

# Thinking on an Island: An Interview with Raffaele Mirelli

Matthew I. Thompson

On the east side of the island of Ischia, the Torre di Guevara rises out of a walled garden. The Renaissance-era structure looks out over a small bay of vibrant Tyrrhenian sea at the much older Castello Aragonese. From the tower, the castle—a fortress that seems to grow out of the volcanic cliffs of its tiny islet—takes up the foreground, while the background is dominated by the island of Procida, Napoli, and the volcano, Vesuvio. For the past three years, the tower and the castle have been the main venues for the Ischia International Festival of Philosophy. Though the august architecture might seem likely to house esoteric debates about continental philosophers, the Festival is designed to change how we think about philosophy, and who practices it. Rather than perpetuating the separation of philosophical ideas from everyday thought maintained by academic architecture and jargon, the founder of the Festival, Raffaele Mirelli, initiated the week-long event to integrate philosophy into the lives of the islanders. Many elements of the Festival are designed to make philosophy more accessible to non-academics, youth in particular. For example, while taking the twenty-minute walk from the ferry terminal to the town of Ischia Ponte (where the castle and the tower are located) I came across multiple signs for the festival, each with a different philosophical quote. One displayed the first sentence of the conclusion to Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*.

Though it was in Italian, here it is in the English translation: “Two things fill my mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: The starry heavens above and the moral law within.” Rather than focusing on Kant’s theories specifically,

this quote invites the passing reader to contemplate the things that inspired Kant's thought. This is symbolic of Mirelli's approach to thinking on the island: everyone can practice philosophy, no matter their training, and the more people who do, the better.

Mirelli functions on Ischia as the island's resident philosopher. From this position he helps the community in areas as diverse as the creation of a sustainable local fishery to the instruction of educators working with students with autism. After completing his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the Albert-Ludwig University of Freiburg, Germany, Mirelli returned to Ischia (where he grew up) to reintegrate philosophy into the community. Mirelli's Ph.D. dissertation entitled *The Daimon and the Figure of Socrates* was published in 2013 by Koenigshausen und Neumann. Alongside his work in the community, he also recently edited a collection called *A che cosa serve la Filosofia? chi è il Filosofo?* which was published in 2017. I caught up with Mirelli via skype in February of this year to ask him about how he views his influence, and the influence of philosophy generally, on the island of Ischia.

**Matthew I. Thompson:** I wanted to ask you about the theme of the upcoming Festival. What is it, and how did you go about choosing this theme?

**Raffaele Mirelli:** Next year's theme is "Human Nature." Brian [Price] and Meghan [Sutherland] are working with me on the call for papers. We want to start letting people know about the Festival and the new theme in order to make our community bigger. We don't want to be limited to a special group of people; rather, we want to make it grow every year, if possible. That is the reason and the aim that we want to follow, as we say in Italian.

There is a committee behind the Festival, made up of a couple of very famous philosophers in Europe but also in America, including James Conant. They work with us to develop the conference themes. The first year's theme was "What is philosophy? And Who is the Philosopher?" We are trying to shape, I would not say a *new* figure of the philosopher, but we are trying to create a public identity for philosophers. The problem is that the philosopher doesn't have a proper place in the public sphere. If, as a philosopher, you are not a professor, then in professional terms, people usually don't know what you are doing for the community. In contrast, we see philosophy as something that works for the community, and, in this way, it is also a political task: we want to bring philosophy to the people.

The second year's edition was about relationships, about relation and mediation. Because maybe, in the human sphere, the philosopher is someone who is tasked with translating everything—just as Socrates was, no? In talking to a philosopher, I ask: What is good? What is bad? What am I supposed to do to make things improve? What is my duty in the community?

In the third year, we talked about values. Often the philosopher ends with values. At the end of a philosophical work new values are often presented as a solution to the problems that have been brought to light. I think of Nietzsche turning everything upside down, and enlarging this circle—which is what we normally consider common sense, which are the values that we accept.

And now we are focusing on the human being and human nature. We are made from nature, we are a part of nature, but it seems as though we are moving in the opposite direction from nature. Philosophy should be more than just a way of thinking. It has to be something pedagogically active, something that forces people to think critically, that brings people together in thinking and as a community. Philosophy should not imply the separation of thought and community. The usual figure of the intellectual is entrapped in a *solipsismus*; they are a lonely person. Someone who wants to be something different from the community, a difference from the other that he achieves through his thought. So we want to change how the philosopher thinks, first. Because as philosophers we have to understand that we are trapped in an academic discourse, and now we need to get outside of it.

