposed as they are in nature.

Hempel’s work, conversely, aimed at reducing the space between nature and spirit and, consequently, between scientific explanations and historical explanations. A scientific explanation, in fact, consists in the deduction of the event that must be explained (*explanandum*) by a number of necessary conditions and marginal conditions as well as by a law that includes both (*explanans*).

The explanation of an “E” event, therefore, requires the presence of a series of utterances that establish the happening of other events (the initial conditions), and of one or more universal laws from which the proposition that asserts the happening of E can be deduced. In a similar way, the concept of prediction is defined as an explanation that looks to the future. If, in fact, the explanation presumes that E is known and that, moreover, the laws of reference are known, while the initial conditions would be unknown, both the initial conditions and the laws are known in the predictions. When based on the initial conditions and on the known laws the prediction is then able to deduce future events. For Hempel, therefore, there is no substantial difference between explanation and prediction, if the empirical fact that the object of the explanation has been verified or not is excluded.

Now, it is evident that in an historical environment we cannot make the same type of predictions that we would make if we were to see Isaac Newton seated under an unsteadily dangling apple. At most, we are allowed to formulate an outline of explanation. That is to say, we can expect, with less certainty than that with which we would watch the apple on Newton’s tree, that an oppressed people, starved and humiliated, through its own dignity can sooner or later find the reasons and pride that will drive it to revolt against the government by which it is tyrannized.

*Analytical Philosophy of History* (Danto 1965) takes Hempel’s arguments as a starting point in order to demonstrate how they, just as the rest of the arguments from detractors of Hempelian positions, have missed their objective. Neither Hempel nor his critics seized the essence of