

The Power of the Monstrous: An Introduction to the Special Issue of *Philosophy Today*

Alterity and Otherness have often been the privileged field of contemplation within Western philosophy. Since the Presocratic philosophers, Being has been defined in relation to – and more often opposed to – non-Being, just as Goodness has been considered in relation to Evil, Beauty in relation to the Ugly, Society in relation to Nature, and the examples could be multiplied *ad libitum*. Every identity is shaped in opposition to an excluded other, an outside, or some thing. Identity and alterity are thus constructed as two inseparable sides of a single, coherent philosophical discourse, or rather a field of various discourses that *comprise* a philosophy, associated with – although not limited to – the early centuries of what we call modernity.

Alterity has many faces, depending not only on the different fields of thought in which it is explored (e.g., theology, anthropology, aesthetics, politics, etc.), but also on the nature of its relationship with identity and, more particularly, with the degree of its resistance to or compatibility with identity. No wonder, thus, that so many philosophers have been fascinated not only with alterity in general, but with alterity at the *extreme* boundaries (geographical as much as ontological) of otherness, at its greatest distance from identity itself. The otherness found at this extreme distance has traditionally been described as *monstrous*.

Monstrosity and the monster have received an astonishing degree of attention across the centuries, not only from philosophers, artists and poets but also, more recently, from scholars in the history of philosophy. The concept of marginality and margins, in particular, has magnetized the attention of the latter and, in the process, completely expanded the comprehension of the *centre*, or what is considered the centre. Perhaps what has not been underlined enough in the history of philosophy is something best described by an almost paradoxical expression: the *centrality of the margin* itself. Monstrosity does not simply offer the *line* or the *margin* as the site of conflict, difference, or what remains unknown (for example, between the inside and the outside of identity); it entails a reflection upon the role played by alterity and otherness in the grounding or emergence of identity. In other words, it draws our attention to the role played by marginality, and otherness of various kinds, in the definition, conception, and understanding of identity during the early modern period and beyond. In our view, identity itself is inseparable from monstrosity.

If the *monstrum* is what causes the most profound bewilderment and amazement and if, according to Aristotle's *dictum* about *thaumazein* in the incipit of his *Metaphysics*, wonder is the origin of philosophy itself,ⁱ might we recognize in monstrosity and its *marginality* something more archetypal and *central* than has traditionally been credited? Perhaps we might find in abnormality, exceptionality, and otherness something that amazes and, more disturbingly, interpellates the entire philosophical enterprise. Thus, the opening of

philosophy, that is, the openings of worlds, the genesis of forms of life, are each tied, as if in a web, with the many figures of monstrosity.

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Given the multifarious complexity of the topic of monstrosity, a plurality of approaches and singular incursions into the thought of individual philosophers or of limited historical periods often provides the best results. This is the rationale and the approach that we have followed for this special issue. We have asked contributors for monographic articles on monstrosity in single authors or articles that compare philosophers' use of monstrosity; we also asked contributors to measure the impact that early modern ideas of monstrosity have had, or continue to have, upon contemporary philosophical and political issues.

The question of cultural impact is particularly relevant. Among the philosophical ideas that have had an influence on the world we live in, monstrosity – in the broadest sense of profound alterity and radical otherness – is one of the most powerful. Our hypothesis is that this impact relates to the active resistance consistently opposed by the concept of monstrosity to its own place and definition. The monster has been considered as an *object* of study--observed, defined, and classified, always in relation and subordination to the norm. And yet – and this is what we see in the early modern philosophical anxiety vis-à-vis monstrosity – the concept of monstrosity has always resisted capture and escaped an imposed definition. The idea of monstrosity has continuously refused domestication, and most vitally, often succeeded in imposing an autonomous and independent self-affirmation, beyond and against the power of the norm. This has happened from the beginning of Western philosophy, for example in the sense that the *simulacrum*, in Plato, reaches an autonomous ontological status and simultaneously threatens both the idea *and* the copy, as Gilles Deleuze points out in a remarkable piece.ⁱⁱ

It is precisely with Plato that our enquiry begins, with Georgios Tsagdis's article and the concept of *thêrion*. Whereas Aristotle distinguishes carefully between the natural and the political domains when he deals with the category of monstrosity,ⁱⁱⁱ in Plato, the teratological dimension pervades both domains. Tsagdis does not focus solely on the *teras*, but considers also the *thêrion*, which in Plato's thought resides half-way between the animal and the monstrous. Beyond a purely metaphorical reading, Plato responds to the problem, at once political, physical, and psychological, of the multifarious beast; he develops what Tsagdis calls, with a Platonic neologism, a *theriopolitics*.

