

Philosophy's ends

THE PASSION OF LIFE, VOLUME I

Stefano Franchi



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Philosophy's ends (The passion of life, volume I)

by Stefano Franchi

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The cover illustration shows Johannes Vermeer's painting *De Soldaat en het Lachende Meisje* (*Officer and Laughing Girl*, c. 1657, now at the Frick Museum, New York). In his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835), Hegel claimed that only Dutch painters were able give a portrait of the cheerful joy that permeates the everyday life of a happy people who cannot possibly know evil. This first volume inquires whether such a life could possibly exist.

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CONTENTS

General Preface to <i>The passion of life: Life, logic, ethics</i>	vii
Acknowledgments	xxvii

PHILOSOPHY'S ENDS

Introduction	3
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Prelude

Mr. Palomar's play with the void	9
Mr. Palomar's checkmates	11
The World of Candrakirti	18
The irreparable light of dawn	30

Part I: Philosophy's paradox

Philosophy, truth, and history	37
Philosophy	37
Ends	41
Hegel's paradox	44
The ends of philosophy	59
Philosophy, science, and wisdom	62
Of lines, circles, and spheres	74
<i>Absolute playing</i>	81
Ein Spielen der Liebe mit sich selbst...	81
"to die game"	88
Absolutes Spielen	95
Bordering philosophy	104
Play	111
Play and the end of philosophy	111
Play in the social sciences	115

Play and non-philosophy	132
Play's paradox	151

Playful structures	161
Mythical games and ritual play	162
Structures	166
Social games and individual plays	178
The anaclastic solution	192
Ontological drifts of the anaclastic game	199

Interlude

Hunters, cooks, and nooks	225
Philosophy and science, again	225
Signposts	227
Cooks and nooks	232
Philosophy and literature	238

Part II: Passivity

Passive concepts	247
Passive philosophy	247
Ordinary passivity	254
The passive mode of being	273
Doing and suffering in Aristotle's <i>Categories</i>	273
Passivity and quality	280
Passion and action	288
Fundamental passivity and contingency	300

Postlude

Vermeer's vision	309
References	325
Index	350

General Preface to *The passion of life*
Life, logic, ethics

Life can be looked at from many different standpoints, but perhaps the most general precept that will not bias the investigation in any particular direction is the following: life requires distance. All living beings are separated and yet connected to their environment by a semi-permeable membrane that differentiates their inside from the outside and therefore posits a distance between the two. The separation must be constantly maintained and worked at, because all physical structures are subject to entropy and tend to dissolve into homogeneity. Difference and separation require constant work, which is why life is always temporally bound by the efficacy of the processes allowing a living being to regenerate its internal structure on the basis of the material it can fetch from the external environment. Life ends precisely when that distinction can no longer be maintained and the distance shrinks to nothing.

There are a couple of important consequences that follow from this insight. First, separation is the opposite of isolation. It may be trivial to point it out, but living beings require an environment and a set of processes to interact with it, and any discussion of life that does not start from its essentially relational character (its “embeddedness,” as some philosophers would say) is not going very far. A living being’s environment, to put it more strongly, is not simply its physical and biological background. On the contrary, it is the space *within* which and *outside of* which a living being carries on. The two seemingly contradictory conditions are meant to stress that while life obviously requires all kind of sustenance from its surroundings, it can only exist when it constantly differentiates itself from it. A pebble lying on a beach is not living, because the only result of its interactions with wind and waves will be grains of sand—there may be a physio-chemical separation between one pebble and the next, but there is no biological one. As it rolls back and forth through the surf, the continuous buffeting of physical forces on its surface will produce a constant entropic

degradation by breaking chemical bonds and simplifying its crystal-like structure. The clam stuck to a rock on the same beach, the strand of kelp waving in the sea, the diatom floating in it, on the other hand, are both biologically and physically separated from wind, rock, and waves because they can provisionally suspend entropic degradation and keep their biological differentiated structures away from the ever-possible slide into lifeless indifferentiation. Life is a relational phenomenon that requires the living being to be constantly distancing itself from the surroundings—neither isolating from, nor coinciding with it. While it needs an environment for its metabolic processes of (differentiating) self-regeneration, it can never be fully absorbed into it.

The second consequence may be less obvious. If a living being is tied to its surroundings by the physico-chemical exchanges of energy and material ensuring its survival, it follows that its relation to the environment will never be neutral. It will always be defined by its own needs, on the one hand, and by the environment's affordances and pressures, on the other. Otherwise put, a particular living being will always have a very specific *view* of its environment that will be different from other species and even from other conspecific individuals, if we allow for developmentally derived phenotypic differences. As philosophers would say, a living being will always be *intentionally* related to its environment: it will have a particular perspective on it that is fully determined by its internal processes and yet not reducible to it, because while a perspective governs *how* we see, it cannot determine *what* will appear in its field. The world always appears obliquely, as it were, slanted by life's perspective.

Moreover, an organism's intentionally oblique bind with the world is never fixed, because the organism's needs change as a function of its internal processes and material exchanges. The environment changes as well thanks to the physical and biological processes occurring outside the organism's purview. In brief, the intentional relation is intrinsically dynamic and subject to temporal evolution. The distance between the living being and its environment is a constantly renegotiated equilibrium—it is a dance where the partners can never be too close or too far away, even though they never stand on the same position on the dance floor. One could perhaps remark that seeing the organism/environment relation as a dance is a rather optimistic view that forgets the essential dimension of all dynamic relations: the counter- and inter-acting forces keeping the dancers together through

their figurations could always fail and send one or both crashing to the floor or into each other. To use the previous language, the dynamic distancing equilibrium could always degenerate into separation or coincidence, in both cases resulting in death. Organisms whose equilibrium is about to degrade into these limit conditions would perhaps be considered to be teetering on the brink of death—still living, they are actually just surviving. On the contrary, we could say that the dynamic equilibrium is optimal when the organism keeps itself at a constant distance from the environment, interacting with it in such a way that it gets what it needs to constantly recreate its own internal structures in the face of ever-changing internal and external conditions challenging them (i.e. entropic decay). In this case the organism would not be just living, but actually flourishing—its life would and should be properly called a *good life*.

The immediate question that comes to mind is whether such optimal equilibrium is possible—whether, in other words, organisms may flourish. The question is not as silly as it may seem. It is obviously true, as a quick glimpse around us would immediately confirm, that living organisms may find themselves in all kinds of conditions. As I write these words in the sweltering heat of a Texas summer, I witness fall options just outside my window: the wilted leaves of the scrappy magnolia tree bravely surviving the 100F-plus degrees temperature face a happily flowering native *Esperanza* bush, while the similarly native massive live oak that shades both carries along, but it would obviously prefer lower temperatures and higher hydration. My recently planted bottlebrush, on the other hand, stopped longing for the moist, down under land it came from and called it a day already—it has now transitioned into a repository of organic material for happier organisms.

Yet, the existence of a random sample of plants in various states of well-being does not really capture the sense of possibility we have in mind when asking if it is really possible for an organism to flourish. Consider again the life of the native *Esperanza* bush I just mentioned. Its blossoming being a clear index of its good health, it is obviously possible for such a plant to thrive in 105°F with almost no precipitation. But, we could ask, *why* is it thriving? Is it just a random occurrence about this specific organism that makes it so happy? In this case, its well-being would only be possible in a very abstract sense: if it always depends on countless conditions specific to the individual, its phenotype, and its developmental history as well its local environment,

then we would rather say that its well-being is necessarily random, because it does not follow any criteria. Yes, the *Esperanza's* blossoming is possible—indeed, it is a fact—but as it is impossible to determine the conditions under which it is possible, its possibility fades into necessity: given a set of (possibly very large) specific conditions, the organism will necessarily end up thriving, or barely surviving, or actually dying. On the other hand, such a random thriving is easily disconfirmed, since a fellow specimen located just a foot away in the same flower bed is similarly enjoying itself under a profusion of yellow trumpet flowers. This seems to indicate a lack of random, purely contingent conditions: the *Esperanza* plants thrive, we would say, whenever we place them in the environment in which they originally develop. To be more precise, we would say that any given *Esperanza* plant would flourish whenever it comes into being in the environment that its evolutionary history has adapted it to.

This conclusion, however, does not bode well either for the fate of possibility. If an organism's well-being is completely determined by its DNA plus a suitable environment, then we would rather say that its thriving is not just possible, but *necessary*. Moreover, since the necessity of its well-being is encoded in the organism's DNA and in the external environmental conditions, it is apparent that its well-being lies outside the organism's own standpoint—its own intentional relation to the world, to resort to the philosophical terms introduced above, does not include well-being at all. Hence, thriving is not truly *possible* because, properly speaking, it does not even exist from the organism's point of view. It is just a third-person assigned label to a set of conditions that will always necessarily obtain or not obtain (depending on the organism's genetic code's fit with the environment, or its lack thereof).

