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Resonance, critique, and disenchantment A modern story

Abstract

The aim of the essay is to inspect the critical force of the concept of resonance. The argument is developed in three steps. First, a critical stance based on an anthropology of resonance is argued to be suitable for fostering a transformative alliance between reason and emotion and, as a result, for changing our way of conceiving of and handling the ever-puzzling relationship between self and world. Second, in order to criticize a form of life for being inhospitable to resonance, a specific and widespread brand of disenchantment is challenged. Third and last, H. Rosa's anti-cynical bend of mind is claimed to be a revival of philosophical romanticism.

Keywords

Resonance, Critique, Strong Evaluation.

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1. *A resonant critical theory*

Hartmut Rosa's bold attempt at a systematic theory of resonance (Rosa 2019a) faces up to the tough challenges of our age, the now widely called anthropocene. In this sense, he deserves to be called a *critical* theorist: i.e., a thinker who wants to know better about the world we are living in because he sees it as in need of change and, no less importantly, as changeable.

The overarching aim of his thinking, in a nutshell, is to provide his readers with glimpses into an understanding of what a good life, compatible with the conditions of late modernity, might look like. Due precisely to its ambitiousness, it is a *both* simple *and* multi-layered take on what it means to be a human being in the twenty-first century.

The resulting paradox can be explained away immediately. On the one hand, the insight underlying Rosa's theory is forthright. A good life, according to him, is neither a life crammed with goods and assets nor a life spared from major disappointments. It is, rather, a life enabled to make the most of its chief hidden endowment, by which Rosa means the life-bearer's capability to be connected with (both touching and being touched by) the surrounding world. On the other hand, picturing oneself as a resonant creature is not the same as displaying a self-interpreting fact about the human condition. For such a claim has to be tested and validated in details and, given its very nature, the checking effort is bound to be controversial and lead whoever makes it to an essentially contested terrain. Hence the complexity, density and length of Rosa's resonance book.

My primary aim in what follows is to inspect the critical force of the concept of resonance. By "critical force" I mean both the notion's ability to bring out and illuminate the malaises of the late-modern Western way of life and its potential for gesturing in the direction of a better alternative. My first claim will be that a critical stance based on an anthropology of resonance is in good position to foster a transformative alliance between reason and emotion and, as a result, significantly alter our way of conceiving and handling the ever-puzzling relationship between self and world, subject and object, spontaneity and receptivity in the light of the human condition. I shall maintain, second, that, in order to criticize a form of life for being inhospitable to resonance, a specific and widespread brand of disenchantment has to be challenged and defused with regard to its most dismal implications. Third and last, I shall consider whether

Rosa's anti-cynical bend of mind amounts in the end to a revival of a variety of philosophical romanticism (spoiler alert: my answer to this question will be a qualified yes).

2. *Resonance for dummies*

Before delving into the philosophical core of my argument, it may be helpful, I think, to begin with an ordinary example of resonance. I assume that the fictional story I am going to tell is sufficiently basic to serve as a shared ground for a preparatory discussion.

Let us imagine, then, that we have a work appointment with a person whom we have never met before. Ahead of the meeting, our intent is to deal with the practical matters professionally, solve them as satisfyingly as possible and go back home immediately after accomplishing the task. Yet, contrary to our expectations, something unforeseen happens along the way.

The change of atmosphere begins with a side comment about the music diffused in the café. The fleeting moment of consonance leads to a more intimate and open-ended talk that commences lazily and gradually gathers focus. Conversation topics multiply, personal memories set in and are joyously shared. As a result, the degree of mutual attention increases exponentially and the rigidly scheduled time of daily life gradually recedes in the background. The more wine is poured and drunk, the more aspects of life are avidly debated, until a waitperson timidly lets you know that the bar is closing.

It is past midnight. You slowly walk out of the saloon chuckling and speaking more animatedly than usual. The sky is clear. You breathe in a puff of fresh air, glance at your new friend and smile unwittingly. The world outside, as you cannot fail to notice, looks different than it appeared just a handful of hours earlier. On the one hand, places you know by heart look more spacious, vivid, denser than you remembered them. On the other hand, the contrasts between things, either real or imagined, come across enhanced, even a bit intimidating. Your new mood might be described as an odd combination of both empowerment and estrangement, as if you were endowed with newfangled powers that you still do not know how to control effectively. Thus, when you ask your new acquaintance what looks like the most appropriate question at the moment – “So, what's next?” – such anodyne words take up an unusual sense of urgency. A “resonant wire of sympathy and trust” has begun to vibrate

and holds the promise of transforming “a mute relationship to the world into a resonant one” (Rosa 2019a: 210, 212).

Changes of mood of this sort, I guess, are more or less familiar to everyone. They are generally experienced as an unusual surge of energy and an eye-opening shift. Intensity and enlargement are the qualities that stick out in these cases. The life of the change recipient suddenly feels different, more vibrant than before. Sensory attention is boosted, mind processes are teeming with new ideas and thoughts, conversation is more fluent and agreeable than it used to be, etc. Everything considered, however, the novel feeling seems to arise less from an inner change than from an enhanced susceptibility to being affected by aspects of reality that were previously out of reach.

Thus, to sum up, the personal transformation is both sudden and arcane. It is unexpected and, by definition, not reproducible at will. And precisely because chance matters so much in this kind of transfiguring process, the transition feels less like an inner push and more as a pull from the world, a sort of uncanny spell which is somehow able to elicit extraordinary drawing powers in your intentional environment. Getting involved and taking action have never been so easy precisely because no special effort is required, now. As spontaneity and receptivity overlap and mutually reinforce each other, the impact on the sense of self-agency is indeed outstanding.

This is, at least, how things look like from the engaged perspective of the man or woman undergoing such a benign shift. But what about people who do not share or are perplexed about the dependability of the account? I myself, as I am telling this story, have to rely on the reader’s trust, favor, vision, in order not to alienate her from the start. For in the absence of a fair amount of involvement and hermeneutical charity, it is difficult to relate to someone enduring a personal conversion of such a scope. We could even go so far as to claim that it is impossible to understand what is going on if we do not somehow resonate with the narrated event.

