Anno XV Numero 32 Maggio 2025

# VITA PENSATA

rivista di filosofia


## Il Classico I

VITA PENSATA

RIVISTA DI FILOSOFIA

Registrata presso il Tribunale di Milano

N° 378 del 23/06/2010

ISSN 2038-4386

www.vitapensata.eu

DIRETTORE RESPONSABILE

Ivana Giuseppina Zimbone

DIRETTORE SCIENTIFICO

Alberto Giovanni Biuso

(Università di Catania)

COMITATO DI REDAZIONE

Daria Baglieri

Sarah Dierna

Enrico M. Moncado

Anno xv - n. 32

maggio 2025

Vita pensata
rivista di filosofia

Classico I

Anno xv - n. 32, maggio 2025

## Editoriale



## Temi





## Temi - II



## Autori



## Recensioni

Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte, «Model Failure. The implications of the 'classical' as a paradigmatic concept», in *Vita pensata*, n. 32, maggio 2025 - *Classico I*, pp. 108-119



# Model Failure
## The implications of the 'classical' as a paradigmatic concept

**Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte**

University of the Free State, Bloemfontein – South Africa

### 1.

Ever since the emergence of the so-called modern age, it has been widely argued that in antiquity and especially during the so-called 'dark' Middle Ages, people firmly believed the Earth was flat. When Christopher Columbus proposed sailing westward to reach the East, he was often considered insane. The popular narrative suggests that most people feared he would fall off the edges of a disc-shaped world[1]. However, although some individuals may have truly believed Columbus' ships would plunge into the void due to the Earth's supposed flatness, these people were largely in the minority. This belief was particularly rare among the educated, most of whom knew the Earth was not flat[2]. If there ever was a time when a significant number of people believed the Earth was flat, it is today. While this is sad and concerning, the point I aim to highlight here is different. What interests me is how this erroneous belief quickly became a *classical* idea. It not only became an idea that was widely held, but it became one of the model-ideas, exemplary ideas, that supposedly proved its intended point; namely the intellectual backwardness of the ancients. But what does it mean to deal not with a classical error, but with the 'classic' as error?

This combination of error and 'classicalness' is very interesting. It seems to contradict everything the idea of 'classical' implies. The terms

1 Columbus did have critics. Their critique, however, was not related to the shape of the earth, but to the distance he was supposed to cover. Those who argued against Columbus' trip to reach the East via the West, simply argued that the distance proposed by the Genovese sailor was far greater than the known one. They were right.

2 See e.g. J. Burton Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth. Columbus and Modern Historians*, Praefer, New York and London 1991; J. Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven. The Singing Silence*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 1997, p. 22; U. Eco, *Serendipities. Language and Lunacy*, Columbia University Press, New York 1998, pp. 4-7.

'classic' and 'classical' are typically understood as representing the highest rank or quality. They are thus far from being associated with error or inaccuracy. Both words, indeed stem etymologically, from the Latin *classis*, which originally referred to an economic classification. It designated people according to their wealth and social rank in ancient Roman society. Over time, this concept evolved and came to represent something that simply serves and functions as a standard. In this view, the 'classic' or 'classical' was, and for many still is, a model to follow.

But how does this traditional view of the 'classic' hold up in reality? Is this belief accurate, or is it yet another illusion (like the flatness of the Earth) that we need to overcome? Is not the example we began with evidence of its inaccuracy, or is it merely an exception? And, as we will come to discover, the importance of examples (examples as such) will soon become clear. How, indeed, do examples and exemplarity relate to the, this, rule of the 'classic'? In the following pages, we will closely examine the conventional belief that the 'classic' is a model to follow. We will do this by exploring, in an a-historical order, the ideas of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, then we will turn to Thomas Kuhn and, finally, to Michel Foucault. So, let's begin our journey in the birthplace of the navigator we started with, Italy, and dive into the work of one of its most intriguing contemporary thinkers: Giorgio Agamben.