As it turns out, asking whether a living being can *possibly* keep itself at an optimal distance from the world—whether, in other words, it can possibly live *a good life*—is not such a silly question. It is especially not trivial when the question is asked from the organism's standpoint—or rather, to account for non-speaking beings, when the problem of keeping itself in the best possible dynamic equilibrium with the world is articulated within the means at an organism's disposal, as differentiated as they may be. We do not need organisms to be conscious or even self-conscious to admit that all living beings deploy strategies of radically different kinds when interacting with the environment. Some of them are simply geared to fetching nutrients and

energy by well-established methods.¹ A *Paramecium* flagellate swimming in its environment, for instance, will normally and quite happily swallow the bacteria coming its way before proceeding to assimilate them into its own body. Some behaviors, however, will not be directed at an immediate material goal, but rather at changing *how* the food is found and are therefore necessarily of the second order: they change how and when their usual feeding and shelter-seeking strategies work. Neither bacteria nor *Paramecia* floating around in the local pond do always keep swimming around in the same immutable fashion with the same rhythm and velocity when food is not coming in.² *Mutatis mutandis*, every other organism behaves the same. We would be justified in calling this double take on the environment a “search for the possibility of a good life,” because beyond an attempt at mere survival it seeks to *improve* its chances—therefore seeking a *good* life.³

If we leave aside bacteria and paramecia and switch back to humans’ own obliquely intentional perspective, we will soon realize that the quest we may observe in other lives has a specific name in our own: we call it philosophy.



According to a long-standing tradition, philosophy is a preparation for death.⁴ It does not really matter if the meditation upon death exhorts us to direct our gaze toward a world of incorruptible essences, or whether, as is often the case nowadays, the acknowledgment of our fundamental finitude becomes the ground for affirming their impossibility. In either case, the focus of the seeker of wisdom’s life is, paradoxically enough, its negation. Death is both the main concern of a philosopher’s life as well the subject of its eventual accomplishment—her *sophia*, or *sapientia*.

There is another, minoritarian, tradition that refuses to take that diversionary path and wants to put life itself square and center. The most resolute advocate of this option—by no means the only one, though perhaps the most eloquent—is Baruch Spinoza. Towards the end of the *Ethics* (part IV, prop. 67), he states: “A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death.”⁵ The proof of the proposition is very compact:

A free man, i.e., one who lives according to the dictate of reason alone, is not led by Fear, but desires the good directly, i.e., acts, lives, and preserves his being from the foundation of seeking his own advantage.

And so he thinks of nothing less than of death. Instead his wisdom is a meditation on life, q.e.d. (1985, I, 584)⁶

Tending to nothing else than to preserve itself as well as it can, life—and not necessarily the human kind, we could add, as just discussed—is driven by passions and desires. In one of the supporting propositions (IV, 24), Spinoza had argued that living beings' cognitive functions—their *ratio*—helps them choose how to direct desires toward appropriate objects, thereby achieving pleasure and avoiding pain. Such direction is necessary, he had argued, because the capacity a living being has to keep itself alive can always be surpassed by the similar and yet greater capacities of some other creatures.⁷ Life is in other words marked by a lack, and more specifically by a relative lack: never completely self-sufficient, always separate from its outside, it is once removed, as it were, from a world populated by other, different, and more or less powerful lives. At the same time, a living being is never fully integrated into its surroundings as a crystal, or a cloud perhaps, are. We reach *sapientia*, or *sophia* when we learn how to cope successfully with the unavoidably unstable world this double lack generates; when we learn how to direct our desires and free ourselves from fear and, by the same token, how to achieve freedom. Since we call philosophy the search for *sophia*, it follows that, far from being a preparation for death, philosophy is a meditation upon life. Wisdom itself, *sapientia*, as well as freedom itself, are nothing but the correct use of our cognitive abilities in order to direct the desires that our lacking nature produces toward goods that the preservation of our well-being requires, therefore avoiding the fear that its loss would generate.

We can conclude from the previous argument that, formally speaking, philosophy is as necessary to (human) life as feeding and sleeping. Indeed, “philosophy” is the name humans have been giving to the search for (their own) second-degree coping activities (to use the previous term) that every living being necessarily deploys. It is simply the inquiry into the *possibility* of a flourishing life.



I said that the previous conclusion is purely formal, because it obviously tells us nothing about its content. We may agree that philosophy is (humanly) necessary and yet be completely unable to determine *what* the good life it seeks actually comports, nor if it will ever succeed. Indeed, if questioning the possibility of a good life is the one and only question philosophy has ever asked, the widespread (and historically ever present) skepticism about its possible success may suggest that the answer will never be found. Yet, I

would argue that this still limited, purely formal conclusion is far from useless, because it provides a concrete starting point toward an answer: it entails that the quest for the possibility of a good life will necessarily be self-reflective and that philosophy will always include an inquiry about its own conditions of possibility.

A brief passage from Spinoza chosen among the many different options in the Western canon that deal with philosophy's goal, means, and methods will make this clear. The *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* opens with these words:

After experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as [my] mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected—whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity. (1985, I, 7 §1 (II,5)).

Undoubtedly, the theme of worldly contempt that Spinoza sketched in the first few lines (*de contemptu mundi*), is a common motif in Western philosophy. I could have chosen similar passages from Aristotle, Plato, or the whole Stoic school, just to remain within the narrow boundaries of an ancient tradition Spinoza knew well. But I find this formulation particularly clear, because it highlights some aspects that are perhaps not so obvious in its sources. In spite of the plain language, Spinoza's text makes a number of very specific claims about life and how it should be conducted. First of all, human existence is characterized by fear, which is nothing other than the expectation of the pain that an encounter with a potentially dangerous ("bad") external object may cause. Its absence is joy (*laetitia*)—which a good life would, if possible, permanently enjoy (*aeternum fruire laetitia*). Experience teaches us that objects are always good or bad as we relate to them, or, as Spinoza says, as they affect us through the mediation of our cognitive faculties ("as our mind is moved by them" (*ab iis animus movebatur*)). Rephrased in more contemporary language, this means that life has a relational structure—or, as I called it above, an intentionally oblique one—in which living beings constantly interact with the world through more or less developed cognitive

faculties that are constantly assessing whether those interactions will bring about pain or pleasure, fear or joy. A good life obviously comports the maximization of the latter, but the commonly accepted understanding of which existential strategy is best suited to achieve that goal proves unsatisfactory, Spinoza will say a few lines later. Wealth, socio-political honor, or sensual satisfaction—the traditional markers for a life of happiness (*divitias, honorem, atque libidinem*)—are as often the cause of pain as of pleasure, for a number of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. The satisfaction of *libido* is always followed by *tristitia*, depression necessarily following the always provisional fulfillment of an essentially incessant sensuous demand. The pursuit of riches and honor, on the other hand, will end up in externally caused painful frustration, because neither is a good in itself. Since both wealth and honor are only valuable as means, their pursuers will be the happier the more of them they possess. Spinoza remarks that these external conditions cause a never-ending search for more wealth or more honor that is bound to be frustrated. It does not matter if the pursuit has come to a temporary stop or to a ruinous final end. In both cases the unsatisfied desire will again produce a deep *tristitia*. Stable happiness (*aeterna laetitia*, that is) can only occur when the pleasure-inducing object is worth in itself and stably acquired—it requires a supreme good that can be enjoyed without being consumed.

Spinoza's condemnation of worldly existential strategies and of the fleeting nature of sensory pleasure is not particularly original. Just to remain within the confines of the Western classic tradition, we find very similar arguments in Plato (e.g. *Rep.*, whose book IX deploys a similar strategy to extol intellectual pleasures as the *summum bonum*), or in Aristotle (e.g., *Eth. Nich.*, whose book X defends the superiority of contemplation of incorruptible essences over practical-ethical life). The Stoics insisted on this point as well, and some commentators have advanced them as Spinoza's main inspiration in this context, perhaps through Seneca's *De vita beata*, or through the Stoic motives that had gained widespread currency since the early Renaissance. The distinction between the stable enjoyment of unchanging objects and the temporary use of a perishable good was also a common place in Scholastic philosophy. Peter Lombard's *Sententiae*—the most widely used textbook in the School since the 13th century—used Augustine's classically-inspired distinction between goods that could be enjoyed (*fruentis*) vs. goods that could (and should) only be used (*utendis*) as the organizing principle of the whole science of theology.⁸

However, Spinoza leverages these classic sources to proceed in a very different direction, as is apparent if we connect his text to another, and much closer source: *The Dialogues on Love* by Judah Abravanel (also known as Leone Ebreo).⁹ This true 16th century bestseller, which Spinoza had in his personal library, had defined love as the desire to enter into a stable union with the beloved object and had identified human happiness as the loving relationship with the supreme good. *I dialoghi's* main character, Filone, argues that true love and hence true happiness include both spiritual and physical union of the bodies. Yet, perfect (human) love is not reducible to the latter and it does not constitute, in Augustinian terms, a misdirected, hence perverted and evil form of enjoyment. Physical desire is an effect of love and not the other way around, hence it will always be subordinate to it and would never exist without it.¹⁰ Abravanel's perfect form of love is closer to a fully realized, perfectly stable dynamic equilibrium than to a mystical ascension. And so is Spinoza's, I would argue, as it becomes increasingly clear when he leaves behind the well-trodden path of *contemptu mundi*, and he switches gears to put all the emphasis on the *possibility* of finding happiness as key to the search.

