

The Philosophical “Stance”

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As in the stellar firmament there are sometimes two suns which determine the path of one planet, and in certain cases suns of different colours shine around a single planet, now with red light, now with green, and then simultaneously illumine and flood it with motley colours: so we modern men, owing to the complicated mechanism of our “firmament”, are determined by *different* moralities; our actions shine alternately in different colours, and are seldom unequivocal—and there are often cases, also, in which our actions are *motley-coloured*.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, 1886

1 A Philosophical “Stance”

When commenting on a paper of mine, “Political Correctness between Wise Stoicism and Violent Hypocrisy”, published in 2016 in the journal *Philosophies* (Magnani [2016]), the logician and philosopher John Woods has introduced the neologism “stancing”, he derived from the subtitle of my book of 2011 *Understanding Violence. The Intertwining of Morality, Religion and Violence: A Philosophical Stance*. Woods was referring to a specific practice of philosophy that characterizes my philosophical research: I especially like this neologism. To the aim of depicting my thoughts regarding the practice of philosophy I prefer, some biographical remarks have to be submitted to the attention of the reader, that will be of help in delineating the general idea of philosophizing as “stancing”.

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2 Some Biographical Fragments

I have been active in research programs in the logic of cognitive systems and the philosophy of science. I tried to pioneer an intellectually broad work in the logic of abduction also gathering into what has come to be known as the Eco-Cognitive Model of hypothetical reasoning, published in my 2009 book *Abductive Cognition: The Epistemological and Eco-Cognitive Dimensions of Hypothetical Reasoning* (Magnani [2009]). The Eco-Cognitive Model of abduction, recently deepened in the new 2017 book *The Abductive Structure of Scientific Creativity. An Essay on the Ecology of Cognition* (Magnani [2017]), takes advantage of the results coming from various disciplines, from the area of distributed cognition to the biological research on cognitive niches, from the study on fallacies to the catastrophe theory, merging psychological, social, and evolutionary frameworks about the development of culture, morality, and religion, with the role of abductive cognition in illustrating hypothetical guessing and acknowledging insights from postmodernist philosophy to cognitive paleoanthropology and psychoanalysis. I also contributed to the logic and epistemology of model-based reasoning, thanks to numerous large volumes of proceedings of the MBR conferences I organized over the last decades, dealing with the role of models in science, technology, mathematics and logic, formal philosophy, and virtually every other venue of theoretical enquiry and reflection. One of these venues is ethics, a field in which I provided other specific contributions. Two years before the abduction book appeared, Cambridge University Press released *Morality in a Technological World: Knowledge as Duty* (Magnani [2007]). Jokingly, in this book I tried a transplantation of knowledge from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to the *Critique of Practical Reasoning*, thereby bringing the deontological character of knowledge into a sharper and more detailed focus. Two years after the abduction book, I published (also with Springer) *Understanding Violence. The Intertwining of Morality, Religion and Violence: A Philosophical Stance* (Magnani [2011]), some of whose themes were first sounded in *Morality in a Technological World*, and others of which were prefigured in *Abductive Cognition*.

3 A Systematic Interdisciplinary Committed Philosophy

In sum it seems to me I always aimed at building a systematic philosophy painting on a capacious canvas: in this endeavor one of the signature aspects of my work has been the success in showing how concepts of absorbing interest in a given subject of investigation travel widely in load-bearing ways to "alien" subject matters. Just to make a good example of this globalization of ideas of local importance I can indicate the concept of violence, which is one of the pinions of the last quoted book. All of the core ideas contained in the previous research figure prominently in *Understanding Violence*, each in their own way subject to the above globalization – moral stoicism, silence, fascistic states of mind, and overmorality, just to quote few examples. As I myself suggest in the book, this is an application-essay in which

a theoretical conjecture is put to practical work in the conceptual archeology of violence. To make the example of my analysis of political correctness, I have tried to show how political correctness could be regulated by the Stoic doctrine of indifference in ways that minimize the levels of inherent or attendant violence, without triggering the undesirable costs of fascistic state of the mind and the excesses of “overmorality” (essentially, too many rules about too many things), a practice I denounce as committing the sin of over-abstractness and unfruitful idealization. In this case I am speaking as an expert in the theoretical value to be derived from the reasonable employment of abstractness and idealization in model-based reasoning.

4 Defending Philosophical “Stancing”

The subtitle of the violence book is “*A Philosophical Stance*”. I take this to be important. It tells us that I am a stance-based philosopher, much in the manner recommended by Bas van Fraassen (Boucher [2014]). “Stancing” (the excellent neologism introduced by John Woods, as I have illustrated at the beginning of this article) is very much the right and most intellectually conscientious state of mind for a philosopher to be in about most of the matters that absorb his interest. Stancing is a natural alternative to attack-and-defend case-making, of which there is too much in philosophy. Stancing is the proposal of ideas and hypotheses, with an account of why their proposers think that they are worth proposing, together with an invitation to readers to reflect on their relevance and potential value to their own enquiries. I would also say that stancing is what a good stoic would propose. In my opinion stancing also reattributes a more intrinsic pregnant dignity to philosophical reflection (and related areas, logic too, as we know for example with the project of naturalization of logic proposed by Woods himself, which also is a fruit of stancing) in our current “cultural” (in the anthropological sense) world characterized by the stupidities of politicians, mass media, and social networks, too often carriers of various types of easily to be perceived violence.