We are facing here an epistemological problem of first order. An inquisitive spectator, it could be claimed with good reason, has a special right, and in all probability even an inborn disposition, to recoil from empathizing with such examples of unbridled enthusiasm. Thus, why should one abide by the request to empathize with the onerous sentiment instantiated in the story above? Is not such a trustful attitude too naïve, too credulous, too uncritical, to say the least, for a rational being? Is it sensible to give so much credit to a first-person account that goes against the

grain of people's average experience of the world as a place where human desires, hopes, endeavors, pursuits of happiness are generally frustrated, crushed and often ridiculed by the course of events? Is not the very idea of feeling at home in the world preposterous, given that humans are a contingent product of a blind evolutionary process that could not care less about the aspirations and humors of what, from a dispassionate point of view, is little more than raw material for natural selection to work on?

As a result, one can easily imagine a wholly different take on the situation, painted from an unbiased view from nowhere, whereby doubts on the reliability of a too rosy account of human relationships can be ruthlessly piled up with destabilizing consequences on what, on closer inspection, may turn out to be a colossal case of false consciousness. In the case under consideration, for example, one can go in search of ensconced asymmetries or hidden dynamics of power in an only superficially open exchange between self-possessed adults who seem to have full control over their needs and desires.

A "work appointment", to begin with, was mentioned at the outset. But are we sure that the new acquaintances came to the meeting with the same goals, expectations, assets? The unanticipated affinity, I recall, was depicted in terms of an open-ended process of mutual discovery and self-disclosure, but nothing was said about differences in age, gender, social status, money or other positional goods such as beauty or reputation. This is crucial, though, for thoroughly understanding what exactly was going on in the alleged resonant act. For how can we rule out a priori that a devious play of imagination was actually shaping the seemingly immaculate display of authenticity? Very often, as a matter of fact, impersonal forces such as mimetic desires, fleeting physical impulses, escapist longings, stale social imaginaries, are actually leading the dance in what, on the surface, look like utterly spontaneous and intimately rewarding moments. All of these misgivings, I reckon, are potential fracture points that may be unforgivingly brought under the spotlight from an outsider's perspective in order to expose the blind spots that made the story carrier's sense of resonance so compelling at first glance.

This belief revision process is too familiar to go on about at length. It starts off with a suspicion about the self-delusional or ideological nature of a widely shared account. The disbelief encourages a subversion of the original point of view. The destabilization of the conventional picture or narrative is both advocated by and advocating a mounting skepticism about any too hasty affirmative attitude toward what rings *prima facie*

true. The stance of incredulity demands an unrelenting alertness against undetected delusions and this, in turn, generates a lingering atmosphere of disenchantment that inhibits the critic's and, consequently, her addressee's trust in the possibility of a radical transformation of the existing power relations. As a result, disillusionment can lead to disengagement and the empowerment experienced on the one side (reflexivity) may be counterweighed by a significant extent of disempowerment on the other side (agency).

How can this disturbing deadlock be successfully overcome? What is left, once a novel type of critical theory centered on the encompassing goal of building a resonant relationship with the world such as Rosa's is discredited as an irenic, quietist and self-deluding project? Can we be satisfied with a merely negative variety of critical thought acting as a source of perpetual disillusionment? What has a hopeful and engaged style of critical thinking to marshal against the all-powerful machinery of modern disenchantment (Brumlik 2016; Susen 2019)? This is the kind of questions that I shall be trying to answer in the rest of my essay. I start from Rosa's counterargument to which I shall add my own view on the matter.

3. *Disenchanted resonance*

The challenge posed by a stance of disenchantment, I assume, is particularly alarming for a critical theorist. A diagnosis of total disenchantment conflating a modern mindset with an across-the-board disillusionment towards any high expectation about human beings and their future prospects, in effect, is likely to erode people's confidence in the effectiveness and worth of a combative stance with regard to world affairs. While the existing state of things is no doubt regularly criticized in a disposition of anger, even of hatred or contempt for what is wrong with it, these negative emotions are seldom cultivated per se by a critical theorist. They are, rather, savored alongside the belief that, as flawed as the world may be, it both deserves and is pregnant with much more than that. Disillusionment with the way things are, then, may be an essential part of the process of criticizing an alienated society, but it does not tell the whole story (Rosa 2017; Rosa 2018a; Rosa 2019a: 444-59).

The significance of the challenge of disenchantment for critical thinking is not lost on Rosa. "Weber's notion of disenchantment", as he notices, "bears all the hallmarks of a loss of resonance, [...] expresses the changes in the quality of our relationship to the world [...] means that the

world literally stops singing” (Rosa 2019a: 326). But the muting of the world is not an inevitable corollary of the natural order or the only possible way of relating to a largely unknown reality. Hence, a condition of disenchantment is for him something that elicits curiosity or even disbelief. A return to an enchanted world, however, is equally baffling. It is not just that nobody can return by fiat to a condition of naivety, once this is over. What is more, it makes little sense to equate having a resonant relationship with the world with being under a spell. Resonance is not a way of escaping from reality’s harshness. A resonant relationship always involves a certain amount of estrangement, tension and dynamism. “Resonance is possible only by accepting, or rather affirming, an inaccessible, irreducible Other that can never be completely adaptively transformed and always contains within itself the possibility of contradiction” (Rosa 2019a: 344). Lack of resonance, i.e. alienation from the world, is like silence in music: it is both the foil against which to measure how much of it there is left and a constitutive element of the process from which music results.