If the existence of never-ending *laetitia* is not assured, it follows that determining *how* to find it is of the utmost importance. In other words, the method of philosophy is as important as its content, for they are heuristically and substantially implicating each other. On the one hand, devising the *correct method* will help us find out what true happiness is, while trying to determine what *that content* is will help us find the correct method. In these opening lines of his early treatise, Spinoza is telling us that philosophy as a path to the good life requires a reflection upon concepts which belong to different orders. Some are first-order and are directly related to human life—and not necessarily human, I would add. While the *passions, fears, and joys* that he mentions having affected his *mind* belong to this order, the existence of eternal *truths* about life, hence the very conceptions of truth and time, as well as the effability of the latter, clearly belong to the meta-level. I may be stressing the obvious if I insist that Spinoza declares the two levels strictly related: thinking about the substantial concepts leads him to question the more abstract ones, while dissecting the meta-concepts is only significant when happiness is the reward.

Yet, the consequence may not be so trivial: the co-implication at the content level entails that the actual path the philosopher must follow—her

ars inveniendi, as it used to be called, or heuristics—must similarly proceed on two fronts. Like a true craftsman whose planned artifacts require the invention, construction, and constant refinement of her tools, the actual philosopher who seeks wisdom will necessarily swing back and forth between content and method while on the path to *laetitia*. The content/form co-implication entails that it may be irrelevant where the search begins: methodology will lead us to content, while devising content will lead us back to method. We get an immediate confirmation of this strong co-implication in Spinoza's text a few lines after the previously quoted passage:

So I wondered whether perhaps it would be possible to reach my new goal—or at least the certainty of attaining it—without changing the conduct and plan of life which I shared with other men.

(1985, I, 7, §3 (II,5))

However, if this were the case, if it were possible to deal with abstract theoretical questions—“the certainty of attaining it”—without altering one's own life, then we would have definite proof that the two levels are fully independent. That is not the case, Spinoza argues, because the very possibility that the good life *may* exist will lead us to search for it and compel us to abandon the commonly accepted values whose inevitable shortcomings are well-known, as he had discussed already. Therefore, we face a choice between two kinds of uncertainties, yet again belonging to two different yet strictly related logical levels:

I first found that, if I devoted myself to this new plan of life, and gave up the old, I would be giving up a good by its nature uncertain [...] for one uncertain not by its nature (for I was seeking a permanent good) but only in respect to its attainment. (1985, I, 8, §6 (II,6))

Several commentators have noticed that Spinoza's argument entails that the search for the good life needs a literal conversion, turning away from common values to a new set of yet undetermined goals. This is certainly true, and it is in keeping with the tradition of the schools, first and foremost the Stoics, who had been insistent on understanding philosophy as a way of life. Yet, Spinoza's emphasis is very different from the traditional literature about religious and/or mystical conversion. The latter stressed the need to abandon worldly ways and to lead the mind toward an absolute, a supreme good, or a God whose indeterminate, indeterminable, and ineffable character poses no obstacle

to a seeker's desire to join it in through the only authentic and only admissible erotic act that would annul man in God.¹¹ The traditional emphasis of both Christian and pagan schools is on the journey's *destination*, whose access to rational understanding is often explicitly denied. Spinoza takes a very different line. First, he comes back again, a few lines down, to the use/enjoyment (*uti/frui*) distinction he had leveraged earlier to chastise the search for wealth, pleasure, and honor, and points out that there is nothing wrong in pursuing them as means and not as ends. A necessarily limited and moderate pursuit is necessary for the attainment of a truly good life, and he quickly sets aside the option of turning the contempt of the immanent world into a union with a transcendent unknowable entity.¹² He does briefly notice that it might be possible to reach the highest good and mentions some of the prerequisites that may be needed to achieve that goal (e.g., thorough knowledge of nature, an equal-opportunity society, good educational, health, and technological systems), but his attention switches almost immediately from the destination—the supreme good—to the features of the *path* that may lead him there (1985, I, 10-11; II, 8, 13-15).

Where to begin, Spinoza asks? He has no doubts:

I come now to what must be done first, before all else: emending the intellect and rendering it capable of understanding things in the way the attainment of our end requires. To do this, the order we naturally have requires me to survey here all the modes of perceiving which I have had up to now for affirming or denying something without doubt, so that I may choose the best of all, and at the same time begin to know my powers and the nature that I desire to perfect. (1985, I, 12 (II, 9, §18))

Undoubtedly the culminating point of the *Tractatus's* introduction, Spinoza's conclusion comes as a bit of a surprise to its readers. Having opened the book with a discussion about the existential necessity to find a good, stable life of joy, Spinoza turns that demand into the necessity to study all the modes of perception (*omnes modos percipiendi*) and the nature of truth and falsity (*ad aliquid indubie affirmandum vel negandum*). After this programmatic declaration, the *Tractatus* indeed switches gears and moves into the detailed discussion of human cognitive functions, their relation to the external world, their intrinsic features as well as the modes of their possible failure. The moral perspective, or rather the quest for a *vita beata*, is no longer touched upon. An existential quest for *laetitia* turns into an epistemological dissection of the most abstract kind: ethics, to put it briefly,

gives birth to logic, and logic, once accomplished, will deliver the sought-after ethics.



Some scholars consider this logical-ethical *pas de deux* the trademark of Spinoza's philosophy, or perhaps, the characteristic feature of the philosophical production of a century, the 17th, that strongly believed in reason and saw no shortage, from Bacon to Descartes, from Spinoza to Leibniz and Locke, of methods for the education, correction, and proper usage of the human mind. In his commentary to the *Treatise*, Alexandre Koyré actually narrows the historical relevance of this approach even further. Widespread as the efforts to "purify" the reason were in the 17th century, he remarks, no procedure could be more Spinozian than starting a logical treatise with a moral exhortation, since for him "logic is just an introduction to ethics" (1979, 97). But Koyré's claim must be taken as hyperbole: if making logic "an introduction to ethics" is a quintessential Spinozian move, it is just because Spinoza may have been better than anyone else in the Western canon at placing out front the conception of philosophy that all its members share even when they don't wear it on their sleeves. The metaphysics of ideas, undoubtedly one of the first fully developed Western logical theories, is reached via a discussion of how to live a good life, or rather a "just" life at ease with oneself and fellow human beings. Plato's itinerary is not so different from Spinoza's after all, even though *Republic's* Socrates, unlike the fictional protagonist of the *Tractatus*, is able to complete the return leg of the ethical-logical journey out of the cave and instruct his fellow human beings about the life of justice.

The reverse path through the logical/ethical circle is perhaps less common, but by no means rare. The best-known example may be Kant's own itinerary as he moves from the analysis of perception and the inquiry into the possibility of unequivocally true propositions in the first *Critique* to the determination of the truth of the categorical imperative—perhaps the only proposition whose truth value Kant really cared about—in the *Groundwork* and later in the second *Critique*. In this respect, Husserl's intellectual development acquires an even greater paradigmatic value: a mathematician whose first work was devoted to the analysis of the concept of number went on to produce very influential and overly abstract works on the foundation of logic, then on the foundation of philosophical method. His last works, though, were concerned with the ethico-political situation of Europe between WWI and WWII, about the ideal life that could be lived,

and about the failure of European society to actually produce the appropriate condition for human flourishing. Some of his followers were quick to use phenomenological analysis to target the ethico-political domain directly, i.e. the determination of the “good” or authentic life (e.g., Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger, among other contemporary Germans). Many more examples could be provided, from the neo-positivist marriage of logic analysis to social consciousness in Paul Natorp and (especially, but not only) Hermann Cohen to, more generally, the whole neo-Kantian movement at the turn of the 19th/20th century.

My goal in this brief discussion of the opening salvo in the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* shows that, *contra* Koyré, Spinoza’s procedure is possibly the least Spinozian move he may have taken. In broad agreement with much if not the whole canon of Western philosophy from its origins onward, Spinoza shows that the discussion of the conditions of possibility of philosophy leads directly into the answer to the philosophical question about the good life. In other words, the discussion of *logic*—broadly understood as the possibility and feasibility of gaining the stable, fear-free relationship with the world that *laetitia* denotes—brings us directly to that *ethics* that is and has always been philosophy’s logical and existential point of departure, even when it is not its narrative start. To put it briefly, Spinoza shows us clearly how philosophy always includes a meta-reflection about itself and its own possibility: the question about what a good life is and how it may be achieved can only be answered by an inquiry into the basic concepts that such answer would necessarily have to rely upon.

This conclusion has some relevant consequences for philosophical communication as well. The co-implication between the two levels—the logical meta-analysis of form and the ethical discussion of substance—means that the starting point of a book of philosophy is largely immaterial. A thorough reflection upon the good life will end up having to discuss the general framework of the question, while even the most abstract discussions of the most sophisticated logical concepts will end up producing very “practical” normative-inducing statement about what a good life is and how it should be lived. This book takes the second path: it starts from the end of philosophy, the analysis of its own conditions of possibility, in order to reach some conclusions about “the good life,” that, in the author’s opinion, are a direct consequence of that very abstract discussion.

The present volume, *Philosophy’s ends*, explores the relationship

between the end of philosophy and the concepts of game and play that have very often been associated with it. The book highlights the necessary connection between philosophy and play while, at the same time, pointing out the connection between play, passions, and passivity that, in my view, have been critically unexplored. I show that a play-based conception of life turns into a self-defeating contradiction, unless we stop considering passivity as the mirror image of activity. A close reading of classical and contemporary philosophical sources allow me to provide an alternative formulation of passivity and to bring forth its connection with contingency.

