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‘Bene Comune e Benessere’: the Affective Economy of Communal Life

In seeking to understand and account for the emotional landscape of the medieval and Renaissance Italian communes one is faced with a range of problems that confront any writer seeking to capture something as omnipresent and yet ephemeral as everyday feeling. For the historian the problem of the ephemeral nature of emotions and feelings is compounded by the additional loss that is consequent on the passage of time. Relatively recently an increasing body of critical work has turned its attention to the interrogation of the world of experience rather than the interpretation of symbolic forms. In sociology and human geography, the emergence of the field of so-called “non-representational theory” and the publication of a number of studies that examine and analyse the aesthetics of presence has seen an attempt to foreground “being” rather than “meaning” in the description of affects rather than the reading of texts, privileging phenomenology over hermeneutics.\(^1\) One consequence of this approach has been to describe presence as a form of transcendental experience that escapes social and cultural mediation and is immune to time and space in an almost mystical manner. Areas as diverse as medieval metaphysics and modern day neuroesthetics are invoked to prove the thesis.\(^2\)

Yet the fact remains, that however much such critical approaches seek to distance themselves from the realms of social and cultural analysis in arguing for an unmediated transcendental aesthetic, emotions and “the felt immediacy of sensual experience” are unavoidably socially mediated and culturally specific.\(^3\) To a medieval and Renaissance readership versed in faculty psychology and the basics of moral philosophy, such a disaggregation of mind and body was unimaginable. In fact the current return to the senses and the so-called “affective turn” in cultural theory can be read as little more than the re-establishment of the pre-modern link between cognition and sensation, a return to the long held assertion of the interdependence of psychology and physiology in the reading of human behaviour. This link was trenchantly refuted by Cartesian mind-body dualism with its exclusive investment in reason as the only means whereby universal truths could be established. Descartes’ assertion that rational enquiry properly executed left no space for doubt was premised on the belief that emotions and the senses were so contingent and susceptible to deception as to require removal from

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consideration, the mantra “Cogito ergo sum” describing perfectly the exile of feelings from the search for truth about being.\(^4\)

In many ways Cartesian method shared much in common with the scholastic method as carried out in the medieval classroom which privileged logical and dialectical argumentation in the analysis of set questions which sought to resolve philosophical and theological contradictions in the search for universal truths. In what follows, however, I want to argue that in communal Italy emotion was always socially and culturally mediated and that sophisticated technologies existed for the management of the emotional economy of the self-determining urban centres of the peninsula. The Aristotelian assertion that man was fundamentally a social animal whose being was most fully realised through civic association took philosophy from the classroom and placed it in the contingent, particular and social realm of the street.\(^5\) For medieval Aristotelianism, as mediated through his commentators from Avicenna, Averroes and Thomas Aquinas, furnished a sophisticated but coherent psychological, physiological and ethical interpretative framework that sought to make sense of the “self in society” whilst acknowledging the susceptibility of the self to external stimulus.\(^6\) This framework conditioned how contemporaries read the world and sought to make sense of human interaction, from Dante to Machiavelli.

Whilst feelings themselves might not be recuperable, the social and cultural discourses, or what Foucault termed technologies, that were deployed to both elicit and suppress, or manage, them are recoverable and allow us to imagine an historical space, or landscape, within which they circulated.\(^7\) What we can do, therefore, is examine the marketplace within which emotional capital circulated and the media that sought to condition emotional investment. Understood in these terms, emotion is seen as an effect of circulation, the product of encounter and interaction rather than something possessed or internalised. As will become clear, this mutual relation between the psychic and social foregrounds the mediated nature of all emotion and allows us to explain the accumulation of affective value within the civic sphere.\(^8\)

The writing of a fuller history of the “embodied” self through a turn to the senses pays attention to the function of all the senses in the *sensorium*, presenting the self as a porous and sensate body that impinges, and is impinged upon, by the world in the accumulation of experience. As it moves through space and time, such a self is radically contingent as it is called into being through its bodily motility and sensitivity to different environments and encounters as a self in

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\(^6\) An excellent summary of Aristotle’s writing on physics and psychology is in P. Boyde, *Perception and Passion in Dante’s “Comedy”*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 11-58 and pp. 173-92.