This is why Rosa strenuously defends his theory as a variety of critical thinking, with its inescapable load of negativity. He is too aware of the deep flaws of the hyper-accelerated modern way of life to discard the utility of a disillusioned stance for a non-acquiescent frame of mind. Still, he is adamant in claiming that “a history of modernity as that of a catastrophe of resonance is one-sided and overly simplistic” (Rosa 2019a: 355). His aim, accordingly, is not to compose a disenchanted epitaph of the modernity’s wager, but “to narrate a *counterhistory* which makes it clear that modernity is both [...] tremendous sensitivity to resonance and catastrophe of resonance simultaneously (Rosa 2019a: 355). In order to navigate the middle path between the Scylla of a too credulous involvement in what is going on and the Charybdis of a disheartened or cynical disengagement, one has to recognize first that

the primary desideratum of Critical Theory today does not consist in once again accounting for reification or alienation. The task is rather to develop a concept of a non-reified mode of existence capable of salvaging [...] the implied and hoped-for potential of mimetic, auratic, erotic, or charismatic relationships in a consistent way. Accomplishing this is the aim and aspiration of the resonance theory elaborated in this book. (Rosa 2019a: 356)

Rosa’s viewpoint, on balance, may be summarized by saying that social criticism is for him by definition a transformational practice that cannot be satisfied with a self-contained act of mental distancing from a suppos-

edly repellent reality. Contrary to this way of buffering against a contaminating antagonist, allowing oneself to resonate with aspects of the lived world, whose inherent worth is recognized precisely by letting them seize you and change you substantially (*anverwandeln*, a key concept in Rosa's line of reasoning), means to rise above the modern taboo of re-enchantment without embracing a quietist attitude towards existence. Since this is a key point of Rosa's long argument, from now on I want to further elaborate on both topics: (a) the practical-transformational nature of critical thinking and (b) how this aspect is connected to the traditional question of the dualism of reason and passion.

4. *Critical passions*

Critical thought, I dare say, is concrete by definition inasmuch as its distinctive object "is not the uncovering of immutable truths, but the fostering of social change" in the direction of a more equal and rational society (Jay 1973: 46, see also 63). In his second *Thesis on Feuerbach*, it was Marx himself who claimed that thinking critically is not a purely intellectual feat. "The question of whether human thinking attains objective truth", he famously maintained in those early notes, "is not a question of theory but a *practical* question. It is in practice that man must prove the truth, the actuality and power, the subjective aspect and validity [*Diesseitigkeit*] of his thinking. Argument about the actuality or non-actuality of thinking, where thinking is taken in isolation from practice, is a purely *scholastic* question" (1994: 116).

What makes critical thinking concrete, however, is not only the shift from interpreting the world to changing it advocated by the young Marx. A different kind of concreteness concerns the emotionally charged quality of the core judgments around which a critical theory inevitably revolves. To cite Adorno (quoted in Jay 1973: 277): "Intelligence is a moral category. The separation of feeling from understanding, which makes it possible for the moron to speak freely and blissfully, hypostatizes the historically created separation of men according to function". The critical intelligence, in other words, is never affectively neutral, dispassionate, deaf to its own inner stirrings of dissatisfaction. And, nonetheless, it unstintingly aspires to be a form of true understanding.

Before being an art of judgment, critique and its political offspring – social criticism – are an attitude, a mode of life. Criticizing is an emotionally charged way of responding to what is out there and taking a stand for

or against it. Willy-nilly, it embodies a style of partiality. The critic, in other words, is expected to criticize what she hates and to hate what she criticizes. Or, more explicitly, she is supposed to reject those results of human agency that she wants not to exist (a plausible definition of “hatred”). At the same time, she is expected to endorse what she loves and to love what she endorses. That is, she is supposed to actively advocate what she wants to exist (in turn, a plausible definition of “love”).

All of this means, in a nutshell, that criticizing a human state of affairs amounts, among other things, to a transformational development involving both reason and emotion. Its starting point is always a thick web of overlapping thoughts, feelings, imaginaries, and habits that are never entirely transcended. This quality may also be described as the inherent situatedness and engagedness of the critical performance, where the ideal element (i.e., the counterfactual picture of a good life) is necessarily embedded in a bundle of social practices, with their embodied habitus, affective repertoires, tacit rules and exemplary instantiations.

Let us take Marx again as a relevant example here. It is easy to see what makes him the quintessential social critic. His dominant passion since his formative years was the rejection of the existing world, the disgust with a reality where injustice and irrationality reign. His is an empowering state of mind, not a disheartening feeling, though, because a permanent hostility towards the present state of affairs goes hand in hand with a lively awareness that another world is nevertheless possible. After all, when Marx was writing papers and books aimed at turning the world upside down, the ancient regime had just melted into the air and the bourgeois world-shattering determination was gazed at with awe or consternation by many. Change, needless to say, is daily bread for capitalism and the critical mindset too has a soft spot for dynamism, shifting point of views, lightning judgments.

In Marx’s view, a negative judgment over the current state of affairs lies at the core of the critical gesture, although the term “judgment” does not do justice to the blatancy, urgency and endurance of his attitude towards the status quo. His stance should rather be described as an appraisal: i.e., an emotionally charged perception of how things are in an area of life that cannot leave us indifferent (Solomon 2003: 10-6). Sure, capitalism must be explained in detail and with the utmost objectivity, but only after its intolerable facticity has been processed with the senses, the heart, the suprapersonal pathos of an emotional contagion. There must be room also for odium, and not just for anger or indignation, in a critical mind.

Hatred is the opposite of love, of course. Again, it is the desire that something or someone not be: a powerful form of negative resonance that must be handled with care. And still, just like anger or indignation, it essentially belongs to the social critic's mindset. It is, so to speak, the negative pole of the critical field. So, it must be doubly counterweighed lest it turn into a nihilistic rage, malicious resentment or another of the sad passions that spoil ordinary people's life. On the one hand, it has to be attuned to a patently hideous state of affairs. But, on the other hand, it has to be invigorated by the prospect of a realizable change.

Both the requirements are hotly debated within the company of critics. To begin with, there is an unresolved tension between what may be called the "negativism" of the critical practice – that is, the processing of the world's hatefulness as a brute fact – and the deep uncertainty over both the hypothetical and the categorical dimension of practical reason. The world, that is, can be experienced as negative *prima facie* and still there can persist an enduring indecision about the nature of such negativity and the most suitable means to deal with it.

