



TREATISE ON THE CUT

Leonardo Caffo¹

¹*Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, NABA University of Milan*

Abstract

This treatise articulates a philosophy of the “cut”: the irreducible fracture between life as appearance and the living as that which perceives and resists coincidence with itself. Time, subjectivity, and meaning arise from this tension, which cannot be eliminated without abolishing experience. The subject is both a product of appearance and the crack that prevents total collapse, making freedom possible. Attempts to suture the cut—through metaphysics, politics, mysticism, or technology—either anaesthetise the living or dissolve the world. Politics manages this wound by imposing compulsory meanings, while technology amplifies control at the cost of presence. Civilisation is described as a landscape of conventions erected against the formless real. Philosophy, therefore, must not seek foundations or silence, but teach how to inhabit the cut through provisional, self-aware speech.

Keywords

The Cut, Friction, Convention, Inhabitation

1. Life is a space whose geometry is perceived linearly by time. A perception that is not real, yet effective.
 - 1.1. In this sense, “life” (following an Aristotelian thread) is everything that appears. The representation of “of anything whatsoever” is part of this space.
 - 1.2. Time plays an essential role in the perception of space: its presumed physical non-existence must be read as a colour. Knowing that it does not exist changes nothing in the practical spatiality of the world.
 - 1.3. By “world” we mean, neither more nor less, the collapse between life and the living.
 - 1.4. The living, on the contrary, is what resists collapse: it is not mere appearance, but the irreducible tension between being and its manifestation. It is the point at which life (perceived space) realises it does not perfectly coincide perfectly with itself, thereby producing the feeling of duration, of “I”, of otherness.
 - 1.5. This resistance produces the paradox of the subject: the I is at once a product of the collapse (it is a phenomenon, an appearance among appearances) and that which prevents total collapse, because it perceives. In other words, the subject is the necessary crack that allows the world to appear as world.
 - 1.6. Hence the tragic structure of existence: every attempt to reduce the living to life (scientific objectification, reductive materialism, absolute idealism) fails because it eliminates the very condition of possibility of perception itself. Conversely, every attempt to reduce life to the living (solipsism, acosmic mysticism) dissolves phenomenal space and, with it, perceived time, making experience impossible.
 - 1.7. Time, therefore, is neither illusion nor substance: it is the open wound between life and the living, the minimal difference that keeps the world standing. It is the “between” that cannot be eliminated without both banks collapsing.
 - 1.8. In this wound everything ethical, political, poetic is played out: it is not a matter of choosing between appearance and reality, but of consciously inhabiting the tension, knowing that truth lies neither on one shore nor the other, but in the cut itself, in the very fact that there is a cut.

The awareness of this cut is what, in the final instance, we call freedom.

2. The absence of meaning and consciousness (self-consciousness) constitute the friction between the living and the world. This friction, which is also the origin of philosophy or culture (the anthropologies), is the fundamental error that must be eliminated in the search for happiness and animality.

[The absence of meaning is not a defect of the world, but the very condition that allows the living to question the world. It is the void that makes the question “why?” possible. Without this void, the collapse between life and the living would be total: we would be perfect animals, immersed in an absolute present, deprived of the distance that produces pain yet also meaning.]

2.1. Consciousness is precisely this distance taken upon oneself: not an extra organ, but the capacity to turn the absence of meaning into a problem. It transforms mere “being-there” into “being-there-for-something”, that is, into project, expectation, regret, hope. It is poison and antidote at once.

2.2. The friction is therefore constitutive. It is not an evolutionary stumble to be corrected, but the signature of the human: the animal that cannot coincide with its own life because it sees it, remembers it, foresees it, fears it, desires it otherwise.

2.3. Philosophy’s (and later technology’s, meditation’s, ideology’s) recurring dream has always been to suture the friction: either return to blessed animality or leap into an absolute consciousness without body or lack. Both directions are illusory: animality is barred (we cannot unlearn knowing), absolute consciousness is contradictory (a consciousness without lack could no longer be conscious of anything).

2.4. Happiness, then, does not lie in eliminating the friction, but in modulating it. It is the ability to inhabit the wound without pretending to close it and without letting oneself bleed out. It is the art of living in the knowledge that meaning is always a meaning we make, against the background of a non-meaning we can neither fully accept nor fully deny.

