Editorial

Carlos A. Segovia*
Conceptual Personae in Ontology

In May 8, 1874, Leibniz wrote to Sophie-Charlotte of Hannover:

> [M]y philosophy … is based on two sayings as common as this one from the Italian theatre: *that it is elsewhere just as here*, and this one from Tasso: *che per variar natura è bella*, which seem to contradict each other, but are reconciled by understanding that one concerns the foundation of things, the other manners and appearances.[1]

In addition to summarising his own philosophy, Leibniz's assertion can be said to elegantly solve a common problem of interpretation regarding the coherence of Parmenides' thought – namely, the integration of opinative discourse side by side with the truthful thinking of being. But there is more to it. Leibniz's allusion to the Italian theatre or *Commedia dell'arte* echoes another reference to it found at the outset of that same letter, where Leibniz says that his "great principle of natural things is that of Harlequin, Emperor of the Moon – *that it is always and everywhere in all things just as it is here*," and hence that "nature is fundamentally uniform, although there is variety in the greater and the lesser and in the degrees of perfection" – like in Harlequin's checkered costume, one may deduce. Harlequin functions here as a special type of metaphor that can be labelled a *conceptual persona*.

Through conceptual personae "concepts are not only thought but also perceived and felt," writes Deleuze – that is to say, they are "philosophical *sensibilia*."[2] Their history is as old as that of philosophy, if not even older, as their roots descend into the fertile waters of mythical thought, of which philosophy – as Schelling intuited – can be adduced to be the continuation by other means. Hesiod invented several ones of perdurable success, including "Chaos," who brings forth his own children. Anaximander built the core of his thought around a theoretical problem – the correlation between presence and absence – which Homer had formerly approached by means of different conceptual personae (Achilles, Agamemnon, Thetis, Zeus, Hector, and so on). In Heraclitus ἀιών is a "child" that plays innocently. In Parmenides a goddess discloses being's truth to an auriga-philosopher. Plato presents his philosophy mostly through the lips of Socrates. Hölderlin reimagined Empedocles to think afresh the Subject/Object distinction. And Nietzsche famously employed the names of Dionysus and Apollo to designate two opposed existential and cultural drives.

Conceptual personae are pervasive throughout the history of philosophy. Furthermore, they often play a part in the production and the definition of new concepts. Mythical figures, science-fiction motifs, and landscape impersonations have, too, supplied numerous conceptual personae to contemporary philosophy and, more generally, to contemporary thought. Consider, for instance, Ihab Hassan's reuse of the myth of Orpheus's dismemberment to define postmodernism, Donna Haraway's reuse of the Lovecraftian Cthulhu to mark the return of the chthonic in the limes of the Anthropocene, or Elizabeth Povinelli's triangulation of the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus to map the open renegotiation of what is life and non-life today. In short, conceptual personae can function, to put it into Peircean terms, as icons, indexes, or symbols

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1 Leibniz, *Leibniz and the Two Sophies*, 317 (translation slightly modified).
2 Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 131.

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for thinking, and can also play a significant part in the making of an ontology of the present and its margins – that is, they can contribute to figure out what the present is and what it can eventually become under the sign of the Otherwise.

But is metaphor truly pertinent in philosophy? Philosophers sometimes think that literal speech is the default when it comes to name conventional things that can be uttered in simple denotative terms within the repertoire of a closed linguistic system. Thus, they often forget to ask themselves about non-immediate denotation, connotation, and the emergent or ontologically disclosing qualities of language. In this manner, they tacitly reinforce the supposition that the ordinary (Goethe would have said flavourless) use of words provides its norm to language. Besides, who can say what the ordinary is in each case, i.e. within the different "language games" (Wittgenstein) of different speakers?