The second volume, *Life, described*, shows that the possibility of a comprehensive account of life will have to point toward an examination of contingent life, before trying to bring it together with the dimension of passivity. I argue that a conception of contingent, passive, content-rich, partially functioning, and biologically compatible drives developed according to the homeostatic model found in W. R. Ashby as well as in the psychoanalytic tradition provide the account I was looking for.

The account I offer in the first two volumes is a detached, third-person theory that, while necessary for any philosophical understanding of life, does not offer a thick, first-person description (in Clifford Geertz's sense). The third and last volume, *Life, lived*, looks in this direction, first from an individual, self-centered perspective, and then from a more social-political standpoint.

Notes

1. The implicit reference of my ascription of a search for a good life (or *eudaimonia*, according to traditional terminology) to microbial beings is the "biogenic approach to *basal cognition*" that has been developed since the early 2000s. Pamela Lyon, one of its best-known advocates, defines *basal cognition* as "the complex of sensory and other information-processing mechanisms an organism has for becoming familiar, valuing, and interacting with features of its environment in order to meet existential needs, the most basic of which are survival/persistence, growth/thriving, and reproduction" (2022, 610-11). Lyon (2006) developed the biogenic approach to cognition on the basis of theoretical work by the early 20th century biologist Jakob von Uexküll, and later expanded by researchers such as Konrad Lorenz, James Gibson, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (authors I will discuss later in chapter 1). Lyon successfully integrated these earlier theoretical approaches with the 1960s technical investigations on the behavior of *E. coli* and other bacterium species by Julius Adler (1966), Howard Berg (1972) and Daniel Koshland Jr.

(1977). See the special thematic issues on basal cognition of the *Philosophical Transactions in Biology of the Royal Society* (Lyon et al., 2021).

It may seem odd to marshal evidence from the biological cognition field in support of the view of life centered around passions and affects that I have been introducing and will defend in detail in this book. One may take “cognition” as a near synonym of “thought,” or perhaps even of “rational, rule-based behavior.” “Cognition” would thus be the antagonist to the passions, affects, and emotions that are often taken to be an obstacle to it, as they cloud dispassionate thinking and preclude clear assessments of means and ends. It would be quite peculiar to claim that bacteria’s newly discovered capacity for a creative, non-instinct-based cognition (in other words, their capacity to think) supports the passion-based (or drive-based) *anti-cognitive* approach that will be the subject of extensive discussions in later chapters.

However, the contradiction is only apparent, for it comes down to a terminological issue motivated by the location of the authors in their respective fields. It is true that the overall goal of the biogenic approach to basal cognition is to extend psychology’s “cognitive revolution” downward on the biological complexity scale by embracing an evolutionary perspective. But the biogenic approach needs to stress the *cognitive* aspect as the basis of behavior in order to counter the psychological approach that reduced all forms of behavior to mechanical, fixed, and hard-coded stimulus/responses pairs. In other words, the advocacy of biological “cognition” stands for an “anti-behaviorist,” sophisticated, non-mechanical (non-“linear summations of stimuli,” as they put it) approach to biological behavior. The “cognitivism” that Lyon and colleagues promote is a tool deployed against behaviorism. In brief, it is very different from the cognitivism that the embedded/embodied cognition approach historically best exemplified by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela fought against. This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that Lyon (2022) lists Maturana, whose work is one of the main references of the anti-cognitivist movement, among the immediate forefathers of the basal cognition field.

2. On the sophistication of *Paramecium*’s behavior, see the comprehensive collection edited by Hans-Dieter Görtz (1988), and especially Houten and Preston’s discussion of the organism’s strategic use of rotational and speed changes to track its food supply via chemotaxis on its prey’s dejections, a behavior made even more sophisticated by its necessary coordination with simultaneously occurring thermotaxis and obstacle avoidance (Machemer, 1988). The earlier monograph by Wichterman (1986) provides an historically rich overall survey of the field.

3. Although Lyon does not stress it, the “basic cognition toolkit” that she ascribes to every living being from bacteria to humans includes first order tools such as *sensing*

and perception (i.e., “The capacity to sense and recognize (re-cognize) existentially salient features of the surrounding milieu”) and *valence* (i.e. “The capacity of an organism to assign a value to the summary of information about its surroundings at a given moment, relative to its own current state”), alongside some obviously second-order capacities such as *learning* (“The capacity to adapt behavior according to past experience, enabling a faster response time”), *anticipation* (“The capacity to predict what is likely to happen next based on an early stimulus”), and *signal integration* (“The capacity to combine information from multiple sources, because all organisms appear to sense more than one thing, and some bacterial species are equipped to sense dozens of different states of affairs”) (Lyon, 2015; Lyon *et al.*, 2021). It is this distinction that, to stress the point once again, turns “bacterial *eudaimonia*” from a seeming oxymoron into a meaningful and scientifically useful expression.

4. Plato, *Phaedo*: “In fact, Simmias, he said, those who practice philosophy in the right way are in training for dying and they fear death least of all men” (1997, 59 (67e)). Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Plato are from John Cooper’s Hackett edition of the complete works, even when only the traditional Stephanus pagination is provided.

5. “*Homo liber de nulla re minus, quam de morte cogitat, et ejus sapientia non mortis, sed vitae meditatio est*” (2010-2011, 1526).

6. “*Homo liber, hoc est, qui ex solo rationis dictamine vivit, mortis Metu non ducitur (per Prop. 63, huius); sed bonum directe cupit (per Coroll. ejusdem Prop.), hoc est (per Prop 24, huius), agere, vivere, suum esse conservare ex fundamento proprium utile quaerendi; atque adeo nihil minus, quam de morte cogitat, sed ejus sapientia vitae est meditatio. Q. E. D.*” (2010-2011, 1528).

7. As the only axiom of part IV recites, “There is in Nature no individual thing that is not surpassed in strength and power by some other thing. Whatsoever thing there is, there is another more powerful by which the said thing can be destroyed” (2002, 323). (“AXIOMA Nulla res singularis in rerum natura datur, qua potentior, & fortior non detur alia. Sed quacunq; data datur alia potentior, a qua illa data potest destrui” (2010-2011, 1438)). This is the only self-evident fact Spinoza requires for his theory.

8. The so-called *uti/frui* distinction—itself deeply in debt to the Platonic discussion of perishable *vs.* imperishable goods—has generated numerous controversies, because Augustine (and Peter Lombard in his wake) holds that only God (or rather the Trinity) can be a proper object of enjoyment, and therefore only God can be loved, while all other beings, including our fellow human beings, can only be used (*De doct. Christ.* I,4-5,22; *Sent.* 1,1-3). This seems to entail that true love must never be directed to another person, since they may only have value as they get us closer

to God and never in themselves (*Cum autem homine in deo frueris, deo potius quam homine frueris*). Pace Kant, it seems Augustine values human beings only as means and never as ends (as Hannah Arendt and Anders Nygren argued, among others). Indeed, following the Kantian imperative would be the root of every human perversion because it would command us to enjoy what should only be used, as Augustine says in *div. Quaest.*, 30 (2010, 56), and also *Civ. Dei*, XV, 7: “For the good make use of this world in order to enjoy God; but the evil, by contrast, wish to make use of God in order to enjoy this world (*Boni quippe ad hoc utuntur mundo, ut fruuntur Deo; mali autem contra ut fruuntur mundo uti volunt Deo*)” (1998, 644). It follows that earthly love of another person would be instrumental to a mystical ascension into God, a truly Bonaventurian *itinerarium mentis in Deum* that forgoes the body and its sensual pleasures and is actively sought for yet never fully realized in the earthly domain. It may ultimately be achieved only in God’s direct presence.

9. Judah ben Isaac Abravanel was the son of Isaac Abravanel, the heir to a family that had distinguished itself in Iberian politics since the 14th century. His father had become a treasurer of the Kingdom of Portugal and, later, a finance minister of the kingdom of Castile. Isaac Abravanel was also a scholar and the author of several commentaries on biblical texts that showed his familiarity with the medieval Aristotelianism advocated by Maimonides as well as with the thought of Averroes and the other thinkers in the Arab and Judaic tradition. After Ferdinand of Aragon expelled all the Jews from the unified kingdoms of Aragon and Castile and León in 1492, Isaac had to leave the Iberian peninsula and fled to Naples, as Spinoza’s family would have to do a few decades later when they left Portugal for Amsterdam. Isaac’s son Judah, who was already a respected physician in the service of Ferdinand and Isabella, continued in his profession on the Italian peninsula. The ever-changing political circumstances and the increasing hostility against Jews forced the Abravanel’s to change residence often. Judah is known to have lived and worked in Naples, Genoa, Venice, Ferrara and Pesaro (possibly), before returning to Naples, until he eventually made his way to Rome, where he died around 1530.

The Dialogues of Love were originally published in Italian as *I dialoghi dell’amore* in 1535, with *Leone Ebreo*—Judah Abravanel’s chosen pen name since his years in Spain—as their author. We don’t know if they were originally written in Italian, Hebrew, Latin, Spanish, or in some other Neo-Latin language, but we know that the book became a big hit in several European languages and made a profound impression on a culture that had just rediscovered Plato’s dialogues thanks to Marsilio Ficino’s Latin translations. The *Dialoghi* were reprinted at least 24 times in the 16th century and by 1660 had been translated into French, Latin, Spanish and Hebrew.

