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# Guido Cusinato, *Periagoge. Theory of Singularity and Philosophy as an Exercise of Transformation*, Brill, Leiden-Boston, ISBN 978-90-04-51563-5 (hardback), 369 pages, 2024

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A felicitous English-language translation of a ponderous 2017 volume (second edition), this book by Guido Cusinato addresses the theme of the essence and actualization of personal singularity, in continuity with other previous works devoted to the self-transcendent structure of human being and to philosophical exercise as a practice of formation (*Bildung*) and transformation (*Umbildung*) of human existence.

Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the University of Verona, with a significant academic background on German soil, former president of the Max-Scheler-Gesellschaft and founder of the Research Center "Metabolé - Philosophy as a Way of Transformation," Cusinato has always wondered about the function of feeling and emotions in the process of constituting personal life and how philosophy can become (or return to being, according to the lesson of Pierre Hadot) a therapy of desire and care of existence. This essay represents a significant point of synthesis of his thought, focusing on an extremely topical question: is it still possible, in the age of the cult of the ego, to discern a way toward meaning and to achieve a sense of existential fullness? Narcissism, which is called by the author "the sad legacy of nihilism" (p. 133) in fact denies questions of meaning, reducing terms like meaning or values to taboo.

Faithful to the lesson of phenomenology, Cusinato is not so much interested in proposing yet another theory on the meaning of life, but rather in exploring the conditions of the manifestation of meaning itself (whatever it may be) and thus in analyzing human ontology in order to glimpse the glimmers of access to meaning and values. And it is precisely in the affective sphere that he identifies the ultimate source of existential orientation: just as primal feeling "is what connects the organism with the original unity of life, or vital attunement" (p. 116), so it is through feeling that we can grasp the directions of meaning along which our existence can seek and find its fulfillment, since we all "come into the world without having finished being born and lack an existential form" (p. 13). The theme of incompleteness, after all, had already been developed by the author, with his typical acumen and clarity, in his book on philosophical anthropology *La totalità incompiuta* (2008) and here it finds a coherent development. From the moment it takes shape, life is in fact an exodus from itself, an itinerary in search of a fullness of being that is not given at the outset, except as announcement and aspiration, but is instead unceasingly yearned for as a goal and destination, that is never quite reached or attainable.

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Human heart is the engine of this search and, at the same time, the "meaning organ" (as the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl would say) that recognizes the "voice of transcendence": namely the relevance of what lies beyond ourselves and claims our attention. The beating of human heart is kept alive by a feeling of lack, a sort of "auroral emptiness" (p. 19) which, according to Cusinato, does not have the structure of need (which can be satisfied), but of desire (which is by definition unquenchable). That the satisfaction of needs is necessary but not sufficient for human survival (let alone its flourishing) and that in the man cub dwells a desire for the other which, if betrayed, can fade in him the will to live, had already been demonstrated by René Spitz's researches on maternal deprivation, as this book rightly recalls.

The care for desire, then, is what humans need to cherish and unfold their love of life. It is a radical therapy, which sometimes (today, especially) demands a complete reorientation of gaze and intention: a kind of Platonic "conversion of the whole soul" (*periagoge holes tes psyches*) which, not surprisingly, this book recalls from the title. Cusinato exemplifies this radical turnaround with references to the cinema of the end of the millennium, from *The Truman Show* (1998) to *The Matrix* (1999), to signify "the problem of coming out of a cave whose walls are as invisible as the air we breathe" (p. 69). It is, metaphor aside, an attempt to escape from the narrow limits of narcissism that, like a prison, grips contemporary existence, condemning it to meaninglessness and unhappiness. The Self, on closer inspection, is but a "little self" (p. 38) that waits (demands) to open up and overcome itself, in the perspective of *self-distancing* and *self-transcendence* (again, two concepts which the author has in common with Frankl, but this similarity is probably due to the Schelerian inspiration of both): "it is only by transcending the little self that the deepest affective layers can mature, and hence the orientation needed for the person's formation process can emerge" (p. 181).

Transformative practices are those through which the call of transcendence can make itself audible again, as a personal and intimate *daimonion* that re-calls us to our authentic "vocation" (p. 210): that is, to find our fulfillment not in ourselves, but in going out into the world. Transformative are those practices that reactivate "the heart's restlessness" (p. 17) and urge it to avoid the deadly stillness of habit and obviousness and to pursue those "fragments of truth" (p. 44) that are waiting to be realized. This is how our personal system of inclinations, the hierarchy of preferences that Max Scheler called *ordo amoris*, is gradually constituted: "The person is precisely this order of feeling: that is, an order of the heart" (p. 41).

There is a precise pedagogical thesis in the author's argument, that is worth underlying here: it is only through witnessing lives devoted to self-transcendence that personal singularity can (re)find the path to its truest actualization. And it is through feeling – again – that the existence of "exemplary" people shows itself as successful and desirable: we feel their fascination and authoritativeness, we are "affected", struck and impressed by them, and this has the power (sometimes) to make us recognize our incongruity, to correct the disordered passions of our heart and, thus, to reorient our steps. "In short, exemplarity is a maieutic testimony that offers the singularity that auroral void that is necessary to continue its birth" (p. 84).

This personal exemplarity, however, does not impose itself with the force of prescription, but rather with the charm of wonder and conviction. The charm of a gesture, for example, like that (immortalized by Giotto in 1295) of St. Francis giving his cloak to the poor (p. 257). It is these existences that call us back to our most authentic possibilities. And therefore they do not presuppose an obligatory imitation that produces homologation, but a free inspiration that generates novelty. So much so that, at first, personal singularity is "guided" by the exemplarity of others (some emblematic figures are provided in par. 2.5), then gradually becomes exemplary itself. From this point of view, the process of individual transformation is inextricably linked with that of social change and renewal. For only the revitalization of personal feeling and the practice of "emotional sharing" (p. 328) can strengthen social bonds and nurture compassion, solidarity, justice, and democracy.

The narcissism in which we are immersed, on the other hand, being fundamentally based on a perversion of desire and a generalized "emotional regression" (p. 79), puts at risk the "anthropogenetic" process of individuals and communities. It is especially the absence (or loss) of emotional competence that, today, threatens to prevent us from accessing growth, maturity, and finally a meaningful life. The inability to detect and name one's emotions, but also to express and share them, constitutes, according to the author, a major limitation of our potential for personal fulfillment. The atrophy of emotional life,

which displays itself today as a mass phenomenon and not only as an individual problem, emerges from this book as the most relevant pedagogical challenge of our time: indeed, the possibility of regaining genuine contact with ourselves, with others and with the world depends on it.

It is, therefore, a matter of recovering the Pascalian balance between *esprit de géométrie* and *esprit de finesse* in the paths of formation: "There is a finesse of sentiment and there is a geometry of reason. These two types of knowledge are not in opposition, insofar as they integrate each other" (pp. 144–145). From this viewpoint, the theory of emotion developed in Chapter 4 can certainly provide guidance to all educators who wish to escape the cage of psychologism and understand how emotional experience is the true locus of relationship with reality, its constraints and values.

In this educational work, philosophy – as long as it is not understood as a mere exercise of logic, but as a search for the best way to live, as it originally was – is not an idle or superfluous occupation, but a genuine necessity of human beings who, neotenic by nature, must take responsibility for their own becoming. This notion of philosophy as "*cura sui*" and as "*askesis*" (p. 240) is, in short, the real delivery of this book, almost the gift of a tool for living *happily*: not in the egocentric and neurotic sense that our time attaches to this term, but in the sense of spending our life for something (or someone) that is truly worthwhile.