This is just to remind that the critical passion is no simple state of mind. It is rather a constellation of feelings (moods and emotions), which have to be both separately cultivated and mutually balanced. This is the reason why, for a partisan of the critical attitude, it is not just prudent, but mandatory to embrace the idea that, among the many burdens that weigh on the shoulders of those who criticize the present state of affairs, there is also the responsibility for the quality of one's own affective repertoire.

I understand accordingly that powerful passage of the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, where Marx clarifies how critical thinking is a field where reason and passion constantly interact.

In its struggle against this situation – says the author of *Das Kapital* – criticism (*Kritik*) is no passion of the head, it is the head of passion. It is no surgical knife, it is a weapon. Its object is its enemy that it does not aim to refute, but to annihilate. For the spirit of this situation is refuted already. In itself it is not an object worthy of thought but an existence as despicable as it is despised. Criticism does not itself need to arrive at an understanding with this object for it is already clear about it. It no longer pretends to be an end-in-itself but only a means. The essential feeling that animates it is indignation (*Indignation*), its essential task is denunciation. (Marx 2000: 73)

5. *Changing moods*

Thus, to resume my argument's thread, a detached social criticism seems to be a contradiction in terms. To criticize a state of affairs one has to be touched and moved by the perception of something strident in it. The emergence of a self-affirmative stance, then, is contingent on a chain of reactive or responsive experiences. But does this amount to claiming that something like a sentimental education is part and parcel of a critical practice worthy of its name?

I would not go so far as to say that the processual understanding of the social critic's frame of mind that I am proposing below deserves to be called "education". However, it is certainly meant as an attempt to benefit from Rosa's efforts at articulating the mutual connection between critique and resonance. Resonance, as it should be clear by now, is a mutual transformative experience (*Anverwandlung*), conveying the idea of both change, assimilation and adaptation. There is an analogy in this respect with what happens when a nasty comment is met by its target not with animosity, but with a form of industrious kindness aimed at preserving the open-ended nature of human communication. Criticism, in other words, is an intelligent reaction to a suboptimal situation making the most of the receptive and expressive powers of human agency.

Having said that, let me paint a miniature portrait of critique as a transformational practice. The trajectory begins with the social critic's qualified rejection of an aspect of the world. As is shown by Marx's quote above, the critical theorist must, willy-nilly, come to terms with a gamut of negative emotions arising from her rejection of the world as it is and from her standing up for a counterfactually better world. Anger, indignation, hatred are therefore persistent feelings, *Stimmungen*, moods, that shape the critic's relationship with the social reality. These are not, however, irreducibly sad passions, because such "acute sensitivity to the negative", even to the "pathological" (Donaggio 2016: 46), does not seal her up in a self-contained realm. On the contrary, the social critic's discomfort is part of a rainbow of emotions with which she responds to the desert of a social landscape, once this is not experienced as an unchangeable fatality. This being the case, wrath, revulsion and dejection are actually compatible with outbursts of tenderness, sympathy, melancholy, yearning that, while being rationalized as an anticipation of the future, constitute nonetheless a true puzzle for those who suffer them.

Bertolt Brecht (2008) captured well this state of mind in his 1939 poem *An die Nachgeborenen* (*To Those Who Follow in Our Wake*) when

he spoke with genuine agony about a time in which “a conversation about trees is almost a crime / For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing!”. Brecht pleaded, therefore, for leniency from the “later-born” because having gone “through the class warfare, despairing / That there was only injustice and no outrage”, he knew that “even the hatred of squalor / Distorts one’s features. / Even anger against injustice / Makes the voice grow hoarse”. What we sense in the last verses of the poem, in fact, is a poignant and constructive sorrow: “We / Who wished to lay the foundation for gentleness / Could not ourselves be gentle”.

This shaky emotional balance, however, is tricky, as it entails a condition of permanent arousal. It is the disposition of Benjamin’s “tiger”, geared up to leap in the future or alternatively in the past, and is only enduring in a state of ceaseless collective mobilization (Benjamin 2007: 261). When the external circumstances, though, are unfavorable, the critical passion may go sour. Hatred, anger, “the discomfort at the sight of the often monstrous social landscape”, arouses resentment, malaise, feelings of alienation (Donaggio 2016: 46). Stasis and powerlessness foster a depressive mood which, being unfit to live in, is bound to lead either to a destructive rage or to a new emotional configuration shaped by disillusionment, cynicism, sovereign detachment, airiness, contempt. This is even more the case when the surrounding world has incorporated private forms of emancipated desire that function as powerful attractors for people who console themselves with the thought that, even if There Is No [collective] Alternative, there are many pleasant [individual] options to pursue separately.

We can go on living, then, although there is a melancholic side in such a remedy to discouragement. The concern is well expressed in a poem by Philip Larkin (*Continuing to Live*), which has been perceptively discussed by Richard Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Rorty 1989: chap. II). Larkin’s (1988: 94) view, in a nutshell, is that even a growing sense of futility (“Continuing to live — that is, repeat / A habit formed to get necessities — / Is nearly always losing, or going without”) can be successfully curbed with creative acts of will imposing order to your inner world (“And once you have walked the length of your mind, what / You command is clear as a lading-list. / Anything else must not, for you, be thought / To exist”). But the actual gain, at the end of the day, is meager, because human creativity, no matter how brilliant, is unable to transcend contingency and leaves the last word to a hopeless human finitude (On that green evening when our death begins, / Just what it was, is hardly satisfying, / Since it applied only to one man once, / And that one dying).

This is the commonest trajectory of critical minds in our time. The end result is a form of disenchantment tinted with resignation (“nothing can be done”) or black humor (“humanity is overrated”). The only alternative left against the melancholy, irony or cynicism of the subdued critic seems to be the ethical sobriety and emotional self-restraint not just advocated, but embodied by a tamed critical thinker like Jürgen Habermas (1994). In his refashioning of Weber’s pose of intellectual abstinence, the concrete human life with its enigmatic moods is pushed in the background and the only emotions that are cultivated are moral sentiments compatible with a fallible, post-metaphysical, humble rationality. The residue is the emotional tepidity of the Stoic intellectual whose highest wish is, to evoke the Serenity Prayer, “to accept the things that cannot be changed, to have the courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other”. A sprinkling of adult forbearance on a personality adapted *quantum satis* to the world seems to be the most a reasonable human being can aspire to after critique has run out of steam (Latour 2004; Felski 2015).

