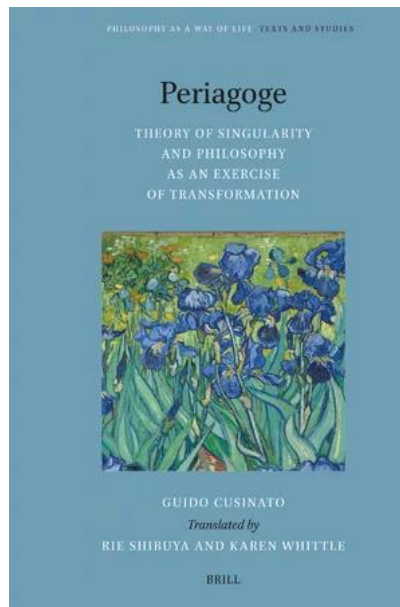


Periagoge: Summary of Book Chapters & Contents



[Periagoge - Theory of Singularity and Philosophy as an Exercise of Transformation | Brill](#)

Back cover

This book returns to the question at the center of our existence, a question that the narcissistic culture in which we are immersed systematically tends to remove: “Why?” The underlying thesis is that the answer must not be sought in success or social recognition, but in a “fragment of truth”, hidden somewhere inside each of us, which reveals itself only if we detach ourselves from our ego and its certainties. It is not, therefore, a matter of finding yet another philosophical theory of the meaning of existence, but rather of shedding light on the conditions under which such meaning can emerge. The author shows us that the ultimate source of our existential orientation lies in the affective sphere, and that the current crisis of orientation is derived from the atrophy of the process of affective maturation on a large scale, and from a lack of knowledge and experience about which techniques are best to reactivate it. We are like glowworms that had once unlearned how to illuminate and have since begun to hover around the magic lantern of the ascetic ideal, already criticized by Nietzsche, and then around neon advertising signs. We are glowworms that have forgotten that we have within our own affective

structure a precious source of orientation. The basic thesis is that this source of orientation can be reactivated through the care of desire and practices of emotional sharing.

Summary of Book Chapters

1) *Hunger to be born and anthropogenesis*

This chapter proposes to fill a serious lacuna. In philosophy, in psychology, and in sociology, there is a very problematic indistinction between our “little self”, that is, our social self, and our “personal singularity”. The little self assumes form while it seeks to assert itself in the struggle for recognition. In contrast, the personal singularity assumes form as it falls, a bit like the breaker of the wave of Hokusai, and then as it copes with crises. The little self can be described in terms of “personal identity” or of “psychological continuity”, concepts that are not adequate instead to describe the personal singularity. In fact, the physiognomy of the personal singularity is designed by ruptures, by deviations, by discontinuities. These scars become its distinctive trait, like the gold veining of a vase reconstructed through the art of *kintsugi*. Who are we then really? If we turn our gaze deeply enough into ourselves, we glimpse an original tension and restlessness of the heart. What is this about? The problem is that we live immersed in a narcissistic culture, which removes the fundamental question, the question of meaning that is at the center of our existence: Why? The restlessness of the heart impels us to take up this question again with attention and care. It does not give us an answer, but it points out to us that at the center of our existence is an unexplored space, an “auroral void”. “Void”, not in the sense of a lack, but in the sense in which an opening from which the water of a spring gushes can be. As the hours, the days and the years go by, I feel it growing within me. Yet, I feel it growing so close to the void of my stomach that I often mistake it for hunger for food or for social recognition. Of course, the auroral void also has its “hunger”. And yet, it is not the hunger for food or for success, but the hunger to be born and to exist. The essential given is that we come into the world without a predefined existential form, that is, without having finished being born. This is why we have the hunger to be born. At bottom, we are nothing else than our hunger to be born.