## 2.

That our exploration of the 'classic', 'models', and 'examples' begins with Agamben, and will then lead us to Kuhn and Foucault might have been guessed by those acquainted with so-called 'Continental' philosophy. The reason we turn to the works of these scholars, rather than others, lies in their ability to frame the 'classic' within the larger concept of the 'paradigm'. By situating the 'classic' in the broader context of social, cultural, and scientific paradigms, we are afforded a more profound understanding of the term. With this in mind, let us turn to the Italian philosopher Agamben, whose work offers a crucial propaedeutic entry into the relationships between the concepts of 'classic', 'example', 'model', and 'paradigm'.

Although Agamben acknowledges that his ideas on the paradigm stem from his studies of Foucault and Kuhn, as is quickly apparent in *The Signature of All Things*[3], he aims to chart a slightly different course than his French and American predecessors. The reason we begin our discussion with Agamben – thus, in a sense, turning history upside down (or, at the very least, adopting an explicitly a-historical approach) – is that it is through Agamben's work that, firstly, the interconnectedness of the three concepts becomes clear, and, secondly, that they are connected and related in an almost perfectly paradoxical way. Indeed, it is only through Agamben's exploration of the meaning and etymological genealogy of the paradigm that we come to understand how the paradigm also functions as both an example and a model. As Agamben states, «it is impossible to clearly separate an example's paradigmatic character»[4]. We would add that the same is true for the model nature of both the example and the paradigm. But the relationship between these three concepts extends beyond merely being translations of one another (as in the case of paradigm and example) or signifiers (as the model is for both example and paradigm).

As Agamben continues his reasoning,

> to give an example is a complex act which supposes that the term functioning as a paradigm is deactivated from its normal use, not in order to be moved into another context but, on the contrary, to present the canon – the rule [or, we could add, the model; K.K.P.V.] – of that use, which can not be shown in any other way[5].

But even this is not the end of it, as we can read, «a paradigm actually presupposes the impossibility of the rule», or better, «the rule (if it is still possible to speak of rules here) is not a generality preexisting the singular cases and applicable to them, nor is it something resulting from the exhaustive enumeration of specific cases». And Agamben concludes, «it is the exhibition alone of the paradigmatic case that constitutes a rule, which as such cannot be applied or stated»[6].

3 G. Agamben, *The Signature of All Things. On Method*, Zone Books, New York 2009.
4 Ivi, p. 20.
5 Ivi, p. 18.
6 Ivi, p. 21.

Basically, to render Agamben's somewhat contorted sentences clear, an example or a model, in their paradigmatic understanding, doesn't model or exemplify as one would ordinarily understand it. The ordinary operativity of an example or a model comports that something belongs to this or that paradigm by corroborating in one way or another a certain likeliness to the model or example of the paradigm, or simply by following the explicit rules for appertaining to this or that paradigm and that can be deducted from the model or example of this or that paradigm.

According to Agamben, what is at stake is not a verification of a conformity (of elements to this or that example or model to belong to this or that paradigm), but the creation and the production of new (paradigmatic-exemplary-model) meaning. All this then led Agamben, by means of a study into the Greek roots of the concept of the paradigm (it indeed being the Greek *para-deigma*), to affirm that the paradigmatic functioning of the example (and the model) is that of the constitution of something *new*; «new ensemble[s], whose homogeneity it itself constitutes»[7]. This is important for Agamben as it allows him to insist on the importance of the task of the philosopher in the reading and interpretation of history in its broadly understood meaning of a socio-political and cultural phenomenon. Because indeed, it is only the philosopher, who has a keen eye on the workings of the paradigms, to unveil and understand these paradigmatic new «series of phenomena whose kinship had eluded or could elude the historian's gaze»[8].