Aristotelian physics was wholly concerned with understanding the nature of change and movement in bodies, what were termed “corpora mobilia”; his psychological writings, specifically *De anima*, with the animation of these bodies through the life giving force of being: as Dante put it in *Convivio* citing Aristotle: “vivere è l’essere de li viventi”. The faculties of the soul were what furnished the “motus” or engine of movement. As Aristotle states, “the essence of life consists in the power to initiate self-change”. The psychological was linked to the moral/ethical, Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics*, in so far as the moral was a branch of practical knowledge that drew together the fruits of experience in order to guide individuals down the correct path in particular situations.

Within the field of late medieval and Renaissance psychology there was a broad consensus, referred to by Park as an Aristotelian *koine*, concerning the understanding of the faculties of the soul as *anima*: that which animates and gives life force to living things. The tripartite division of the soul into vegetative, sensitive and intellective parts saw the sensitive, or organic, soul host the motive faculties of movement and appetite as well as the ten perceptual faculties which were in turn divided into the internal and external senses. Whilst the internal senses enabled the perception of absent sense objects through cogitation, memory (sense image), fantasy, imagination and common sense, the external senses of vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch enabled the body to perceive present sense objects. Similarly, whilst the progressive faculties produced physical movement, the appetitive faculties produced emotion.

Common sense was located in the frontal lobe of the brain and drew together the sense data from the individual senses to form a composite impression “imago” in a process referred to as “apprehension”. Sense experience was stored in sensitive memory which conditioned what was sought and avoided in terms of pleasure and pain as those feelings were literally “re-cognised”, brought back to the front of the mind, or as image “re-presented”, in order to compare with the current situation to determine action. Passion, therefore, was the “feeling aroused by ‘apprehension’ leading to either ‘pursuit’ or ‘flight’ (consecutio or fuga)”. Consequently passion was understood as the realisation of appetite, that which put it into movement or activated it either away from or towards a good or an evil. The bridge between the soul and body, and the source of all movement, was provided by *spiritus*, a vapour which was produced from blood and spread through the body by the arteries and nerves. Passion, therefore, effected a bodily change (*transmutatio corporalis*) which involved expansion or contraction, warming or cooling, drying or moistening which then caused the muscular movements which

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11 Cited by Boyde, *Perception and Passion*, p. 33 translating Aristotle, *De anima* II 1, 412a 15: “Proper autem ratio vitae est ex hoc, quod aliquid est naturam movere scissum, large accipiendo motum.”


14 Ibidem, p. 52.
animated the limbs. The disposition of the four body fluids – blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm - were also held to condition character type and predisposition to certain emotions and moods in keeping with Galenic temperament theory.

Overall the kind of faculty psychology outlined furnished pre-modern philosophers and commentators with an explanatory system through which to make sense of human behaviour prior to the advent of the social sciences. Particular, contingent, and socialised, such a self sought to understand the nature of its being less through abstract philosophical speculation than as a free standing instrumental philosopher who was repeatedly called upon to make his/her own judgements within a demanding and unstable social world which offered a mass of advice on self-management when faced by a multiplicity of possible scenarios. Whilst animals and man shared a sensitive soul, what differentiated humans from beasts in reaching judgements was the possession of an intellective soul composed of the faculties of intellect, will, and memory (conceptual). As such man was not only a self-moving body, or corpus seipsum movens, but also had potential as a self-governing body, a corpus seipsum dirigens, to read situations and make decisions on account of his intelligence. Human decision making, therefore, was informed by reasoning understood as intelligence from intus and leggere “to read between or beneath the surface” and hence “under-stand” The human ability to comprehend as well as app-rehend is the difference between the faculties of the intellective and sensitive soul, and the space in which human will, the ability to choose and exercise judgment, resides.