2) *Periagoge and exemplarity*

This chapter describes the influence of the exemplarity in the process of formation of the human singularity, understood as anthropogenesis. Exemplarity is often confused with model. A model testifies to a social

success; in contrast, an exemplarity testifies to a successful act of overcoming the perspective of one's little self. A model demands to be imitated and indicates precise rules to be followed; in this way, it produces standardization and conformism. An exemplarity, through its testimony, limits itself to offering a maieutic space and helps us to give birth to our personal singularity; in this way, it produces differentiation. The act of self-transcending, which is at the basis of the exemplarity, recalls the movement of the "periagoge" with which Plato describes the movement of the neck of the prisoner of the cave as soon as he is freed from the chains. Why is there a need for an exemplarity? To live is not natural for human beings. It is by no means a spontaneous event or a matter of course. By contrast, it is a craft that requires a difficult traineeship. Each human being is born without an already given existential form. From this point of view, each newborn is the first Eva or the first Adam of a new anthropogenetic pathway. The experiences that have been tried out during the most recent millennia through this "craft of living" have been settled into one particular type of knowledge: philosophy. Philosophy, understood as the exercise of transformation, is therefore not a cognitive method and not even a system of thought. By contrast, it is the consequence of the fact that human beings come into the world without having finished being born. And this is the only true motive why philosophy still exists today: the anthropogenetic process is still underway and has not yet been concluded, but, if it were concluded, philosophy would be concluded as well. Therefore, a future in which the restlessness of the heart and the hunger to be born came to be neutralized would be a future devoid of philosophy.

3) Toward a new order of feeling

Feeling and emotion have often been set in contrast to one another: the former confined to a subjective and inner dimension, while the latter intentionally directed toward the world. This chapter calls into question this contrast and proposes a reevaluation of feeling intentionally. Feeling has almost always been considered a treacherous and chaotic material to be "straightened" and oriented, or, oppositely, to be exalted as the source of pure truth and authenticity. In this chapter, it is demonstrated that feeling is neither one nor the other, and that it is important to overcome both the dualism between reason and feeling and the romantic myth of feeling immediately. Feeling must not be oriented, since it is precisely in feeling that the ultimate source of every orientation is rooted. However, "immediate feeling" is often limited to reflecting common feeling in which one is immersed. This comes about because feeling is like a little seedling

that needs to be cultivated with care. It is only once it has grown that it can orient our existence in an autonomous way by emancipating itself from common feeling. Therefore, it would be naïve to suppose that the widespread sensation of meaninglessness and the fragility of the current framework of cultural orientation derive from the inability to develop a new and more effective philosophical “theory” of the meaning of life, of justice or of the good: rather, the meaninglessness derives from a deactivation, at mass level, of the process of affective maturation and from a lack of knowledge and of experiences about the techniques apt to reactivate it. We are like glow-worms that have unlearned how to illuminate. In the age of repressive morals, hence until the announcement of the death of God by Nietzsche, human beings used to circle around the magic lantern of the ascetic ideal. Now, in the age of narcissism, they are instead buzzing around neon advertising signs. They are glow-worms who have forgotten that they have a precious potentiality of orientativeness within their own affective system.

4) Emotions that give shape to the existence

In this chapter, it is demonstrated that emotions are the ultimate source of all types of motivation. Without emotions there would be no motivations for moving, for acting, for carrying out choices or acts and therefore, there would be paralysis. At the more elementary level, emotion motivates movements of the living body (*Leib*). Without emotions, all the possibilities of movement would be perceived by the living body as devoid of significance, because they would be absolutely indifferent. When one thinks of emotions, one often thinks of something visceral and instinctive, something that sweeps us away with catastrophic outcomes, hence something to be refrained from. In human existence, emotions can sweep us away precisely because they reveal an extraordinary plasticity. This plasticity is not to be “corrected” or “straightened up”, but must be cultivated, since human emotions continue to develop and mature even many years after biological birth. In this chapter, a radical rethinking of human emotion is proposed by conceiving it as the engine of the anthropogenetic process: in human beings, emotions become the chisels that give form to our existence. Each significant experience that touches me is metabolized into a further piece of the expressive process of my physiognomy or into the scar, into the mark of a disfigurement. To each significant experience corresponds therefore a reconfiguration and an enrichment of the physiognomy of the personal singularity. Emotions are part of us and accompany every gesture and experience of our life. Considering this, it becomes essential to

comprehend them, to know them and to learn to handle them: they are our window onto the world. From early childhood, it is fundamental to train emotional competence, which is not to be thought of from an individualistic perspective: it does not consist only in the ability to recognize and name one's own emotions, but first and foremost in the ability to express and share them.

