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COMPENSATION

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It. *Compensazione*; Fr. *Compensation*; Germ. *Kompensation*; Span. *Compensación*. The notion emerged in German philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century, and was used to explain a specific form of unfolding of historical (especially modern) processes, and to claim that human sciences must compensate societies and individuals for the cultural losses caused by modernization. As a general idea, the concept comes from the post-World War II reflections of the historian of philosophy Joachim Ritter (1903-1974) and of the so-called "Ritter School" (Robert Spaemann, Odo Marquard, Hermann Lübbe, Max Imdahl, and other participants in Ritter's *Collegium Philosophicum* in Münster).

JOACHIM RITTER: MAKING THE SPLIT POSITIVE

Ritter's hermeneutics of the modern historical reality is far from any regressive nostalgia and abstract utopia, and draws on both Aristotle's practical philosophy and Hegel's rational idea of philosophy as "his own time learned by thought". The goal was to discover a potentially emancipatory hidden unity in the modern split (Hegel's *Entzweiung*) between objective reality and subjectivity: a split summed up in the Hegelian saying that the sacred grove is reduced to timber (Hegel 1977: 57), to which Ritter adds that it is actually split into timber and feeling. Precisely because modernity is characterized by abstractness, ahistoricity and technical-scientific reification, subjective (but not subjectivistic-sentimentalistic) life should protect the history of one's derivation. Keeping tradition and cultural derivation alive means "preserving" them or, better, "compensating" for the disenchantment of the modern industrial world through subjective life, providing a temporary conciliation. For Ritter, these modern antidotes to the modern divergence between derivation and future are: laughter, which preserves what society dismisses as invalid; the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*), working as traditions of orientation; faith; and above all aesthetics and art (Ritter 1974).

Ritter's groundbreaking lessons on aesthetics of the 1940s and 1960s (Ritter 2010) and his famous 1963 essay on the landscape (Ritter 1974) claim that the aesthetic field is an instrument to enhance subjectivity and the re-enchantment of the world. Its function in modernity, through the aestheticization of art (previously considered only as *téchne* or craft) and even of the non-aesthetic (e.g. nature), involves keeping alive the *theoria*, i.e. the free and contemplative gaze on all that is (*kosmos*) that is the greatest human happiness according to ancient metaphysics. Ritter's sketched theory of compensation thus became one of the most influential theories on the modern genesis of aesthetics: only in modern times can subjectivity be emancipated from its subordination to human needs and instrumental reason, being free to contemplate (natural and artistic) reality in a detached and disinterested aesthetic way.

Promoted in the eighteenth century as the gnoseological emancipation of sensibility and the indemonstrable certainty of taste (*veritas aesthetica*), aesthetics thus provides an essential contribution to modernity by complementing scientific truth. The subjectification and growing autonomy of images from their ancient mimetic-ontological function and above all the modern transformation of nature into landscape show this compensation very well. The landscape, understood as aesthetically mediated nature, implies that one goes "outside" and enjoys the aesthetic spectacle of nature as a cosmic totality not for idyllic reasons, but while still appreciating the freedom enabled by urban life (*polis*) and needing to get back to it (Ritter 1963).

ODO MARQUARD'S AESTHETICS OF COMPENSATION

Trying to integrate Ritter's insights about modern "aesthetic art", Odo Marquard (1928-2015) makes compensation the key concept of his sceptical philosophy of human finitude, clearly influenced by philosophical anthropology (Arnold Gehlen and Helmut Plessner), metaphorology (Hans Blumenberg) and reception aesthetics (Hans Robert Jauss). According to him, the concept of compensation has been philosophically interesting since the beginning of Christian theology (Tertullian), in the sense of redemption. Nevertheless, the modern all-human need for compensation (i.e. an integration acting as an exoneration, a historical fulfillment that is never a definite "whole") only came after losing faith in transcendent compensating subjects like God (classical theodicy), nature (Romanticism) and the "cunning" historical reason (Hegel).

Compensation should allow for decelerations and conservative responses to the increasing modern overtribunalization of the world seen not only in the "trials" of and to history but also in the frustrating post-Kantian epistemic question about the conditions of possibility of everything. More specifically, compensation should partially mitigate some modern tendencies like people's infantilization, the temporal acceleration (tachyalienation), the loss of experience, the fictional simplification of complexities due to the universalization of the Kantian "as if", and finally the growing illusions affecting people that are increasingly devoid of experience and past. Compensation, therefore, is the right therapy against Western one-sidedness, due first to the Jewish-Christian annihilation of the Greek conception of beauty – for Marquard, the "end of art" is already inscribed in Christian monomythical eschatology and therefore came long before Hegel's thesis – and then to the philosophy of history of the revolutionary age and of progress.