## 3.

One of the most intriguing assertions in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*[9] – if we continue with our a-historical approach and now turn to Thomas Kuhn[10] – is the claim, which has sparked considerable

7 Ivi, p. 18.
8 Ivi, p. 31.
9 T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1996.
10 I am aware that in theory I should first turn to Foucault and his more 'paradigmatic' work that is chronologically earlier than Kuhn's work. As this reading does not intend to follow a historical approach, it also does not intend to strictly follow an a-historical one. If anything, synchrony is the temporal concept that functions as the red thread in this text.

debate, that the primary tasks of scientists within a mature scientific paradigm – what Kuhn also calls the period of 'normal science' – consists of «mop-up work»[11]. In other words, the fundamental operation of science during this phase – that is, science when it functions, and is functioning, as a paradigm – is puzzle-solving. This is the case because, for a paradigm to dominate, it does not need to anticipate or explain all the problems it may encounter. Rather, for a paradigm to be accepted as the best one to follow it needs only «seem better than its competitors»[12]. Kuhn reinforces this point later when he insists that «we must recognize how very limited in both scope and precision a paradigm can be at the time of its first appearance» and that a paradigm's success often lies in its «promise of success»[13]. Much work then is and remains to be done within the boundaries of these 'promises' of the prevailing paradigm. And the majority of this work thus consists mainly out of 'simple' puzzle solving and 'mopping-up'.

For Kuhn, this is not something that is problematic, although he recognizes that it may be surprising to many, particularly those outside the scientific community. However, this simply reflects the nature of «mop-up work» within the context of normal science. As Kuhn elaborates, scientists in this phase aim little «to produce major novelties, conceptual or phenomenal»[14]. In fact, «normal science does not aim at novelties of fact or theory and», more importantly, «when successful, finds none»[15]. Novelties and innovations challenge the normal functioning of normal science, and often lead to a shift in, or, even worse, a change of the paradigm itself. Said provocatively, a successful and smoothly functioning paradigm is one in which all discoveries merely confirm what is already known.

In this context, the question of the rules – first encountered in our discussion of Agamben's understanding of the paradigm – returns. Although historically impossible, Kuhn agrees with Agamben in broad terms regarding the relationship between paradigms and their rules. For Kuhn,

11 T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, cit., p. 24.
12 Ivi, p. 17.
13 Ivi, p. 23.
14 Ivi, p. 35.
15 Ivi, p. 52.

as well, rules can only emerge from specific paradigmatic instances. As he wrote in the *Postscript* that was added to *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1969, «concrete problem-solutions» function as «exemplars»[16]. This means, as Aaron Preston accurately summarized, that the rules «serve as models of work *within* the paradigm by exemplifying how the relevant features of the paradigm-case can be abstracted and applied to other problem»[17]. It is thus through the knowledge and practical sharing of these rules, that operate as 'exemplars/models', that science in its normal state can function paradigmatically. It is through this sharing of concrete exemplars that normal science functions and unveils its 'rules'. Thus, rules are considered and function exclusively intra-paradigmatic.

However, there are also other types of 'rules' that are important in Kuhn's discourse. In fact, he wrote the aforementioned *Postscript* to address some of the confusions that had been identified in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. These 'other' rules are foundational to, and for, the paradigms themselves[18]. What is most interesting about this second set of rules is that, for a paradigm to function within the framework of normal science, these «rules and assumptions need *not* be made explicit»[19]. Moreover, these rules – those that define the paradigm itself and allow it to function – must remain unexamined for the paradigm to operate effectively. In other words, the peculiarities of a given paradigm – why it enables a particular worldview rather than another (as Kuhn argues, paradigms shape our view of the world) – are not part of the problems it addresses. Indeed, when these foundational rules become part of the paradigm's problems, the paradigm begins to unravel.

16 Ivi, p. 187.
17 A. Preston, *Analytic Philosophy: The History of an Illusion*, Continuum, London and New York 2010, p. 129. These last two sentences once again make clear how the concepts of paradigm, example, and model intertwine and play out their little game of identity in difference.
18 It is regarding this set of foundational and fundamental rules that Agamben seems to have left Kuhn, and, as we will come to see shortly, Foucault, behind. As a paradigm is fundamentally always future-oriented for Agamben (it is directed to new ensembles or new series of phenomena) these primary rules are no longer of importance (as they can be eliminated). One can see how the structuralist influence on Foucault and Kuhn has been left behind in the philosophical discourse at the time of Agamben's writing. For what it matters, I, personally, believe a renewed interest in and reading of structuralism might give us again a firmer grip on understanding our strange times.
19 T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, cit., p. 88.

