

Fragility and Responsibility

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One of the striking features of the work of Manuel Cruz, particularly when viewed from the perspective of English-speaking philosophy, is its willingness to engage with a range of philosophical sources. In Cruz's writing, Anscombe rubs shoulders with Arendt, Cavell with Putnam, Parfitt with Primo Levi; ideas are developed in a fashion that is neither technical nor simplistic, but rather engages with problems and issues in a manner that is open and accessible, yet also serious and committed. In his own contribution to this volume, Gianni Vattimo describes Cruz's work as also belonging to an 'ontology of the present'. I agree with Vattimo's choice of phrase here, although I would add that there is an important sense in which all genuine ontology is ontology of the present, and can only be such. That is to say, all ontology, when properly undertaken, is directed at the working through of concepts, structures, and phenomena as these are given here, now, in relation to current concerns and a contemporary situation.

In this sense, Gadamer's adoption of the Hegelian conception of history as always 'present-centred' has to be understood as applying as much to ontology, and to philosophy in general, as to any of the human or natural sciences. This is not to capitulate to a form of historicist relativism in respect of philosophical inquiry, but rather to recognise the way in which all understanding, including the philosophical, has its origin, both in the sense of its starting place and its proper ground, in the place in which we already find ourselves, and from which our inquiries are first given motivation and direction. It is partly for this reason that philosophical understanding is given over to a constant process of articulation and rearticulation, of appropriation and reappropriation, of reflection and self-reflection. Understood as both an

'ontology of the present' in the sense intended here (which implies also a certain critical engagement *with* the present) as well as its position between the usual oppositions of philosophy in its so-called 'analytic' and 'continental' forms, Cruz's work is thus also characterised by an attentiveness to the indeterminate and complex character of the issues with which it deals. The use of the term 'indeterminate' should not be misunderstood. Cruz himself worries about the term on the grounds that it might be thought to imply an abandonment of any notion of correctness.

In fact, the notion of indeterminacy does not imply that 'anything goes'. Instead, it means only that if there is one correct description, interpretation, or reading, then there will be many such correct descriptions, interpretations or readings, as well as many that are incorrect. This is, indeed, the characteristic way in which indeterminacy appears in Davidson's work.¹ The indeterminacy of the linguistic reflects the richness and complexity of that about which language speaks, namely, the world, which always appears in excess of anything that may be said about it, but it derives from the richness and fecundity of language itself. The very same feature that makes it possible for language constantly to reshape itself, constantly to readjust to new ideas, expressions and nuances, also means that it is always open for re-statement, redescription, reinterpretation. Indeed, this feature of language itself underpins the possibility of truth in the ordinary sense of correctness, since it is what enables us to connect up different statements as in some sense 'saying the same', and so as each being true in the same way (even though any such judgment is itself subject to inevitable indeterminacy).

The character of Cruz's thinking as beholden neither to a narrowly 'analytic' nor 'continental' mode of proceeding, while also being attentive to, and concerned for, the contemporary context for thinking, brings with it, in fact, a sensitivity to the interconnected and 'fragile' character of the connections between concepts, problems, and phenomena. Indeterminacy is one element in such fragility, since as we employ it here, 'fragility' refers to the way in which inquiry is always highly sensitive to the manner in which it

proceeds, and to the manner in which the concepts, problems, and phenomena at issue are described and interpreted, even while it also remains the case that not every difference in approach or in descriptive or interpretive frame will imply a difference in conclusion nor need it imply a difference in the correctness or acceptability of the conclusion. Thinking is always a 'fragile' activity since it demands sensitivity to the complex network of connections on which it depends and which it also explores. Such a conception of the 'fragility' of thinking may even be said to bear comparison with Vattimo's own idea of 'weak thought' (*pensiero debole*).² Just as weak thought eschews the desire for certain and univocal foundations, addressing itself to the often shifting character of our contemporary situation, so too does the fragility of thinking imply a similar scepticism about the possibility of any final resolution, as well as a recognition of the always incomplete character of inquiry.