6. *Reason and passion: no masters, no slaves*

Despite its sketchiness, the trajectory just outlined is relevant for whoever is still committed to the ideal of good life foreshadowed by social criticism. If having the right emotions matters so much here, how emotionally distant from the world ought the social critic to be? Should the detachment rate be measured in centimeters, meters, kilometers, or light years? How much of repulsion, how much of understanding, and how much of imagination should an emotionally balanced critical effort incorporate at its best?

If hatred, anger, aversion to the iniquity of the present state of affairs are inadequate to realize the breakthrough potential of critique, emotionlessness is no viable cure against such deficiency in any case. For if there is something that typifies the good enough social critic, it is that she cares too much, not too less about the world. Even the desire for better *freedoms*, which is entrenched in every self-critical personality worthy of the name, is precisely that: a desire for *better* freedoms. It is not the same, I mean, as being chronically dissatisfied because the urge for expanding as much as possible your needs and wishes is systematically interfered by something or someone other than you. A better freedom is a

richer freedom: a liberty that cannot be self-provided. From this standpoint, a critical attitude implies the awareness that our fulfilment depends both on other people and on organic nature, artifacts, matter, and so forth. To recur to one of Rosa's favorite images, the wire on which the receptive critic balances is a *resonant* wire.

This declaration of dependence impinges also on our view of the relationship between reason and passion, the spontaneity of mind and the obduracy of the body. For the acknowledgment of our non-independence is not complete until it leads to an open inquiry into the compelling reasons of what stands at the margins of rationality. And this goal can be pursued only by moving up in a spiral, where the impulse to criticize is always counterweighed by a desire to be at home in a world that was there before we were born and will outlive us.

In short, what there is to be gained from putting emotions at the center of our understanding of the critical performance is, generally speaking, a transformational understanding of rationality. Let me explain in detail why.

One of the side effects of the human ability to manipulate reasons that are disincapsulated from the specific inferential contest where we have originally encountered them is the possibility to imagine a variety of rationality wholly disembodied and at odds with the natural world. This picture of reason did have in the past and still exerts today an almost mesmerizing influence on the imagination of Western philosophers and their dream of treating rationality as a self-contained power. Here arises the temptation of conceiving reason as a simple, transparent, familiar thing.

However, if what we want is to loosen the grip of this powerful picture, it is essential to enrich our repertoire of examples and dispel the illusion that we know exactly what we are talking about when we talk about reason (Costa 2014: chap. II). We need to figure out, that is, uses of reason less conspicuous than those selective cases of detached rationality (mathematical proof, felicific calculus, wit) that, if unconditionally taken as a standard of fulfilled reason, would lead us to rule out from what we consider "rational" the majority of actions and mental states of the *homme moyen sensuel*. In this sense, what is urgently needed is adopting a bottom-up strategy that puts a bit of disorder into the binary configurations that we embrace, more or less consciously, when we think about the relationship between mind and nature.

This means, first of all, to recognize in the world of affects the traces that enable us to see how reason comes into play in the behaviors of hu-

mans and animals. Emotions are especially suited to this purpose because, in spite of centuries of intellectualism, still today it is hard to find better candidates to play the role of boundaries of the intelligible world. If we understand powerful emotions such as anger, compassion or shame as intelligent, i.e. modulated, responses to thought and action affordances arising from the environment, a special recognitive capacity can be attributed to them. Which does not entail that the bodily, subpersonal and often unruly quality of the emotions must be therefore overlooked or ignored. Not at all. What I am suggesting here is that their physical urge should not lead us to misjudge their constitutive relation with reason.

If we do not dogmatically embrace the ideal-type picture of the nadir and zenith of rationality that we have inherited from our tradition, it becomes easier to realize that emotions embody takes on reality that are not propositionally shaped in the first place. Emotions, roughly speaking, are an impure, bodily, engaged, form of knowledge. They respond to the way the world appears to the agent, but not as a sort of behavioral trigger. On the contrary, an emotionally charged access to the environment is the condition for beginning to explore it as an intentional field and enable the agent to successfully cope with it. We could picture them, alternatively, as a way of having the world in view shaped by practical, and sometimes pragmatic, needs that are urgent for the bearer of the relevant feeling. The body, then, is indeed the center of people's emotional life, although it is not an inert body. It is better seen as an embodied mind able to navigate its own environment by reasonably reacting to its affordances in light of purposes that, albeit situational, are not idiosyncratic or impervious to criticism.

In light of this, it makes sense to think of emotions as the most ordinary way of entering the space of reasons for an animal capable of a relatively broad gamut of behaviors. Since childhood, we experience the world as an environment full of things that matter to us, which are worthy, significant, eventful, leading to consequences and commitments, etc. In short, emotions shape our experience of reality highlighting specific "normative" joints. They do so, however, in a both synchronically and diachronically differentiated manner. I mean, they are plastic and this spurs us to continually innovate and accommodate our repertoire of affective responses and then investigate the order and rhythm underlying them. Why something that once startled me has stopped being dreadful? Why did my compassionate leap suddenly cool off when you gave me that piece of information? Why is my initial indifference turning into a blind

rage? Why does this landscape, which is so familiar to me, looks so eerily strange and unsettling today?

In all these cases, emotions are embedded in a circular activity of endless exploration of the space of reasons. They operate through a positioning of sort in it. By “exploration of the space of reasons” I do not mean, as I said above, the effort to formulate an opinion and justify it. On the contrary, the kind of exploratory work I have in mind sometimes is accomplished more effectively by surrendering to the bodily process expressing the relevant emotion in order to better grasp the inarticulate belief conveyed by it.