Marquard also uses the notion of compensation to better explain why the aesthetic field, which in modernity refers to art born after the (first) end of art, assumed an unprecedented philosophical primacy in the last two centuries. However, rather than underlining the theoretical-metaphysical function (a modern revival of the ancient *theoria*) that Ritter attributes to art, Marquard sees it as the anthropological and even therapeutic function of responding to the human need to live in a (more) colourful world. Next to “conservation stories” (humanities) and “orientation stories” (traditions and habits) he thus places “awareness stories” (the aesthetic field). All these narratives are able to save the areas sacrificed by modern rationalism and thus to provide a new solution to theodicy through the positivisation of the negative (*bonum through malum*).

The aesthetic field successfully compensates for: a) the rationalistic disenchantment of the world, by re-enchanting it; b) the (first biblical-Christian and then revolutionary) eschatological annihilation of the world, by highlighting presence and the present and thus maintaining, as an exoneration (Gehlen’s *Entlastung*), an oasis of serenity and pleasure against the global sadness imposed by Critical Theory; c) the evils specifically banned by modernity, i.e. ugliness or even simply sensibility, now redeemed precisely by the science of aesthesis; not least d) the Lutheran condemnation of “good works” through the “small redemption” only provided by “beautiful works” (Marquard 1989a: 27). In short: rather than a failed revolution, art is a successful conservation: “art is conservation or it is not art” (Marquard 1989a: 220), even when “art [is] no longer beautiful”, as in the transition from the sublime to the ugly, from the grotesque to cruelty – that is, even when it becomes the opposite of fiction (anti-fiction), thus differing from a reality that, like in postmodernism, becomes completely fictional and therefore anaesthetic. Even in its anti-fictional form, aesthetics is compensative: it safeguards experience, otherwise suffocated by expectations and “hearsay”; it legitimates the right to have multiple myths (many stories) in reciprocal balance (as happens in novels); and finally it provides an escape into unindictability, i.e. “a refuge of human freedom from the need for justification, a resurrection of the self-evidence (which is otherwise lost) of matters of course” (Marquard 1989b: 52-53).

SOME QUESTIONS

Objections, predictably, mostly concern the neoconservative context of the Ritter School. These objections, however, are rather blunt, since Ritter and Marquard certainly indulged neither in utopian-revolutionary anti-modernism nor in regressive and anti-modernist illusions, working towards a philosophy of stability. Marquard’s explicit “traditionalism of modernity” wants to restore a partial consensus towards modern liberal societies and, like a wise surgeon, only intervenes when treatment is impossible, saving whatever can be saved – i.e. the (Hegelian) positivity always immanent to reality. Habermas’ argument (1987: 71-74) that a philosophy of compensation is nothing but a contradictory and ineffective approach, merging a too affirmative attitude towards social modernity and a simultaneous devaluation of cultural modernity, overlooks that it’s possible to give the right value to both sides of the modern split (objectivity *and* subjectivity).

Doesn't compensation risk re-proposing the optimism of Hegelian rationalism also in aesthetics, as if it were a sort of "self-redemption of modernity"? Marquard's project of "utopian quantum reduction" tries to subtract the idea of compensation from its originally optimistic context by admitting even negative and therefore non-consolatory compensations, e.g. planning as the preservation of chaos by other means, immoralism as the effect of social rigorism, naivety as the result of excessive reflection (Marquard 2000: 35-37) and, in agreement with Plessner, German philosophy as a fanatic compensation for political shortcomings. A more consistent objection is that the aesthetics of compensation, while criticising the Western one-sided meta-narrative of progress, ends up providing one of the meta-narratives it wants to reject.

A final objection is that an aesthetics of compensation ascribes only a modest surrogate role to the aesthetic field, as well as to the humanities – a claim also made by Spaemann (2010: 185, 195), who while being a member of the Ritter School considers art, unlike natural beauty, as something fictitious and therefore not true. Marquard could easily reply that his philosophy seeks precisely to stress the penultimate (as opposed to the ultimate) things, "doing something else instead" (*Stattdessen*). This, however, does not mean that art, while never falling into the Romantic delusion of aesthetic "absolutism" according to which it is a promise and a prophecy, is simply compensation and therefore has to preserve experiential and even material reality (anti-fiction) against the postmodern trend towards artistic escapism and the superficial aestheticization of reality.

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