Historiographical Reading and Theoretical Reworking. An Underestimated Distinction

1. Premise

The writer of this article has been working for years in the field of History of Ancient Philosophy; he applied his efforts on a very selected field, using the professional tools required by his discipline. He has, therefore, experienced the transformations that have happened over the last decades. Scholars of his generation used to undertake their labours under the delusion that one could not write one book on history of philosophy without having read everything: this was what a Master expected when the typescript of the thesis or of the book was handed over for supervision and (at times) publication. That world is over, and no one nowadays can work by such standards unless they focus on an extremely narrow and unexplored field.

On October 5, 2004 the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera reported a conference held in Turin by Giovanni Sartori about Norberto Bobbio and the theoretic reasons of the crisis of democracy. Sartori ended by stating that in the last 30 years he has witnessed with horror – and he insists: “yes, horror” – the decay of theoretic research: «Bobbio and I are among the last few scholars that believed and still believe in the transmission of knowledge (which is for me the first mission of the educated man) and that, before they write, read those who wrote before them. Younger authors, on the contrary, have a growing tendency to write books with no bibliography, spontaneous offspring of their own genius. Their (scarce) readings are, with few exceptions, from 20 years before, and they mostly quote coetaneous peers and jolly fellows as inexperienced as themselves».

Decay is obviously not only quantitative. The “fundamentals” or ABCs of a discipline – may it be etiquette or sports – can be lost this way.

1 Giovanni Sartori (1924–2017) was one of the most famous experts in political sciences on an international level, and the most important Italian political scientist.
I will not presume here to reinvent the fundamentals: but given the horizon I have depicted, one can forgive me if, moving towards some conclusions, I will suggest some indications of my own methodological convictions. The main point I want to state is a reflection on the peculiar intertwining between the primacy of the text and the necessity of an aware use of the paradigm that one, as a scholar, is de facto adopting.\footnote{2}

2. The underlying problem

I will choose as my interlocutor, albeit somehow instrumentally, R. Brandt (1998), who introduces an actual problem to which he gives, in my opinion, an unsatisfying answer. His aim is to react to decades of relativistic excesses, that deny – de iure and/or de facto – that it is possible to somehow “certify” the content of a text, thus leaving absolute freedom to the interpreter. Now, as much as one can be eager to reaffirm objectivity of text, it is impossible to completely rule out subjective intervention, as Brandt strongly underlines: In fact the attribution of any meaning completely depend on the subject: the object is, therefore, both given and not given (p. 11).

A double negation is then necessary: both pure subjectivism and pure objectivism are deemed simplistic. Objectivity can be reaffirmed only by measuring itself against all obstacles that deny and oppose it. In this respect, method appears as a point of paramount importance: an assertion is objective when results from a methodical analysis of the text; the object is the product not of arbitrariness of the interpreter, but of his

\footnote{2} These are, indeed, the two capital elements of hermeneutics: to be questioned by the text itself and to acknowledge and to accept one’s own presuppositions as essential to all readings (cf. Gadamer 1983 pp. pp. 312–340). One has to enact both procedures, however antithetical they may seem, incorporating them in a circular system that verifies and enriches them both “at every round”: the point is to give no space to an innocence of view which is not possible nor, at the same time, to a hermeneutic of pure invention that answers only to the interpreter’s intellectual skills. On the contrary, hermeneutical circle suggests a double operation concerning 1. the text and 2. one’s presuppositions. This leads to paying particular attention to the relation between the two elements, without unilaterally taking sides, thus keeping in mind and highlighting the need to monitor and therefore modify the presuppositions themselves, to the point of being available to radically challenge it if necessary.
method (p. 11). Objectivity then totally depends on method. Brandt seems so confident in the power of a universal and perfectly formal method that he comes as far as stating that reader should free themselves of his subjective assumptions so that the text can be transmitted with no modifications to the tabula rasa of his conscience. Brandt thus expresses an indiscriminate attack on all forms of hermeneutics.

3. Two different hermeneutics

A role in this attack is, first of all, to be attributed to a difficulty in distinguishing between historical readings of a text and explicitly theoretical reworking without reducing the former to a philosophically irrelevant activity.³

The theoretician’s problem

Brandt (p. X) critically quotes a statement by Habermas (1981, pp. 154–155), who bluntly affirms that his way of appropriating other philosophers’ ideas results, despite his efforts, brutal. Even when he makes use of quotes what he said has sometimes very little in common with the opinions of the quoted authors. Brandt, linking Habermas to Gadamer and Heidegger, accuses this attitude of being an arbitrary reading, a way of colonizing the authors. Actually, Habermas is only stating the elementary truth that when a theoretician works on another philosopher’s text, the theoretician is in the end, regardless of all quotes, the only one speaking. This can be done in a stronger or weaker fashion, more or less brutally, but it has nothing to do with the radical forms of interpretative relativism. Habermas’ statement in fact denies any relativistic grounds, since he acknowledges an explicit distance from a correct interpretation of the text.

³ For an overview on the Italian debate in the 1970s on the relation between theoretical and historical interpretation – not casually correlated to the Italian translation of the seminal work of Gadamer 1983 – cf. Piaia 2007 pp. 12–14; this text is also recommended for further bibliographical references (on the subject of philosophical historiography, see in particular pp. 41–73).
In comparison with a widespread praxis that presents as “historic” what is, in fact, “theoretical”, Habermas’ attitude appears correct, since he recognizes the fact that the meaning of any statement is modified by the historical and/or theoretical context in which it is placed. It is in this perspective that one should weigh the “violence” that, inevitably, all theoreticians perform. In the context of philosopher K the statement that “a is b” is linked to a series of concepts 1, 2, 3, 4 that qualify both “a” and “b”; if philosopher F takes that same statement and brings it inside his own system, he places it in a relation to another series of concepts 5, 6, 7, 8 that qualify both “a” and “b” differently; therefore, the meaning and philosophical weight of the statement “a is b” is more or less radically modified depending on the theoretical and semantic distance between sequences 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, 6, 7, 8.

This situation is the same also if the statement is presented in an essentially historiographical form, within which we distinguish two different possibilities.

1. Philosopher F says that “for K, a is b”; if “a is b” is not to be found in K’s works, F’s statement is false and/or mistaken; therefore, a theoretician cannot avoid the historical dimension, the exact reconstruction of the text and context he refers to; only from this unavoidable starting point can the theoretician’s “inevitable violence” be applied;

2. Even so, the fact is that regardless of “a is b” being stated by K or not, when it is quoted by F its weight and meaning immediately change, because it is placed in a different conceptual frame that modifies value of both “a” and “b”.

Let K be Kant and F be Fichte, and the example will become immediately clear.

