


FLUSSER'S RADICAL IMMANENT MONISM

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ABSTRACT

Starting from Flusser's most explicit statements about irony, self-irony, and the Devil, I try to make some sense of the relations, in Flusser's thought, between language, reality and scepticism. And, perhaps most importantly, I try to clarify Flusser's notion of the role of philosophy proper. This analysis will bring us to a puzzling spectrum I see hovering over Flusser's ideas: the eradication of boundaries between the ontological and the ethical. That is what I call Flusser's radical immanent monism.

KEYWORDS: Flusser; Irony; Self-irony; Devil; Language; Scepticism.

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Vilém Flusser, *Bodenlos: Uma Autobiografia Filosófica*.

Initial remarks

Even students of philosophy have ghosts. Mine is the status of the Devil in the writings of the Czech-Brazilian thinker Vilém Flusser (1920-1991). But to understand the nature Flusser's Devil, one must consider a series of intertwined Flusserian concepts.

For this purpose, starting with Flusser's most explicit statements about irony, self-irony, and, of course, the Devil, I try to make some sense of the relations, in Flusser's thought, between language, reality and scepticism. And, perhaps most importantly, I try to clarify Flusser's notion of the role of philosophy proper. This, I believe is one way of having a good grasp of the role of the Devil in Flusser's writings.

Language and fiction

But we have to start with language. Throughout Flusser's *ouvré* language is a frequent philosophical issue. If the linguist turn wanted to indicate that the limits of language mean the limits of reality, i.e., language and thought limit or determine reality, Flusser tried desperately to grope for a way out of such prison.

Thus, for Flusser, if language is prison, as some philosophers want, if knowledge, reality, and truth are all aspects of language, 'Irony' — philosophical irony in particular — is the linguistic weapon against the limits of reality — *it is fiction against fiction*.

In the following sections, then, I intend to explore Flusser's understanding of irony and self-irony more closely. I believe there is a complex construction of an ironic ontology in Flusser's struggle to overturn the limits of the univocity of philosophy in its narrowest sense: that Kantian analytic ghost that still haunts some of us, making us believe that the limitations of philosophy are fully determined in the transcendental analytic framework.

Put differently, with Wittgenstein, we believe that "even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all" (*Tractatus*, 6.52). Thus the fundamental question: What is the use of philosophy if it does not help thinking out of prison? And no-one, I would say, took this question more seriously than Flusser.

Irony, self-irony and foolish joking around

All that said, the opening lines cited above — "Philosophical problems are like chess puzzles, only more fun, because they can better hide the ludic character of the game" (2007, p. 45) — taken from Flusser's philosophical autobiography (*Bodenlos*) concisely defines Flusser's approach to philosophical problems throughout his writings, from his first book *Língua e Realidade* (*Language and Reality*) to his last, unfinished, manuscript *Menschwerdung* (*Becoming Human*).² The statement

² *Língua e Realidade* was first published in Portuguese in 1963, in São Paulo, by Harder. The fragmentary version of *Menschwerdung* was later published together with another essay titled "From Subject to Project", in a book titled *From Subject to Project: Becoming*

may sound a bit absurd to those certain of their philosophical truths; and might go against our ordinary way of thinking that human reason is the ultimate measurement of reality. But Flusser would probably be the last person to object to this criticism. His reply would probably be a cynic smile! What else is philosophy supposed to do?

To be treated seriously — Flusser would say — we sometimes must ridicule life; much like the way exile does to expellees, poverty does to the excluded ones, lack of honor does to the unemployed, and so on. In exile, for example, upon losing everything and everybody, one might eventually realize — like the poets of the ancient Kingdom of Judah taken as slaves to Babylon did — what he or she had taken for granted when settled. As the poem goes, taken into captivity, the poets turn into self-exhortation to remember the Zion. And, in such exhortation even the suffering and the hanging of their harps upon the willows by the rivers of Babylon become beautiful.³

Of course, exile is a ridiculous condition; no-one should be forced into exile. Yet, according to Flusser, and certainly based on his own life experience, it is by being ridiculously thrown into exile that the migrant, the expellee, the groundless (or the survivor) is challenged to be creative. Put differently, it is by ridiculously testing how goodly his or her tent is, in the solitude of the desert, as Jacob was, that one may hear the steppe wind calling “Hear, O Israel” (FLUSSER, 2003, p. 64).