10. In book 1, for instance, Abravanel’s *Dialogues’* protagonist, Filone, opposes purely sensual and therefore imperfect love generated by a physical attraction that

will necessarily cease once it has been satisfied to a higher and perfect form of love: “But for the other kind of love, love generates desire of the beloved, instead of being generated by desire or appetite. On the contrary, when we first love perfectly, the strength of that love makes us desire spiritual and bodily union with the beloved. Thus, the first kind of love is the offspring of desire, while the second is the true father and true engine of desire. When this love fulfills its desire, it does not cease, even though the desire and appetite end. In fact, the removal of an effect does not provoke the removal of its cause (*Ma l'altro amore è quello che di esso è generato il desiderio de la persona amata, e non del desiderio o appetito; anzi, amando prima perfettamente, la forza de l'amore fa desiderare l'unione spirituale e corporale con la persona amata: sì che, come il primo amore è figliuolo del desiderio, così questo gli è padre e vero generatore. E questo amore quando ottiene quello che desidera, l'amore non cessa, se ben cessa l'appetito e desiderio; perché, levato l'effetto, non per quello si leva la causa*)” (2009; 2008, 65).

11. As Bonaventure's main mystical treatise proclaims from its title—*Itinerarium mentis in Deo*—meditation and contemplation are techniques the self deploys to travel away from this world toward the ultimate communion with the transcendent entity. The itinerary begins with marveling (*thaumazein*) at the splendors of the created world and necessarily leads to give praise to God before ending in a conversion to first principles: “Any person who is not illumined by such great splendors in created things is blind. Anyone who is not awakened by such great outcries is deaf. Anyone who is not led from such effects to give praise to God is mute. Anyone who does not turn to the First Principle as a result of such signs is a fool (*Qui igitur tantis rerum creaturarum splendoribus non illustratur caecus est; qui tantis clamoribus non evigilat surdus est; qui ex omnibus his effectibus Deum non laudat mutus est; qui ex tantis indiciiis primum principium non advertit stultus est*)” (Bonaventura, 2002, I, 15).

Augustine speaks of man's “deification” in the treatises on the first of John's Epistles, a work extensively commented upon by Hannah Arendt (1988): “Each person is as his love. Do you love the earth? You will be earth. Do you love God? What shall I say? Listen to Scripture, for I dare not say this on my own: *You are Gods and sons and daughters of the most high, all of you.* If you want to be Gods and children of the most high, do not love the world and what lies in the world. There is no divine charity in those who love the world, because everything in the world is carnal desire, lust of the eyes, and worldly ambition, which do not come from the father but from the world: that is, from the human desire of the world. As the world perishes so do its desires, but those who do God's will persist in eternity, as God lasts eternally (*quia talis est quisque, qualis eius dilectio est. Terram diligis? Terra eris. Deum diligis? Quid dicam? Deus eris? Non audeo dicere ex me, Scripturas audiamus: Ego dixi: dii estis, et filii altissimi omnes (Psal., LXXXI, 6). Si ergo vultis esse dii et filii Altissimi, nolite diligere mundum, nec*

ea quæ sunt in mundo. Si quis dilexerit mundum, non est charitas Patris in illo. Quia omnia quæ sunt in mundo, desiderium carnis est, et desiderium oculorum, et ambitio sæculi, quæ non est ex Patre, sed ex mundo: *id est, ab hominibus dilectoribus mundi. Et mundus transit, et desideria ejus: qui autem facit voluntatem Dei, manet in æternum, sicut et Deus manet in æternum*)” (1864, II, 14, 1997).

12. As Spinoza puts it, “the acquisition of money, sensual pleasure, and esteem are only obstacles so long as they are sought for their own sakes, and not as means to other things. But if they are sought as means, then they will have a limit, and will not be obstacles at all. On the contrary, they will be of great use in attaining the end on account of which they are sought, as we shall show in its place (*vidi nummorum acquisitionem, aut libidinem, et gloriam tamdiu obesse, quamdiu propter se, et non tamquam media at alia quaeruntur; si vero tamquam media quaeruntur, modus tunc habebunt, et minime oberunt; sed contra ad finem, propter quem quaeruntur, multum conducent, ut suo loco ostendemus*)” (1985, 1, 10 (II, 8, §11)).

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Index

A

- Aarseth, Espen, 115
abiogenesis, 308
Abravanel, Judah Leon, xv, xxiii, xxiv
absolute knowing, 4, 48, 57, 83-84
Abyss (*Abgrund*), 134-136, 158
action and passion, 216, 225, 275-276, 288-300
 as actual *vs.* potential property, 294
active destruction, 153
activity, 81-106
 as autonomy, 185, 216, 222, 224, 247, 282, 285
Adler, Julius, xxi
Adorno, Theodore W., 83
Aeschylus, 253, 305
Agamben, Giorgio, 9-10, 17-18, 31-32, 252-253
American Psychiatric Association, 260, 271-272
Ammonius, 280, 282-283, 305
Ananias, 70
annihilation, 15, 29, 142, 151
 of philosophy, 233-237
antagonism, 90, 101, 167
anthropology, 115, 119-120, 125, 132-133
 Girardian, 206, 223
anxiety, 15, 22, 25, 30
Aquinas, St. Thomas, 133, 158
Arendt, Hannah, xxiii, xxiv, 242
Aristotle, xiii, 7, 69, 134, 144, 158, 180, 229, 252, 273-303
alteration (*vs.* generation/corruption), 258, 282, 288-291, 305-306
Categories
 being in a position, 258
 doing and suffering (*poiein/paskhein*), viii, 7, 15, 48, 70, 164, 190, 215, 253, 255-257, 259-260, 266, 270, 273-303
corruption and passing away, 108, 274, 277, 288-291, 294, 297-299, 306
cosmology, 174, 301
dunamis, 293, 295-296
energeia, 279, 293
generation and coming to be, 288-290, 306
prime matter (*matter qua matter*), 290-291, 295, 297, 307
 as “dormitive virtue”, 295
sinolon (*informed matter*), 292
theory of change, 288
Artificial Intelligence (AI), 33, 234-236, 242, 270
Artificial Life (Alife), 234-235
Ashby, W. Ross, xx, 271
Atomists, 289, 294-295, 307-308
Aufhebung, 48, 71, 75, 312
Augustine, xiv, xxiii, xxiv
Aumann, Robert, 157
authenticity, xvii, xix, 40, 176, 229, 231, 277, 304
 (*inauthenticity*), 30

INDEX

Axelos, Kostas, 116, 156, 188
Aycock, Alan, 33

B

Bacon, Francis, xviii
Bakhtin, Mikhail, 115
Barbut, Marc, 158
Barwise, Jon, 58
Bataille, Georges, 156, 160
Bateson, Gregory, 115, 120, 157
Baudrillard, Jean, 116, 156, 249, 253
Beckett, Samuel, 117
behaviorism, xxi
Berg, Howard C., xxi
Bertoni, Roberto, 32
Binmore, Kenneth, 118
biology, 6, 38, 61, 64, 69-70, 106,
162, 205, 225-226, 258, 308
Blanc, Jan, 309-310, 314, 316, 323
Blanchot, Maurice, 252-253, 259,
270
Blankert, Albert, 319, 321
Bloch, Marc, 57
Blumenbach, Johann Friedrich, 269
Boden, Margaret, 234-235
body, xi, xxiii, 15, 22, 38, 177, 201,
203, 248, 257, 278, 280, 283-284,
292
Boethius, 278
Bonaventura, xxiii, xxiv
Böttinger, Karl, 79
Bowie, Andrew, 159
breakthrough (*Durchbruch*), 319-
322
Brooks, Rodney, 237
Brown, Douglas A., 80
Brown, Robert F., 56-57
Bruzina, Ronald, 159
Byron, George Gordon (Lord), 94

C

Caillois, Roger, 33, 115, 126-133,
140-141, 145, 150, 158, 160, 162
Cairns, Dorion, 159
Calvino, Italo, 9-31, 117, 157
Cambridge affair, 242
Candrakirti, 10, 18, 32
Canto, Monique, 242
Caravaggio, 320
care for death, 53, 58
Carnap, Rudolf, 60, 90
catastrophe theory, 209, 223
categories of being, 116, 127, 129,
161, 181, 248, 273-307
cause, 23, 139, 286
 final, 139, 143
chance, 47, 100, 113, 127, 129-131,
133, 140-141, 152, 158, 184, 191,
201, 205, 213-214, 222, 225, 286
chemotaxis, xxi
chess, 18-21, 23-27, 29, 32-33, 89-
92, 95-96, 133, 155-156, 158,
163, 166, 169, 174-176, 178, 183,
196, 205, 207, 209, 212, 223
child, 89-91, 121-124, 132, 138-139,
141-143, 150-152, 154, 156, 159,
167, 214
Chomsky, Noam, 270
Christianity, xvii, 66, 108, 248
Churchland, Patricia, 38, 55, 61
Clark, Andy, 270-271
Cleinianism (as minimal
 Platonism), 229, 231-232
Cleinias, 227-233, 235, 239
clitoral activity, 249
cognition, xxi, xxii, 314
 basal, xx, xxi
cognitive function, xii, xvii
cognitive science, 61, 226
cognitivism, xxi