Quoting another author has, in fact, its precise functions that should be investigated in each singular case. Merely as an introductive example, we could distinguish the two following situations:

1. Sometimes the quote has an essentially rhetorical value, supporting and/or reinforcing an argument to which it adds nothing substantial. It is a very widespread and somewhat legitimate use, that pays a tribute or points to a significant coincidence of views; but it should also be regarded with some suspicion, since it can use an auctoritas to cover analytical or argumentative weakness. In some traditions, such as Marxism up to a few decades ago, the sometimes-unaware carelessness in the use of quotes can be quite embarrassing.
2. In other cases, a quote is used to recall and deepen another philosopher’s argument, underlining its value (which is given by the new context). In this case, we are not talking of a tribute but of a common reflection and/or a discussion with a “distant” philosopher, whose method is adopted or criticized. Even a radical critique of the older text is actually directed towards giving value to something else, i.e. something stated by the interpreter. Substantially, we are not moving within the frame of the interpreted text/author, but within the frame of the philosopher-reader who is philosophizing by means of the reading and discussion of a text.

There is, although, a “historical” version of this way of operating, that has been described by O’Brien. He wonders whether a scholar is allowed to qualify a certain statement in a certain way «even if Plato does not present it as being so... <certain authors> think to do Plato a favour by stringing together series of numbered propositions, culled from different places in the text, and then looking to find their logical coherence or lack of it. Such a procedure almost inevitably blurs the distinction between what might, or might not, have seemed cogent enough to Plato (or what Plato might, or might not, have wanted to present as persuasive at any one point in the course of his dialogue) and what the modern critic judges to be logical or illogical» (O’Brien 2003 p. 70).

This reflection can be broadened: even before introducing contemporary thought, statements change for the simple fact that they are decontextualized. For this reason, the widespread praxis of selecting one single page of Plato inquiring its philosophical sense regardless of what the author himself says in the preceding or following pages comes off as philosophically and historically wrong, and sometimes even ridiculous: if the philosophical question to be found is that of the philosopher-writer, the philosopher-reader would benefit more from inquiring how the author “somewhere” answered it – or not – instead of focusing on demonstrating how many fallacies and misinterpretations the author committed. The risk one faces is to be blatantly belied by other pages from the same author. As Plato teaches it is the whole that determines the meaning of the parts and not the other way around (we will come back to this later).
The problem of historian and theoretician

It should be acknowledged that the concept of “truth of a philosophical text” means two very different things to the historian and the theoretician. First of all, the historian holds as important the correct interpretation of the text as an object, whereas the theoretician is more interested in the truth that manifests itself within the text. This divergence leads to different behaviours. To be rather schematic, and willingly simplifying, we can say that, according to whether they are faced with a “true” or a “false” statement, theoreticians should always act in two different ways; historians, on the contrary, do not need to have two different reactions, because they always focus on giving a correct, adequately documented interpretation of the argument, that will therefore appear in its true or false nature (which is not philosophically irrelevant).

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So, in order to recognize the argument as true or false, historians cannot avoid a theoretical approach. But they should do this from their own point of view, that forces them to ask themselves: why did this argument not seem false in the author’s eyes? The question is historically inevitable, because things are not the same if the answer is 1. logical fallacy of the philosopher 2. absence of adequate theoretical tools and/or non-separation of concepts.

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4 I agree on this with Garin 1959, p. 127: to do history of philosophy, or to do philosophy by means of a historical confrontation with ancient thinkers, «does not at all mean simply establishing texts or gathering data: it means fidelity and constant respect towards every concrete individualization and every real situation within the whole of the historiographical act».  

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that were later separated or 3. extra-theoretical reasons. It is clear indeed that each answer implies a different meaning of the text. Therefore, theoretical tools are at work also in the reconstruction of the argument (in our example: the logical system at the author’s disposal and our assessment based on more recent innovations; theoretic distinction between concepts the author did not distinguish; simultaneous presence of theoretical reflections and pragmatic or environment-derived conditioning). If one of these elements is missing in the interpretation, the reading is incomplete from a historical point of view.

What we are saying will appear obvious once we approach it from another direction: if a historian wants to interpret the text in its objectivity the text should be reconstructed as according to its intrinsic nature, as poetry if it is poetry, as philosophy if it is philosophy. If a “philosophical” text does not exhibit philosophical contents, rather appearing as an “anonymous and neutral” text, then it has not been reconstructed as that object that it was and that it was meant to be. So, a “historical” reading of a philosophical text, exactly because it is a specific and correct reading, cannot avoid “philosophizing” and trying to put a theoretical system at work, while keeping in mind all the “historical” problems that can occur – if nothing else because of the diverging epochal and conceptual presuppositions that separate the author of the text from the contemporary reader.

So the distinction between historian and theoretician should be held as an indication of method that points towards the two poles between which the whole range of philosophical readings take place – because there is no philosophical interpretation that avoids the historical dimension (no one can legitimately read Plato as though he were our contem-

5 “Presuppositions” holds here a double meaning: 1. those elements that constitute an epoch’s or culture’s conceptual system, and that can be partially made clear and transcended but not modified; 2. that more or less conscious choice of the elements starting from which our interpretation of phenomena starts. Although “presuppositions 2”, the interpreter’s guiding hypothesis, is obviously influenced by “presuppositions 1”, we will mostly refer to “presuppositions 2” when dealing with method while we will often address “presuppositions 1” when explaining our general views on hermeneutics, since it offers evidence of the impossibility of full transparency of the text. We could have used a different terminology – such as “paradigm” or “reading hypothesis”, but this would have led to deeper confusion.
porary), nor a historical reading can reconstruct a philosophical argument without conceptualizing and questioning about the truth of the argument.

Some differences between the two hermeneutics

What we have tried to say is that there is a continuous intertwining between historical and theoretical – which should not make us forget there are some strong differences.⁶

A theoretical reading of a text needs no particular external legitimations, because it constitutes a moment of the philosophizing activity of someone who cannot at this point be reductively depicted as being only an interpreter. The historical one, instead, only finds legitimation outside itself, in its capability of disclosing the sense of the text and bringing us as close as possible to what the author meant.

On the level of method, as well, we have substantial differences. For example, a historian has to individuate and respect the order of the text, because it’s the text that should be the one talking and it’s of paramount importance that we understand in what order it wanted to express its content. Philosophers do not have to obey this rule, because what looks like a quote is actually a step in their own argument and should therefore fit in the correct order within the argument – not within the original text: every choice is justified within the new text, not within the old one.

Also on the level of “truth of the argument” we have two different meanings of “truth”: 1. the truth the text wants to express (we have to read Plato in the light of his own views on science, separating what “in his eyes” is absolutely true from what is only mostly true, or just highly

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⁶ Following different paths, analogous conclusions are reached in Piaia 2007 pp.16 – 17: it is necessary to «knowledge – on the basis of their different motives, methods and aims – the autonomy and equal dignity of two distinct disciplines, philosophical hermeneutics (as a seminal moment in theoretical research) and history of philosophy. It does not seem legitimate to speak of “correlated unity” between these different approaches to the past... at the risk of polluting historical analysis or downgrading it to hermeneutics’ “handmaid” ... This is true, at least, as long as the historian is moved by trying to reconstruct philosophical theories by contextualization... whereas the philosopher is drawn towards the past under the pressure of a contemporary problem».  