But what makes Flusser’s reflection on the role of philosophical irony and self-irony refreshing is precisely this: it evokes the absurdity of existential exile. Thus, if language is a conceptual prison, irony is, for Flusser, our weapon against this imprisonment.

Said differently: if language draws the borders of what we know, of what we think we know, if language is man’s ontological prison, and the prison of philosophy itself, then irony will set us free. Or still, in Flusser’s words “Irony is an ontological weapon against agony and death, because it shows not only how resilient the weak is, but also how his oppressor is fragile” (FLUSSER, 1972).

Therefore, it is possible to claim that Flusser stands heir to a long tradition of ironic philosophers that starts at least from Socrates — probably one of the greatest masters of irony in the Western tradition — to the present. To give just some more recent examples of ironic masters, consider the following.

In *Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty writes: “The meaning is beyond the letters; the meaning is always ironic” (1973, p. 30). Taking Merleau-Ponty’s dictum fairly requires what Flusser calls a ludic relation with philosophy.

In the same vein, Nietzsche also asks, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, in his own particular ironic style: “Might not the philosopher allow himself some laughter, elevating himself above faith in grammar?” (2008, p. 37).

To Nietzsche’s and Merleau-Ponty’s observations regarding the role of irony in philosophy, Flusser would certainly answer Yes! Indeed — with Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty — Flusser would say that one way of raking philosophers would be according to the quality of their sense of humor.

If fact, Socrates, Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty and Flusser all seem to converge on this specific theme: Irony is a valuable virtue. And it is precisely this ‘virtue’ that lies in the heart of Flusser’s close investigation of the nature and manners of the ‘Devil’ in his *History of the Devil* (2008).

Human, in 2001 (Free Association Books Limited). All translations of Flusser’s text into English are my responsibility, unless otherwise stated.

³ See Psalm 137.

Yet, it is worth noting that Flusser draws a critical distinction between stupid jokes, irony, and self-irony. Flusser's exaltation of irony comes closer to the Greek term *eirōneía* (εἰρωνεία), stemming from the verb *εἰρωννύω*, i.e., 'to speak in disguise' or 'to fake one's own ignorance' — in this sense, 'irony' indicates a 'rhetorical method', a certain way of talking. That being said, Flusser remarks, it is never too easy to distinguish between foolish joking around and irony, and to separate irony and self-irony.

Trying to illustrate the distinction, Flusser asks us to imagine someone trying to defame or ridicule Napoleon's military skills and political achievements by focusing merely on the day the great conqueror fell from his horse. It was the unfortunate morning of 24th June 1812, Napoleon Bonaparte was getting ready to cross the River Niemen, leading a troop of nearly seven hundred thousand soldiers into Russia. the alleged moment the great Emperor of the French 'fell from his horse.' Some say a rabbit ran into the legs of Napoleon's horse, causing the animal to swerve sharply, and forcing the Emperor to the ground.

Now, in Flusser's view, Napoleon's fall is obviously not irony; however amusing it may sound, this is just a frivolous anecdote, for it simply says that "strong individuals are sometimes weak" — i.e., it is a joke at the expense of what everyone already knows.

Thus, in *On Irony*, Flusser says: "To say that humanity is pathetic, for example, is to talk nonsense, because that might not be telling us anything new" (1972). And with these examples Flusser contrasts:

Now, to speak about the absurdity of life, nay, the futility of all human endeavors, though it might still sound a little *cliché*, is not necessarily foolish, because it is always painful and agonizing to hear such harsh criticism against ourselves, against human civilization (Ibidem).

However, this is precisely the ultimate task of philosophy in the Flusserian sense of the term: to reiterate the painful and the agonizing. Why? One answer can be indirectly established by considering another passage by Merleau-Ponty, from *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*:

One can speak in such a way as to make freedom show itself in and through the various respects and considerations, and to unlock hate by a smile — a lesson for our philosophy which has lost both its smile and its sense of tragedy. This is what is called irony (1970, p. 38).