Cohen, David, 122
 Cohen, Hermann, xix
 Colli, Giorgio, 157
 Collins, Harry, 33
 combinatorics, 3, 18, 20-21, 23-29,
 32, 176, 178, 202
 communion, total, 29-30, 88
 consciousness, xix, 30, 66-68, 82, 96,
 107, 128, 166, 190, 201, 203, 237-
 238, 250, 313
 contingency, 50, 319
 as logical category, xx, 3, 7, 157,
 300, 303, 322
 conversion, xvi, xxiv, 154
 Cornford, Frederik, 242
 Creel, Richard E., 260
 Creon, 99
 Crouter, Richard, 80
 cybernetics, 202
 Cynics, 62, 241

D

dance, viii, 21, 113, 145
 de Hooch, Pieter, 309
 death drive, 122-123
 deconstruction, 212
 defense mechanism, 124
 Deleuze, Gilles, 5, 116-117, 152-
 154, 156, 190, 199, 213, 221-222
 democracy/tyranny, 248
 Dennett, Daniel C., 235-236
 Derrida, Jacques, 5, 9, 34, 58, 106,
 109, 111, 113, 116-117, 119, 144,
 155, 197-199, 210-215, 222, 238,
 248-249, 253, 259
 Descartes, René, xviii, 41, 145, 192-
 194, 220-221, 252
 Dextreit, Jacques, 155
 dialectics, 188, 206, 223, 227
 (anti-dialectics), 9, 111-112

master/slave, 86, 248
 Dilthey, Wilhelm, 57
 DNA, x, 201-202
 genome, 222
 Dr. Seuss, 232
 Dretske, Fred, 38, 55
 Dreyfus, Hubert, 234
 drive, xxi, 134, 229, 302
 Duflo, Colas, 115
 Duncan, Dennis, 32
 Dutch painting, 309, 312, 321
corps de garde genre, 309, 314
 spinozism of, 319
 Dutch Republic, 311, 313
 bourgeois revolution, 312-313
 dynamics, 30, 178, 199, 237, 273

E

ecstasy, 21-22, 26, 29-30, 141, 151,
 160, 200
 ego homuncio, 49-50, 58
 Elden, Stuart, 159
 embeddedness, vii
 end, 44, 148, 150
 Engel, Norbert, 155
 entropy, vii
 entropic degradation, viii
 environment, vii, viii, ix, x, xx, 9-10,
 121, 200, 256, 261, 263-264, 266,
 271, 311
 Epicureanism, 75
 equilibrium, viii, ix, x, xv, 122, 202,
 212
 dynamic, ix
 Esposito, Roberto, 37, 39-40
 Etchemendy, John, 58
 ethics, xviii, xix, 60-62, 155, 233
 European/Asian, 248
 evolution (in biology), viii, 50, 292
 externalization, 84-85

INDEX

F

Ferraro, Bruno, 32
 Ferry, Luc, 39
 Feuerbach, Ludwig, 102, 109
 Fichte, Johann Gottlieb, 79-80
 Ficino, Marsilio, xxiv
 finitude, xi, 50, 52, 74
 Fink, Eugen, 5, 115, 117, 145-151, 156, 159-160
 Forni, Guglielmo, 243
 Förster, Eckart, 56, 61, 80, 108
 Foucault, Michel, 58, 219, 227, 230-232, 239, 241
 fracture, of representation, 11-13, 17, 28-32
 Franchi, Stefano, 33, 157, 270
 freedom, xii, 5, 32, 56, 94, 104, 119, 123, 130-131, 141, 162, 165, 168, 184, 187, 214, 248, 312-313
 of movement, 33, 88, 130, 134, 142-143, 148
 freedom/slavery, 248
 Freeman, Kathleen, 156
 Freud, Sigmund, 122-124, 176, 220-221

G

Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 33, 115, 117, 140, 143-144, 149, 156, 159-160, 253, 259, 270, 305
 game, xiv, 14, 25-26, 43, 115, 127, 162-163, 173, 229-230, 291
 “matching pennies”, 127, 131, 163-164
 game theory, 115, 118-119, 157, 162, 165, 169, 176, 217
 extensive form, 164, 217
 normalized form, 164, 217
 pieces, 20, 24-25, 95-96, 138, 178, 184, 190, 198, 208-209, 214

rules, 5, 19-20, 23, 33, 88-89, 91-92, 94-95, 117, 120-121, 124-125, 127, 129, 137, 139-140, 142, 149, 151, 153-154, 163-166, 169, 175-176, 184, 190, 198-199, 205, 209, 213, 215, 218
 seriousness of, 90, 92, 97-98, 153
 tic-tac-toe, 207-208
 Garniron, Pierre, 56, 80, 107
 Geertz, Clifford, xx, 120
 Gelderblom, Oscar, 312
 geometry, 63-64, 223, 228
Geschick (of being), 136-139, 158
 Gibson, James, xxi
 Gildea, Niall, 242
gloire, 22, 160
 God, xvii, xxiii, xxiv, 62, 67, 69, 85-88, 90, 95, 97-100, 104, 112, 132, 141, 157, 252, 260, 314
 as immovable motor (in Aristotle), 299
 love of, 95
 good life (*eudaimonia*), ix, x, xii, xiii, xv, xvi, xviii, xix, xx, xxii, 132, 208, 316
 Görtz, Hans-Dieter, xxi
 Gould, Stephen Jay, 126, 269
 Gowing, Lawrence, 309, 323
 grace, 22
 Graves, Joseph L., 269
 ground (foundation), xi, 19, 27-28, 30, 61-62, 65, 68, 75, 123, 134-135, 139, 155, 159, 185, 200, 203, 226, 231, 238-239
 growth (as change in Aristotle), xx, 57, 288-291, 294
 Grussi, Olivier, 158
 Guattari, Félix, 116, 156, 199, 221
 Güzeldere, Güven, 270

H

Habermas, Jürgen, 4, 38-40, 55, 102-103
 Hadot, Pierre, 58
 Hannaford, Ivan, 269
 Harris, Paul L., 122
 Hawking, Stephen, 63-65
 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 4-6, 37-109, 111-114, 131, 134, 140, 156, 159, 161, 181-182, 184, 188-190, 201, 203-204, 206, 216, 220, 223, 226, 233, 242, 247-248, 301-302, 312-314, 322-323
 completion of the work of the
 negative, 85, 97-98, 100-103, 312
 master/slave dialectic, 86, 248
 "Sunday of life", 26, 312
 Heidegger, Martin, xix, 5, 54, 57, 60, 90, 106, 109, 112-113, 115, 117, 134-140, 143, 145-147, 150, 156, 158-160, 200, 222, 234, 237, 250-253, 259, 269-271, 320
 being-at-hand, 146
 being-of-*Dasein*, 146
 being-present, 146
 Henrich, Dieter, 56
 Henriot, Jacques, 115, 157
 Heraclitus, 11, 32, 115, 132, 136, 138-139, 141, 150, 152, 156, 159
 hermeneutics, 179, 181-182, 185, 187, 196-197
 Hesse, Hermann, 118
 heuristics, xvi, 20, 204, 269
 history, 4-6, 13, 18-19, 25, 29, 39-40, 42-48, 50-59, 62-66, 70-76, 78, 80, 85, 93, 95, 99, 103-104, 106, 109, 111-113, 136, 149, 180, 201-203, 213, 220, 222, 225, 233-235, 237-238, 242, 269, 272-273, 302,