Unlike R. Fogelin, who views metaphor as a mere figurative comparison based on a thing's salient features, and thus turns metaphor, it can be argued, into metonymy; unlike Davidson, who thinks a metaphor's meaning to be literal whatever the intent of the speaker, thus dissolving any metaphor into a trick; unlike K. Walton, who claims that metaphors are best understood by reference to games of make-believe, which once more amounts to turn metaphors into tricks; and unlike Searle, who breaks down the interpretation of a metaphor's meaning into so many troublesome steps (including the determination of the strategies for generating a range of possible meanings for it) that thereby makes the apprehension of any metaphor as infinitely differed in time as Zeno's attempt to have Achilles catch his turtle – unlike them J. F. Ross[3] and E. F. Kittay[4] rightly underline that we use words metaphorically and that we do so even when we do not think we do. Philosophy is not an exception to this rule, even if the study of the role of metaphor, and trope in general, in the production of meaning tends to be an anthropological rather than philosophical subject.

I am thinking here mostly of the works of Roy Wagner, who claims that metaphor can ultimately be said to be the mirror of meaning and *vice versa*.[5] Thus, for example, when a male Bororo metaphorises his identity as that of a "parakeet," he employs metaphor that stresses his distinctiveness from other men (those who, belonging in a different tribe, call themselves "toucans") and his similarity to other men (those who are "parakeets" like him because they belong in his own tribe) to satisfy notions of totemism and tribal classification; when he metaphorises his identity as that of a "man," he employs a metaphor that stresses his distinctiveness from other people (the elders, women, and children of his family) and his similarity to other men (those who, beyond his family but within his tribe, call themselves "men" in contrast to their own elder, women, and children) to satisfy notions of progeny, kinship role, and social status; and when he metaphorises his identity as that of a "jaguar," he employs a metaphor that stresses his distinctiveness from other men (those who, among the people of his tribe but in contrast to him, are not shamans) and his similarity to other men (those who, despite belonging in a different tribe, may be shamans like him) to satisfy notions of shamanic theriomorphism and perspectival shift.

But again, philosophy is not alien to these doings. In his *Philosophy of Mythology*, Schelling divides the ontological process that brings about the morphogenesis of all things into three successive stages: (i) Hades, or the pure possibility of being which lacks determination; (ii) Poseidon, i.e. its self-determination to be or self-affirmation, which lacks, in turn, form and intelligence; and (iii) *Zeus*, *or* being's *qua* fully achieved and conscious determination, which contains the two previous moments and brings all things to ontological fulfilment. For his part, Michel Serres uses in his works, *inter alia*, two conceptual figures – one positive: Hermes, the other one negative: Hermaphrodite – to stress the view that identity can only be attained beyond and against redundancy. In both Schelling and Serres, therefore, sameness and otherness exchange their roles and perspectives according to the requirements of a Janus-like conceptual imagination that aims at synthesising the notional and the figural.[6]

3 Ross, *Portraying Analogy*.

4 Kittay, *Metaphor*.

5 Wagner, *Symbols That Stand for Themselves*.

6 By the "figural" I mean exactly the opposite to what Lyotard means in turn in *Discourse, Figure* when he employs the terms "figure" and "figural" to denote the unrepresentable.

Oftentimes, though, philosophy's conceptual persona prove enigmatic, unsettling, or both. Who or what is Heidegger's "last god?" Why does the last Guattari write about Ananke, Dike, and Moira? What do Negarestani's Xeno-agents prompt us to conceptually think on and dream or un-dream with? These and other metaphors, one suspects, serve to make analogies and distinctions that would otherwise remain too mild, too inoffensive, or perhaps unthinkable.

The essays gathered in this topical issue venture themselves into this somewhat exotic territory with an eye put on matters relevant in one way or another to ontological discernment. They explore the possibilities and the difficulties inherent in the production and circulation of conceptual personae in contemporary thought, examine through them the relation between ontology and physicality, inquire into the contrasting ways of thinking being that different conceptual personae epitomise, scrutinise and unravel the secrets of some rather notable ones around which contemporary ontology gravitates whether consciously or unconsciously, signal the limits of mythical thinking as such, or attempt at redrawing today's philosophical board with recourse to the latter.

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