But philosophy, Flusser would insist, cannot simply unlock hate by a smile ... simply being philosophy. To make freedom show itself — the ultimate task of philosophy in the Flusserian sense of the word — philosophy must throw man continuously into exile, into homelessness: that is where freedom can truly show itself.

For Flusser, then, the role of philosophy proper, i.e., philosophy that has lost neither its smile nor its sense of tragedy, is never without its consequences. On this account of philosophy, radical in the proper sense, irony might cost us dearly, as Flusser explains:

The alleged Second Romanticism illustrates our sense of irony: irony that costs an arm and a leg. I'm referring to that generation of bourgeoisie Europeans, contemporaries of the Bourbon Restoration of the Kingdom of France, and the Holy Alliance established by the Congress of Vienna. This Romantic irony shows perfectly well how the method works: it's a dangerous double-edged sword. Even though it was romantically drawn and wielded by the

Romanticism into pieces; i.e., the very ideal of Romanticism was its own death. Perhaps irony amounts always to this, then: it's our ultimate weapon in this battle called agony (1972).

So, this is what Flusser means when he says, 'philosophical irony' cannot be banal — for irony is a weapon of freedom: "Whenever spirit blows; that is where irony lies" (Ibidem).

Yet, it would be a mistake to rely too far on this homely view of irony. Flusser strongly suggests — and in this Flusser seems to depart from other Ironists — that, in order to make freedom show itself truly, the philosopher has to go further in his drawing and wielding of his double-edged sword ... turning it on him or herself. Indeed, this is what Flusser calls real irony: *Self-irony*, and thus he goes on to say that self-irony provides an even better understanding of the true virtue of irony. To 'protect' him or herself from his oppressors, the weak cuts his own body into pieces, maybe to show the strong how weak he actually is in his desperate need to oppress others.

And Flusser goes on to illustrate what he means, by appealing to his Jewish heritage:

Good examples of such self-irony are found in some Jewish jokes during the war: 'Jewish on rowing boat sinks German battleship' or 'German shepherd dog dies bitten by Jewish moneylender.' This is precisely what I mean by irony as a weapon against agony: Irony not just as a weapon of the weak, but rather a weapon of those waiting to die, whether in gas chambers or in circuses — recall the customary hand gesture of gladiators saluting to the Emperor before their own death: *Ave imperator morituri te salutant* ['Those about to die salute you!']. Hail, supreme Irony! (1972).

In this passage Flusser engages us in what he means when he says that true freedom better shows itself in one's smile and sense of tragedy towards oneself. In the end, it is only self-irony that may allow philosophy to be itself. But what does it mean for philosophy to be self-ironic, really?

It requires, among other things, a sort of melancholic mood from those philosophizing. Melancholic philosophy does not seek absolute truths, illumination, happiness, salvation, or immortality. It simply surrenders itself to the doubtful as an ontological gift. In such a state of redemption, far from approaching philosophy as a mendicant or a master, the melancholic mind of the ironic philosopher desires nothing: it simply wishes to die.

This, of course, implies neither a physical nor metaphysical death. And it is not a Tractarian silence either, for melancholic philosophy is not concerned with Wittgenstein's threaten that "if an answer cannot be expressed, the question too cannot be expressed" either. Or, said differently, melancholic philosophy does not believe that "If a question can be put at all, then it can *also* be answered" (*Tractatus*, 6.5).

In sum, then, to Flusser, scepticism does not need to be refuted, and it is not "palpably senseless" (Ibidem, 6.51). Precisely because melancholic philosophy understands that "Philosophical problems are like chess puzzles ... only more fun" — and it understands the joke (FLUSSER, 2007, p. 45). Thus, we must say a bit more about Flusser's notion of philosophical melancholia.

Melancholia as a philosophical virtue

It is in this state, as Flusser puts it in his *History of the Devil*, that the philosopher approaches philosophy "without asking questions or favor" (FLUSSER, 2008, p. 204). And this is precisely what Flusser means by *melancholia* as a philosophical virtue. The philosopher, in the Flusserian sense of

the term, refuses to exchange a life of love of wisdom for a life of alleged fundamental truths — philosophy leaves this task to science and technology. The senseless search for truth is left to naïve artists, priests, scientists, and philosophers. According to Flusser, it is only by renouncing the claim (or hope) to any ‘reward’ that philosophy finally becomes philosophy itself; and thus it becomes the turning point for spirit to elevate itself beyond nature.

