Distant Reading and Data-Driven Research in the History of Philosophy

DR2

Working Papers 1

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Editors' foreword

With this small volume we inaugurate the series of Working Papers published by the DR2—the research group on "Distant Reading and Data-Driven Research in the History of Philosophy" that we founded in 2016 at the University of Turin. In the last twenty years, Franco Moretti's "distant reading" approach has provided a fresh understanding of literature and its historical development not by studying in detail a limited number of texts, as in the so-called "close reading", but rather by aggregating and analysing large amounts of information. The central role of data in this approach is not determined only by their quantity. It is also important to look for different kinds of data, not investigated before, drawn from a variety of sources. In this sense this approach may be regarded as a form of "data-driven research" in the humanities.

Recently, quantitative methods have been applied to the history of thought, and in particular to the history of philosophy (Bonino, Pasini, and Tripodi 2021), very broadly conceived, so as to include the history of science, the history of ideas and intellectual history, the sociology of past knowledge, and other related disciplines. There are both different approaches and tools and different goals in this broad field: distributional analysis in view of an architecture of concepts (de Bolla 2013), operationalized models for a computational history of ideas (Betti and van den Berg 2014 and 2016), serial reading of full-texts *à la* Moretti (Bonino, Maffezioli, and Tripodi 2020), analysis of metadata (Bonino and Tripodi 2020), citation analysis (Petrovich and Buonomo 2018), topic modeling (Malaterre, Chartier, and Pulizzotto 2019; Weatherson 2021; Ambrosino et al. 2018).

A founding event for this research programme was the first DR2 Conference held in Turin in January 2017: Franco Moretti sent a paper on *Patterns and Interpretation* (later published as Moretti 2017), and gave the opening talk via Skype; Arianna Betti (Amsterdam), Peter de Bolla (Cambridge), Gino Roncaglia (Viterbo), Justin Smith (Paris Diderot), and many other scholars from different countries and fields participated in the conference and met together for the first time. Some general issues emerged in the discussion: the peculiarity of philosophy and its conceptual development as a subject matter for distant reading; the crucial importance of *corpora* for any quantitative

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research in the history of ideas; the existence of a sort of divide between those scholars who primarily aim at finding answers to historical-philosophical questions, with the aid of whatever tools are available, and those who are more interested in developing refined digital tools and methods, sometimes with little attention for actual results in the historical-philosophical field.

Since then, the DR2 research programme has developed in several directions. The research group has been enlarged by new members and collaborators, including a number of young scholars and students. A series of DR2 Colloquia was inaugurated, and a second DR2 Conference was held in Turin in February 2019. After Moretti's opening talk on data visualization in cultural history, the conference focused on two main issues: the problem of style in philosophy, discussed by Nikhil Krishnan (Cambridge), Glenn Roe (Paris Sorbonne), and Paolo D'Angelo (Roma Tre), and the question of corpora building, dealt with from different perspectives by Enrico Pasini (Torino), Arianna Betti and Annapaola Ginammi (Amsterdam), Giulia Venturi (CNR Pisa). Nicola Guarino (CNR Trento) gave the concluding talk on ontological analysis and applied ontology. The third DR2 Conference is upcoming in 2022.

Furthermore, in academic years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 some courses on quantitative methods in the history of philosophy have been scheduled at the MA level at the University of Turin—such as an introductory workshop, a course held by visiting professor Arianna Betti on computational history of ideas and two special courses at the Scuola di Studi Superiori "Ferdinando Rossi"—and the first MA dissertations based on these methods were defended.

Last, but not least, a web page and a blog were opened, with the aim of raising attention to this approach, of communicating results and reflecting on tools and techniques, and of providing a space for discussion of our research work (https://dr2blog.hcommons.org). Besides information on people, projects and events, the DR2 blog contains also a section offering resources such as an open bibliography of quantitative studies in philosophy and some basic tutorials—on, e.g., how to draw a map with R. In 2019, the blog hosted an open peer review experiment, whose conclusion was a publication on the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History of Ideas* in a section devoted to quantitative methodologies in the history of ideas (Bonino, Pasini and Tripodi 2019).

The present DR2 series is designed in the form of "Working Papers"—in our view, a "third way" between a regular book series and a journal. This choice is motivated not only by the need to account for *works in progress*—as it usually happens, for example, in sociology, economics, and astrophysics,

or in the series of the Berlin MPIWG preprints—but also by some further considerations: among them, the attempt at creating a space and a showcase in which distant reading and data-driven research can fulfil its vocation as a *collective enterprise* and, in particular, in which young researchers—including students—can freely discuss their work. It goes without saying that the Pamphlets of the Stanford Literary Lab (https://litlab.stanford.edu/pamphlets/), founded in 2010 by Moretti together with Matthew Jockers, are our model and source of inspiration. Even more importantly, the working paper format suits well the *experimental* character of distant reading and data-driven research, which entails the necessity of focusing on mistakes, false hypotheses and conjectures, methodological lacunas and blind alleys, no less than on positive and solid results and discoveries. Such will be, all in all, the requirements for all papers appearing in this series: a frank discussion of both strengths and shortcomings, a thorough and honest description of the tools and procedures, and a problematic attitude towards one's results and stances.

More in general, not only are we fully aware that in this field there are interesting failures and dead ends that are worth consideration, but we are also convinced that a priori and armchair methodology should be replaced by *methodology at work*, conceived of as the a posteriori discussion of actual attempts. At the same time, this perspective offers a possible way out of the dilemma: methods-driven investigations or results-driven research? We incline towards a results-driven approach, and we suggest that the fundamental and interesting role of methodology is better investigated if one starts from specific research questions, which are difficult or even impossible to answer or to tackle by applying traditional or close reading methods, thus asking for a quantitative and data-driven turn or switch.

Guido Bonino
Enrico Pasini
Paolo Tripodi

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