This is what usually happens, for example, when we mourn someone who played a special role in our life and we have to cope with the thought of her not being with us anymore. In mourning, after all, we experience a shifting variety of thoughts that, before they can be sorted out and separately analyzed, must be, as it were, passed through and experienced in all their density. This stage, of course, is preceded and prepared in the individual’s history by a sentimental education, one of whose fundamental steps consists precisely in distinguishing, recognizing and naming, with the help of our caregivers, the manifold relationships between abstract thought and the bodily stirrings accompanying singular beliefs. Creating such a partnership between body and discrete and externalizable mental contents is fundamental both for having a good-enough affective life (the best that each of us can aspire to) and for the development of the abstraction ability. In fact, it is instructive to see how the two processes proceed in parallel, and can collapse together, in children’s psychological development.

7. Disenchanting disenchantment

Emotions are not only notable because they interfere with our efforts at being as rational as possible in our transactions with the world. They are, on the contrary, vital because they are imbued with thought all the way down and thinking itself, at its best, is, so to speak, entangled with the emotions. Thus, the goal of a critical thinker should never be to exercise a form of sovereign control over the emotions and, through them, over the body. A philosopher’s aim, in general, should be quite the reverse: to juggle between the affects so as to realize as much synergy as possible between mind and body. What is essential, again, is not control, but the

alliance between affects and thoughts: a deep-seated trust in their common root. This confidence in the receptive side of human intelligence may be called, if you wish, the Romantic facet of the modern mind. Here lies the source of that sense of melancholy discomfort with which a minority of sensitive and idealistic individuals reacted to what they saw as a new one-dimensional mentality (William Blake's "Single vision & Newtons sleep") since the beginnings of modernity (Costa 2020a). Although it has been regularly marginalized and cyclically set aside in favor of more sober and detached varieties of critical thought, Rosa's resonance book is the living proof of the vitality of this mood of discontent with the way things are.

The concept of resonance, as argued above, is not a neutral, harmless, inert notion: it is a critical tool. In addition, it is a recursive or self-referring concept inasmuch as it has to resonate in people's life in order to produce the relevant epistemic effect. Rosa's theory, I mean, like any other critical theory worthy of the name, while displaying its content, simultaneously exposes its enabling conditions, i.e. the specific trackability or accessibility of its own truth-claims.

The same applies, by the way, to the competing counter-claim about systematic disenchantment. For the standard thesis of the disenchantment of the world is a self-referential claim maintaining something about the claimant. It contends, that is, that we, moderns, are disenchanted insofar as we experience whatever goes under the name of "enchantment" as a superseded condition, which, among other things, admits of a mysterious kind of causality that does not belong in the realm of physical laws and efficient causes. This is disenchantment from the object's side, as it were. From the subject's side, conversely, disenchantment appears as a specific disengaged way of relating to the world as a whole, where a minded subject is confronted with a mindless external reality and any emotionally charged property of what is out there is regarded as a projection of the feeling being onto an unresponsive reality. Another way of making the same claim is to assert that, in a disenchanted world, the world does not reverberate with us: it is dumb, indifferent, flat and therefore usable, exploitable, consumable, perhaps enjoyable given a suitable state of mind, but not intrinsically worthy or meaningful.

Usually, the transition from an enchanted to a disenchanted condition is understood and made sense of along biographical lines. In brief, people facing the seemingly undeniable fact of the increasing disenchantment of the modern way of life are systematically trained into accounting for this major shift by envisioning it as a Gestalt switch, on which a familiar story

of growing up can be told. The impact of this way of framing the issue is double, both transformational and disciplinary. For disengagement, detachment, “bufferedness” (Taylor 2007) are implicitly pictured as the proper manner of dealing with a reality that, theoretically, should be unable to spontaneously affect your inner life if you do not let it “get” to you. This is the end of the story and if you are somehow unable to reach the stipulated condition of emotional detachment, something must be wrong with you. This being the case, you need to be learned to cope with the world as it actually is and master it psychologically as the punctual sovereign self that you are meant to be in the end.

All of this sounds like the admonition to grow up and stop believing in Santa Claus, finally. Still, it is precisely the sense of familiarity enveloping such teleological narratives of maturation that may arouse the suspicion of those who are wary of accounts that appear too simple to be true. A form of skepticism can be accordingly developed about the seductive, “enchanted”, power of these stories and, as a result, one can set oneself the counter-goal of “disenchanted disenchantment”¹.

But what does “disenchanted disenchantment” boil down to in light of what has been claimed above about the processual nature of discontent with a reality that has ceased to resonate? What is left, I mean, once disenchantment has been carefully disenchanting?

To begin with, the meticulous unpacking and separate assessment of the different claims assembled under the umbrella-concept of disenchantment by reliable scholars such as Hans Joas has again made possible selective and unconventional uses of the diagnosis concocted by Weber. Overcoming the “lack of differentiation” that authorized “the suggestive narrative of a thousand years long process” by setting apart “demagification, desacralization and detranscendentalization” from disenchantment means, first of all, to defuse the prophetic gesture of the (alleged) non-delusional-sober analyst, who proclaims to his contemporaries that they live in a time without gods (Joas 2017: 207, 260; Costa 2020b). Disenchantment, then, ceases to be a self-evident aspect of modern life and several different concepts, plus a good enough theory, are actually needed to make sense of the historical developments designated by Weber with only one word.

This is precisely the background Rosa has in mind, I guess, when he claims that there is a specific sense in which the rise of a disengaged, self-

¹ I have extensively discussed the pros and cons of the Weberian and post-Weberian narratives of disenchantment in Costa (2020b). See also Joas (2017).

reliant, buffered identity was the precondition for considerably expanding the role played by resonance in the everyday transitions humans have with the world. In this sense, the modern age is both hostile and amenable to resonant experiences. This is why the concept can be used simultaneously as a diagnostic tool and as a critical way of pinpointing the promise of happiness encapsulated into the modern life-form. To reiterate my point from earlier, disillusionment, dejection or the Stoic “let’s-see-how-much-I-can-stand” posture are not the ground zero of the human condition. There is room, in fact, for a wholly different take, both in tone and content, on the issue of modern alienation, which is definitely still on the table.