This leads us to agree with Neil Levy's claim that accepting a paradigm is akin to adopting a dogmatic stance that «puts an end to debate about fundamentals»[20]. However, this too should not raise particular concerns. Mop-up work and puzzle-solving do not require philosophical speculation about the foundational principles or axioms of paradigms. The sharing and transmission of exemplars presumes these fundamental rules are implicit, not critically questioned. As Kuhn remarked, «normal science usually holds creative philosophy at arm's length, and probably for good reasons»[21].

## 4.

If our previous statements are correct, and our interpretations of Agamben and Kuhn have been accurate (albeit in a historically 'creative' way), then we are much closer to understanding the link between the classical and (in)accuracy or error. One final step is needed to complete the circle. This step concerns the concept of 'truth'. Can something be considered right within one paradigm but be wrong? Maybe just wrong, or less right, in another paradigm? And what are the implications of this?

These questions bring us to our final scholar, the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Several years after the publication of Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Foucault's groundbreaking *The Order of Things*[22] was published. Although Foucault does not use the term 'paradigm' in this volume (he did, however, frequently employ it in later works), it is difficult to overlook the fact that this work of archaeology centres on the functioning of paradigms as we have understood them thus far[23]. The various epistemological fields or *epistemes* discussed

20 N. Levy, «Analytic and Continental Philosophy: Explaining the Differences», in *Metaphilosophy*, 2003, 34(3), p. 292.
21 T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, cit., p. 88.
22 M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Routledge, London and New York 2005.
23 Two prominent scholars of Foucault, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, clearly indicate the importance of the idea of the paradigm in the work of Foucault. «He is now proceeding», they wrote, «through a description of discourse as the historical articulation of a paradigm, and approaching analytics in a manner that is heavily dependent on the isolation and description of social paradigms and their practical applications». H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1983, p. 199.

throughout the work operate largely as Kuhnian paradigms (although encompassing more than just science). However, while Kuhn's work was mainly directed at describing how scientific practices within a paradigm are transmitted, requiring the foundational rules to remain unspoken, Foucault's archaeology is specifically concerned with uncovering these unspoken rules and examining their function. In fact, Foucault's archaeological analysis precisely seeks to discover

> on what basis knowledge and theory became possible; within what space of order knowledge was constituted; on the basis of what historical a priori, and in the element of what positivity, ideas could appear, sciences be established, experience be reflected in philosophies, rationalities be formed[24].

Thus, Foucault's research during his so-called archaeological phase aims to delve into the foundational rules of the paradigms of the human sciences. This is the type of philosophy, as we noted at the end of the previous section, that is held at arm's length by 'normal' scientists as it makes them nervous. And, as the reactions to Foucault's work have shown – and continue to show – it has made, and still makes, them uneasy.

The nervous reaction of scientists to Foucault's archaeology, however, is not what interests us here. What is, is the role that truth plays in Foucault's work. That we turn to Foucault for this aspect within the broader context of a theory of paradigms – and, ultimately, the concept of the classical – is because, and notwithstanding the conviction of those who saw Foucault as a radical relativist, his work has always been fundamentally connected to the idea of 'truth'. This became explicitly evident in the final years of his life. His lectures at the Collège de France became now literally about the truth[25]. But truth had always been central to his work. Some have even gone so far and claimed Foucault's entire project could be described as a 'history of truth'[26], or that truth

24 M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, cit., p. xxiii.
25 His 1980-1981 lectures are entitled *Subjectivity and Truth*, and his final course from 1983-1984 is entitled *The Courage of the Truth*; and the lectures he held in-between are about the Greek concept of *parrhesia*, that is, the telling of the truth.
26 D. T. Deere, «Truth», in *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, edited by L. Lawlor and J. Nale, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York 2014, p. 517.

serves as the red thread running through his entire oeuvre[27]. That this interpretation is much closer to the truth (pun intended) than the portrayal of Foucault as a relativist and anti-truth philosopher is confirmed by Foucault himself, who insisted on several occasions that truth was, indeed, the central focus of his research[28].

