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MIKEL DUFRENNE

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Mikel Dufrenne (1910-1995) can be surely considered one of the main scholars in the tradition of phenomenological aesthetics. His research spans the second half of the last century. By the end of the war, he published his first book, *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence* (1947), together with the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. He defended his doctoral theses *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique* and *La Personnalité de base* at Sorbonne University in 1953. In the 1950s, Dufrenne began his academic career after years spent teaching in high schools. The 1960s definitively established his name in the world of academia and research. He was co-editor of the *Revue d'Esthétique* (1960-1994) and president of the *Société française d'esthétique* (1971-1994). He became professor at the new Nanterre University in 1964, where he founded the philosophy department. He took part in the protests of 1968, which greatly influenced his thinking. He retired from university in 1974, but continued his philosophical work until his later years.

Mikel Dufrenne's aesthetics is undoubtedly rooted in phenomenology. On the one hand, he ideally carries on the studies conducted by scholars belonging to the first wave of phenomenological aesthetics, such as Waldemar Conrad and Roman Ingarden; on the other hand, he explicitly follows Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenology. It is no coincidence that his career opens and closes with two works in this tradition: *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique* (1953) and *L'œil et l'oreille* (1987). Phenomenology is the underlying structure of Dufrenne's thought. Even in a work far from the theory of experience such as *Le Poétique* (1963), the genesis of poetic language is investigated in light of the relationship between the subject, in this case the poet, and the world with its hidden meaning. The effective experience of human beings in the world is perhaps the theme that can best capture the spirit of Dufrenne's aesthetics.

Dufrenne's thought is also strongly influenced by contemporary French aesthetics. Especially his conception of the imagination, which runs throughout his philosophical production, is the result of a dialogue with his mentor Alain, with Gaston Bachelard and, of course, with Sartre. However, his aesthetics

is certainly first and foremost a phenomenology of perception, directly inspired by Merleau-Ponty's theory. From this perspective, artworks are conceived by Dufrenne as aesthetic objects, which arise from the encounter with the perceiving subject. Thus, seeking a new way to describe the artistic object with respect to classical canons, Dufrenne conceives of artworks primarily as "objects for me" related to the sensible dimension.

Finally, there is a strand within Dufrenne's aesthetics that is devoted to the social and the political. In the work *Art et politique* (1974) he investigates the meaning of art in terms of social and popular commitment. Many of his aesthetic writings are also collected in the three volumes *Esthétique et Philosophie* (1967-1981).

Before embarking on a brief analysis of Dufrenne's major aesthetic works, it is necessary to offer some clarifications. Many scholars pointed out that Dufrenne's philosophy has all too often been reduced to his aesthetics. While this is probably true, it must be nevertheless emphasized that sensible experience is the foundational dimension in which all other questions are rooted. Beside this, it must be also said that Dufrenne's aesthetics is not a self-enclosed sphere. It is clear from the very first texts that his investigation starts from aesthetics and seeks to transcend its own domain towards an original substrate of experience. Over the course of his career Dufrenne gradually clarifies this ontological thought through the expressions *a priori* and Nature. In this respect, the most relevant works are *La notion d'a priori* (1956), *Le Poétique* (1963), and *L'inventaire des a priori* (1981).

Aesthetics undoubtedly remains the constant question in Dufrenne philosophical career. One of his most important works is still *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique* (1953). In this voluminous book, the philosopher aims to describe the aesthetic experience of artworks through the relationship between object and subject. The philosopher develops a view that reverses the perspective on artworks and focuses on experiencers. Artworks are analysed as aesthetic objects, by describing the structure of the spectator's perception while also giving artworks meaning and value precisely on the basis of this perception. Therefore, beholders acquire an essential role, since works find their fulfilment only in the subjects' experience: they are both *performers* and *witnesses* to the epiphany of aesthetic objects.

Moreover, the French philosopher defines the artwork as a *quasi-subject*. This makes Dufrenne's approach to the artistic question unprecedented. Aesthetic experience is thus a mediated relationship between two human styles: on the one hand, the aesthetic object, through its presence, bears witness to the artist's experience (*quasi-subject*); on the other hand, the beholder phenomenologically constitutes it, grasping the glimmer of meaning and humanity enclosed in it.