5) *Care of desire*

Few terms have such a fascinating and controversial etymology as the term "desire". The Latin verb "*desiderare*" is composed of the prefix "*de-*" (which usually indicates a lack) and the noun "*-sidera*" (the plural of "*sidus*", that is, star). Therefore, one thinks that desire expresses a lack (*de-*) of stars (*-sidera*). But what kind of stars are they? Since antiquity, a set of stars has assumed a very precise significance: it is a "constellation", and these are necessary not only for orienting oneself, in the nighttime navigation for example, but also for orienting existence through the zodiacal signs. These constellations expressed our destiny. In this chapter, I propose a new interpretation of desire. Indeed, the prefix "*de-*" can indicate not only "lack", but also the action of destructing, as in the case of terms "to de-construct", "to de-structure" or "to de-molish". In this case, desire becomes an action of destructing that constellation that imprisons, like a destiny, my actual existence within the worries of the daily routine. Desire becomes the dissatisfaction that "de-constructs" the old constellation (destiny), to place oneself in search of a new constellation (destination). Human beings are born without having finished being born, because their destination is not predetermined or already inscribed somewhere. This is why there is desire. When I desire, I take distance from habits, from customs, to let a little fragment of truth emerge from my auroral void. A fragment of truth that, to remain alive, needs to dialogue with other fragments of truth. This fragment of truth, which often remains hidden, represents my destination, that is, my vocation.

6) *Philosophy as an exercise of transformation*

There are experiences that make one "tremble", because they make one lose the ground beneath one's feet. They are "periagogic" experiences in that they bring about a conversion of the way of thinking and feeling and make possible a new beginning of existence. The art of this periagogic conversion coincides with a philosophy understood as an exercise of transformation. If philosophy serves to *learn to think*, philosophy as an exercise of transformation serves to *learn to live*. In this chapter, starting

out from a precise personal experience, I describe some phases of a possible pathway of transformation in the order in which I experienced them. I do so without any pretension of completeness and also by seeking traces of them in the philosophical tradition. The first phase confronts the Platonic theme of purification (*katharsis*) and of refutation (*elenchos*) to reinterpret the learning to die in the sense of a learning to live. The second phase is devoted to the theme of an emptying that concerns not only one's own certainties and convictions, but also the psychological structure of egotism, by which I do not understand the legitimate self-love, but that excessive and blinding love toward oneself that Plato, in the *Laws*, pointed to as the greatest of all evils. The third phase is devoted to the exercises of dis-tension. This is a moment of passage from the deconstructive moment to the positive one of the exercises of transformation. In the fourth phase, I consider the *pathos* of *thauma* as an experience of being touched by the world, in the dual sense of horror and wonder. After the theme of wonder, I tackle those of annunciation, eros and finally soliloquy and meditation.

7) *Generative goods and open community: the new axis of social transformation*

At the center of this chapter is the attempt to rethink the problem of social transformation in the age of narcissism. In no other age has the idol of one's own ego enjoyed so much space as in the current one. A project of social transformation that does not consider the problem of the interwovenness of narcissism and nihilism runs the risk of turning out entirely inadequate. In the philosophical and political debate of recent decades, the theme of social transformation has de facto run aground. The projects of transformation proposed by Foucault, Sloterdijk, Anders, and Nussbaum remain imprisoned within a self-referential and individualistic perspective. They refer only to individualistic feeling and revolve around the projectuality and initiative of the individual and sovereign subject. In this chapter, transformation is no longer rethought from the point of view of individual feeling, but in terms of practices of emotional sharing and relations of care. Social transformation implies the possibility of reorienting emotions in the public sphere beyond a self-referential and narcissistic perspective. This chapter shows that this becomes possible if one passes through the spaces of community where practices of emotional sharing oriented by exemplarity are possible. A perspective of social transformation opens up only if one raises the bar and calls into question the real ideological presuppositions upon which the current production system of Western society is based, that is, the

logic of *homo oeconomicus*, and rediscovers the difference between need and desire, between gratification and happiness. Without this passage, in the age of narcissism, traditional attempts at social transformation turn out incapable of undermining the logic upon which consumer society and entertainment industries are based.

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