The practical intellect’s ability to make judgements, therefore, describes a process of psychic deliberation in which it finds possible solutions (inventio), weighs up the advantages and disadvantages of a particular course of action (deliberatio or concilio) prior to reaching a decision (giudizio) in the mind’s own court of arbitration. Only then does wilful action occur. The sheer number of schools of moral philosophy in the Renaissance with their varying advice on how to order one’s life can therefore be read as an index of the heterogeneity of ends in a contingent world, offering different pathways to the self-governing body depending upon conditioning circumstance rather than proposing universal rules which transcend the particularities of place and time as was the case in the identification of an a priori “summum bonum”. The different positions assumed, Stoic honesty and self preservation, Epicurean pleasure, Augustinian self-sacrifice, and so on, depended on the prejudices of specific teachers, their forms of argumentation conditioned by the particularity of the circumstance in which their audience found themselves.

Similarly, the guidance found in late medieval and Renaissance medical texts and commentaries, such as the Latin pseudo-Aristotelian Secretum secretorum and the Regimen sanitatis Salernitanum, placed the care of the self squarely with the

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15 Ibidem, pp. 53-54.
17 BOYDE, Perception and Passion, pp. 175-76.
decision making individual in their holistic approach to physical and mental health. Of the six non-naturals over which individuals had agency – environment, diet, exercise, rest, balance of humours and emotions – it was the final category which contained advice concerning the regulation of joy, anger, fear and distress as part of a regime for the effective management of everyday life.

The communal experience of late medieval and Renaissance Italy, therefore, offers an inviting context when beginning to think around the dynamic relation between social life and affective life, between action and emotion, being and feeling, within a civic environment. According to historical anthropologists of the Italian communes, doubt, uncertainty, and anxiety were the defining characteristics of a civic experience vitiated by an awareness of the mutability of fortune, themes that still exercise contemporary commentators on urban experience. As face-to-face societies which were highly socialised, the sophistication of their institutional, economic, and political infrastructure was complimented by an equally complex web of overlapping associational bonds to the point where they have even been characterised as suffering from “an excess of intimacy and community”. If we add to the mix the increasing levels of lay participation and literacy, increased social mobility through the loosening of both feudal ties and the formal structures which had traditionally policed social hierarchies, a broadening of the social distribution of wealth, and the increase in inter-communal and dynastic rivalry, we are describing a social world in which the consequences of contiguity were as contestatory as they were consensual, and where the forces which drew some people together simultaneously differentiated them from others.

It was this social world which caused those caught up in its vagaries to advise, celebrate, and...

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21 The parallels between the classical and medieval six non-naturals and a 2008 report by the New Economics Foundation entitled ‘Five Ways to Well Being’ are striking. Drawing on data collected by the UK government’s ‘Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing’ the five imperatives for wellbeing are: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, Give. See http://www.neweconomics.org/projects/entry/five-ways-to-well-being

22 See the collection of essays in La ricerca del benessere individuale e sociale. Ingredienti materiali e immateriali (città italiane, XII-XV secolo). Atti del ventiduesimo Convegno Internazionale di studi (Pistoia, 15-18 maggio 2009), Rome 2011.


25 For a suggestive attempt at recreating the experience of moving through the everyday in the medieval Italian city, albeit without the theory, see C. FRUGONI, A Day in a Medieval City, Chicago and London 2005.
lament, as well as chronicle and reflect, on what it meant to live communally, to be a social being. As testaments to their engagement in civic life, the texts they produced looked both backwards as judgements of the events they experienced and forwards as guidebooks to navigating the uncertainties which lay ahead, a dynamic reflected in the plethora of “speculum” texts which sought to convert accumulated experience into prudent action; in the innumerable chronicles which recounted events of note; and in the many notebooks and *zibaldoni* into which the free-literates of the lay communes pressed the flowers of learning in their bespoke arrangements of so-called *florilegia*.  