304, 313-315, 322

end of, 26, 43, 161, 313

Hopwood, Christopher J., 272

Houten, Judit van, xxi

Huizinga, Johan H., 91, 93, 108,

115, 119, 156-157, 310, 319, 323

human/artificial, 248

humanism, 39, 111, 213

(post-humanism), 111-112

Husserl, Edmund, xviii, 41, 57, 145,

211, 238-239, 241-243, 250

Hyppolite, Jean, 109

I

Iamblichus, 305-306

indeterminacy principle, 9

infinity, 25, 74, 76, 78-79, 144, 149

interiority, 252

internalization, 84

intuition, immediate, 82

Irigaray, Luce, 249, 253

irrepresentability, 9-11, 17

Iser, Wolfgang, 155, 243

J

Jaeschke, Walter, 56, 80, 107

jeu, 34, 89, 109, 111-115, 126, 142,

144, 155-158, 217

jeux, 111-119, 126, 129, 155, 217

Jonker, Joost, 312

Jose, Anita, 272

K

Kafka, Franz.; 15, 31

Kahn, Charles H., 156-157

Kant, Immanuel, xviii, xxiii, 17, 41-

43, 48-50, 55, 60, 80, 108, 115-

116, 118, 134, 144, 155, 157, 181-

182, 184, 186-188, 203, 210, 224,

235, 247, 250, 253, 269, 275-276,

INDEX

- 303-304
Katz, Jerrold, 270
Kierkegaard, Søren, 54, 60, 106, 237
Kojève, Alexandre, 43, 61, 68, 79,
156, 313
Koshland, Daniel E., xxi
Koyré, Alexandre, xviii, xix
Krell, David Farrell, 159
- L**
- laceration, 11, 13, 32
lack, x, xii, 54, 68-69, 77, 89, 92, 126,
129, 143-144, 150, 154, 165, 189,
217, 230, 248, 250, 275
laetitia, xiii-xix
Lane, Christopher, 272
Langland, William, 108
“last man”, 152-155, 160-161, 213
learning, 286-287
 as example of suffering, xxii, 281,
 285
 learning through suffering (*pathei
 mathos*), 253, 305
Leibniz, Gottfried W., xviii, 133, 158
Levinas, Emmanuel, 61, 252-253
Lévi-Strauss, Claude, xxviii, 5-6, 32,
161-222, 247
libido, xiv
life, 140
 affirmation, 141
 cosmic, 158, 202
Lindley, David, 79
Literature, 115, 155, 239, 264
 as mimesis, 240
 as philosophy’s projection, 126,
 238, 240-241
 as production (*poiesis*), 240-241,
 243
Locke, John, xviii
logic, xviii, xix, 76, 182, 188, 273
Lombard, Peter, xiv, xxiii
Longhi, Roberto, 320, 324
Lorenz, Konrad, xxi
love, xv, xxiii, xxiv, 24, 86-88, 90-91,
100, 107, 141, 145, 148-149, 323
 God’s, 85-86
ludic phenomena, 21, 32-33, 95-96,
115-116, 118, 120, 124, 126-134,
137, 139-140, 154, 162, 190, 314
lust (as essential dimension of
 passivity), xxiv, 42, 261, 301-302,
319, 321-322
Lyon, Pamela, xx, xxi, xxii
Lyotard, Jean-François, 116, 156,
220, 222
- M**
- Machemer, Hans, xxii
male/female, 248
“man who wants to perish”, 152-
155, 160-161, 213
Marchesini, Manuela, 324
mathematics, 38, 45, 63, 133, 218,
220, 230
matter (in Aristotle), 258, 285-286,
290-296, 298-300, 306-307
Maturana, Humberto, xxi
McGinn, Colin, 38, 40
meaning intention, 179
meaninglessness, 27, 100, 117, 149,
157
mediation, xiii, 76, 83, 85, 119, 180-
181, 183, 188-189, 191, 249
Melandri, Enzo, 243
methodology, xvi, 105, 219, 222
Michelet, Karl-Ludwig, 56-57, 107-
108
Migne, Jacques-Paul, 262
Miller, A. V., 56
Miller, David L., 116, 126, 155, 157

Mirowski, Philip, 157, 217
 modesty, 133, 272, 317
 Morante, Elsa, 107
 Morey, Leslie C., 260, 272
 Morgenstern, Oskar, 115, 118, 125,
 162-164, 166, 212, 217
 Moss, Lawrence, 58
 movement, xxi, 11, 19, 21, 23, 25,
 33, 51, 74-75, 79, 84, 88, 94-95,
 98-100, 113-114, 122, 131, 137-
 138, 142-144, 147, 159, 173, 184,
 189, 191, 205, 251, 284-285, 287-
 289, 291-292, 297-300, 305-307,
 313
 endless, 142-144
 movement/change, 289
 as *kinesis*, 270, 306
 as *metabolé*, 288-290, 307
 becoming, 98-99, 141-142, 152,
 213, 291-292, 296, 305-307,
 314

N

Nagarjuna, 10, 32
 Natorp, Paul, xix
 necessity, as logical category, x, xvii,
 9, 15, 27, 46, 50, 66, 70, 73, 76,
 103, 129, 131, 174, 188, 213, 222,
 242, 282, 296, 300
 Newtonian, 292
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 5, 9-10, 32, 54,
 60, 106, 112, 115, 117, 134, 140-
 143, 145, 147-154, 156, 159-160,
 190, 237, 321, 323-324
 the "great noon" (*große Mittag*),
 321-322
 nihilism, 10, 141, 151-153, 316, 322
 nothingness, 9, 17-19, 23, 32, 202-
 203
 Nygren, Anders, xxiii

O

objective experience, 124
 objectivity, 14, 66-67, 183, 195-196
 ontology, 109, 145, 147, 150, 203,
 252, 274
 onto-theology, 150
 Oulipo, 117, 157
 Overbeck, Franz, 321

P

Palomar, Mr., 3, 9-32, 323
 pan-logicism, 4, 101
 pan-tragicism, 4, 101-103
 paradox, liar's (Epimenides), 51,
 157
 Paramecium, xi, xxi
partie, 34, 163-164, 166, 176, 178,
 208, 217
 Pascal, Blaise, 133, 158
paskhein, 7, 253, 274-305
 passion, xii, xv, xx, xxi, 3, 6-7, 133,
 157-158, 217, 225, 241, 253, 255,
 260, 270, 275, 285-286, 290, 292-
 294, 304, 306, 312, 316-317
 passivity, xii, xiii, xx, 3, 5-7, 15, 26,
 32, 55, 91, 104, 130, 153, 158,
 203, 216, 241, 247-249, 251-271,
 273-281, 283-290, 292-297, 299-
 303, 305-306, 308, 316, 319, 321-
 322
 active/passive distinction, 216,
 249
 and contingency, 302
 as a relation
 being cooled, 277-278
 being heated, 277-278, 283
 cooling, 277-278, 283
 heating, 277-278, 283
 as being acted upon, 215-216,
 275, 280

INDEX

- as being affected, 253, 256, 259-260, 273-274, 276-278, 280-284, 286-288, 294, 296-297, 305-306, 308
- as being carried away, 92, 264, 266-267
- as capacity to suffer, 253, 260, 273-275, 277-282, 284-287, 305-306
- as derivative concept
 - actio*, 275-276, 304
 - passio*, 275-276, 304
- as heteronomy, 224, 247, 316
- as impassivity or impassibility (as *apatheia*), 259-261, 265-267
- as impropriety, 41, 124, 264-265, 267
- as inactivity, 255, 300-302
- as letting a transfer channel open (of sensors), 256-257, 261, 263, 266
- as letting be (*Geschehenlassen*), 250-252
- as life of contemplation (*bios theoretikos*), 251
- as potentiality, 252, 270, 296-297, 302
- as prejudice, 247-248, 253
- as promiscuity, 261-267, 300-301
- as receptivity, 22, 248, 250-252, 256-258, 263-264, 266-267, 270, 273, 291-294, 299, 302, 319
- as releasement (*Gelassenheit*), 251
- as requiring a disposition to suffer, 277, 283-284, 296
- as resistance (passive-aggressive), 260-261, 265-267, 271-272
- as suffering
 - pain as an indicator of, 151, 270, 277, 279, 285
 - deflationary (relational) view of, 280, 284, 286, 296-298, 305
 - derivative character of, 275, 287
 - essential opening of, 302
 - fundamental, 252, 298-299, 301-302
 - in passive synthesis, 250
 - in the "accusative" (as relative to position), 255, 257, 266, 271, 319
 - learning through suffering (*pathei mathos*), 253, 305
 - minimal (grammatical conception), 254-255, 267-268
 - of lust, 7
 - of prime matter (in Aristotle), 299
 - ontological concept of, 296
 - passivitas luxuria*, 261, 266-267, 301-302
 - radical, 248, 252
- Passmore, John, 56
- perception, xvii, xviii, xxii, 67, 75, 94, 109, 128, 201-202, 248, 250, 270
- perception/sensation, 248
- Perec, Georges, 22
- perfection, 28, 73, 78, 83-84, 145, 260, 281, 299, 305
- Petitot, Jean, 5, 204-210, 215, 222-223
- phallic/vaginal, 248
- Philoponus, 294, 300, 305, 307-308
- philosophy
 - (anti-philosophy), 237
 - (non-philosophy), 54, 106, 116, 237
 - as consolatory discipline, 99, 103, 105
 - as edification, 85, 97

- as play, 86-87, 95, 108
 as poetic invention (*Dichtung*),
 238, 241
 as rigorous science, 238
 as science, 47, 239-240
 as wisdom or *sagesse*, 68, 242
 Continental, 37, 238, 312
 dilemma of, 15, 46, 55, 103, 116,
 187
 end of, xx, 3, 5, 37-38, 40-41, 43-
 44, 52-54, 72, 77-78, 88-89,
 94-95, 102, 104, 111-112, 114,
 154, 161, 226, 301, 313
 end of (as completion or
 Vollendung), 4-5, 42, 47, 55,
 58, 62, 73, 83, 95, 99, 112-113,
 143, 208, 215-216, 313, 315,
 322
 end of (as *exitus*), 47, 316
 end of (as *telos*), 5, 21, 40-41, 48,
 53, 61, 70-71, 77-78, 106-107,
 154, 238, 299
 end of (as *terminus*), 40-41, 48,
 53, 55, 58, 63, 78, 104, 106,
 113, 154, 161, 201, 216, 313,
 315
 goal, xi, xiii, xiv, xvi, xvii, 9, 11-12,
 18, 21, 29, 31, 40-42, 46-48,
 55, 60-61, 63-64, 68-70, 72-73,
 75, 77-78, 104, 106, 112, 143-
 144, 181, 187-188, 202, 205,
 216, 220, 226, 234, 239, 241,
 247, 284, 288, 300, 314, 316
 in a disciplinary role, 103, 230,
 242
 intrinsic contradiction, 48, 71, 75
 phonology, 186
 physics, 9, 39, 45, 59, 63, 79, 106,
 226, 288, 292, 306
 Piaget, Jean, 115, 121-125, 230, 242
 Piero della Francesca, 321
 Pirandello, Luigi, 117
 Plato, xiii, xiv, xviii, xxii, xxiii, 6, 32,
 52, 57-58, 60-62, 68, 119, 132,
 148, 155, 225-241, 253, 274, 283,
 294, 298, 308
 Thrasymachus, 231, 242
 Platonism, 229
 Plautus, 315
 play, xx, 3-4, 6, 9, 11, 13, 19, 21-25,
 27, 30-31, 33-34, 83-85, 87-109,
 111-160, 162, 165-166, 176, 183-
 184, 190, 192, 207, 212-213, 215-
 217, 225, 247, 268, 313-314, 316
 affirmation of, 140, 152-154, 213-
 214
 arbitrariness (of rules), 136, 139-
 140, 214-215
 as *agon*, 4, 23, 86, 95, 113, 128-
 129, 131, 151, 184
 as *alea*, 127-131, 140, 145, 184
 as creation, 142
 as dissemination, 144, 212
 as ecstasy, 149
 as gambling, 22, 127, 158
 as *ilinx*, 21, 33, 127-131, 133,
 140-141, 145, 158, 184
 as irreality (*Unwirklichkeit*), 148
 as mimicry, 127-128, 131, 150-
 151, 184
 as *paidia*, 127, 129-130, 132, 140,
 155, 184
 as *Spiel*, 3, 5-6, 33, 87-97, 100,
 102-104, 107, 112-114, 119,
 123, 130, 135-136, 138-140,
 142, 145, 147, 150-151, 154,
 156, 159, 161, 215-216, 225,
 247, 313, 316
 Godly, 119
 groundlessness of, 148-149
 mechanical (*Spielraum*), 137,
 140, 156