In this spirit, the melancholic mind of the philosopher does not approach σοφία as if approaching a master or a provider of daily bread. Philosophy is itself its own fiction and glory, as Flusser elegantly tries to illustrate in his Allegory of the Ivory Tower (in *The History of the Devil*):

The ivory tower, in which the spectrum of the mind of the philosopher dwells, houses logical staircases. Each step is richly ornamented and covered with silver bells that chime ethically and frantically as one goes up.

The mind of the philosopher ascends these logical steps, inductively placid; descending again, deductively serene, whenever the ritual requires. In these gracious whereabouts, philosophy continues to chime the bells of morality, while the rabble at the foot of the tower receives its teachings reverently.

Tired, with his eyelids half closed, the philosopher guides the rabble, and beholds at it disappears before the philosopher’s vacant, meditative eyes. The mass disappears towards the future, for a while, as long as the lessons it has just received continue to inspire them in their imitation of Sisyphus.

Now the melancholic philosopher can finally turn his gaze toward the very tower he inhabits, philosophy itself, and the towers dissolves hopelessly into clouds of oblivion. The spectrum hovers above the clouds — like those sages floating on Chinese engravings.

The philosopher tosses his weary arms out into the clouds whose forms change with the weaving of those tired arms. Eventually, he sees himself turning into a cloud, hovering through other clouds, as he is himself, much like everything else, made of clouds (2008, p. 205).

Now, what ‘spectrum’ must this be, if not the spectrum of pure scepticism? Yet, the closing sentence has genuine force, since it does not even challenge the reader to perform the required mental act the philosopher engages himself or herself in. To Flusser, such a state of mind is a state of genuine philosophical realization in which even the idea of self-realization is abandoned. It is as paradoxical as imagining a saint who seeks no salvation, for s/he realized that redemption lies precisely in the very act of being a saint — and that is all that matters.

Philosophy beyond the language that points

To spell this out a bit further, setting aside saints and mystical language, notice that the Spanish philosopher, Ortega y Gasset has suggested a similar view of philosophical resignation when, in a somewhat different context, he says that every concept turns crucially around its own irony — and this is precisely what the spectrum must fully understand before it can earn the right to exist peacefully in the Ivory Tower.

Philosophers, Ortega y Gasset says, often pretend to know where some absolute truth lies, and thus conceitedly declare: “This thing is A and this thing is B” (1964, p. 93). However, the only assertion the spectrum of the mind of the melancholic, true philosopher takes seriously is that of the man who is always “playing a joke on us”, that is:

The unstable seriousness of one who is swallowing a laugh, which will burst out if he does not keep his lips tight closed. Philosophy knows very well that this thing is not just merely A, or that this is not just merely B. What the concept really thinks is a little bit different from what it says, and herein the irony lies (Ibidem).

To illustrate: the primary form of concept would be that of a baby's index-finger gesture, pointing at its objects of desire, precisely because it lacks language proper. At first, babies suffer from a form of cognitive illusion, and imagine everything to be always at their fingertips, as if they could grab them easily. But after many trials and errors, infants start to renounce the desire to grab those 'things in themselves' and will rest content with only pointing at their objects of desire, relying now on a mother or a caregiver who may provide them with those objects. To Flusser, philosophy must get to a point in which it grows out of this infantile stage. Philosophy must stop pointing at objects of desire.

On the one hand, religion and science — for whom, in their own distinctive ways, reality in itself does not really matter; what truly matters to each is their own systems of signs at fit to describe reality according to their own specific interests — is thought to be the 'grown-up' version of this babyish illusion.

Arts, on the other, at times attempt just the opposite: to immortalize reality, which would otherwise always escape our grabbing, moving from signs to the representations of the things in themselves. But reality is a myriad of events at any given time; and to think that art — in its broadest sense, in the Flusserian sense of the term — which includes language, technical images, and works of art (as 'nets' to collect new ideas, new ways to experience and think the living world, i.e., art as our way of opposing entropy, of creating a living world and avoiding chaos⁴) — can genuinely describe, for instance, that what happens now is what happens always is a farce.