Prime position amongst the technologies for the management of affect in the communal realm was the art of rhetoric understood as the art of persuasion, from *per-suadere* to strongly urge or induce. Rhetoric put the specificity of situation, the contingency of action, back into the frame as it uses emotions to affect judgement. In this respect the psychic deliberations undertaken in making judgements were directly linked to the external factors that conditioned such decision-making processes. Learning how to move people was an art that could be taught, a skill with a definite premium and value, and a *techne* that saw a particular revival in late medieval and Renaissance Italy. The combination of the Aristotelian concern with instrumental philosophy that stressed the importance of reasoning and speaking, *ratio* and *oratio*, with the related revival of the performative civic oratory of Ciceronianism placed the emotions at the heart, as well as at the soul, of social life and the everyday experience of communal living. Significantly, it also configured rhetoric as a medium through which bodies and wills could be moved, and as such as the go-between in the continual dialogue between the senses and the intellect, desire and reason, appetite and will. Given that rhetoric alone embraced “the undeniable reality and vitality of the irrational”, it was key that the orator secured an “understanding of the economy of man’s emotional system and the functioning of the volitional generation of virtues and vices, of values and habits”. It was this belief in the instrumental capacity of rhetoric to engage the senses, to move individuals and communities that led Brunetto Latini (c.1220-1294), ideologue of the communal polity, to assert that although rhetoric was subordinate to politics it constituted its most valuable part. As the handmaiden to ethical discourse, it delivered right reason concerning the obligations and duties of the good citizen in persuasive form, stressing the virtue of action over the attainment of knowledge, the primacy of the good over the identification of the true. Unlike logical and dialectical argumentation, rhetorical argumentation and invention were far more suited to the contingent world of communal political and social life. Whilst the former method deployed demonstrative syllogism to prove the truth-value of its principles, the latter had recourse to the more contingent enthymeme which was based on premises that were probable rather than definite and relied more heavily on induction rather than deduction in seeking to persuade its audience. Where the former mode of reasoning was speculative and abstract,

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28 Kessler, ‘The Method’, p. 120.

rhetorical argumentation was applied and situated, taking on cases in which the outcome was always in doubt.\textsuperscript{30}

It was rhetoric’s appeal to the governing powers of the intellect and will, and supported by the embedding of those beliefs within conceptual memory, that saw man exercise his rational powers. But to get there required the appeal to the sensitive soul and the channelling of its desires and appetites. Unlike logic and dialectic which solely concerned themselves with rational argumentation, rhetoric called on the irrational forces of emotion to move the will, requiring the orator to possess a level of emotional intelligence if he was to carry the hearts, as well as the minds, of his audience. To understand the instrumentality of rhetoric, therefore, required an account of the susceptibility of the self to persuasion, to being moved, as rhetoric’s potency was dependant on its ability to engage with the senses and emotions.

Just as psychological writings broadly shared a common frame of reference, the same can be claimed for rhetorical precept literature. In terms of winning over an audience this was achieved by means of educating, entertaining and moving: \textit{docere}, \textit{delectare} and \textit{movere}. Whilst the first appealed to the intellect (rational soul), the other two were achieved by appealing to the emotions (the sensitive soul). The intellectual form of persuasion was largely carried out in the \textit{narratio} and \textit{argumentatio}; persuasion through \textit{delectatio} or \textit{conciliatio} was achieved by establishing an empathy with the audience in the \textit{exordium}, through the use of humour, and through the power of a speaker’s personal charisma or ethos; and persuasion through the moving of an audience by the use of pathos, in Latin \textit{affectus}, which is a form of emotional shock which seeks to draw the audience to the speaker’s side and is especially effective in the conclusion, or \textit{peroratio}, of any speech when, as Quintilian puts it, “all the floodgates of the emotions can be opened”.\textsuperscript{31}