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likely or simply very convincing); 2. the truth it still holds in the interpreter’s time. These two are not necessarily alternative to one another, but they are very different, and they determine the philosophical fortune of a text. For an extreme example, think of the truth of the arguments in Plato’s *Timaeus*, when, for instance, he depicts the heavenly bodies as deities. This text has had an enormous impact on the following centuries, but nowadays it is difficult that someone who is not a historian of philosophy will find it to be interesting.

Philosophers have, although, another possibility: they can say that the argument is, in its nature, false, but he can at the same time reassess it as valuable by giving it a new context. For example, a philosopher could be interested in re-formulating Plato’s reflection on Ideas not on a metaphysical level but rather on a methodic-dialectical one, re-thinking Plato’s scientific paradigm.

First conclusion

We can close by drawing another distinction: everyone should do (1) an *explicative* reading, concerned with the “meaning” of the text, to which according to one’s interests one can add (2) an *assessment* reading aimed at the truth the text tried to have in its original context and/or (3) a *theoretical* reading such as one concerned with truth and/or argumentative validity within context of the reader’s knowledge and logics.

We could therefore propose three patterns:

1.1 Within *historical hermeneutics* the explicative reading is most important; the assessment reading accompanies it as a necessary complement, whereas the theoretical reading will be extremely limited;

1.2 Within *theoretical hermeneutics* the theoretical reading is clearly predominant; the assessment reading accompanies it as a necessary complement, whereas the explicative reading can be limited to what is strictly required to avoid mistakes or trivialities.

2.1 The *theoretician* has to always make a stand within his own expository structure, since he cannot positively absorb a proposition that he holds as false or soundly mistaken;

2.2 The *historian* has no problems of this sort.

3.1 The *theoretician* especially pays attention to truth-falsehood, or argumentative usefulness of the formulated thesis.

3. Two different hermeneutics
3.2 The historian especially pays attention to truth-falsehood of the proposed interpretation.

The difference between the two attitudes also manifests itself, obviously, on a “behavioural” level. While we can/must postulate that philosophers consider a philosophical text because of the interest it holds and as a moment of their own personal research, historians can work on a text that they consider of very low theoretical interest but that must be studied for different reasons, for example in order to complete a historical picture, to fill a gap in knowledge or to heed a somewhat “internal” challenge within the historical context (on the model of: “no one has yet managed to resolve the problem of…”). In any case, historians should avoid imposing their theoretical judgments on the interpretation of the text and pay maximum attention to the risk of unwillingly doing so.8

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7 A historian’s first aim is not to judge, or even worse condemn, but to understand what the author did and why. If one begins with a negative judgement on a philosophical operation, considered useless or flawed or anyhow unacceptable, the risk is to constantly force one’s own thought on the author’s “logic” architecture.

8 Therefore, we can agree with what Berti says (1989, pp. 50–51) while criticizing, with balance and theoretical preoccupations, proposals by the Tübingen-Milan School. He does not radically disagree with what he calls, in accordance with Cassin, “appropriation strategies”, or «the attempt to use some aspects of ancient philosophies as corroborating contemporary philosophical positions» but he asks that some conditions be observed «that are not always respected. It does not seem to me, in particular, that it is correct to read ancient philosophers starting from a contemporary problem, applying our own conceptual patterns to their thought and destroying their unity in order to use the fragments in an extraneous context»; one should, instead, «start from the perspective of the philosopher that is being studied, trying to find unity in his thought and, when it is the case, separating within it what is born of the culture of his time and what is original, always keeping in mind the sense of each part – meaning its function in the general economy of a certain philosophy. To do this, it is necessary in the first place to perform a historical reading, capable of placing the philosopher in his own time, freeing him of interpretations that have been given in following periods and returning its original meaning to his thought». 
4. The problem of method

As we have seen, the problem of respecting the text’s objectivity cannot be denied even by the most radical theoretical approach. This applies a fortiori, then, from the standpoint of historical hermeneutics.

The impossibility of a pure reduplication of thought

As we said, Brandt moves from the conviction that method can be universal and completely de-subjectivized ad de-historicized: one simply has to show the formal rules that make objectivity possible, so that the method disappears at the same moment it makes its appearance. Brandt shows no doubt on the possibility of this total transparency and formality concerning not only its logical formulation, but also its application, the method in its actualization.

The point is, though, that it’s not clear how a specific interpreter can apply a method whatsoever irrespective of personal precondition, of objective constraints and of historical conditionings. And yet the German scholar holds that the interpreter’s critical activity, can and must follow the other author’s thought, following the same path followed in the author’s philosophical reflection (pp. 12–13). It is not, then, about (tentatively) going back to the genesis of a thought, because this would imply going outside the text and reaching an intention: rather, according to Brandt, a reader can always follow backwards all the passages of the text just the way the author placed them there. But this vision, even on a merely historical level, faces a number of problems.

Brandt suggests a path that has to be followed by a specific reader, that sets in motion complex cultural systems and historical conditionings. His (or her) universe of meanings and experiences, structured by language, conceptual system, culture and all other factors that form thought in their interactions, cannot remain external to the reading. In short, it is impossible to follow the same philosophical itinerary because the word “follow” sets a radical change: activating a mechanism of verification on a theoretical proposal implies a different conceptual operation than the one enacted in discovering and stating the proposal itself. The philosopher A, that thinks (1) trying to solve a problem he is faced with, it is different from the “interpreter philosopher” B that thinks both (2) trying
to understand how A entered and came out of that situation or (3) verifying, and perhaps criticizing, that very same path. The object of thought remains in all three cases substantially different, even when one succeeds in giving them formally identical appearances.

This situation reaches its apex when time passes, bringing innovations, or anyhow a deep modification, in philosophical structure: what could be said before a conceptual distinction cannot be thought once this achievement has been reached; lost innocence cannot be regained and what used to immediately make sense appears insufficient (when not senseless) afterwards. It is a situation that who studies ancient thought is constantly faced with, having to deal with distinctions earned later in the history of philosophy. A basic example will be Parmenides’ *logos*, which he describes as spherical: we cannot “understand” it if not by analogy, because it implies *identity* between material dimension, logical-hermeneutical principle and ontological First Principle: three levels we immediately conceive as separated. We can understand the sense of Parmenides’ operation, which then does not seem absurd from the stage of philosophical maturity he had reached, but we cannot follow his same path because we cannot think as united concepts that our presuppositions necessarily and immediately hold as distinct. So only in an “abstract” and/or analogical fashion we can follow the steps that ancient thinkers made linearly, and only with difficulty we can say what they were perfectly at ease in saying.