All the mind can do is to assume that things are this or that way, and these assumptions, it is true, provide us with a kind of road map of the world; and with this map in hand, one can navigate reality for a while. However, the information provided by this map is much like the information one could gather about an infinite field only by looking through a peephole on the wall. Looking through a peephole, one may certainly be able to describe what he or she sees through that particular angle. But the hardest part, so it seems, is for one to humbly accept that this is all he or she is doing: looking through a small crack in the wall — and still not panic, and not lose the smile.

With Flusser, and Ortega y Gasset, we may say that some scientists, some artists, priests, and some forms of philosophy have each poked their own peepholes on the horizon of being — although they will occasionally share peepholes among themselves — through which they see A or B; yet, they will quite so often claim with certainty that A or B is definitely the truth.

It is only irony and melancholia that allows the advanced philosophical mind — or saints, artists, philosophers or otherwise — to finally realize that to peephole is to play a joke on ourselves.

⁴ FLUSSER, "A arte: o belo e o agradável," aula não-publicada. 1975-1976. In short, to Flusser the greatest works of art aim at enriching future perspectives of reality ... new ways of thinking the living world.

Philosophy proper

That being said, genuine philosophy recognizes not only the irony of the joker, the claimers to truth access, but its own. Thus, for Flusser self-irony, as explained earlier, is superior to irony itself; and it is precisely this realization of self-irony that allows philosophy to live peacefully and joyfully in the Ivory Tower, till its time to dissolve into clouds comes.

What is the actual task of such philosophy, then?

The primary task of philosophy as melancholia is to create fantasy, myths; and for that, it must suspend belief, occasionally. Beliefs are, in Flusser's view, the death of the myth; it is when myths finally become rituals, incorporated into daily existence; when myths begin to be worshiped as the sacrosanct.

Without myths, however, humanity would not have progressed through the different modes of historical fabrication, which has allowed humankind, despite all its apparent limitations, to advance from its ape-like hands painting figures in cave walls to robots and cyber alienation — i.e., from caveman, to tool-man, to industrial-man, to robot-man. Needless to say, each of these transformations required deep epistemological and ontological transmutations; they required man to abandon old rituals and create new myths. And the creation of such new myths are, according to Flusser, the task of art proper — or, in a broader sense, the poets, as in the Greek term *poiētēs*, as creators, makers, inventors.

However, for Flusser, this role is inverted the moment new myths, the new propositions about reality, start to be accepted and deified, by the rabble gathered around the foot of the Ivory Tower, not as myths anymore, but as rituals: that which is believed and practiced as truth in a given culture. On this picture, arts, sciences, and religions, all create myths; and to do so, they must — in one way or another, sooner or later — suspend beliefs in order to exist.

Still, and this is Flusser's whole point, genuine philosophy — philosophy proper — is the only discipline capable of creating myths self-consciously and, above all, laugh at the myths it creates: that is, philosophy is capable of recognizing, without remorse or shame, that all it does is to write myths; and it is what allows the melancholic philosopher to live this kind of self-irony.

But this also means that the philosopher understands that without myths, there is simply no Reality. For thousands of years, the universe has been made precisely of that: myths of giants and fantastic creatures and mysterious Gods. And new 'truths' are precisely that: new myths of giants and fantastic creatures and mysterious Gods. That is why Flusser says Irony is a linguistic weapon against nothingness, against chaos, against entropy: *it is fiction against fiction*; for irony allows the philosopher to create myths consciously, knowing s/he is creating nothing but.

Flusser's radical immanent monism

Now, I cannot deny that at times Flusser's blatant scepticism may come across as pure cynicism, which might raise the question of why his scepticism should be seen as philosophically relevant; not to speak of the problem of its relevance to the rabble around the Ivory Tower. And this brings us to another puzzling spectrum I see hovering over Flusser's ideas: the eradication of boundaries between the ontological and the ethical. That is what I call Flusser's *radical immanent monistic view*.