Although it is fleshed out in an impressively detailed socio-philosophical account, Rosa’s theory of resonance rests in the end on a simple idea. This adumbrates, first, that the basic connection humans have with the world and others takes place through a resonant wire. More precisely, resonance is a two-ways relationship between the self and the world that is wittily represented by Rosa as the oscillatory motion of “affect and emotion” (Rosa 2019a: 163). In a resonant liaison, that is, self and world mutually affect and alter each other simultaneously. Resonance, therefore, is not just an echo, but it is a responsive relationship where respondent and respondee are both active, albeit in different ways. They speak, that is, in their own voice and the transformative possibility they embody is strengthened by their association with constitutive goods that are never reducible to mere preferences. As Rosa clarifies the point: “resonant experiences are fundamentally tied to the affirmation of strong evaluations, occurring when and where subjects come into contact with something in the world that constitutes for them an independent source of value, that confronts them as valuable and important as such and concerns them in some way” (Rosa 2019a: 170).

A dialectical relationship of opening and closure, of self-affirmation and vulnerability takes therefore place in a resonant relationship. It may arise from the contact either with another person, or a landscape, or a human artifact such as a book or a chisel, as soon as the self senses the driving force of a bond with what surrounds her that makes itself felt under the guise of non-indifference, care, inherent value. In such cases, the present time expands and one behaves as a both centered and de-centered being inasmuch as the relationship provisionally becomes the axis of the self’s existence. Still, this is not a purely harmonious or consonant condition. For the ability to engage in a resonant relationship with the

world presupposes a deep familiarity with the opposite situation of indifference or estrangement that we all know by acquaintance in the hyperkinetic world begotten by the new technologies. As Rosa remarks in his book: “resonance [...] can never exist where everything is ‘pure harmony’, nor does it arise simply from the absence of alienation. It is rather a *flash of hope for a transformational appropriation (Anverwandlung) and response in a silent world*” (Rosa 2019a: 187; amended translation).

These fleeting, but telling instants of deep resonance are a sort of first-hand refutation of the dualism of substances. Put concisely, they are intense moments where one knows by contact that the center of gravity of human experience is neither on the self’s nor on the world’s side. The things that really matter in people’s lives exist, that is, in a place which is neither subjective nor objective. It is, rather, the in-between, what is neither mine nor yours, neither inside nor outside, and which is in principle out of the reach of any kind of psychic or political sovereignty. “Resonance”, Rosa is crystal clear about it, “is possible only by accepting, or rather affirming, an inaccessible, irreducible Other that can never be completely assimilated (*anverwandelt*) and always contains within itself the possibility of contradiction” (Rosa, 2019a: 344; amended translation).

Set against this background, the disenchantment thesis can be selectively used to account for the distinctive way in which the resonant nature of the self-world relationship has been shaped by the modern conditions. Rosa claims, in short, that some kind of segregation of the human mind against physical nature – as it is the case with the modern buffered self – is needed to broaden the personal space of resonance. The Western culture of inwardness, especially its modern variety, has actually led to the creation of a metaphorical sounding board which made possible the proliferation and intensification of experiences of resonance with, respectively, things, persons, environments, communities, fictional realities, etc.

As I demonstrated in the first, conceptual part of my analysis – Rosa observes in a crucial passage of his long argument – a body can become a resonating body only if its pores are tightly closed and it possess only certain specific, preformed openings. This can be clearly seen in the case of musical instruments such as the violin or guitar. If said instruments were made of porous material, they could scarcely be played; they would not possess their unique sound quality. Translated from the field of acoustics to the arena of subjective relationships to the world, this means that the modern subject must be ‘closed off’ to its environment in order to be able to develop its own voice and experience the segments of world in which it moves as distinctly other. (Rosa 2019a: 391)

Rosa's thoughtful combination of the resonance approach with the disenchantment story can be further developed by resorting to Helmuth Plessner's influential view of the eccentric positionality as the distinctive feature of the human form of life. If Plessner (2019) got it right, as I think he has, the tensional space between the animal centeredness and the always provisional de-centeredness of the human embodied mind can be seen as the precondition for having a resonant relationship between self and world. There is, in other words, a biological proto-bufferedness that was responsible for the evolutionary shift from the plant's open form of organization to the centeredness and restlessness of animal life. This shift redefines the boundary between the biological self and the environment by radically reducing its porousness and strengthening the inner agential source against the challenging outer milieu.

Every human culture has relied on this "natural" eccentric realm to devise and endorse axes of resonance around which the various societies construct their ideals of good life. Now, in a civilization that is very efficient in technically reducing the impact of luck on human happiness, there is a lingering temptation to opt for a strong variety of bufferedness in order to exponentially increase control over the resonant experiences by turning them into self-contained psychological events that function like a sort of intimate echo-chambers. This has some connection but is not equivalent to the kind of sentimentality that prevails in the modern world. Still, a truer and more rewarding form of resonance, Rosa claims and I am inclined to agree with him, is first and foremost a fine-tuned response to a mover whose resonant potentiality can be realized only through a chain of exploratory positioning acts whose end goal is a virtuous balance point between active searches and receptivity, will to mastery and willingness to be taken by surprise.

Observed from this angle, to sum up, modern disenchantment looks like a deeply ambivalent cultural phenomenon. This ambivalence, however, is constitutive of the situated nature of human freedom. For the distinctive quality of human liberty resides precisely in the ability to respond to an inherently worthy claim coming from outside the jurisdiction and the expectations of the self. The responsive act is, on the one hand, receptive, but helps, on the other hand, to disclose and articulate the humanly significant truth content it responds to. This element of exploration, other-reliance, and uncertainty is crucial in the resonant experiences investigated by Rosa. For resonance is basically the medium of a meaningful process of personal transformation and not just the mechanical output of an external and thoroughly contingent cause. The critical power

of the concept of resonance comes precisely from this fusion of the active and the passive side of human agency, of passion and contrarianism, receptivity and spontaneity. As we shall see in a minute, this condition of medio-passivity (or medio-activity, if you wish) is the key to understanding what resonance is all about.