The alleged univocality of the text

The (alleged) absoluteness of the method implies, for Brandt, the assumption that it is possible to univocally determine or at least circumscribe the content of texts (p. XI). The ambiguity of this formula – to univocally determine or at least circumscribe – can be explained by keeping in mind that one of the targets of his criticism is interpretative anarchy: both expressions are effective against it because they both assert that rules exist. From a moderate and aware hermeneutical point of view, on the other hand, the two words appear to describe completely different perspectives. Within a circumscribed range of meanings, obtained by exclusion of what is impossible or unacceptable, a variety of legitimate interpretative hypotheses can (and will) be disclosed; among these, one can separate more or less effective, complete, or likely ones. Not only does this rule
out the possibility of a univocal meaning, it also poses methodological problems that are radically different from those concerning definition of such univocal meaning.

Univocity, indeed, implies 1. total transparency of the text, regardless of how the author wrote it; 2. perfect functionality of language, that will not veil the meaning, even in the case of translations from ancient languages to more contemporary ones; 3. total absence, or irrelevance, of specific preconditions or presuppositions. A hermeneutical attitude, on the contrary, essentially tries to single out those meanings that can be set out against such limitations and, as much as possible, force them towards a progressively more correct interpretation of the text.

Brandt’s argument then appears to be based on a false dichotomy, that ends up denying what he had in theory conceded: either the text expresses itself in all of its pure univocity or there are some presuppositions that superimpose the interpreter’s subjective point of view on the text. In this second case, no interpretation would be different from a “fixed idea” (p. 9), i.e. a completely subjective idea that resists any objective restraint: this is the reason for which Brandt needs to postulate a tabula rasa of the conscience as a starting point for his method.

An excessive disapproval

Some of the reasons that push the German scholar towards this attitude are legitimate: the diffusion of hermeneutical relativism and the underestimation of the necessary degree of historical precision have paved the way to many forms of mistake and actual “betrayal” of the text; fragmentation of analysis has determined the loss of a holistic view; even the most mature forms of hermeneutics too often underestimated methodological issues, limiting themselves to recall the necessary honesty and attention of the interpreter. This way, the concepts of “objectivity” of the text and of the interpretation seem to be facing a crisis.

All of this does not, anyhow, justify the conclusion that all hermeneutical premises, no matter how carefully and critically they are formulated, make textual objectivity impossible. It is not possible, according to

9 The exact opposite of what Plato thought of the act of writing, which he always regards as ambiguous and limited.
Brandt, that presuppositions can also be a tool that discloses an array of contents “held inside” the text. But this has consequences on Brandt’s own methodological reflections.

Brandt cannot deny factual evidence of continuous progress in interpretation throughout time, so he has to justify it with the technique of external comparison; such comparison must, although, rule out any possible sign of “influences” from outside the text and should therefore limit itself to what is explicitly required by the text, because a relation that cannot be traced back to the text exists only in the mind of who conducts a subjective interpretation (p.93). Having thus exorcised the presence of the subject, a range of possibilities is disclosed: “semantic of concepts”, “debates” in which the text takes part, mentions of older statements by the author and so on,\(^\text{10}\) that explain the continuous progress of interpretation with the income of new data: it is possible to modify an interpretation on the basis of identities and differences between old and new data. It is clear that Brandt is trying to prevent external comparison from compromising the purity of the text. But even if we were to accept this methodological imposition (which can be useful, albeit not exhaustive) the result does not guarantee the absolute objectivity of the text for two reasons:

1) interpreter includes a factor (external to the analyzed text) and therefore enriches the interpretation, finding elements “in the text” that they would not have seen without that comparison; the objective reality

\(^{10}\) Some of these proposals require careful assessment, because a rigid hermeneutical setup risk oversimplification of the interpretative proceeding. For example, Brandt, p. XXIV, says that the objective interpretation always starts from a mistake that must be removed; this apparently rules out the common and important experience of reading the text for the second time not in order to correct a mistake but, rather, to further understand what has been discovered. Each procedure, including the one imagined by Brandt, takes place in time and does not happen all of a sudden. For this reason, all interpreters know it is always possible that a very well-known text turns out to hold a meaning that had not been noticed up to that moment. Although we cannot know when or whether this will happen, we can never rule out the possibility for new discoveries. For this reason, and not for correcting a mistake, we keep going back to texts we hold as important. This (real and frequent) process can be “described” only if one does not start from a perfectly objective (and therefore unilateral) view of the meaning of the text, leaving space to a correct whole-part relation (on which we will soon say more).
of the text that thus emerges is always necessarily mediated by this comp-
parison, that is something the subject decided to add.

2) if a comparison justified by the text modifies the interpretation, any
other conscious or unconscious comparison acts in a similarly “immedi-
ate and indirect” way; an interpreter has read other things before and
these “other things” are related to the text: the lector unius libri or the
unspecialized reader does not see in a text what a learned or specialist
reader sees.

The inability of fixing the method

It is significant that not even Brandt himself can manage to follow the
method he theorized, since he unknowingly adds integrations and pre-
suppositions. One particularly evident emerges just at the beginning of
his discussion of the interpreter: according to Brandt (p. 5) Plato’s Meno
was allegedly written for a public interested in the Academy, whereas the
Philebus was directed at members of the Academy and introduced an
abdication of the doctrine of Ideas. I do not wish to discuss the content of
these statements, which I find to be unacceptable, but I do want to high-
light how they express the author’s opinion and find no confirm whatsoever in the text itself; they are not, in fact, born of any text at all: they
are just the product of a widespread narrative of the whole development
of Plato’s thought (a development not certified by any text), an example
of those “inventions” that, as Kuhn says, all groups of scientists come up
with in order to facilitate their interpreting job. There is, this way, the
risk that interpreter is conditioned by presuppositions that will be
strengthened by its being unacknowledged. It is exactly in order to pre-
vent this terrible outcome that interpreters need to be conscious of the
paradigm they adopt. When they underestimate this issue, by denying it
in the name of an “objective” method, they are paradoxically exposed to
otherwise unexplainable phenomena of blindness.

11 Brandt’s historiographical stands are often questionable; they would deserve a
chapter, but I chose not to discuss actual effects of his model in order to focus
on criticizing the method itself.
A clarification on the actual situation

I think it is clear that the writer of this article acts under the intention of being a historian that wants to state the objectivity of text without falling for positivistic delusions. On the other hand, in order to avoid misunderstandings, it is necessary to say something that might appear trivial: nowadays, especially in the Anglosphere, there is no risk of this sort of excess; on the contrary, there is the risk of not separating theoretical and historical attitude, thus performing continuous violence on the text: this is the position of those who «even though they are following the purpose of a reconstruction of ancient philosophies, have acted with assessment criteria that come from their own theoretical orientations... The reconstruction thus obtained will be flawed because of a series of preliminary choices, completely alien to historical method, heavily interfering with the research ... one has to... acknowledge that, in general, the activity of speculative history of philosophy has too often resulted in a massive operation of colonization of the past, subjugation of ancient thinkers to opinions and views that were alien to them, indiscriminate “exploitation” of certain authors and doctrines and misunderstanding of others... an enquiry on ideas of the past has often given an excuse for smuggling one own’s ideas while under disguise of figures of prestige, in an ambiguous status between history and speculation» (Piaia 2007, p. 19).