**MT:** I wanted to ask you about the terms “human” and “nature” first, and then the concept itself of “human nature.” These are all contested terrain in a sense. The words human and nature are often deconstructed by philosophy as modern, western concepts. The term nature is coming under fire at the moment because it signifies so many different things; both what is right and normal, but also what is separate from humans in the sense that it is outside of culture. So, I was just curious about which ways you were looking forward to having the concept of human nature complicated at the upcoming Festival?

**RM:** That's a big question, actually. You know, we have to wait to see how the Festival develops during the sessions because it is a work in progress. Through the call for papers, one gives input, but the speakers have to take

up the discussion for themselves. And they will do it in a way that makes it possible for everyone to understand the problem of human nature. It is exactly this separation between human and nature that we are going to work on, because, in my opinion it's really important. One hears that we are in the world, we are on the Internet, we have this new window on the world, and yet we have to understand where to find the truth, or if we even need a truth, because if it's only one it's not that much. Everyone has a different truth. The separation is going on, maybe, and if it's not a separation, it's another way to recreate nature, because maybe there is a substitutability of the terms God, nature, and so on. We are trying to rebuild a scheme; we are trying to rebuild our lives in a much larger way. How can I say? It's like a net. It can hold things together, but it can also be a trap.

If you look at the Renaissance, you can see the way that nature and human beings were considered one, and how God was understood to be the one who was moving the puppets around. Maybe that was the first window, in the same way that there are windows now on the Internet, on laptops, everywhere. So, I think the separation is going on, but maybe it is also a transformation. If you have the chance, and we do have the chance, to think with your own mind then it's important not to say shit to everything. We have to say what is good for us and what is bad for us, but when we do, we are not reaching a conclusion. We are initiating something by having many different points of view come together as the development of our thinking. That's why it's good to have a lot of people with us at the Festival, to hear from a large community. It is not a Festival for superstar thinking, because you know, usually conferences have so many speakers that are brilliant thinkers, that are very clever, but do we always need to be so clever? Can't we gain a little more cleverness together?

**MT:** On that note, can you tell me about the inclusion of young people through the Young Thinker's Festival? What is the significance of the inclusion of teenagers in the Festival? What do they bring to it, and what do they get out of it?

**RM:** First I want to say, don't take all of my words and thoughts too seriously. I'm not a serious person. I love to think, but I also love to make fun of myself. All of the people working on this Festival, and there are a lot, we are working every year differently, with different ideas and with different people, so we have to be ironic. We can't take everything so seriously because otherwise we will be another academic world, in which we begin to

separate some things from other things and some thoughts from other thoughts. Young people are essential to us not only for a better future but also because they remind us that we don't need to take ourselves so seriously. Young people help us because they are living another part of their lives. The way they revolt against authorities and aesthetical thinking is a really important lesson for philosophy. They are the new fuel we receive every year. However, young people also need to be influenced by philosophy, by philosophers; they need help in shaping their minds in order to be different from the masses. Because if you take a look at all of these windows we have in front of us, the risk is this: we are getting stuck, framed in.

The Festival tries to mix young and older thinkers in order to renew philosophy and to renew the thought of philosophers. Sometimes, as philosophers we take ourselves too seriously. The science of philosophy, if philosophy is a science at all, needs to be open even more than other sciences because we are the first to ask questions. We need to keep alive this curiosity, as well as our non-sense, to keep curiosity and non-sense alive because the non-sense can open up a new space, which is the space we're shaping.

The name of last year's Young Thinker's Festival was "become a philosopher." The idea was to get young people interested in philosophy. Maybe they are already philosophers. It helps to tell them that they are, so that they have permission to enter into this kind of thinking.

**MT:** So, if I understand you correctly, children are very good at asking why, and at the same time they are obsessed with nonsense. If those are two critical things for a philosopher then it makes perfect sense to me that young people are, in a sense, already philosophers and can teach philosophers about philosophy from another aspect.