Tsagdis's reconstruction offers a thoughtful basis for a group of articles devoted to some of the most important philosophers of the 17th century. Andrea Bardin frames Hobbes's philosophy between Galileo and Descartes, insisting on the intertwining of the natural and political dimensions of the problem of monstrosity. Bardin's enquiry reveals the ideological dimensions of Descartes's and Hobbes's scientific enterprise. Beyond the too easy opposition between dualism and monism, the two philosophers reinterpret materialism as a threat to their project of characterising modernity, both on psychological grounds (i.e., the

invention of the modern subject) and political ones (i.e., the invention of modern sovereignty).

Hobbes is also at the centre of Arnaud Milanese's article, which analyses the dual dimensions of monstrosity in Hobbes' writings, namely the Civil War in *Behemoth* and the absolute sovereignty in *Leviathan*. Nothing, however, seems to support a clear and unambiguous opposition between the two models. Nothing, in other words, supports the idea that an extreme violence is confined to a natural sphere preceding political civilisation, as many contemporary readings suggest. Through the study of monstrosity and its relationship to animality, Milanese invites us to reconsider influential readings, such as Freud's and Derrida's, and to restore to Hobbes's thought the full magnitude of its complexity and productive ambivalence.

Oliver Feltham and Susan Ruddick explore another major author of the 17th century, namely Baruch Spinoza, whose philosophy itself has been described as monstrous from its inception; a characterization that continues across the modern period.^{iv} While Feltham focuses on the monstrous nature of the multitude, developed in different ways by both Hobbes and Spinoza, Ruddick scrutinises the potentialities of Spinoza's monstrous philosophy to decenter and de-ontologise the human subject, and invites us to reflect upon the limits of the human/nature boundary itself. Fruitfully employing Spinozism in order to build an original theory of judgement (Feltham) and an original critique of anthropocentrism and capitalist technocracy (Ruddick), both articles offer a deep analysis of the intimate connection between history and theory. In this way, they also open up a number of dialogues between monstrosity and contemporary discussions around 'new materialism' and the shape of the posthuman.

The passage from the 17th to the 18th century brought a new role and status for the concept of monstrosity. This largely happened within the development of the post-Cartesian *critique de système* by many 18th century philosophers, a development that allows some to elaborate new ideas regarding the origins of life as well as the new place of man in both civil society and, more broadly, in nature. This is manifest most clearly in the neo-Spinozist Denis Diderot and the crypto-Spinozist Giacomo Leopardi, two of the most important intellectual figures of the 18th century.

In her article, Annie Ibrahim takes up the interconnections between physiology and politics in Diderot's work, looking particularly at the concepts of normality, hybridity, and monstrosity. As with Ruddick's reflections on the need to compose human and non-human hybrids with Spinoza, Ibrahim also explores the posthuman monstrous forms emerging in Diderot's *Philosophical Thoughts*. Holding a revolutionary position against the idea of fixed and rigid boundaries, Diderot has much to say about the archaeology of biotechnology and biopolitics. Through the critique of a rigid taxonomy dividing the species, Ibrahim claims, Diderot's thought functions as an antidote to any possible taxonomy *within* the human species itself. Rather, his quest is to invent a physiology of the living monstrous, and Ibrahim reflects upon the political stakes of such a position.

The relative nature of the concept of monstrosity can also be seen in Fabio Frosini's analysis of Leopardi's thought. Leopardi develops his powerful meditation on monstrosity in nature within the dialectic between its reality and its imagination. Monstrosity, Frosini claims, is thus linked with the inception of the peculiarly human perception of the exceptionality of man or, in other words, of humanity as something distinguished from nature. Deviation from nature and otherness thus distinguish man from nature, making monstrosity, in Frosini's words, "the identification mark of humanity."

The last section of our issue continues the analysis on more contemporary ground, exploring the ramifications of ancient and early modern conceptions of monstrosity in recent philosophy and politics. Vittorio Morfino traces the presence of monstrosity in two major 20th century French philosophers, Henri Bergson and George Canguilhem, back to the Latin poet Lucretius. The connection with Spinozism is thus made clear once again, as the ancient atomists are one of the few classical sources explicitly praised by the author of the *Ethics*.^v The interest in revisiting Bergson and Canguilhem is not only exegetical, but instead philosophico-political since what is at stake is nothing less than the status of chance, contingency, necessity, and the ontological determination of nature and the world. Through these divergent interpretations of Lucretius, Morfino explores the problem of man's role and the possibilities to shape both the world and nature, despite the tyranny of forms. Morfino's article points to the figure of *monstrum* as an inevitable materialist process of grappling with the aleatory, the uncertain and the unknown.