5. The possible objectivity

It is precisely for this reason that it is necessary to turn back to the issue of an objective interpretation of the text that, at the same time, keeps in mind all the limits.

The issue of the reader

It should be self-evident that it is impossible to read a text according to how a writer from, say, 4th century BC would have wanted his public to read it: there are too many things we do not know and the way we think is too different.
First of all, in any text there are a lot of things that remain untold because they are perceived as superfluous: the multitude of facts and knowledge that constitute the common possession of a generation and an environment are not written. Therefore, in a specific environment, a sentence has a certain value, for example allusive, that is completely undetectable in the absence of indications.

For this reason, one is baffled by Brandt’s suggestion of relating to the reader of that time, who is a significant element in any hermeneutical reading but becomes here of paramount importance in the method of “objective” reading, because it should save the text from the deforming relation with the reader of today. But, even if one was willing to accord central importance to this figure, three insurmountable obstacles arise:

1) it is not possible to adequately reconstruct this reader, that is bound to a universe of expectations, thoughts, widespread cultural elements, that cannot be simply assumed, because they constitute problems that are often not only irresolvable but also unthinkable, since we ignore much (and understand very little) of any other context;

2) even if it was possible to reconstruct such figure, this should be done through other texts, thus giving course to an infinite process or a circular argument;

3) also in the case that a text provides information of who its intended readers are and what intentions it has, this (important) factor would not be enough since:

3.1) this part of the text would be the only premise to the reading of the whole text, including that part itself

3.2) it would not immediately prove useful on an interpretative level, since it expresses the attitude of the writer towards the problem of the “reader”; not only could his true intention be different from what he writes, but especially it could be different from what he is conscious of.

Therefore, it may be true that one should also deal with the problem of the reader, but certainly this problem raises more questions than the ones it answers: who decides to move on these grounds will face a never-ending series of preconditions and interferences, and elements that often are never to be found in any ancient text.
The issue of the author

Brandt, in his attempt to ensure the objectivity of the text, does his best to limit the author within the boundaries of textual elements, denying him (or her) an empirical-psychological subjectivity. Yet, even though it is true that our attention should be focused on the text, two things must be kept in mind:

1) inside the text there are traces of who the empirical subject was, because his stressing certain things, inferring others, paying more attention to others are all born of his personal history and sensibility;

2) the picture we are trying to reconstruct is also – and sometimes especially – tied to the entirety of the author’s oeuvre, as we are about to see in the next paragraph; this makes it necessary to gather information not only concerning the texts as such, but also the history of the author (a text may have different meanings if it was written in an early or late moment of his intellectual life, before or after meeting another philosopher’s thought and so on).

Brandt, instead, thinks that information concerning the author’s biography is always useless or even capable of misleading the interpreter’s judgements and the links he (or she) draws (p. 26). The author is a figure that cannot be ignored (p. 28) only in that he is the unifying element of everything the interpreter works on. The limits of this view can be showed starting from the very example Brandt uses to explain himself: an author, he says, can be accused of not knowing something by looking at what he wrote; if the text lacks “something”, one can legitimately infer the author ignored that thing. To this we can easily move the following objection: if other sources tell us that he had knowledge of that “something” when he wrote, the interpretation cannot obviously ignore this information. Furthermore, to fully accept this argument we should assume that each and every time the author writes he feels the urge to reveal all aspects of his thought, including the ones he might regard as trivial because abundantly covered in plenty of other writings (that might be lost to us).

Anonymous texts are particularly interesting in this regard, because one starts from the text and tries to infer the context and even the author – which shows how deep one can dig into a text. In summary: the issue of the author has many nuances that cannot be ignored.
A short excursus on Plato

What we have said until now will be made clear by this short excursus on Plato, that Brandt describes as an example of an author who completely excludes himself from his texts (p. 32). This already faces us with the impossibility of adhering to the “objective” method, because Brandt shifts his focus from the text towards the author’s intention, an intention that is not “written” anywhere but, rather, “inferred” from the text. In the choice that Brandt (mistakenly, in my opinion) ascribes to Plato one can read the choice of the empirical subject, Socrates’ disciple, that is the origin of the text and writes it with intentions that determine its nature. So according to what we just said, if we want to understand the text we should understand such intentions.

Moreover, the problem is dealt with moving from a contemporary sensitivity that looks for the subjective presence of an author that expresses his thought in a “first person” form. Thus, one misses the central element of a dramaturgical structure deliberately designed to activate an autonomous cognitive procedure in the reader. This implies a superabundant presence of the author that heavily influences the reader with his choices (starting with characters, frames and scenes).

Obviously, one should be cautious about stating an author’s intention, paying great attention to what can be demonstrated and giving no space to those (easy) integrations that are often to be found in historiographical readings. It is therefore correct to stress that it is wrong to move from the sphere of biography to that of textually verifiable thought. But this does not justify turning this operation upside down, thus ruling out all mentions of the empirical subject.12

12 Here too there is the risk to loosen critical attention: for example, in assessing “indirect sources” Brandt (p. 53) and many others put on the same level testimonies about Plato coming from Aristotle, that was his contemporary and disciple, and Plotinus, who lived in Alexandria and Rome more than 600 years later.
The necessary rigorousness on the topic of presuppositions

If acknowledging and paying attention to one own’s presuppositions is of paramount importance, this operation is only possible by means of a progressively more detailed comprehension of the text, which in turn can only be understood in relation to the presuppositions themselves. This succession of steps, difficult to explain and to perform correctly, implies a never-ending process of approaching the truth, constantly working on the text while knowing that it is impossible to definitely grasp the object, and at the same time never giving up the will to earn a higher level of comprehension, as a tool to purify, as much we can, our method: within one unitary process we need to both correct the paradigm we apply and get to know the text more in depth and more completely.

If one of these conditions is not satisfied, the hermeneutical operation will not be totally correct: we will only have the explanation of a thesis that was never modified by the interpretation. This raises the question of whether we have actually allowed the text to speak to us. What have we actually discovered, if the paradigm remains unaltered? We must acknowledge that in the end we only know what we already knew at the beginning. This “illustrative” procedure (that has, as such, its own dignity and space of legitimacy) can occur regardless of the paradigm being declared or not, but usually manifests itself in this latter case, because in this situation the scholar’s self-control is most required.