Indeed, Flusser's whole philosophical efforts flirts with this attribute. It is *monism* because within Flusser's philosophy, the variety of things that are said to exist in the universe can ultimately be reduced to one opacity (meaning the mind never has access to single substances; all the intellect can ever know is a blurred constellation of ideas, which are basically meaningless outside a given context); it is *immanent* because the organization of such opacity into Reality obviously depends solely on the way the human mind operates; and it is *radical*, as in the Latin term for root, *radix*, or foundation, because, in elaborating his philosophy, Flusser begins always with the assumption that every fundamental ontological and ethical problem humans have to face is deeply rooted in the way the mind erroneously differentiates between thought and reality, mind and body, being and thinking, God and the Devil, mortality and immortality, truth and falsity, so on and so forth.

Of course, one could try to argue that the task of philosophy is to record the passages of meanings rather than to take it as an accomplished fact. But this, Flusser would say, is the task of history. And history is the Devil itself; or at least one aspect of the Devil — its ontological mask, as the horizon of being (the other side being language itself — the Devil's epistemological feature). Thus, Flusser will say, "the evolution of the Devil and the evolution of life", of human civilization, of progress, "are at least parallel" if not two aspects of a single reality (2012, p. 22).

What the melancholic philosopher does, then, is to overcome the limits of its own thinking, by surrendering to the essence of thought, the doubtful: by doubting doubt itself.

Put differently: if language is indeed a sterile and tautological system of symbols and rules, and the only field of activity of the intellect ... the idea that man's thoughts are symbols of the world, and, in turn, the world is the projection of human thought ... as if the human spirit were closed in on itself, imprisoned within itself, in a particular type of hell, and if it is true that we cannot overcome this highly unsatisfactory reality of the imprisonment of the language itself, philosophy can nevertheless reflect against itself; that is, philosophy can not only doubt the doubtful, but it can doubt itself (FLUSSER, 1963, p. 7).

Protecting the doubtful

And this brings us to one more distinction Flusser's radical immanent monism seeks to erase: the Cartesian dichotomy "thinking thing — extended thing" (Ibidem, p. 5) — for all forms of dualism are pure abstractions: "What does exist is an interpersonal relationship, a networking [intercorporality], intersubjective fields of relations," from which we may "extrapolate" particulars, but all we have is opacity (FLUSSER, 2003, p. 102).

Thus, while Descartes — and science in general ... and art and religion that try to copy science — appeal to scepticism only to put an end to it, Flusser wants to push the doubtful to its extreme: it is only when philosophy protects the ontological function of doubting and accepts bewilderment, fiction, myth, and absurdity humbly — and, above it all, learns to laugh at its own ignorance — that it can be the gate to any decent conversation capable of amazement, and in contact with the ineffable (1963, p. 7). Let science and technology be rigorous ... that is not the role of philosophy ... at least, it should not be its ultimate goal. In Flusser's terms, "Should philosophy become too rigorous, we would lose our capacity for amazement; no new words, no new thoughts would then emerge," and [philosophy] would simply "revolve in repetitive circles of idle talk" (Ibidem).

Hence, it is only reasonable for philosophy to protect the doubtful, accepting that thinking is not a tool to master and manipulate chaos — the ultimate aim of any search for indubitable certainties. In doubting and doubting itself, thinking becomes rather “a song of praise to the never-conquerable” and nameless chaotic principles of nature. “The doubtful is therefore not something to be defined, but something to be thought; indeed, it is the very horizon of our own thinking” (Ibidem, p. 5). And, in doubting, thinking should lead us “up to that point where, (to quote a myth), we were expelled from Paradise and where our thinking, which is our exile, began” (Ibidem, p. 2). That is, in Flusser’s view, one way of moving away from progress, away from the collapse of civilization. The doubtful is, for Flusser, the very condition of thinking and being — thus, it must be cherished.

In which case, with Machado de Assis, Flusser would probably agree:

Let Pascal say that man is a thinking reed. He is wrong: Man is a thinking erratum. Each period in life is a new edition that corrects the preceding one, and that in turn will be correct by the next, until publication of the definitive edition, which the publisher donates to the worms (2008, p. xxvii).

In/Conclusion ...