The fragility of thinking reflects the fragility of the connections that bind concepts to one another, and that also bind concepts to the world. The fragility of those connections is itself what makes for much of the difficulty in thinking, since the danger is always that the desire for solution will lead us to force our way through the multiplicity of connections before us in a way that also damages or neglects those connections. Cruz's work, which often seems to be given over to the exploration of a maze of issues whose interconnection is never completely resolved, can be seen as aiming at the careful exploration of a network of concepts, problems and phenomena in a way that retains a sense of their complexity and indeterminacy, displaying them as belonging to a delicate, 'fragile', system of relations. Eschewing simple or univocal solutions, Cruz' work thus takes the form of a tracing and retracing of philosophical direction and associations in a way that suggests understanding is here construed as a movement, rather than a point of arrival. In this respect, it reflects something of the same dynamic 'relatedness backward or forward' that Heidegger identifies, in *Being and Time*, as characteristic of thinking as

such,³ and that can be seen as itself a central theme in contemporary hermeneutics.

It is thus that I have argued elsewhere for an understanding of the hermeneutical as essentially 'topographical' in character.⁴ From this perspective, thinking, and the attempt to understand, is a matter of finding one's way around a certain 'region' of ideas or of experience, becoming better able to move around within it, through developing a sense of the interconnectedness of the elements that make it up. One does not come to know a place by attempting to go beneath and uncover the bedrock on which it may rest, nor by leaving it far in order to get a view of it in its entirety (only thus can one see a place in its entirety, but seen in such entirety, the place dissolves into indistinctness). Instead, one comes to know a place through one's engagement with it – through walking its pathways, through seeing and approaching different landmarks from different directions and under different aspects, through becoming acquainted with the forms of action, and the forms of human being, the place enables and supports, through recognising the way in which even apparently perduring features of that place are woven from a multiplicity of interdependent and finely-textured connections. Philosophical understanding is no different – it is arrived at not through ever deeper excavation or ascent to ever-greater heights, but rather through simple attentiveness to the complexities of things as they appear, and to the ramified connections, the unity and multiplicity, within which concepts and problems are placed, and by which they are constituted. Such a mode of proceeding is thus attentive, not only to what I have referred to as the fragility of things, or of concepts, but also to the very fragility of thought – to the uncertain and indeterminate place that thinking opens up. That place is rightly characterised, in Heideggerian terms, as a place of questionability, and thinking as therefore characterised by its errancy, by its being always 'on the way' (*unterwegs*).⁵

Nowhere is the exploratory, dynamic and so also, 'topographic', character of Cruz's work clearer than in his treatment of the interconnected

character of identity (which also encompasses 'subjectivity') and responsibility. In Cruz's account neither identity nor responsibility provide any absolute foundation for the other. Instead, the two are worked out together, as part of a single, yet ramified, structure. This requires, of course, that we understand identity rather differently from the way in which it has often been taken up within the existing philosophical traditions. Identity is not the identity of the self-contained 'one' whose character is completely determined through its own internality, through its own simplicity, through its own separability. Rather, identity as understood as only arising in relation to plurality, sameness appears out of, and in connection with, difference.

Such a mode of understanding is surely only to be expected if one takes the fact of the fragility, that is to say, the complexity, multiplicity, and relationality of the field within which identity and responsibility operate, and within which they are articulated and shaped. Of course, the fragility of the concepts at issue here may be said to reflect the fragility of conceptuality as such, and while that is correct, it is also true that it takes on a special character and significance here. Not to be construed as merely one concept among many, identity plays a key role in the very formation of conceptuality as such. To understand the fragility of identity is to understand the fragility of the concept. Moreover, responsibility also stands in a central position here, since responsibility and fragility are not disconnected notions - responsibility is, instead, what is called forth by the recognition of fragility.

Yet if identity and responsibility, and so also fragility, are indeed mutually related in this way, then how might that relatedness be articulated further? How is it articulated by Cruz? The title of the work in which Cruz explores the relation between identity and responsibility, already referred to briefly above, can be read into English as 'taking on' or perhaps 'taking charge'. The implication is that responsibility is not something that is simply given to us from without, nor is it something that simply awaits us, but rather responsibility is something we ourselves 'take on' (so that responsibility implies our 'taking charge' - although not in the sense of

assuming authority, as the English expression often connotes, but of taking on an active role in relation to what is at issue). Responsibility is thus always a matter of our putting ourselves 'into the frame' – we might say to take on responsibility is to take things 'on' in such a way that we also 'take on' ourselves.