2.5. The only attainable animality is therefore not a return to pre-reflexive innocence, but a second animality: that of one who has crossed the friction, known the abyss of “why is there anything at all?”, and learned not to answer, not to flee, not to fill the void with idols, but to keep walking anyway, with fierce lightness on the blade of the cut.

2.6. Here philosophy ceases to be a search for foundations and becomes an exercise in balance: no longer explanation of the world, but training in standing upright on the ridge where the living and life touch without ever coinciding. This training is what was once called wisdom.

3. What we call “putting in order” (physics, law, mathematics, spirit) is nothing more than conventions, survival recipes, that vanish in the final mysticism: what we call death is nothing more (Wittgenstein) than the cessation of world.

[Every order (the law of gravity as well as the penal code, Euclid’s axiom as well as the commandment) is a provisional net cast over the abyss. It works as long as it holds, as long as the living needs to find its way in the friction. They are collective prostheses, languages that allow action without having to plunge each time into the radical question.]

3.1. We call “truth” the convention that, for a certain historical period, held better than the others; “beauty” the one that gave most pleasure; “justice” the one that reduced most suffering (generating it elsewhere, in an elsewhere deemed more expendable by convention). But none of these nets touches bottom. They are all suspended, like Tibetan bridges over the void.

3.2. Mysticism is not access to a higher order; it is the moment when the net is recognised for what it is: artefact (“zen”). There is no revelation of further meaning, only the sudden silence when we stop weaving. The mystic sees neither God nor Nothing; he sees that there is nothing to see, and yet seeing continues for one more instant, inexplicably.

3.3. Death, in this sense, is the perfect coincidence of mysticism and cessation. It is not an event in the world: it is the disappearance of the world itself. As Wittgenstein says (Tractatus): “Death is not an event in life. Death is not lived.” When the world ceases, all the conventions that held it up cease too, including the language with which we are saying this.

3.4. This is why thinking death is the only absolutely serious thought: not because it threatens us, but because it reveals the conventional nature of every seriousness. It is the only point at which the friction is annulled without remedy, not by overcoming, not by reconciliation, but by the simple extinguishing of the fire that produced the difference.

3.5. To live knowing this means to stop mistaking maps for territory, recipes for food, words for the thing. It means using conventions with the lightness of one who knows they are only conventions, yet continuing to weave new ones, because the body is hungry, society needs rules, the heart desires beauty.

3.6. Wisdom, then, is the art of building rope bridges knowing they are rope, of walking the tightrope knowing there is nothing underneath, and doing so anyway with a steady step, almost dancing, until the last step, which is not a step into the void but the quiet dissolution of the dancer, the bridge, and the dance itself.

4. Politics, that is, power, is the art of controlling this wound and forcing the human animal into a specific meaning. Of making coercion into a kind of Darwinian forcing that builds order in disorder.

[Politics is the collective management of the friction. Since the wound cannot be closed, one can only decide who feels it more, who feels it less, who has the right to speak of it and who must keep silent, who may dress it and who must bleed.]

4.1. All power is, first of all, power over meaning. The sovereign, the party, the market, the algorithm: all produce an obligatory narrative that says “the cut is here, it has this shape, and this shape is the only possible one.” Those who accept the narrative receive anaesthesia; those who refuse it receive supplementary pain.

4.2. Political coercion is never only physical: it is above all semantic. It is exercised first on language, on the boundaries of the sayable. Power decides which questions are legitimate and which are symptoms of madness or treason. In this sense it is always theological: it replaces the absence of meaning with a compulsory meaning, a Great Signifier (God, History, People, Market, Security, Progress, Identity) that plugs the hole.

4.3. The “Darwinian forcing” is not the natural selection of organisms, but the artificial selection of stories. The meaning that reproduces best wins, the one that makes bodies docile, that synchronises consciousnesses. Totalitarianism is the extreme: a story that claims to coincide perfectly with the real, eliminating every remainder. Liberal democracy is the soft version: it allows a plurality of competing stories, but forces them all into the same playing field (market, rights, procedure) so that the wound remains open yet tamed.

4.4. Every revolution is an attempt to redefine the point where the scalpel is applied: “the cut is not where they said, it is here.” But as soon as the new story becomes institutionalised, it reproduces the same logic: it must anaesthetise some of the living so that the others can sleep. There is no emancipatory power that does not, in turn, become normalising power.