With this, the aims of this paper — to make some sense of the relations, in Flusser’s thought, between language, reality, scepticism, exile — is, I believed, accomplished. The doubtful is Flusser’s idea of the ontological condition of exile at an epistemological level — and it is the task of philosophy proper.

On this score, then, we may say that — following the good example of the metaphysicians of Borges’ imaginary land of Tlön⁵ — Flusser adopts the philosophical stand of those philosophers who “do not seek for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for the astounding”, which is the very condition of the possibility of thinking, which for Flusser is not different from reality.” This is precisely why Flusser will strongly suggest — in his *Autobiography*, for instance — that we should look at philosophical, metaphysical problems just as pieces on a chessboard: “Only more fun, precisely because philosophy can better hide the ludic character of the game: (2007, p. 45).

Flusser rejects, then, the “I” that thinks to eradicate doubt, and replaces it with ‘thinking happens, therefore something exists’ — and on this he seems to agree with Deleuze, who termed the *Cogito* as an involuntary activity that is always affected by external forces and elements. Something in the world forces the “I” to think — and “This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter” (DELEUZE, 2007, p. 139).

The freer philosophy is from prejudices, the more open it is to this encounter, within the immanence, and the more interesting the conversation becomes. Thus, affected by fundamental immanent encounters, the beginning of thinking is never determined by a self-sufficient Ego with a collection of ideas, but rather by forces external to the “I” that thinks itself freed from prejudices. And that is one reason why Flusser says in *The History of the Devil* that the “I” is an empty concept (from an epistemological point of view), and a lack (from an ethical-ontological standpoint). And Flusser completes this idea with the thesis that fiction is the only tangible reality we possess (FLUSSER, 2012, p. 8).

⁵ This is, of course, an allusion to the characters in the story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, by the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges. See, for instance, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New York: A New Direction Book, 2007), p. 10.

However, here we have a problem: if “the sensation of the fictitious is everything that surrounds us, the world of the masses [the rabble at the foot of the Ivory Tower waiting for certainties] continues to mask its fictitious character ever more successfully” ... and fiction is reality — which seems to suggest a contradiction; as one of the terms is defined by negating the other. I.e., if it is *fiction*, it cannot be real; if it is *real*, it cannot be fiction. Yes. But Flusser already accepted that to “be human is to be absurd” (1963, p. 7). And the task of philosophy proper is “this motion of thought, this reflux, this doubt about doubt, about itself” (Ibidem).

What’s more, this absurdity should not surprise us, for it started a while ago, with the dichotomy between what should be saved and what should be doomed, of what can be trusted, and what should be doubted:

The dichotomy, far from having arisen with the Cartesian system, is already contained within those primeval myths from which Western civilization has sprung. Christianity is the ritualized expression of such myths. From this point of view, Descartes is no more than Christianity explicit. It is Christianity that distinguishes between that which should be saved (the soul) and that which can be given up, the body (FLUSSER, 1963, p. 3).

This final passage, which is connected with everything else we have discussed thus far, plays an important role in Flusser’s radical immanent monism as a whole (in the way I have been painting it), and in his rejection of dualism in particular — be it in its Cartesian form or in its the Neo-Platonist/Christian form. For both forms of dualism perpetrate, in their own ways, the view that “The shadows we see in the world contrast with the reality of the ideas” and that “This valley of tears contrasts with the kingdom of heaven” (FLUSSER, 1966). That’s why Flusser will say that Descartes’ doubt is not different from Augustine’s certainty.

For Flusser, however, there is only one thing worthy of being saved: the act of being ethical in becoming human, for the sake of being ethical and becoming human, by understanding our condition of exile, and nothing else. In other words, what Flusser seeks to save, then, is not the soul, but philosophy itself. But save it from what, from whom? Threats come from all sides: from the rabble, from the rigidity of science and technology, and from religion and art that serve science.

Sure, philosophy may still provide the rabble with what it needs to survive: “The spectrum of the mind of the philosopher” climbs the “logical staircase ... richly ornamented with silver bells that chime ethically and frantically” as the philosopher goes up and down the staircase (FLUSSER, 2008, p. 205). Still, philosophy cannot forget that it is itself just a spectrum, and Reality belongs to the unclassifiable — and the unclassifiable has already been poetically described: “I am that I am,” “I am who I am,” “I will be what I will be” (Exodus 3:14); and no surprise, Flusser would say, this revelation had to be uttered through a burning bush. And what can philosophy possibly say in strict linguistic terms about burning bushes?