The point is that one should have a “critical” attitude towards presuppositions and their purpose: not in order to deny them, but to manage them correctly while recognizing them as inevitable. Indeed, whatever attitude the interpreter chooses, this “choice” always makes itself evident. Let’s take, for example, our relation to ancient authors. Exactly because the distance is evident and it should be clear that it is impossible to precisely and faithfully follow their steps, Brandt has to stress and exploit what is common between them and us: he not care that this common world is only a projection of our present culture and historical interests; the interpretative praxis moves from the assumption that its objects are always identical and are never merely projections (p. XXV).

Once again, I am not interested in the specific theme of this statement – therefore exploring what is meant by such “identity of the objects”. The point is that, even if we accepted this suggestion, we would still have
to admit it is the choice of one specific premise among three possible ones:

1) the one (Brandt) that maintains that objects remain identical to themselves;

2) the one that sees objects as radically different from time to time, according to epochal discontinuities;

3) the one that states that in this relation there is a thick intertwining of similar and dissimilar elements, that requires moving very carefully towards assessing each data in its specificity, avoiding “general, well-rounded” solutions.

It is enough to say, at the present moment, that we are talking about a choice that will generate a reading method with consequences on the following interpretation. This is not pure subjectivism, because the validity of one’s choice needs to be tested.

As for the content of this choice, I think one should always keep in mind how Kuhn 1977, pp. X-XII, tells the story of the beginning of his theoretical investigation. As a very young Physics student at Harvard, he approached Aristotle in 1947 while studying the epoch-changing turn from Aristotelianism to Newton’s physics. He was shocked to discover that Aristotle was a sharp and respectful observer of reality in the study of biology and politics, but seemed to lack of these qualities completely when it came to the study of motion. Aristotle was certainly wrong, yet it seemed impossible to Kuhn that he might have made such crass mistakes. Finally, «one memorable (and very hot) summer day those perplexities suddenly vanished. I all at once perceived the connected rudiments of an alternate way of reading the texts with which I had been struggling». Kuhn discovered that it is precisely by reflecting on those “apparently absurd” passages, i.e. by asking oneself how a great thinker could have written them, that it is possible to grasp the peculiarity of Aristotle’s vision, which is to say bring out the underlying motivations that led the philosopher to reason in a way that seems quite incomprehensible to us.

Finally, once one gives up seeing each and every “paradigm” as a statement of subjectivism, it becomes possible (and necessary) to highlight the procedure by which one can use certain keys to interpretation that make different meanings of the text available to the reader. But the first step should be to focus on the presence of both elements, presuppositions and objectivity, keeping them separated during the critical analysis, and con-
stantly and correctly (as much as the problems allow it) moving from the former to the latter and back again.

To defend textual objectivity from relativism it is necessary to think about the elements that structure our reading: 1) the chronological dimension according to which a thought inevitably belongs to a certain epoch, 2) a rigorous method of textual enquiry, 3) the choice to adhere to a theoretical paradigm that defines the background against which the object (period, school, thinker) is set, 4) the single interpreter’s own suggestions on the matter.

As for the paradigm, it is necessary to remember that 1) it is a choice, 2) it is an interpretative key, 3) its method should be activated in a way that also allows to verify 3.1) acceptability and 3.2) usefulness of such “postulate”; 4) this is necessary because some perspectives “hide” the text while others clarify it and only a careful assessment of the results allows assessment of the paradigms; 5) furthermore, since no perspective is absolute, one needs to pay particular attention to those elements that the adopted view tends to obscure (with all the problems that such effort can meet).

One last note: paradigms are mutually exclusive, and such is their adoption, but only in the sense that it is not possible to use them at the same time, else one will mix different logics. It is possible, although, to use different paradigms in different situations, choosing rational criteria for adequacy of one or the other. A playful example can be the one that follows: a loving couple of astronomers will describe the movement of the Earth around the Sun in a strictly Copernican language, but they will talk about a romantic sunset in our common, Ptolemaic way. Which is correct, since it is more effective.

6. A hypothesis on method

We will now examine something more technical and more empirical, starting from the sketch we drew up to this moment.

The first important issue is the order in which we proceed, given that choosing the right starting point in an operation including progress and circular verification is of paramount importance. If one starts, for example, by ignoring any ordered sequence and thus takes on text, context and presuppositions all together, since they are all intertwined and some-
times identical (context plays often a significant role in presuppositions) the synergy between context and presuppositions, amplified by literature, easily acts as an (often undetected) distortion that has a negative influence on the reading process. A different way of proceeding could perhaps provide some “defence” against a number of possible mistakes.

The first moment consists in isolating and considering carefully presuppositions: what one thinks, what one knows (both about text and context), the elements one uses, the solutions one is looking for, the hypotheses one has. The point is to admit (to oneself, in the first place) this structure, so that it is clearly laid out and it can be constantly examined in order to find mistakes and to question its illuminating and/or misleading power.

The second defining moment is analysis of the text, with all available tools. This is where the paradigm should display its power to explain what would otherwise go unexplored. For this reason, like classic authors taught us, we first of all have to look for aporias and paradoxes that the text faces us with. The goal is to show, much as Aristotle nearly always does, that the solution one offers is the best, more complete, more resistant etc.

The third thing we ought to do is to verify the result in order to assess the efficiency of the adopted reading hypothesis and analysis technique. This obviously requires more than one passage, according to the hermeneutical circle: a continuous process of purification of the interpretation and discovery of the meaning or meanings of the text.

To sum up the advantages offered by this method:

1. There is a verification operated on the text, that has to be conducted with technically adequate tools, but without the illusion of an impossible transparency;

13 Obviously, this effort will be conducted on two levels in accordance with the two meanings of “presupposition”: the reading hypothesis or interpretative “paradigm” we choose can be well determined, whereas the “epochal” dimension in which we find ourselves remains largely undetected and cannot be transcended.

14 This is a radical problem: «there cannot be a concept of philosophy elaborated by the historian and held as an absolutely adequate parameter, but one that changes through the epochs and has to be detected from time to time» (Piaia 2007 p. 21).
2. Our critical attention must be two-sided, since it also needs to give mind to our presuppositions; we need to assess whether or not an interpretative paradigm works, meaning that we have to assess
2.1 risks and advantages of the adopted interpretative praxis;
2.2 the effects of our presuppositions on the specific case and
2.3 whether or not the presuppositions themselves were modified, which is important because if a research (a thorough, complex and well-articulated one, not a limited and very partial one) has not modified the paradigm or the interpretative frame, we must conclude we are facing either
2.3.1 an exceptional case of perfect confirm of our expectations, or
2.3.2 a simple operation of adjustment of the text to our presuppositions.