Given that it is impossible to cover the full scope of how this central aspect runs through the entirety of Foucault's work, I want to focus on what I consider a particularly significant concrete example of how truth operates within the broader epistemological and paradigmatic context of his thought[29]. This example is found in Foucault's inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, *The Order of Discourse*[30], and concerns the puzzling fact that 19th-century biologists and botanists failed to recognize the truth of what Austrian botanist Gregor Mendel was saying. What is most important here is that Mendel's theories were not seen by his contemporaries as erratic or obviously wrong. They did not perceive him as either telling the truth or expressing falsehoods. For them he was neither telling the truth nor expressing false things. As Foucault candidly states, «Mendel spoke the truth», but «he was not 'within the truth' of the biological discourse of his time»[31]. What he said simply made no sense. «Mendel was a true monster», Foucault notes, «which meant that science could not speak of him»[32]. His discourse, for his contemporaries, was like the infamous Chinese encyclopedia from Borges' story, with which Foucault begins *The Order of Things*. It provokes the same laughter that is a sign of the questioning of familiar landmarks

27 F. Gros, *Michel Foucault. Une philosophie de la vérité*, in *Michel Foucault. Philosophie. Anthologie*, edited by A. I. Davidson and F. Gros, Gallimard, Paris 2004, p. 11.

28 In an interview from 1976 he crassly claims that «*j'ai beau dire que je ne suis pas un philosophe, si c'est tout de même de la vérité que le m'occupe*». M. Foucault, «Questions à Michel Foucault sur la géographie», in *Dits et Écrits II, 1976-1988*, Quarto Gallimard, Paris 2001, pp. 30-31. In a later interview he states that «*tout ceux qui disent que pour moi la vérité n'existe pas sont des esprits simplistes*». M. Foucault, «Le souci de la vérité», in *Dits et Écrits II, 1976-1988*, Quarto Gallimard, Paris 2001, p. 1488.

29 Although Foucault admits that he drew this thought from Canguilhelm, he clearly made it his own.

30 M. Foucault, «The Order of Discourse», in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, edited by R. Young, Routledge, Boston 1981, pp. 51-77.

31 Ivi, p. 61.

32 *Ibidem*.

of one's thought and that, in the end, is a fundamental questioning of thought itself[33]. Mendel's truth (because he was saying the truth for the 'generation' to come) simply did not belong to the *episteme* of his time.

Translating this into the Kuhnian language of paradigms, we can simply say that Mendel's scientific work did not fit into the scientific paradigm that was operative when he lived and wrote. Mendel's work was not mop-up work, it did not belong to the puzzle-solving nature of the scientific work in the times of normal science. In fact, Mendel's work was so outlandish, that it radically questioned the foundational rules of the ruling paradigm, causing it to crumble and disappear; becoming non-sensical in its turn. But up until that moment of sudden understanding/collapse, it was basically invisible. Kuhn converges here (a-historically) with Foucault. Where Foucault states Mendel was not in the truth, Kuhn claims that phenomena that don't fit the agenda of the reigning paradigm are simply not seen: «Indeed those [phenomena] that will not fit the box are often not seen at all»[34].

## 5.

Where does this all take us? Where does this discussion on paradigms, *epistemes*, not being within the truth, and invisibility lead us regarding the concept of the classical?

If all of this leads us somewhere, it is first and foremost to the realization that the concept of the classical can only have meaning within a paradigm. The classical, as the exemplary model, can only function *within* a paradigm or *episteme*. It seems to embody the quintessential example of mop-up work, the model for puzzle-solving. Or, more precisely, the classical represents the success promised by the paradigm, serving as the model for much of the mop-up work and puzzle-solving that remains to be done. Moreover, as the nature of the classical implies, this subsequent work is performed by aligning compliantly with the model, without the need for the model itself to reveal or prove its underlying rules and assumptions.