So let us now turn to the relation of rhetoric to the emplaced subject. Although knowledge of, and familiarity with, the rhetorical works of Cicero (including the \textit{Ad Herennium}), Quintilian and Aristotle varied in time and place, they all shared a similar frame of reference and the Italian communes proved eager consumers of their classical rhetorical theory. To briefly rehearse the situated nature of rhetoric as an art of persuasion within specific civic contexts, we can return to the sort of divisions and subdivisions already seen in relation to psychology and the faculties of the soul. The three genres of rhetoric, the judicial, deliberative and demonstrative, were situated respectively in the law courts, communal assemblies, and public fora. All three were controversial in as much as they involved the judgement of the issue under discussion: guilty or not guilty; to do or not to do; to praise or to blame. In terms of audiences, judicial rhetoric sought to persuade a judge or jury, deliberative rhetoric the members of a political assembly, and demonstrative rhetoric the general audience. Success depended upon the ability to marshal the strongest arguments but also deliver them in a


manner that secured the empathy of the audience with one’s position. Bartolomeo Cavalcanti (1503-1562) in Book 4 of his oft-reprinted Della Retorica entitled “De gli affetti” amplified Aristotle’s discussion of the place of emotion in rhetorical instruction noting:

“Queste passioni sono senza alcun dubbio potentissime, et accocciamente usate, maravigliosi effetti producono: perché si come gli argomenti il consentimento dell’intelletto efficacemente cercano; così le passioni l’ubbidienza dell’appetito violentemente si procacciano.”32

Similarly, Orazio Toscanella (c.1510-1580) also drew on Aristotle’s Rhetoric in his 1569 diagrammatic exposition of rhetorical precepts Armonia di tutti principali retori et migliori scrittori degli antichi e nostri tempi, laying out the eleven “affects” and listing the mental disposition which gives rise to them, the persons to whom they are directed and the reasons for their arousal.33 In the case of anger, ira, for example, Toscanella lists four conditions which predispose men to anger, eighteen classes of people who elicit anger, and eighteen occasions which give rise to anger (figure 1). Significantly, the vast majority are concerned with honour and respect for social station. Through understanding the nature and causes of emotion in specific contexts and by appealing to both the intellectual and emotional faculties of the audience, the speaker was better able to win over or secure advantage for his specific position or case, what was known as the utilitas causae or “party interest”.34

The structural DNA of rhetoric was therefore fundamentally controversial and partial. It requires the taking of sides. In this respect the agonistic social world of the communes was homologous with the agonistic classical rhetorical paradigm that was revived in Italy during the communal period. The optimistic assumption in much writing is that the application of reason to probabilistic argumentation will lead to a consensus concerning the best course of action to take. But the reality is that rhetoric, as a system for the marshalling of emotion as well as reason in the pursuit of victory for one’s side, parte or causa, revealed its amoral status as a language art which was ethically neutral. For it was equally equipped to stigmatise, abject and exclude opposing views, those “not of the same persuasion” as we say in English.35 The Rhetorica ad Herennium in particular taught the means for pursuing security (securitas) or utility (profitability/interest) (tutum or utile) over virtue or honour (honestum).36 Aristotle was even more direct in his Rhetoric: the political orator’s primary consideration in offering council was to commend the useful and warn against the harmful. Whether a course of action was just or unjust, honourable or dishonourable was the primary concern of forensic and demonstrative rhetoric but not deliberative rhetoric. Machiavelli’s mantra to a