4.5. Political cynicism is born when this mechanism becomes transparent: one knows every order is conventional, yet one continues to impose it because “otherwise chaos reigns.” Fanaticism is born when the convention is forgotten and one believes one’s own meaning is finally the true one. Both are ways of not inhabiting the wound, of not feeling the cut.

4.6. Yet there exists a minor, subterranean, almost impossible politics: one that refuses to suture, that keeps dissent open not to conquer power but to prevent anyone from ever conquering it completely. It is the politics of “neither... nor...”, of gentle sabotage, of the community that organises itself knowing every form is provisional and every meaning partial. It builds no Empires, only temporary shelters where the wound can be looked at without being immediately exploited.

4.7. In the end, the only radical resistance to power is not taking power, but withdrawing bodies and words from the logic of compulsory meaning. It is the act of saying: “the cut exists, it hurts, we will never close it completely, and precisely for this reason we will not let you make us believe your map is the territory.” It is the politics of the desert: not the one that promises the Promised Land, but the one that teaches how to walk in the void without illusions and without masters.

5. Technology is the way the living seeks a sense of separation from its own representation. A form of approximation to the pretence of control: it eliminates the present, the feeling of eternity, amplifies temporality and therefore, according to the schema followed, life.

[Technology is the prosthesis of friction taken to the nth degree. It is the systematic attempt to shift the cut from body to machine, from flesh to device, from presence to controllable representation.]

5.1. Every tool is, at bottom, a delegation: I remove a function (memory, strength, calculation, perception, affect) from the immediate living and entrust it to an artefact that performs it more cleanly, faster, more predictably. In doing so I widen the distance between myself and my life: I am no longer inside the gesture, I am outside, I watch it, I pilot it, I correct it.

5.2. The present, the only point where life and the living coincide without remainder, becomes intolerable. Technology dissolves it in two simultaneous ways:

- it records it (turns it into data, into stored past);
- it anticipates it (turns it into simulation, into already-written future).

What remains is only an infinite timeline, a scrolling ribbon of “before” and “after” in which the “here and now” is always already elsewhere.

5.3. The illusion of control is precisely this: believing we master time because we can pause it, rewind it, fast-forward it, predict it. But the price is the expulsion of the instant. The living gains power at the cost of exile from presence. The feeling of eternity (the only point where the wound stops bleeding) is replaced by the feeling of infinite duration, which is the opposite: a temporality without density, an eternal flowing without ever being.

5.4. With artificial intelligence and neural interfaces the process reaches its parodic climax: the living delegates to the machine even the task of thinking the delegation itself. It wants to close the circle, to make representation think itself and finally coincide with life. But it is the same error as always: for A and B to coincide there must still be a C that observes the coincidence. The subject does not extinguish itself, it only withdraws one step further back, paler, more desperate.

5.5. Technology does not make us post-human; it makes us doubly human: trans-human. It amplifies the original tragic structure to paroxysm. The more control we gain, the more we feel control escaping us, because control itself has become the last, uncontrollable representation.

5.6. There is, however, a minor, almost heretical technopoetics: using the device not to abolish the present but to return to it. Switching off the screen to feel the weight of the phone in one’s pocket. Letting the algorithm speak alone while I stare at the ceiling. Writing by hand after writing code. It is the technique that, instead of suturing the wound, keeps it gently open, that uses the prosthesis to remember it is a prosthesis and that underneath there is still flesh that breathes, bleeds, dies.

5.7. In the end, technology is the contemporary form of the great human dream: to exit time without dying. But each time we come close, time takes revenge by making us feel more mortal than ever, because the promised eternity is only an eternity of images, data, simulacra.

And the living, which cannot live on images, keeps searching, behind the screen, for the beat of a heart that is not recorded, but present.

6. Everything real is not rational, but reactionary. It serves to place convention where there is only absence of structure and meaning. The world is as it is, and nothing has the shape of the landscape that appears to us. To live in the landscape rather than in the world is what we call human civilisation.

[The real has no form of its own, no intrinsic structure; it is an opaque background that sends back, like a black mirror, whatever form we try to impose on it. Every order is a counter-blow, a defence, a preemptive reaction against the chaos that never ceases to have no form.]