**RM:** Most philosophers will get upset if you say that everyone is a philosopher because professional philosophers have a peculiar, very high skill level in philosophy. I think there are so many different levels of technicality with everything, and so it is with philosophy, as well. But many non-philosophers ask the same kinds of questions: Why am I living here at this moment? Why do I have to die? Why do my parents or my friends have to die? These are, in my view, the philosophical questions that all of us ask every day—about time, about ourselves, about living together or not living together. These are the principles; these are the starting points in

philosophy. And I don't know why you started in philosophy, but for me it was about this: asking about time, death; asking about everything that was a nonsense question, a non-sense question. And as philosophers, we cannot provide a generous solution or a final answer because we are *in divenire* (becoming). It means that everyday we become something different. Nonsense, then, is our sense in philosophy. We don't like the light, we like the darkness; we like the spaces where we don't know what our feet will walk on. And that is the aim of philosophy and of science in general. You can't create a new theory, or even progress in a place where there is light. You need a dark place, and that place can be everywhere, even your chair is a dark place in the light.

**MT:** What is your role as a philosopher on the island of Ischia? How are you involved in the community of Ischia, and what are some of the things you do as a philosopher there?

**RM:** This is a new role for me. When I was in Freiberg writing my PhD in philosophy, I was, as many of us are, waiting for something to come from the academy I was waiting for a place where I could work or be a philosopher, a recognized one. I did work in the academy for a couple of years and when the contract was over I left Germany. Back in Ischia and in Italy, I started this Festival because I wanted to share with my community in a different way. On an island, it's really dangerous because there are a lot of habits. Every day you do the same things and think the same way. Islanders don't want to think differently, and that's a paradox. It's absurd because in Ischia we receive every year 30 million visitors. It's a huge quantity of people, and it's a huge amount of differences. The danger, then, is to build a wall and to think, "I am from Ischia and because I am from Ischia I will think in only this way." If you think differently then you are a danger to the community. I wanted to change the shape of thinking on this Island, because if you live in many countries, you come back to your own country and see things differently. We have a lot of problems here. We have a beautiful place, but we don't respect it as much we should. That is why I decided to live here! I want to improve myself along with my beautiful island. So, philosophy can be the means to make people conscious of how we live every day. We can treat our island better, have respect for the ecology, for the landscape, for everything. We have so many cars on this island. There are 50,000 cars and we are 63,000 people. That's a lot. It's too

much. We are lazy here, we want to bring our cars directly into our bedroom and open the door and skip into bed [laughs].

Philosophy is, first of all, an ethical task. It is about changing minds and being conscious of the place we are living, accounting for our beauties and thinking about how to keep these beauties alive. Every year at the Festival there is a social campaign related to a problem on the island. The first year was about responsibility and driving. The second year was *vivere en comune*, living together, because on this little island there are six different cities, six different authorities each with a different idea about how to run the island. It's difficult. For the third year, we got more philosophical. The third social campaign was about the lack of beauty. It is unbelievable to think about the lack of beauty on this island. I mean, we're not the only beautiful place in the world—there are many more beautiful than Ischia—but often the people here think Ischia is the most wonderful place in the world. So, we worked on photos. Did you see the Castello Aragonese, the big castle on the rock? That is the symbol of the island. Everyone is in love with this castle. And, I mean, they have good reason to love it. Everyday people go down to Ischia Ponte where the castle is and take a look at it to make sure the castle is still there. So, we worked on photos and we removed the castle, and we did the opposite as well, we took a photo from the castle and we removed the island.

**MT:** From what I understand, part of the ecological work you are engaged in as a philosopher on the island has to do with the fisheries. Can you tell me a little more about your involvement with that?

**RM:** Yes—as a philosopher I am working with politicians in shaping ecological projects. We are thinking about how we have to be rational about fishing, how we have to respect ecological processes. It is something that we are working on together with the larger European community. It is an ecological, thus general, approach to fishing. It takes into account the economic dimension and the way we act in the sea. It extends also to structures, how they sell the fish, together with traditional displays. It is a huge project. And you have the philosopher to make it work, to give ideas at the beginning and the end. So, the first moment and the last moment are my responsibilities in this project. It is something that is going to last for a long time. We will be active again in one year in order to see if there has been an improvement to the system.