However, the core of this text is the analysis of the subject's perception. To perceive, Dufrenne states, is "to know – that is, to discover – a meaning within or beyond appearances which they offer only to the one who knows how to decipher them" (Dufrenne 1973: 335). In the second volume of this work, three phases of the aesthetic experience are defined: presence, representation, and reflection and feeling.

Presence is considered a nascent state, namely the condition of possibility of all experience. It is an unutterable relationship between subject and object, occurring at the bodily level. Though the body is

always the founding dimension of every experience – according to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology –, Dufrenne introduces an operating consciousness.

The second phase, representation, is defined by the role of imagination. This is conceived as a condition of possibility for all knowledge, which converts what is acquired by sensible experience into the visible, generating a representation – close to Kantian aesthetics. By breaking the plane of presence, consciousness itself emerges. Thus, the function of representation is to mediate between the presence and the reflective plane. Hence, imagination is conceived as a bridge, an organic passage from the immanence of the presence to the transcendence of consciousness. It makes it possible to go beyond mere sensibility and to develop a kind of reflection that delves into the structure of our experience. Dufrenne's imagination can also be defined as "existential", in Jaspers' sense, since it is that function which, in its transcendental and empirical nature, concretely places humans in the world. It gives them their own mode of existence, which is that of representation.

The third phase of the experience discloses the expressive dimension of the aesthetic object through feeling, conceived as a kind of capacity for receptivity, a sensibility to a certain world. According to Dufrenne, feeling needs to be encompassed by reflection. Reflection operates in a continuous attempt to understand artworks as feeling has grasped them; at the same time, feeling is reinforced by reflection. Hence, the final stage of the aesthetic experience is characterized by the union between feeling and reflecting, in a never-ending dialectical process.

The aesthetic process is coherent whole within the phenomenological frame. The object is grasped by a stratification of gazes, which gradually clarify its meaning without ever being able to fully reach it.

In the last pages of the *Phénoménologie*, the author refers to poetry. The spectator must transform himself into a poet in order to access a pre-conceptual dimension, i.e. to grasp the poetic side of the perceived. Similarly, in *La notion d'a priori* he claims that, in order not to be forced into silence, philosophy must transform itself into poetry. This is the only language capable of giving adequate form to the common ground of subject and object, which the author calls Nature. However, it is only in *Le Poétique* that his reflection on poetry finds fulfilment. Dufrenne describes the essence of poetry by setting out from the experience of the reader, who is drawn into a "poetic state" both physically and intellectually. In this almost ecstatic moment, the reader comes into contact with a specific world, directly sharing the poet's experience. At the core of poetic writings, there is the sensible experience of poets, who are able to deeply connect with the inner sense of the world. This sense is, by definition, overflowing and cannot be enclosed in any form but verse composition. In the poetic act, the author describes another side of reality, a sense that is not immediately visible, but immediately ready to be grasped: *Natura naturans* as the original ontological dimension.

After May 1968, Dufrenne became more and more certain that art is charged with promoting cultural revolution, which, in his view, always precedes political revolution (as Marcelle Brisson stated in Lascault 1975). In *Art et politique* (1974) the author explored these two dimensions and their intertwining, in dialogue with thinkers such as Pierre Gaudibert, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Deleuze. The philosopher

criticises art as a market phenomenon, whereby objects merely acquire an exchange value and become symbols of belonging to a certain social class. When art becomes institutionalised and ideologically charged, it loses its wild dimension: it is “derealised”. Art and politics are linked in *utopian practice*. They both find their original vocation, which starts with *desire*, defined as the awareness of a lack, but also as the productive force and the very process of utopian action. In light of this, art must belong to common people and therefore become a socio-cultural practice: not mass art, but an art belonging to the masses.

The *Trattato di estetica* (1981) sprung from the friendship and collaboration between Dufrenne and Dino Formaggio, one of the exponents of the Milan School. This text, divided into two volumes, “History” and “Theory”, collects a series of contributions from various contemporary scholars, including Gianni Vattimo and Emilio Garroni. Dufrenne offers a rich picture of contemporary French philosophy, presenting himself as the heir to Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics. He contributes the essays *Arte e società*, *Arte e natura*, and *L’arte e le arti*. These books are particularly valuable today, as they not only offer us a vivid testimony concerning the major aesthetic themes of the time, but also illustrate how certain issues and authors were perceived within academic circles.