An important thing to keep in mind: if the fundamental question addressed to the text is «what do you say?», “weird” answers, leaps, problems are the ground for verification: more the emerging sense of the text is complete, coherent, articulated, more the proposed paradigm turns out to be "verified" at least in its usefulness. For example, let's consider three logical and legitimate interpretations, radically diverging from each other, with a clear relation to text and that can be considered both to be the cause and the effect of a certain reading of single dialogues:

1. Plato expresses his opinions through Socrates or the dialogue’s wise figure;
2. Plato expresses his opinion through the question-and-answer game internal to the dialogue;
3. Plato, by means of narrative devices, addresses the reader with an array of problems/solutions in order to push him towards an active practice of philosophy.

A scholar should verify the effects of these three readings, to see which one better discloses a coherent meaning of each dialogue and of all dialogues as a whole. This is the element of our work that appears to be lacking nowadays: verification is too rare a procedure within the humanities.\(^{15}\) Hermeneutics are often content to make “research” coincide with

\(^{15}\) And yet it should always be done. In 2013 a young Economics student, Thomas Herndon, has confuted (opinion of Nobel in Economic Sciences laureate Paul
“originality” rather than “objectivity”, and the historian appears to enjoy the freedom of a thinker or a poet.

I believe we should, instead, adopt some technical priorities. Two themes seem central to me in this regard, that of relation with the whole and that of relation with critical literature.

The whole and the part

What we consider to be the whole almost always appears as given by presuppositions, but exactly for this reason the problem requires to be closely considered. The whole can be a historical period, a philosophical school, the thought of an author, a work, a section of a work. This means it is possible (as always) to identify a variable set of wholes and parts, since (almost always) a whole is a part of a greater whole and is, in turn, composed of parts. The choice of which whole to focus on is not without consequences and should always be justified and kept under control, since it could turn out to be misleading: a part of a work can be a whole, but not any part can be considered as such, because certain pages hold no meaning when considered on their own. Therefore, the choice cannot be “free”, given that there are (there could be) two wholes: the reader’s and the author’s. This distinction must be kept in mind because the decisive whole, on a historical level, is the author’s and not our own.

There is also the problem of how to distinguish, without keeping them separate, the analysis of the part as part of a whole from the analysis of the part as a whole in itself, an “autonomous” system. Each of these

Krugman) one of the most quoted studies in the last few years while writing his PhD thesis. This study was an article by prestigious Harvard professors Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff, establishing a “scientific” correlation between exceeding a 90% foreign debt to GDP ratio and difficulties in economic growth. This study had already been criticized by great New Keynesian exponents such as Krugman and Stiglitz, but the discussion was only theoretical. The young student did something different: he did scientific verification. He verified all passages and found a series of mistakes (including a mathematical one due to bad alignment of numbers on Excel), that ruled this “scientific demonstration” out of the list of tools available to the greatest international Economics organizations. All this within a science that feels very at ease in using mathematical tools.
readings has its own logic, so one cannot simply apply them together assuming (and forcing on the text) the idea that these readings are one and the same – which is sometimes the case, but not always. To force on each platonic dialogue an interpretation derived from the set of all dialogues is just as misleading as it is to assume that the whole picture will appear out of the simple addition of partial interpretations. There is no reason for the meaning of single parts, each considered as holding an autonomous sense, to coincide with the meaning of the whole; and even where there is such a coincidence, one cannot aprioristically exclude that some works, given their particular nature (posthumous or unfinished publications, writings meant to be kept secret etc.) or a deliberate choice of the author, can represent a variant, something that would like to stand out of the crowd, offering resistance to the application of this pattern.

Anyway, if there is such a thing as a logic of the whole, it is here that the ultimate sense of the parts is determined, and not the opposite. A whole dominates the parts with its logic, but it is the whole that it is only because of parts being functional to it. Therefore, this pattern appears to be appealing, on an operational level,\textsuperscript{16} because it forces some questions on us about the peculiar situation we are faced with both in a holistic and an analytic perspective.\textsuperscript{17}

When we are dealing with a single, complete and autonomous work, the matter is not particularly complex. The starting point is to assume that the text is complete, but this assumption must be carefully evaluated by means of 1) corroborations or falsifications provided by the text or 2) a conceptual architecture that involves the entire work. A whole is, in fact, not a mere set, but rather a meaningful structure that “qualifies” and “connotes”, as such, the parts of which it is composed.

When looking for this architectural structure one must always keep in mind that it is possible for single connections and articulations to prove

\textsuperscript{16} This method is not challenged by discovery of internal contradictions in the text (as Brandt states, instead, p. 83) because these appear as contradictions exactly because they are placed within that interpretative frame. They represent a success for the interpretation of the reader, who found a mistake in the author’s claim to truth.

\textsuperscript{17} Briefly, imagining an extreme example: reading of a anonymous book x is (more or less radically) modified by discovery of it belonging to author B, of whom it represents a somewhat anomalous product that cannot be related to other works of B. This forces us to re-think author B as a whole.
“not functioning”: in this case the whole emerges as something merely hypothetical, something the author attempted and failed to realize. The architectural dimension, however, remains like the ruins of a church whose ambitious structural design was unable to sustain the weight of the dome: the church collapsed on itself, but its architectural structure and its style remain legible.

But the structure of a text is not a univocal dimension, because it has two aspects: compositional and rational. The first is mainly formal, as it aims to single out parts of the work and connections among them; the rational one is more substantial, aimed at exposing the argumentative structure on which the whole work is based on. Since these two can be described in different ways, we should keep in mind that a conclusive reconstruction of the theoretical frame must be able to mediate between them.\(^{18}\)

Context and literature

It is clearly fundamental to engage in comparison with critical literature. But the proliferation of contributions on each single topic, often the result of a merely academic logic, alongside the crisis of the “objectivity of text” has made this field increasingly more autonomous thus leading to two “dangerous” outcomes: there are works that 1) only analyze the literature, keeping a very feeble connection with the primary source; 2) limit their analysis to the text, while avoiding all mentions of the literature and enacting an explicitly partial and almost subjective reflection (unless

\(^{18}\) For example – although the nature of the work, which is not an actual book but a collection of lectures, makes it difficult to read adequately – if we take Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* we will clearly see that in the architecture of the book the issue of theology is absolutely marginal, given that the author only deals with it in less than half of book XII; at the same time, the architecture itself reveals that without this issue, not casually present at the end of the book, the whole Aristotelian system would implode on the subject of foundation of movement as passage from potentiality to actuality that would remain unexplained, with devastating effects also on his physics. From this “contrast” we can deduce a series of reflections on the nature of Aristotle’s interests, on the weight of ontology of the physical world in his system, on the (residual?) role of platonic theology and so on. All of these things have to be subsequently verified against a new reading of the Metaphysics and other Aristotelian books.
they full under the category of works that silently appropriate someone else’s interpretation).