33 M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, cit., p. xvi.
34 T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, cit., p. 24.

The classical – to say it in a less Kuhnian and more Foucaultian way – is always 'within the truth' of the discourse of its time. It is always true (necessarily always with a lowercase t). But it is always only true *within…*, within a paradigm/*episteme*, within a certain epistemological field. Its truth is always just temporal and limited and, contrary to what one would expect from a concept so irruent, almost arrogant, is that it is not a critical concept at all. It does not question one's thought; let alone does it question thought itself. It merely functions as a pragmatic and practical conformist applicability. As a model, as an example, the classical shows the extreme elements of ambivalence that we have encountered in precedence and that signs it in its most profound interiority. The classical is in a most basic way a profoundly contextual and partisan concept. To say it crudely, it does not matter if something classical is true or effective. It will always be, or have been, locally and temporarily true. But this is of little to no importance for the classical idea itself. What does matter is that it can only become classical when it fits the preconceptions of a dominant cabal.

If there is any solace (required?) in what I have attempted to demonstrate here, then it can be found in the following ambivalent (but maybe even ironically contradictory) understanding. If ever the critical disavowal of the concept of the classical that this text is proposing becomes accepted (should we dare say 'classical'), then we have no quandaries acknowledging (obviously tongue-in-cheek) that what we have claimed here is…wrong.

## Abstract

E se la concezione comunemente accettata del 'classico' fosse parziale? Se la sua funzione-modello non fosse quella che solitamente percepiamo? Forse nel concetto di 'classico' c'è di più di quanto pensiamo. Questo testo sfida la comprensione tradizionale del 'classico' come modello, proponendo che la sua funzione possa essere più limitata ed erratica di quanto comunemente riconosciuto. Attraverso un'analisi delle opere di Giorgio Agamben, Thomas Kuhn e Michel Foucault, il saggio esplora come i paradigmi plasmino la portata e i limiti del 'classico'. Sostiene che la funzione del 'classico' sia più strettamente legata alla conformità e al pragmatismo che all'analisi critica o all'applicabilità universale.

What if the commonly held understanding of the ‘classic’ is partial? What if its model-function is not what we typically perceive? Maybe there is more to the concept of the ‘classic’ than we realize. This text challenges the traditional understanding of the ‘classic’ as a model, proposing that its function may be more limited and erratic than commonly acknowledged. Through an analysis of the works of Giorgio Agamben, Thomas Kuhn, and Michel Foucault, it explores how paradigms shape the scope and limitations of the ‘classic’. It argues that the function of the ‘classic’ is more closely related to conformity and pragmatism than to critical analysis or universal applicability.

Parole chiave
Agamben, classico, Foucault, Kuhn, paradigmi
Agamben, classic(al), Foucault, Kuhn, paradigms

**Vita pensata**
**rivista di filosofia**

**Classico I**
**Anno xv - n. 32, maggio 2025**

## Hanno collaborato a questo numero:

Daria Baglieri
Michele Del Vecchio
Sarah Dierna
Giuseppe Frazzetto
Giulia Gotti
Daniele Iozzia
Afshin Kaveh
Marica Magnano San Lio
Federico Nicolosi
Enrico Palma
Giuseppe Savoca
Ida Scebba
Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte

L'indirizzo di posta elettronica di ciascun autore è disponibile nella prima pagina del rispettivo contributo, cliccando sul nome.

«La vita come mezzo della conoscenza» - con questo principio nel cuore si può non soltanto valorosamente, ma perfino gioiosamente vivere e gioiosamente ridere

Friedrich Nietzsche, *La Gaia scienza*, aforisma 324

VITA PENSATA
Rivista di filosofia



**Per info e proposte editoriali**
redazione@vitapensata.eu