You have to fight against mentalities, old mentalities. People say, “we live now,” (that's a philosophical problem), “we live now, we want money

now, we are afraid of changing things now, how can we change these things and still ensure our family can grow up and give them the possibility to have enough money and have an education?” And that too is a huge philosophical problem.

**MT:** Something I have been thinking about a lot is our need to try and think about the future more realistically and materially. The need to get away from this instant gratification, constant consumption mentality that both capitalism and human nature work together to heighten. Because of course you want to provide for your family and be able to give your children education, that makes perfect sense, and yet if the system that allows you to do that will mean that there are no fish for their children to get out of the ocean, for example, then it’s obviously a broken system. We need to learn, I think, how to represent that potential future to people in a way that is compelling and that causes them to act differently.

I really love the idea that you’re so involved in the community and trying to use philosophy to have a practical impact. I think that we are suffering over here in North America from this distinction between intellectuals, philosophers and everyday people, and that’s a huge divide for us, a huge wall that we need to overcome....

**RM:** During my Ph.D. I tried to understand why I was studying philosophy. To tell you the truth, I was not sure why. I loved philosophy, but I didn’t understand why we still needed it. My idea was to discover the process in which we, as philosophers, were trapped. I came up with a theory, not an absolute theory, just a theory about why we were in these schools around the world; always in schools, always behind walls.

Why was the first philosopher—considered the first philosopher, *the* philosopher—why was he the one who was killed? If you read Plato’s works it seems he was the one who has a reason to say everything, because he is right. He cannot be other than right. If you read Plato he is always right. Why, if he was so right, was he condemned? For me the society in which Socrates was living was not functioning. The same process was going on in the Christian community, in the bible with Jesus Christ. It was the same, the one who is the right one is going to be killed. So, what are we? Are we stupid? Or, do we need these figures as an example in order to understand how to make things work differently?

The history, the story of Socrates is a bad story. Not a good story to take as an example. And if Plato was learning from the example of Socrates—

how his life was, and how it ended—how can I not see that Plato built the school because he was afraid of the masses? Because if I am talking as a philosopher in the square, in front of everybody, there will be someone who will say, “what is he talking about? He is talking dangerously!” The people, or the authorities will say “I must not think as he is thinking. He is giving me the impression that I have to renew my thought and think, for example, that there are no official gods, that there are other gods, there is another way to see reality. No, I don’t agree with this, so Socrates has to be killed.” Plato understood that and said, “let’s build a school, maybe we can just have a safe place in which we can be a philosopher, and if we go out we can say ‘we are exercising, practicing philosophy everyday here and so you won’t understand what we think,’” and that’s the truth. Since then all the schools and the whole history of intellectualism have been trapped within walls. When inside we say, “we know the truth, and you outside don’t know this truth, you don’t know this truth at all, so, you stay there. I am here.”

That is why the name of the Festival is “the philosophy, the castle, and the tower.” Because we believe, as philosophers, that we are in a castle, we believe we are in a tower that allows us to see things better. But before the castle and the tower came philosophy, and that is why philosophy comes first in the name of the Festival. Then to conclude this thesis comes Nietzsche, who rebuilt the figure of the wanderer.

**MT:** As Zarathustra.

**RM:** Like Socrates, who was not in academia, he wanted to walk the path to the people once more. He wrote aphorisms and he was thinking differently about philosophy and he made intellectuals think “what the fuck is this philosophy? There is no historical background.” And it was not the truth because there is a huge historical background in Nietzsche’s philosophy. And it was a crisis for philosophy at the end of the last century.

**MT:** One of my favorite pieces of Nietzsche’s is “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense.” When he argues that all truths are actually just dead metaphors that over time have come to seem like reality is, for me, a really instrumental observation. Even the truths that we as philosophers observe from the tower are in fact, according to Nietzsche, just some old poetic figurations that over time have become kind of solid.

**RM:** This essay by Nietzsche was one of the starting points of my research. It is wonderful. He writes that, like philosophers, mosquitoes also think they are the only ones who have the truth. The danger is to be stuck in one truth. That is what we have to try to understand and not be afraid of. Because we have this kind of religious belief in things, if we have a theory we love this theory. We say, “that’s my theory.” You are going to read, and you learn more and more and so you are confident to make reality into a mathematical formula. But we are not the only one who can think about truth, we need to listen to other people who are not philosophers.