Echoing authors such as Foucault, Butler, and Mbembe, Selin Islekel and Andrea Torrano each tackle the issue of monstrosity in light of one of the most explored concepts in contemporary political philosophy, that of biopolitics, where the production of life and its others are both ordered and contained. Between the disciplinary and the biopolitical paradigms, Islekel argues, modern societies organize their populations and establish their destinies of death not so much through an external and negative force, but rather through an internal functional power that Islekel characterises as "Ubu-esque." Torrano also challenges the idea of a negative and external bio-power acting from the outside on and against a positively self-established political body. She reads monstrosity through the category of *immunization*, namely through an internally produced antidote or poison that acts upon and through that same political body. Returning to the Hobbesian paradigm once again, but now stretching the analysis to consider the contemporary positions of Negri, Agamben, and Esposito, Torrano interrogates emergent forms of monstrous subjectivity and clearly illustrates the early modern roots of contemporary political thought.

Even more openly philosophical *and* political at the same time is the last piece in the issue. A. Kiarina Kordela's reading of monstrosity considers the field of contemporary terror(ism). Like Islekel and Torrano, Kordela understands Western conceptions of otherness as constructed not so much as something external, a threat from the outside, but rather in a monstrous self-production of a new 'monistic universal' as the guiding principle of modern capitalism. Moving freely between philosophy and psychoanalysis, Kordela reveals what is hidden

beneath contemporary rhetoric about the monstrosity of terrorism, namely the common root of biopower's identity and otherness. The self and the other are today materially embodied in the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles on the one hand and in the suicide bombers on the other. Notwithstanding their claimed opposition, the self-defence and the destruction of the other similarly point to the same monstrous nature of contemporary biocapitalism.

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Each of the articles in this issue were originally presented at the international conference on "The Power of the Monstrous," held at Brunel University, London, on the 26th and 27th of June 2014, and co-organised by the Collège International de Philosophie (Paris) and Queen Mary University of London. As the title of the conference suggests, the question at stake, for all our authors, is monstrosity's *potentia*, only improperly translatable in English as 'power.'^{vi} Together, the articles help to signpost something about the insuperable and inseparable connection between philosophy and monstrosity, and hence something about the movement of philosophy today: thinking emerges not within a single discursive field but through many openings and mutations into politics, aesthetics, culture, science, history. To ask the question of monstrosity's *potentia* today is to invite reflections upon the figure of monstrosity *before* its categorisation as other, outside, limit or margin. It is to bring the margin to the centre. But it is also to ask something about the *act* of thinking monstrosity *today*. What is a monstrous philosophy?

In his *Art poétique*, one of the most influential works on 17th century aesthetics, Nicolas Boileau wrote that there is no monster that cannot be *made beautiful* by art.^{vii} What a magnificent attempt to neutralise the concept of monstrosity, in the ultimate attempt to connect beauty, reason, and truth and tie them together against their Baroque otherness! And yet monstrosity, untamed through the centuries, resists; through the powerful and productive ambivalence that has challenged us since the early days of our civilisation, monstrosity persists. A spectre is still haunting Western philosophy: the spectre of monstrosity.

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ⁱ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 982 b 12.

ⁱⁱ Gilles Deleuze, "Platon et le simulacre," in Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit 1969), 292-307; trans. Constantin V. Boundas as *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

ⁱⁱⁱ Anne Jaulin, "Aristote et la pathologie politique," in Annie Ibrahim, ed., *Qu'est-ce qu'un monstre?* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005), 29-45.

^{iv} Antonio Negri, *L'anomalia selvaggia, saggio su potere e potenza in Spinoza* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1979); trans. Michael Hardt as *The Savage Anomaly: The*

Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

^v Spinoza, Letter LVI, in *Complete Works*, ed. Michael Morgan and trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis : Hackett, 2002), 905-906.

^{vi} See M. de Launay, "Macht," in Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 607-609.

^{vii} Nicolas Boileau, *Art poétique* (Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1969), III.1-4, p. 98.