In his exploration of responsibility, Cruz refers us briefly to Arendt's notions of natality and 'love for the world'. Already, in these two concepts, we can see a conception of agency as requiring a mode of engagement with the world that mirrors what seems also to be at stake in Cruz's account. Birth is the bringing of something new into the world; it expresses the ever-present possibility of hope, of a new beginning, of a mode of appearing that comes forth from what already is, and yet also opens up into a yet-to-be-determined future – a future which is itself to be taken on. In its directness towards a future, Arendt's emphasis on natality does not refuse or deny mortality (and in this respect can be seen as a supplement to rather than a replacement for the Heideggerian emphasis on the fact of death), but rather turns our attention to the essential interconnectedness of mortality with natality.

Mortality itself becomes significant only in relation to natality, since it is natality that opens up the possibility of action within the horizon marked out by our finitude. Natality thus refers us back to the manner in which our *facticity*, our being born in this situation, this time, this place, is what opens up the possibility of our acting, of our creation of things anew – it is also what demands such action of us. We are constantly returned to this possibility for action – a possibility which is also a necessity, since it is not a possibility that can ever remain merely a possibility – and so are constantly returned to the fact of our own natality, and in being so returned, we are also returned to the fact of our own responsibility. Our natality is thus given in our activity, and in the taking on of that activity. It is given in the character of action as always a beginning, just as much as it is also a continuation and a response.

Responsibility and natality are closely linked, since the recognition of our natality, and so of the ever-present possibility of bringing something new

into the world, is also a matter of our 'taking on' of that possibility, and our making it our own. Here too, responsibility and natality converge with the issue of identity. Identity is formed, not only in the fact of natality, not only in the sheer facticity of our being, but also in our response to it. Far from being a way to evade responsibility – as if the fact of our being born was an end rather than a beginning – our natality is that which makes responsibility possible. It is our natality that establishes the ground on which our choices, decisions, and actions are given content and significance, and in so doing it opens up the question of their realisation and the manner of their realisation. Our natality is thus the gift of a beginning – a gift whose giving is not ours, and that cannot be refused. Identity thus finds its origin in natality, but not its final determination. Indeed, the taking on of responsibility for oneself and the formation of identity can be seen as two sides of the same responsiveness that is first opened up by the fact of our natality and our situatedness, and by the very capacity for activity and creation that these imply and of which they are an expression. Natality, especially when understood in relation to facticity, actually exhibits the same character as Heidegger famously attributes to truth – it is a revealing that is also a concealing, and its character as revealing is itself dependent on its character as also concealing. Moreover, the way that Heidegger elucidates the essence of truth, which he famously names *aletheia*, and that also resonates in his understanding of *physis* (inadequately translated as 'nature'), is in terms that themselves evoke the sense of coming forth, or emergence, that is also present in the idea of natality. What is at issue in all of these terms is the idea of an original and originary coming forth into the world.

Inasmuch as natality opens up, but does not determinate the manner in which we make ourselves responsible, and so also opens up, but does not determine, the manner in which our identity is formed, so our natality might be construed in terms of *freedom*, except that the way natality is tied to possibility and the enacting of possibility, is not on the basis of some absolute absence of constraint – natality is not to be construed as the marker of

complete self-determination. Our natality does indeed encompass our facticity, the determinacy of our origin and situation, such that one may even say (and here the thinking of responsibility in the work of Simone Weil seems especially relevant⁶), that it refers us to our essential *rootedness*. In this way, natality is a concept that draws us back, once again, to the idea of the topographic – to the placed character of our very existence. The idea of natality is thus no mere assertion of existentiality over facticity, nor of essence over existence, but rather directs attention to the way in which action and possibility, the new and the originary, only arise on the basis of the concrete situation, the place, in which we already find ourselves, and yet also offers the possibility of moving beyond those circumstances, beyond that place.

The latter point is especially important, particularly for Arendt, since it is this possibility of creating something new that is essential to the possibility of being able to overcome the misdeeds, misunderstandings, and mistakes that are the inevitable consequences of finite knowledge and action. Thus we might say that the very possibility of acting differently – of reshaping the places in which we already find ourselves or even of opening up new such places – itself stands in a mutual relation of dependence with the possibility for forgiveness and for reconciliation in relation both to oneself and to others.⁷

Natality encompasses both the capacity *for* action as well the character *of* action. In particular, it shows action as dependent on the circumstances in which the possibility of action first appears. Natality thus implies a new beginning, but that is not to say that it is a beginning that is without precedent, without any determination, without a starting place. To be born is to find oneself on the earth, here, now, in a situation that already makes demands of one, but in which one also has the opportunity to make things anew. In this respect natality refers us to the character of our acting and thinking (and not just our ontology) as always ‘of the present’, but thereby being also of the past and of the future – the timeliness of action and thought is itself a function of its placedness. One might say that natality refers us not only to the character of action as the establishing of a new conditionality, but

also to the character of action as arising out of a conditionality that always precedes it.