In 1977, Dufrenne took part in a conference in New York dedicated to Merleau-Ponty with a paper entitled *L’œil et l’esprit (Esthétique et philosophie 1981)*. Here he rhetorically wonders why the philosopher chose to focus on the eye, instead of other organs, such as the ear or the hand. By further exploring this perspective, in his last work *L’œil et l’oreille* (1987) Dufrenne discusses the theme of the synaesthesia. After years spent focusing on ontological themes, and political and anthropological issues (*Pour l’homme* [1963], *Art et politique* [1974], *Subversion, perversion* [1977]), Dufrenne returns to the issue of sensible experience. He describes the original unity of the senses: the original dimension is the sensible field. The *synesthetic experience* is conceived as the most radical conceptualization of sensible experience: it designates precisely the original unity of the sensible prior to the specialization of the senses. Dufrenne stresses that this dimension always arises within the perceptual horizon – in the flesh of the world, as he puts it. Within this framework, this original sense is named the *virtual*. This term defines a dimension at hand just behind that which is immediately perceived. Thus, it is not something transcendent, but something immanent in perception. It thus indicates the qualities of objects that are not immediately or consciously perceived, but which fill the real and give it depth. For example, in their joining the visual, the tactile and the sonorous are conceived as a virtual part of the real, since they are not directly felt or visualized.

The notion of the virtual, then, is linked to that of the imaginary: a final, crucial turning point in Dufrenne’s conceptualisation of the imagination and its extension. The latter is a theme running throughout his philosophical output. In his early works, imagination plays a marginal role, but gradually the author begins a cautious reappraisal of its functions, assigning it an increasingly essential role. A renewed conception of the imaginary gains ground in Dufrenne’s writings from the 1960s onwards. His short essays *L’imaginaire* and *Vers l’originare...*, both published in *Esthétique et Philosophie* (1976), explore this issue, opening up a rich reflection on the topic within the author’s production. Dufrenne defines the imaginary as that which is possible in reality, but also starting *from* reality. This conception is definitively reaffirmed in his last work,

L'œil et l'oreille. Here, imagination, beyond its creative function, becomes an actual faculty capable of detecting a sense of the real: the virtual dimension of the given. Through the notion of the virtual as the imaginary immanent to the perceived, the author thus seeks to describe another possible way of relating to the world. Imagination becomes the capacity to open oneself to that which is not immediately perceptible.

As has already emerged, Dufrenne is an extremely wide-ranging author, who enters into dialogue with scholars of contemporary French philosophy. At the beginning of his career, he directly engages with the previous generation of scholars, such as Étienne Souriau and Raymond Bayer, whose theories about artworks are mentioned in the *Phénoménologie*. Most notably, in the article "*La sensibilité génératrice*" published in *Esthétique et philosophie* (1967), Dufrenne discusses Bayer's concept of sensibility as strongly linked to imagination.

Certainly, the dialogue with contemporary phenomenology remains the fundamental point. Dufrenne owes the greatest debt to Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception, but he also maintains a direct intellectual exchange with Sartre throughout his career. According to Sartre, the aesthetic object enters the realm of the imagination, namely of the unreal. On the contrary, for Dufrenne the work of the imagination as an empirical function arises exclusively from the presence of a world, and is indeed constitutive of the perceptive process. Hence, images set out from the visible and never cease to refer to perception itself in order to receive decisive confirmation. Dufrenne also criticizes Sartre's position on the aesthetic experience, which is considered merely an induced dream. Rather than describing a consciousness locked in the imaginary that suddenly re-engages with the real, Dufrenne depicts consciousness in relation to an experience that is rooted in reality, without necessarily excluding the "dreamlike" aspect. Finally, the spectator loses himself in the perceived and not in the imaginary, as claimed by Sartre. The reflection on imagination is also influenced by Gaston Bachelard's idea of a realizing imagination. He distinguishes dreams from *reverie*, namely a form of conscious and controlled imagination far from the dangers of fantasy. In *L'œil et l'oreille*, the meaning of imagination comes closer to this notion. Ultimately, the concept of the imaginary regains its positiveness and richness, in opposition to Sartre's theory.