**MT:** And so, you spoke a little about Socrates and Plato and Nietzsche are there other thinkers that are important influences on your thinking about integrating philosophy into the greater community?

**RM:** I think each philosopher has their own truth. The texts I was working with first were from non-philosophers, like Homer and Hesiod, and then I came to Plato, then Maximus of Tyre. And Pascal, as well, was someone that I read with interest because I wanted to get to the bottom of the idea of truth, to read people who were thinking differently about truth. And then I came to Nietzsche and there I found this kind of daemon, this kind of inner voice who is talking to people, to philosophers, and saying let’s shape it differently; we don’t have truth so let’s think about it differently. Let’s not take our theories as absolutes. And other philosophers as well, but I started not from a philosophical perspective. More from an epic perspective with myth, mythos. It was important to understand how this culture was structured into more modern philosophical thinking. Because we are always working with mythological thinking and tales, and we take these as truth, but these are examples.

While I was working, Nietzsche allowed me to have a kind of freedom, the freedom to be a vagabond exploring the land of truth. The philosopher is a vagabond, someone who doesn’t have a proper home. I mean, we are without a home in that we are without a proper job. If you look for philosopher on the Internet as a job you won’t find anything. As philosophers, we don’t have a definition or a job. A proper job, I mean. For it is important to think. It’s something we can give young people—the possibility to think philosophy as a job. Because there is a job for everything nowadays, but not for philosophy. People ask, “are you a professor? No. Are you a teacher? No. What are you? A philosopher.” “Oh, what are you doing actually?”

In Italy, sometimes people are afraid to call something philosophy, even sometimes to pronounce the word philosophy. I mean, *phe-philosophy*, sometimes I've heard Italians say *fifosofy*, or... sometimes when I write it I make a mistake. I miss an "o," or something like this. I need to work on it [laughs]. In Naples they call you a philosopher in order to say you are someone who is saying something strange. I don't know if there is also a similar way to say it in English as well, but here in Napoli if you are a philosopher you are saying bullshit, there is a gap between what you are saying and reality.

**MT:** And this does seem to presuppose a gap between thinking and action, which I have always had trouble with because I believe thinking is a kind of action. And people say "oh, you are a philosopher, you must not do anything, you must only think." Presupposing therefore that thinking is not doing.

**RM:** I agree, it is an action because the first step to change things is to think. So, I think, I say a word, that is energy and is a sound, a material thing. And I make people act differently depending on what I say. If I say "F--k you," you say "oooo"; if I say "I love you," you say "aaaa," and that is a thinking-action-reaction. People don't think that philosophy is action, but it is. Thinking is an action. It is the first step in action, it is an action itself. But we have to work a lot to make people understand this. This is the purpose of the Festival. We have worked for five years on this project. And I hope in a certain way we will build this community and we will change philosophers.

**MT:** Do you hope to recruit more philosophers out of the young people who are involved in the Festival? Do you hope they someday write philosophy in a more traditional sense, or is it enough for them to just participate?

**RM:** I hope more and more young people will be involved every year. Young people are working with us in the organization. They are doing interviews with some of our guests, and in this way they will understand how they can shape a cultural event, how they can enter into conversations with philosophers, what they might ask, how they can present themselves. The young people will give more sense to the whole thing. Young people, as I said before, they keep this kind of lightness in their thinking, but it is also deep thinking.

**MT:** Can you tell me a little more about what we have to look forward to at the upcoming Festival?

**RM:** This year we will have as a guest Massimo Cacciari (a philosopher and a politician). I think that he will be a good guest for us. We have Giorgio Manzi (an anthropologist) and Markus Gabriel (a very well-known philosopher) from Germany. At the fourth edition we are crossing science now with human nature. We have to be really in contact with all sciences, to overcome a philosophical limit. You know, we are trying to have guests that are not only philosophers, like writers, artists, politicians, because they are the way through which we can enlarge audience and our thoughts. The call for papers this year had a huge resonance and we are really proud of it. Philosophers from all over the globe responded very intensively to our “human call” (if I may say it in this way), and we are convinced that by creating a big community we will give philosophy a wonderful future and the right consideration in pedagogical fields.

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