INDEX

- of the world, 145, 150
playfulness of, 92, 97-98
rapture, 21-22, 141
sacred, 148, 160
self-containment of, 134
self-enclosure of, 112, 140, 144,
148, 150
self-forgetfulness of, 142
spatio-temporal leeway (*Zeit-
Spielraum*), 136-138, 140, 156
player, 21, 23, 26-27, 33, 90, 92, 95-
97, 117, 125, 127, 130-131, 140-
142, 144, 147-148, 150-153, 163-
165, 169, 184, 205, 207, 213, 314
submission to rules, 152-153
playing drive (*Spieltrieb*), 117
plaything (*Spielzeug*), 132, 148-151
pleasure principle, 122
Plotinus, 283-286, 293, 303, 305-
306
poiein, 7, 274-280, 287-288, 290,
296, 303, 305
Politics, 231, 242
agonal, 231, 242
Porphyry, 288, 303-304
Positivism, 69
(neo-Positivism), xix
Postal, P. M., 270
postmodernism, 3, 44, 156
predicables, 275
presence, xxiii, 5, 15, 18, 28, 31, 66-
67, 72, 104, 111, 113, 119, 123-
124, 167, 194, 213, 215-216, 248,
271, 309, 315, 321
Preston, Robin R., xxi
Propp, Vladimir, 163, 188, 219
psychoanalysis, xx, 123-124, 220
psychology, xxi, 6, 38, 70, 99, 105,
115, 121, 123, 125, 139, 201, 225,
234-236, 252, 271, 283
psychosis, 221
purposelessness, 129, 131, 134, 140,
143, 148-150
- ## Q
- Quine, W. V. O., 38, 69
- ## R
- rationality, 165, 201, 208, 234
reality principle, 122
reason/passion, 248
reflection, xv, xix, 14, 16, 27-28, 37,
43, 53, 69, 101, 106, 111, 126,
131, 134, 136, 138, 149, 193, 195,
201, 203, 229
reflexivity, xiii, 4, 6, 42-43, 105, 121,
181-182, 193, 214-215, 232-233,
247, 282
second-order, 43
religion, 59, 61-62, 65-70, 72-73, 80,
155, 202, 206, 223
Renaut, Alain, 39, 55
representation, 9-11, 17-18, 33, 108,
164, 173, 192, 217, 263
rhetoric, 125, 228
Ricoeur, Paul, 32, 55, 179-187, 190-
191, 193, 196-197, 200, 215, 219,
221
robotics, 236
Rorty, Richard, 243
Roskies, Adina L., 61
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 133, 144,
151, 155, 158, 248
rule-bound, 112, 117, 119, 121, 127
Russell, Bertrand, 58, 60, 121
- ## S
- Said, Edward, 248, 269
Sartre, Jean-Paul, 39, 200
Sasso, Robert, 160

- Scheler, Max, xix
- Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph, 61, 86, 96, 159, 220
- Schiller, Friedrich, 115, 117, 134, 157
- Schoorl, Sje, 271
- Schütz, Karl, 309, 323
- science, xv, xx, 6, 40, 45-47, 49-51, 55, 59-65, 67-73, 76-77, 83-84, 95, 102, 105, 164, 181, 184, 193, 196-197, 220, 225-231, 233-236, 238-243
 as *Wissenschaft*, 59-61, 79, 81, 84, 107, 226, 243, 251
 progress of, 64
- Searle, John, 38, 55
- self, affirmation of, 141
- self-annihilation (of player), 151-153
- self-negation (of player), 152
- Seneca, xiv
- sensation, 75, 250, 260
- signifying chain, 29
- Silesius, Angelus, 150
- Simplicius, 279, 284-286, 303, 305-306
- Skyrms, Brian, 118
- Smith, Peter K., 121-122
- Socrates, xviii, 52, 60, 228-229
- Sokal, Alan, 238, 242
- Sophists, 62, 230
- Sophocles, 99, 171, 219
- Spanneut, Michel, 260
- Spariosu, Mihai, 115, 119
- Spinoza, Baruch, vii-xx, 85, 96, 108, 200, 221, 319, 321, 324
- spirit, social mind (*esprit*), 161
- Stoicism, xiii, xiv, 75, 260
- Stravinsky, Igor, 145
- Structuralism, 34, 116, 156, 161-222, 322
- anthropology, 179, 182, 197
- as anaclastics, 191-194, 196-199, 215, 220-221
 in astronomy, 193, 220, 227
- as formalism, 182, 187-188, 196
- as Kantianism without a transcendental subject, 182, 186
- as schematizing formalism, 189-190
- bundle of relations, 170-171, 175, 204
- linguistics, 167, 191
- structure, as unconscious mediation, 179
- closure of the structural field, 198
- of kinship, 163-164, 166-168, 203, 210, 215
 atom of kinship, 177
 consanguinity, 167, 171
 descent, 167
 Tonga, 166, 168
 Trobriand islands, 167-168
- of myths, 99, 148, 165, 170-180, 188, 193-197, 199-201, 203-210, 218-222, 248
- canonical formula (*formule canonique*), 174, 176-177, 200, 203-204, 219
- double twist (*torsion surnuméraire*), 177
- gross constituent units, 170
- horizontal (as narration), 170, 173-174, 178
- Oedipus, 170-173, 176, 178, 218-219
- vertical (as chord), 11-13, 15, 17-18, 21, 23, 25, 27, 30-32, 71, 81, 83, 85, 88, 117-118, 159, 170, 221, 310, 319, 323
- agrammaticality, 211

INDEX

subject, 181

 human, 32, 178-179, 181, 187
 transcendental, 184, 186-187

subjective experience, 124

subjectlessness, 131, 134, 151, 153-154

substance, xix, 82, 85, 96, 98, 193, 198, 204, 220, 262, 274-276, 278-280, 282-286, 288-295, 299-300, 302-307

sufficient reason, principle of, 137

supreme good, xiv, xv, xvii

Sutton-Smith, Brian, 125-128

symbol, 17-18, 185-187, 311-312, 323

 syntactic manipulation of, 182

T

téchne, 298

teleology, 202, 301
 of the cosmos, 301

Tertullian, 7, 261-264, 266, 272, 277, 300-302, 319

theology, xv, 68, 146, 180

Thoré-Bürger, Théophile, 320

Todorov, Tzvetan, 319, 321, 323

transparency, 29, 88, 95, 97, 196, 228, 263

Trawny, Peter, 80

tristitia, xiv

Troubetzkoy, Nicolas, 166-167

truth, of philosophy, 44, 79, 83, 108, 323

U

Uexküll, Jakob von, xxi, 271

undecidability, 26

uti/frui distinction, xvii, xxii

V

vacuity, 9-10, 18, 27, 29

vaginal passivity, 249

valence, xxii

Van Baburen, Dirck, 318, 323

van der Woude, Ad, 311

Varela, Francisco, xxi

Vermeer, Jan, 309-310, 314-323

vita beata, xiv, xviii

void, 3, 9-10, 18, 22, 100-101, 108, 212

von Neumann, John, 115, 118, 125, 162-164, 166, 178, 212, 217

W

walking over, as example of non-passive suffering, 283-284, 293

Weinberg, Steven, 64, 79

Wetzler, Scott, 260, 272

Wheelock, Arthur K. Jr., 310-312, 314

Wichterman, Ralph, xxii

Williams, C. J. F., 295, 307-308

Williams, Robert, 102

Winnicott, Donald Woods, 115, 123-125

wisdom, xi, xii, xvi, xxii, 19, 38, 40, 43, 50, 60-62, 68, 227

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 156

work, 11, 46, 75, 91, 93-94, 97-99, 103, 109, 149, 180, 189, 206, 229-230, 232, 235, 240

Wright, Aidan G. C., 272

writing, as example of non-passive suffering, 283

Z

Ziff, Paul, 271

Žižek, Slavoj, 4, 101