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33 O. TOSCANELLA, Armonia di tutti principali retori et migliori scrittori degli antichi e nostri tempi, Venice 1569, c. E2.
34 See LAUSBURG, Handbook, p. 34.
prince to hold on to his power, “mantenere lo stato”, even at the cost of injustice and dishonour drives wholly out of this tradition.37 Even the exchange of invectives between the Florentine and Milanese Chanceries that formed the bedrock of Baron’s thesis concerning civic humanism is premised upon the use of controversial demonstrative rhetoric of praise and blame in which Florentine civic values are lauded, especially in Bruni’s *Laudatio*, whilst the Visconti are characterised as rapacious serpents.38 Both the classical rhetorical tradition and contemporary cultural theory, therefore, work on the basis that identities are generated as much by saying what you are not as by saying what you are. The identification and abjection of the threatening “other” simply serves to strengthen the bonds of association and adherence amongst one’s fellow citizens (and by extension one’s family members, social groupings, neighbours and personal communities).39 This is why hate can be read as a manifestation of love.40 Rhetoric was therefore a key medium through which emotional communities were created and sustained by the repeated statement of values that accumulated emotional capital through ritual “re-presentation” in a form of cognitive re-booting.41 The more you presented, the easier it was for the audience to “re-cognise” what was being presented and make use of it in their decision making. The repeated imprinting of concepts into the wax of the intellectual and sensitive memory ensured audiences “got a good impression” and were guided in terms of what to pursue and what to avoid. The same dynamic underlay the techniques and practices of the mendicant preachers.42 After all, the passion of Christ was a narrative episode that only “made sense” when contemplated empathetically and staged in such a way that the narrative was broken up into specific moments, stations, which focused attention on the changed physical and emotional state of the suffering redeemer.

The *bene comune*, was one another object of contemplation that required repeated representation in communities where individuals were required to make so many decisions.43 As the least immediate but most important obligation, all media were mobilised to impress upon the people the importance of considering the good of the community ahead of their own particular, more localised interests

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(utile). In the affective economy of the communes the sole purpose of demonstrative rhetoric was the accumulation of emotional interest and its investment in a concept as abstract as the commonwealth. Foremost in the attempts to regulate and contain the appetites and passions of these hyper-communal communities, therefore, was the articulation and propagation of a distinct civic ethic. As Trexler outlined in typically pithy fashion in relation to Florence, the commune was characterised by an enduring tension between the ethical ideal of sacrifice, both in classical and Christian terms, and the mercantile principle of contract. I take this to mean the irreconcilability of the moral imperative to give away, to let go, in an exchange economy that was regulated through legally binding acts drawn up to facilitate accumulation, to store up. Expressed in terms of emotional capital, this relationship can be presented as the tension between caritas understood as the giving of self, or unconditional love, and reciprocity, the expectation of mutual benefit from the Latin reciprocus, moving backwards and forwards, a tension reflected in the numerous tracts on the nature of true friendship. Faced with the reciprocal exchange economy of favours in the securing of personal profit and advantage, it was communally sponsored rhetoric as a discourse, from discurrere -to run backwards and forwards- that sought to compete for citizens’ attention and impress upon them the validity and utility of investing in the common-wealth, either financially through the purchasing of Monte bonds or affectively through making an emotional investment to increase the “bene”, the emotional wellbeing or capital, of the commune.

In foregrounding the importance of rhetoric as an art of persuasion, humanists and preachers embraced the emotions and recognised the partiality of audiences as a function of their attachment to a host of associational groupings that inevitably came into conflict. In their scepticism concerning the stoic belief that mental wellbeing was not necessarily connected to material and physical wellbeing, they admitted to the interrelation of the psychological, the physiological, and the social in the pursuit of happiness for an embodied and emplaced self. In addition, by embracing the concept of love, whether as Christian caritas, Platonic love or a fusion of the two, they privileged an emotion that transcended reason without compromising virtue. Our passions, therefore, were deemed central to what made us human and were not guided solely by reason. In stressing the connection between psychology and physiology they showed that happiness was also a result of taking care of our physical selves, the corpus seipsum dirigens, through attention to diet, exercise, the place we live, and our relationships with our friends and loved ones. Our well being, benessere, therefore was dependent upon our being well, physically and psychologically. To believe otherwise, one might argue, would be perverse and wholly irrational.

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44 On the economy of salvation see M. BACCI, Investimenti per l’aldilà. Arte e raccomandazione dell’anima nel medioevo, Rome and Bari 2003.