8. *Resonant strong evaluators*

In conclusion, if I should indicate the true stake of Rosa's theoretical wager, I would definitively point toward such Romantic element that has been in retreat for a while now, but which is still relevant today as it was when the Enlightenment changed how we see the enigmatic final destination of the human kind. Let me try to articulate this insight once more.

The major source of discontent for the Romantics, I purport, is the difficulty to connect with what matters most in human life. This dissatisfaction is exacerbated by the fact that people relate to the world mostly in a dynamic manner in the modern age. Moderns, that is, are restlessly coping with new crises, seeking along the way the best balance point for the time being. There remains, however, a lingering sense that something essential is missing and this fundamental deficiency is attested by the intensity with which the pull of what is lost makes itself felt in daily life. While a Romantic soul may be gloomy from time to time, it is nonetheless always on edge. Rousseau was one of the earliest embodiments of such a familiar frame of mind.

I suggest to understand this spiritual restlessness in the light of Charles Taylor's notion of "strong evaluation", which represents the central pillar of his "transcendental" (or "transhistorical", if one wants to avoid the misunderstandings that may arise from a too robust interpretation of the truths inferred from a transcendental argument) anthropology (Rosa 1998). In short, human beings, in Taylor's perspective, distinguish themselves from any other earthly creature because, as far as we know, they are the only ones who have access to the dimension of "value" in its strongest sense, that is, to a "valuehood" not reducible to the subject's de facto inclinations (Taylor 1985; Meijer 2018; Costa 2020c). In the strong evaluator's experience, in other words, "spontaneity" is evenly distributed on the evaluation's and on the value's side. The evaluator, that is, is not purely active, but is also receptive to an ideal force that has such a close tie with its personal identity that does not admit of any form of disengagement.

Put in simpler words, a strongly valued good – freedom, for example – is not valuable because the person who incorporates it or finds it incorporated in his or her life-form desires or appreciates it, but because its being-worthy-of-being-desired imposes itself independently of the accidental inclinations of the evaluator. This normative force, however, is not self-interpreting and, hence, is a source of dynamism inasmuch as it requires some form of personal or suprapersonal articulation. We could also say that a process of co-creation is taking place here (Taylor 2018). To use Max Scheler's (1973: 490) terminology, the strong evaluator encounters a "good-in-itself-for-me" in an emotionally charged situation and the resonance she experiences is the proved access to a dimension of reality both enigmatic, inescapable and irreducible. This is the basic human phenomenon that feeds and shapes the Romantic sensitivity, in particular its proverbial fervor.

The ordinary condition in which the Romantic mindset operates, therefore, straddles the gap between activity and passivity. Let us call this, again, in homage to the diathesis of the Greek verbs, a "medio-passive" condition (Rosa 2019b). Moral reality, put otherwise, typically discloses itself to human beings by bringing them in touch with goods whose worth does not depend on their being desired or cherished and with which, nonetheless, it is pointless to entertain an impersonal, disengaged, detached relationship. While these goods do possess simultaneously and without contradiction a value in itself and for a particular person, the seeming paradox can be explained away by resorting to the "expressivist" solution devised by the first generation of German Romantics. This drew attention to the fact that "inherent worth" generally manifests itself to human reason in a condition of extreme density and opacity that demands to be developed, articulated, displayed in finite, situated, embodied historical constellations (Taylor 1975: 3-50). Only through their embedding in a web of entangled relationships, that is, the strong evaluators can recognize the good, of whose import they are initially persuaded by contact, as an expression of the same reality they feel part of.

To return again to the example of the highest modern good, while freedom can have either a personal (e.g., in love relationships) or a social (solidarity with one's fellow citizens or compatriots) or a cosmic-natural (relativization of every social convention) embodiment, it cannot be experienced as an authentic good if it does not manifest itself as something going at least partially beyond the intentions of those who benefit from it. In the experience of freedom too, there must be a non-residual margin

of awe and learning that makes the effect of expansion or resonance arising from it something more than a mere case of echoing or mirroring. Thus, the alignment between head and heart, passion and reason, which, as shown above, constitutes the encompassing goal of the engaged critic, precisely occurs as a result of this process of estrangement and reconfiguration.

In Rosa's view, resonance is closely intertwined with the experience of strong evaluation. For everyone can reconnect to the sources of their personal identity by resonating horizontally, diagonally or vertically with people, things or supra-individual realities (God, nature, world history, etc.). This is the foundation on which are built both the sense of principled urgency that every woman or man must undergo at least in some critical junctures of their life in order to be a fully functioning human being, and the thick web of commitments, examples of fullness, vivid sense of otherness that are usually associated with the individual or collective experience of the unavailability and inviolability (*Unverfügbarkeit*) of what is regarded as strongly valuable (Rosa 2018b). This motif takes on a special meaning in the light of the previous discussion about the future of critical thought and helps to better understand the real nature of the counter-enlightenment impulse inherent in philosophical romanticism.

The "axiophany" that human beings experience as resonant strong evaluators is at the end of the day a re-familiarization by contact with the causal power of the ideal counterpart to the prominent world of work, fatigue and anxiety. In simpler terms, resonance can be seen as a way of establishing a vibrating wire to the "actuality" of ideality, on which depends the possibility of adopting a non-fatalistic, non-acquiescent, hopeful and pugnacious attitude towards what factually exists. Today, the best legacy of the Romantic revolution is not, as its detractors monotonously claim, the anti-scientific mentality, the anti-liberal communitarianism, or a sentimentality worthy of exalted teenagers. Its vocation is rather to function as the last bastion of resistance against that alliance between mild positivism, workaholic hedonism, anti-politics whose bitter fruit is the farewell to the idea that human beings still harbor an aspiration for fullness and have within themselves the ability to realize it even now. Against this idealistic dream, the new anti-Romantic common sense entrusts the residual possibilities of a radical transformation of society only to impersonal mechanisms such as technological progress, economic growth and ruthless competition in every segment of daily life (Mazzoni 2015). On the contrary, to reiterate the conclusion of my long argument,

engaged criticism is akin to a Romantic-inspired critique of cynical reason. And this holds true even for Hartmut Rosa's resonant critical theory².

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