In drawing attention to the relation between natality and responsibility, the character of responsibility as also standing in a direct relation to identity is itself illuminated. Responsibility is not only a taking responsibility for action, but is also a taking on of action; it thus mirrors the character of natality as both an origin and also originary. If responsibility is a taking on of oneself, then it is a taking on of oneself, not only as one is already present, as one is already born into the world, but also a taking on of one's own coming to be present, and so a taking on of one's own future. It is crucial to understand, however, that the sense of responsibility that emerges here is precisely *not* a sense that carries with it any notion of authority or of 'decision' (that responsibility might well be understood in this way is something that could well be encouraged, in Cruz's account, by the English translation of his *Hacerse cargo* as 'taking charge'). In similar fashion, as I noted above, natality is mistakenly understood if taken to imply an unconstrained freedom.

The danger of such a misconstrual of responsibility, as well as of natality, is, in large part, why it is so important that both these notions are indeed seen in the light of the fragility of our thinking, our acting, our mode of being. To 'take on' ourselves, and our place in the world, is not to engage in some heroic act of determination or decision, but is rather to acknowledge one's own character as already given over to the world, as placed in it and claimed by it, and yet as called upon to respond to the world, and to act within it, in a way that also constitutes an opening up of the world and of oneself. Here is the essential fragility of responsibility, in which responsibility is itself a response to fragility, and yet is also characterised by it. To 'take on' the world, then, is not to 'take control' of the world, but rather to recognise the uncertainty and indeterminacy of the world and our place within it. It is precisely to take on the questionability and fragility of things, and to do so in the face of the contrary refusal of questionability and fragility that seems

otherwise to prevail so completely. To 'take on' the world in this way, therefore, is neither to be assured of a particular form of success nor to enact some pre-ordained doctrine or ideology. It is to act even in the uncertainty of the outcome; to think in a way that preserves the questionability of one's thought. Responsibility, on this account, is not something that is simply 'done', as if it were the acceptance of some judgment, the handing down of a decision, or the attribution of a punishment; responsibility is instead an ever-present task that is always incomplete. At this point one, can also see why a certain notion of tolerance might emerge in Cruz's work – a notion of tolerance that is founded, not on our disengagement from the other (which is also, in a sense, a disengagement from ourselves), but an engagement with the other that recognises our mutual fragility.

The philosophical engagement that characterises Cruz' work, and that I noted at the very beginning of this discussion, can itself be seen to exemplify Cruz' own commitment to the form of tolerance, as well as the notion of responsibility, that is at issue here. Cruz' thinking is not restricted to the safe and secure terrain of any one tradition, but engages across a range of approaches and styles in a way that is neither dismissive nor adulatory. His concern is not with a mode of philosophising that stands aloof from our current situation, but instead recognises its own rootedness in that situation, and responds to it. If Cruz appears not to offer any direct answers or simple solutions, this is partly because there are none, but more importantly because the desire for such answers and solutions is itself an element in the contemporary failure of responsibility, in the demise of questionability, and in the refusal of fragility. If the task for philosophy is no longer merely to understand, nor even to change the world, but to 'take it on', then what must also be taken on is philosophy itself. In the work of Manuel Cruz, we find an admirable example of just such philosophical responsibility.

¹ See, for instance, Davidson, 'Indeterminism and Anti-Realism', *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

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- ² As worked out in a number of places, including his *The End of Modernity Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (London: Polity, 1991).
- ³ *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962), H8.
- ⁴ See, for instance, 'Locating Interpretation: The Topography of Understanding in Heidegger and Davidson', *Philosophical Topics* 27 (1999), pp.129-148; see also my *Heidegger's Topology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006) and *Place and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1999), for fuller explorations of the notion of the topographic and also the topological.
- ⁵ See, for instance, Heidegger's discussions in *What is Called Thinking?* trans. John Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).
- ⁶ See especially Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (London, Routledge, 2002).
- ⁷ See Lucy Tatman's discussion of this in her 'Tikkun Olam through Forgiveness and Promise: Renewing the World in the thought of Hannah Arendt', part of a larger work-in-progress under the title *Hannah Arendt and Homo Temporalis*.