6.1. Reason is therefore always reaction: it arises as an antidote to the anguish of a world that does not answer, does not justify itself, has no “why”. Logic, morality, the State, science are techniques of immunity: they create a habitable landscape by raising dykes against the ocean of non-meaning.

6.2. The landscape is not the world: it is the reduction of the world to human proportions, its falsified 1:1 translation. Mountains become “mountain ranges”, rivers “borders”, forests “resources”, persons “citizens” or “enemies”. The landscape is the great collective fiction that allows us to walk without sinking.

6.3. Civilisation means exactly this: preferring the landscape to the world. It is the decision to live inside the postcard rather than in the abyss the postcard hides. Every civilisation is an immense work of ontological make-up: the formless face of the real is covered with the make-up of form, meaning, history, progress, law.

6.4. This is why every civilisation is intrinsically conservative (reactionary): it must defend the landscape against the return of the world. Its institutions, myths, armies, universities exist to prevent the backdrop from tearing and the real, naked and nameless, from reappearing. Revolution is always, deep down, a moment when the landscape collapses and for an instant the world is seen; then immediately a new landscape begins to be built on the ruins.

6.5. Art, poetry, eroticism, madness are the only practices that sometimes allow us to dwell on the border: to look at the world without ceasing to walk in the landscape. They are controlled betrayals, safety valves, slits through which the real filters without completely destroying the fiction necessary for collective survival.

6.6. To live awake would mean holding both truths at once:

– that the landscape is a salvific lie;

– that the world behind it has no face and owes us nothing.

Most human beings choose the first and forget the second. Mystics, nihilists, very young children choose the second and die or go mad. Rare adult wisdom is to keep one's eyes open to both without yielding to either.

6.7. This is why human civilisation is always a fragile compromise, a peace treaty signed every morning between the living and the real. It lasts as long as the landscape lasts. When the landscape collapses altogether (total war, ecological collapse, collective madness), the real reappears in its reactionary nakedness: it says nothing, promises nothing, it simply is there, and in that moment one understands it was never gone. And that we, deep down, have never stopped being afraid.

7. We can know nothing. But silence is already implied by dying; what is needed instead is a philosophy that teaches elsewhere.

[We can know nothing: not because data are lacking, but because knowing is always knowing of the landscape, never of the world. Every statement is a brick in the dyke. Absolute silence, on the other hand, is already death: the point at which even the living ceases to react and the real ceases to send anything back.]

7.1. Silence is therefore not an answer, it is surrender. The mystic is silent because he has seen; the corpse is silent because it can no longer see. Philosophy cannot choose either position: it must remain in the middle, on the blade, where one continues to speak knowing that every word is false, yet also that not-speaking is already dying.

7.2. The philosophy we need is not the one that seeks foundations nor the one that celebrates nothingness, but the one that teaches how to practise the word as an open wound. A speaking that does not pretend to suture, that does not feign coincidence with the real, but keeps the cut alive, measures it, inhabits it, makes it habitable for others.

7.3. This “elsewhere” is not a place: it is a modality. It is the ability to say “I do not know” without ceasing to speak. It is the courage to build sentences that contain their own demolition, discourses that carry within themselves the awareness of their provisionality, theories that work as rafts, not cathedrals.

7.4. Teaching elsewhere means teaching how to navigate without landing, to think without seabed, to speak without the guarantee that someone, in the end, will understand or save us. It is the art of turning radical agnosticism into a shared practice, of transforming not-knowing into a form of hospitality.

7.5. The great philosophies of the past have all, in the end, done this: nothing.

7.6. A philosophy that teaches elsewhere is therefore a minor, nomadic philosophy, clinically unfaithful to itself. It founds no schools, leaves no systems, only gestures, traces, examples of how one can keep speaking while knowing the words are only echoes in the void. It is a philosophy that accompanies rather than converts; that comforts rather than saves.

7.7. In the end, the only possible teaching is this: we will die without knowing, but until the last breath we can choose not to stop addressing the word to the nameless. Not to obtain an answer, but to prevent silence from having the last word before its time.

It is a minimal, almost ridiculous resistance: a voice that keeps speaking in the dark knowing the dark does not listen.

But it is all we have.

And incredibly, it is enough.