Thus, says Flusser, the only hope philosophy has to grasp the unclassifiable is to know itself: “Philosophy may be defined as language [but language is fiction] talking about itself, as a reflection on language itself” (FLUSSER, 1963, p. 7). But, of course:

Though without confessing it, philosophy always knew this much about itself, and this was the role it played in the history of conversation ... it reflected upon conversations, and thus make room for a new kind of conversation to spring from the ineffable ... a conversation full

of amazement, full of adventures; a conversation about something as yet completely unimaginable (Ibidem).

And that is how philosophy can continue to avoid the plunge of Western civilization and the Devil. Ah, the Devil! It cannot be forgotten ... And what is it, exactly?

Of course, it is a thing with many faces, or should we say many masks. It is us; it is history; it is the abyss of absurdity of human existence; it is exile; and it is the doubtful. Thus, not to talk about the Devil is “an attitude at least suspicious” (FLUSSER, 2012, p. 20); and to attempt to eradicate Him is equally absurd; for to eradicate the Devil is to eradicate the human element from the horizon of thinking and being ... therefore, reconciliation is a must. How? It has already been said: through philosophy proper; i.e., and now paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, philosophy that has not “lost both its smile and its sense of tragedy” (1970, p. 38) in “this battle called agony” (FLUSSER, 1972).

Exile – according to Flusser – is where the “ethical question” smashes the Devil’s temple to pieces, so to speak. It is in “exile” that humanity has the chance of waking up to “accept the responsibility for answering the call” of Being. On a last note, exile for Flusser means any place or situation in which the human element is “forced” or “called” to be ethically responsible; and this is often a situation in which one’s historical/existential circumstances and projects are shaken, if not altogether crushed. Or, at least, this is Flusser’s reading of the narrative of Balaam and Jacob in the Book of Numbers. Flusser asks us, placing Balaam’s question in the mouth of Balaam’s talking donkey: “What did Balaam’s donkey mean by: ‘How goodly are your tents, Jacob?’”

And Flusser himself answers it:

The donkey must have had in mind the experience that tent dwellers (including himself, Balaam, and Jacob) have of desert and steppe winds. They cannot help but hear whispering voices in the wind.

Theologians, however, have, for thousands of years argued over the precise message that the steppe wind uttered through the tent wall, therefore transforming Jacob’s tent into a medium of fantasy. Probably it uttered nothing more than “I am that I am,” thus challenging Jacob to become what he should be (2003, p. 64).

If follows that, for Flusser, the distinction between the ontological and the ethical is never an absolute one; and the issue that lies at the heart of Flusser’s radical immanent monism is precisely the ethical call, the whispering voices in the wind uttered through the tent wall in the desert, that urges us to become human in the very act of becoming human. In other words, for Flusser, we have to earn our right to be called human, according to the way we respond to the ethical call. Of course, as Flusser explains, still reflecting on Jacob’s story:

The voice calls out to him; but Jacob doesn’t necessarily have to obey. The voice that utters ‘Hear, O Israel’ does not necessarily mean ‘Follow, O Israel’ — in which case we may say that Israel is Jacob honorific (Ibidem).

On this particular score, we may say that Goethe's⁶ vision of the ethical is the same that animates Flusser's ethics: "He who earns his freedom, and his life must reconquer them each day."⁷

So, Flusser would certainly agree with Machado de Assis' critique of Pascal's image of man as a thinking reed. Flusser's radical immanent monism implies the fundamental human condition as a thinking erratum. Yet, Flusser would add, the publisher should still wish to donate to the worms the best definite edition possible. This indicates Flusser's eradiation of the boundaries between the ontological and the ethical. I call it Flusser's radial immanent monism.

⁶ Goethe is indeed one of the thinkers whose ideas impacted Flusser the most, as he himself tells us in his philosophical autobiography.

⁷ See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe's Faust: and abridged version*, translated by Louis MacNeice and El Stahl (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1965).

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