Normally there are no theorems in stancing, although there is plenty of room for conditional proofs. There are no theorems on offer in my books, and rightly so, I think: in its current state of our understanding of various phenomena we see in various fields of research, from the problem of discovery to the nature of violence, from the role of duties to the need of saving the ownership of our destinies, they are in no fit state for clinching deep theorems. I contend that “stancing” also favors the adoption of a kind of Kantian attitude, in which it is important to analyze the “conditions of possibility” of various things, events, and processes. At the same time stancing performs a defense – thanks to concrete examples – of the conviction that philosophy produces a knowledge of the world which is specific and not reachable through other disciplines or ways of thinking. In this sense, the philosophical “stancing” still – intact after 2000 and more years – aims at incarnating a way of making intelligible the world that is exclusive, even if a bit aristocratic, but more than precious and, I repeat, unique.

5 The Constitutive Plurality of Philosophical Practices

The initial part of this small article reflects some extremely personal considerations about me as a human being that studies philosophy and related disciplines and what I think to be my own way of intending the *practice of philosophy*. Hence, I obviously have my personal ideas concerning this practice, which aim at minimizing both too abstract commitments and scholastic outcomes, ideas that also reflect an “aristocratic” (in the sense of intellectually aristocratic) sophisticated concern, which, even if shared with others, is far from the reach of uncultivated human beings. Indeed, I can just plausibly hypothesize that if I try to teach an intellectual attitude that resorts to the above described “philosophical stance” to those “other” uncultivated people, they will perceive my teaching as something violent and incomprehensible (obviously, this is the violent effect of any intellectual aristocracy).

I think the practice of philosophy just refers to human preferences: there are *preferable* ways of doing philosophy (for example for me and for other intellectual people). Some researchers prefer virtuous technicalities typical of logical and analytical traditions, others prefer history of philosophy, some people even promote the so-called “pop philosophy”, many intellectuals work on philosophy for children, and so on. I like a Kantian attitude and dislike what Daniel Dennett called “analytic metaphysics”, because I think this conceptual deviation sterilizes the great virtues of both analytic traditions and metaphysical reflections. I see in the attitude of “stancing” the effort that philosophy always made – together with mathematics – pertaining the aim of rendering intelligible the world in a rational way: it is clear that the social success of such a preference depends on the struggle in the objective life of the groups of actual philosophers and of their coalitions, a struggle that does not necessarily obey to merely “philosophical” reasons.

Is the philosophical stance “natural”? Obviously, I do not think so. Philosophical practices are very variable: do not you see how different the feeling of knowing is in different philosophy scholars? As a philosopher – who also adopts a naturalistic perspective – what I want to avoid is to establish a final and stable truth about the correct method of philosophical research, that is a dogmatic and “locked” intellectual philosophical perspective about “what is the right way of making philosophy”. Of course I also want to avoid dogmatically answering questions like “how can we get rid of bad philosophy”. Answering these questions *inside philosophy* seems to me the perpetration of a high degree of meta-intellectual violence, disrespecting the fact that the conflicts between philosophical perspectives are occurring *in rebus*, as the result of objective contents of philosophical knowledge. However, the reader must not misunderstand me! When I say I want to provide a “special dignity” to all the philosophical practices I am referring to the fact that we have to respect them, as human behaviors that cannot be discriminated thanks to an abstract, narcissistic, emancipating, conceptual philosophical theory (too “low cost”, from both the intellectual and emotional point of view). This would be a kind of intellectual violence, a merely abstract terminator machine, “written in more or less complicated books”, which just fakes a perverse atmosphere of an almost empty moral “militancy” as purification of some philosophical approaches.

6 “Moral” Philosophy in a Pickwickian Sense

Let me finally address the problem of what I can call a “moral philosophy”, intending the expression in an unconventional non-academic way (which comprehends the intrinsic “morality of sound philosophizing” and is concerned with a somehow moral “commitment to the truth”), supposed to be clever in a pure way and able to foster good cognitive outcomes for everyone. The following is an example of how this philosophical morality can be a severe conflict-maker: you like logic and trust logical reasoning, and the role of empirical evidence, so you explain to a person what *modus ponens* is and its wonderful capacity to preserve truth in philosophical argumentations, and therefore you aim at transferring what you consider to be pure logical information – that you candidly think devoid of any harmful potential. Your interlocutor can nevertheless feel violated maybe because he prefers sophisms and does not care about correct philosophical reasoning, which he instead regards as dangerous because too rational and “frigid”!

Taking advantage of the perspective I have just illustrated we can advance the following final argumentation. Philosophers (myself included) are used to deal with clear and highly valued subjects like rationality, science, knowledge, ethics, and so on, which are supposed to be endowed with an intellectual dignity *per se*. Philosophers seem to think that violence, *just because it is violence* appears as something trivial, bad, intolerable, confused, ineluctable, and marginal, not sufficiently interesting for them: as a matter of fact, history, sociology, psychology, criminology, anthropology, just to mention a few disciplines, seem more appropriate to study violence and to provide data, explanations, and causes. I am instead convinced that, at least in our time, philosophy is exactly what possesses the style of intelligence and intelligibility suitable for a fresh, impertinent, and deep *understanding* of such an intellectually disrespected topic. Yes, here, to shed light on this endeavor, a “philosophical stance” is the best we can do. When dealing with violence, philosophy, still remaining an abstract discipline as we know it, paradoxically acquires the marks of a kind of irreplaceable and indispensable “applied science”, as I tried to demonstrate in my book *Understanding Violence*, I have quoted above.

After all, philosophical “stancing” also potentially favors a virtuous attention to the connection between knowledge and (moral) action. Stancing could help to maintain an intellectual focus on moral commitments, hopefully, also beyond the strictly intellectual community, to the end of supplying that rational poise required to handle controversial issues regarding science, technology, religion, morality, and language, now and in the future.