In the short essay *Pour une philosophie non théologique*, published as a supplement to the second edition of *Le Poétique* in 1973, Dufrenne condemns the "philosophies of absence". In opposition to the perspectives of Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot, the philosopher reaffirms an ontology of presence, at the centre of which there are always human beings in their perceiving and aesthetic existence. Dufrenne discusses the idea of *désir* as a relationship with the impossible, a notion borrowed from Blanchot, yet without the negative aura the latter assigns to it. Directly relevant to this conceptualization of desire are the themes that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari discuss in *L'Anti-Œdipe. Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (1972). Here the idea of desire retains its positive value, since it is not immediately related to a lack, but rather to the productive strength of reality. Hence, philosophy is not the waiting for a *parousia*, but a search conducted within the *sensible presence* by human beings, who feel a desire for a total presence, which is to say for an encounter with Nature.

Mikel Dufrenne has been absent from academic debate for many years, both in France and abroad. However, in recent years many scholars have published several studies on this philosopher, highlighting different aspects of his thought.

Maryvonne Saison, Professor Emeritus at Nanterre University, has established herself as the leading Dufrenne scholar in France, starting with the contribution *Imaginaire et anarchie* in *Mélanges Mikel Dufrenne: Vers une esthétique sans entraves* (1975). She was the editor of the book *Mikel Dufrenne et les arts* (1998). In 2018, Saison published *La Nature Artiste. Mikel Dufrenne de l'esthétique au politique*. Here she draws an articulated picture of Dufrenne's thought. She defines the philosopher's aesthetics as "atypical", since it goes beyond works of art themselves, while still dealing with them. Hence, according to Saison, the *Phénoménologie* remains a unique work with no continuation. One of the most interesting parts of her book is that in which she takes the reader back to some of the lesser-known short texts pertaining to Dufrenne's aesthetics. For example, the article on Robert Lapoujade's exhibition (1961), which was published in *Revue d'esthétique*, as follow-up to Sartre's text for the exhibition catalogue.

In her work *La percezione armata. Esperienza estetica e immaginazione in Mikel Dufrenne* (2018), Fabrizia Bandi emphasizes the author's aesthetics as a theory of experience and critically analyses the stages of aesthetic experience developed in the *Phénoménologie*. She also offers a cross-sectional look at the author's works, analysing the evolution of the role of imagination.

A close look at various themes and concepts in Dufrenne's aesthetics is provided by the collected volume *Mikel Dufrenne et l'esthétique. Entre phénoménologie et philosophie de la nature* (2016) edited by Adnen Jdey and Jean-Baptiste Dussert. In some contributions, the author is also read in relation to Heidegger's thought.

Roberto Revello has edited the Italian translation of *Pour une philosophie non théologique* (2015), giving the text a life of its own, independent from *Le Poétique*. In the introductory essay, Elio Franzini wisely reconstructs the fundamental elements in the author's thought, framing the text within Dufrenne's ontological horizon. An essay by Revello himself concludes the volume with a detailed study about Dufrenne and Derrida's thought.

Frédéric Jacquet devotes the first part of *Naître au monde. Essai sur la philosophie de Mikel Dufrenne* (2014) to the author's aesthetic thought, while the rest of the text analyses Dufrenne's cosmological and anthropological themes. These pages highlight the role of Dufrenne's aesthetic reduction in the aesthetic experience of the *Phénoménologie*. Emphasising the notion of existential *a priori*, Jacquet argues that Dufrenne transcended both Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's perspective, by combining the transcendental and personal nature of subjectivity with corporeality.

In *Poetiche del sensibile. Parole e fenomeni tra esperienza estetica e figurazione* (2013) Rita Messori focused on the relevance of the poetic language in relation to the ontological dimension in the author's perspective. Also, in *Un'etica della parola: tra Ricoeur e Dufrenne* (2011) she analysed the original bond of *aisthesis*, *poesis* and *ethos* in Dufrenne's philosophy.

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