To keep far from both extremes, the centrality of text must be reaffirmed in order to confirm the absolute subordination of critical literature, that must nonetheless be carefully examined in order to consent:

1) an investigation of the text that embodies (honestly acknowledging intellectual paternity) all that has been highlighted by others;

2) a verification of the explicative power of diverging paradigms.

In this regard, a high profile and relevant historical work (i.e. of wide scope and dealing with important issues) should give proper space to a series of cross references that, starting from and always coming back to the text itself, allow to build an adequate interpretative map. But the discussion should always be focused on the text and never (or almost never) become an autonomous treatise on the interpretative debate. The historian needs critical literature only as a vehicle towards the text and as a tool to verify his own interpretation, by means of comparison with and discussion of different positions. What often happens, instead, is very different: one only analyzes the discussion (and perhaps chooses where to stand) and subsequently verifies whether the text supports one position or another.

Overestimation of the literature holds well known consequences. The most trivial is fuelling already lengthy and articulated discussions that end up forgetting the textual problem from which they aroused. The most frequent is the diffusion of a history of historiography, that shifts the focus from philosophical texts to critical studies. This leads to the point where some scholars seem to think their only option is to list diverging interpretations without even taking a stand.

I think it is right to highlight some consequences of all this on the procedural level. First of all, I think that as a general principle it is not right to begin with the critical debate; one should always and only start from the text, because only this allows to verify whether the current debate on the matter is interesting or it convoluted around self-referential problems or, even, it came to a dead end because it took an erroneous line. Indeed, a simple reflection on phases (if one does not want to say trends) in the interpretation of ancient philosophers such as Plato could show how many times this trivial situation occurred.

Only after interiorizing an explicative and expositive hypothesis for the text one can engage with the literature, since it is at this point possible to
enquire whether the text justifies or not that particular mode of formulating the problem – even before evaluating the proposed solution. Without this compass, it is easy to be the victim of a disruptive excess of interpretations, that often are kept alive by reciprocal support (whether in the form of conflict or convergence). The great strength of prevailing opinions is not only the effect of brutally academic logic, but also of a very obvious psychological situation: those who really do research experience moments of true “anguish” when faced with a text they “do not understand”; a shared view often represents a lifeline, a lifebelt, and therefore holds great fascination; which is the equal and the opposite of the fascination of being original at any cost.

This has nothing to do with being not interested in the literature, which is luckily a rare problem in the field of Ancient Philosophy studies; what we are here saying is merely that critical literature, since it is text-oriented, should only be used in well-aimed and useful ways for a reflection on an issue; this usefulness should obviously be proved in opere operato and not merely assumed to be the principle that orients one’s study.

In the end, it is the whole that can save us. Any statement, evaluation or argument can be subject to many different hermeneutics, not always compatible with each other: it is within the evaluation that the statement can be read in one way or the other; it is within the sentence that the evaluation is balanced; it is within the empirical situation – be it written text or oral communication – that the sentence gains its meaning. This is always true. In our studies we are rarely faced with absolutely implausible or rash statements; this does not make them all acceptable, because one’s reading of some philosophical pages should be able to endure comparison with other pages from the same text and, in the absence of adequate reasons to think otherwise, ultimately with the whole thought of the author.

Ancient Philosophy

At last, we would provide a quick mention of the peculiarities of applying this method to ancient philosophy. The first thing one must accept is that we move among ruins, knowing that too much has been lost and it is therefore methodologically wrong to fill in the huge blanks with the product of our own ingenuity. When it is strictly necessary to complete
what we are missing, it is necessary that we highlight our intervention so that it cannot be confused with the original. As I have often stated in my analytical works, when one does not proceed this way the integration easily becomes a strong element of the way the thought of the ancient philosopher is presented: which it never should be.

As for the technique, Brisson (2002, p. 87.) well synthesized it by explaining Cherniss’ method: «a) read the texts in ancient Greek and try to translate them; b) place these texts in their proper context and connect them to all other related texts from the considered author; c) never consider a text or an author in isolation, but rather place them in their theoretical and historical background; d) at last, study the literature on the subject in order to avoid bias».19

To these points one should add that it is important to avoid “a certain reductionism”, consisting in the search for one single resolutive element. What emerges, for example, in Plato or Aristotle is the multiplicity of approaches the author proposes to engage a reality of which he accepts the complexity.20 From this point of view, reductionism is a hermeneutical catastrophe, leading towards two positions: either a text is bypassed, or else it is used to prove there has been an evolution from incompatible positions. On the contrary, those steps not conform to the reductionist criteria should be used for more complex reconstructions.

Reductionism also has a “quantitative” version. Sometimes, on the basis of a single element, one claims that an assumption can be considered as proved. Proof should be exhibited, instead, on the basis of a critical mass of elements and an overall reading that makes one’s hermeneutical proposal (highly) plausible. At the same time, a good interpretation should have a high degree of homogeneity and cannot be an inconsistent and fragmentary collection of a thousand different inputs: a thousand different inputs can indeed be present, but organized (that is, forced) in a neat structure.

19 Therefore, the problem is not to suspend judgment but rather to remember there is always another interpretation and that, therefore, the strength of one’s hypothesis must emerge by comparing results.

20 On this issue see Cattanei-Fermani-Migliori 2016 (cf. the title of the contributions on p. 114 n. 17); cf. in this volume: A Hermeneutic Paradigm for the History of Ancient Philosophy: the Multifocal Approach, pp. 110-130.
7. Conclusions

In short, what I want to claim in this article is, on the one hand, the need for a rigorous method, on the other hand a critical reception of paradigms, that leads to their critical verification, in order to carefully verify them and prevent presuppositions from becoming a matter of fact and thus operating undetected. The goal is to detect and solve as many problems as possible, which also represents the real tool to control one’s work. To be absolutely schematic, the point is to have a scientific attitude as well described by Kuhn’s (1969) image: normal science as puzzle solving.

This attitude is necessary within hermeneutics, because each part of a philosophical text is open to a wide array of possible interpretations, drastically reduced by context (the whole of the text, the chronological position, the author’s specificities and so on). To solve the puzzle – the whole – is to read single parts and single works and single authors in a way that composes a frame that makes sense and gives adequate explanation and proper place to, at least, the vast majority of pieces.

A never-ending work is thus outlined for the researcher, who is reminded of objective limitations to all interpretation: one begins with presuppositions, proceeding to identify problems and solutions that modify the paradigm and disclose a new and interesting path to explore the text.

Without this attitude one risks Gadamer’s delusion: to think it obvious that the preliminary project is continuously corrected. This is, sadly, not true. It is not correct, on a methodical level, to leave it to a scholar’s intellectual honesty. Popper (1969, pp. 113–114) rightly stated that it is wrong to assume that objectivity of science depends on objectivity of the scientist. What can be called scientific objectivity only resides in the critical tradition. In other words, scientific objectivity is not the matter of single scientists, but it is a collective matter of their reciprocal criticism, the division of work between scientists, their cooperation and their contrasts.