



Rosmini and the Sciences: Research Prospects

In 1931, while writing the “Wissensoziologie” (“Sociology of Knowledge”) for the Handwörterbuch der Soziologie, Karl Mannheim, challenging the idea of a priori presuppositions of the knowledge typical of neo-Kantism prevailing at that time, argued that every knowledge and every form of knowledge are, in fact, constantly influenced by their social placement, by their “ontological bond” (Seinsverbundenheit). Today, in what commonly and conventionally seems to be accepted as the “age of science”, Mannheimian scepticism regarding the Kantian definition of knowledge as “a belief that is subjectively and objectively sufficient” seems to have become a school of thought.

The problematic nature of the concept of knowledge is obviously to be attributed to an ever-increasing gap – well documented at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Georg Simmel, amongst others – between the progressive subjectification of knowledge and the progressive objectification of science: if, again in the 18th and the first half of the 19th century (in the style of German classical philosophy, for example), science and knowledge were mainly synonyms for scientia and ars, they therefore, constituted man's disposition and faculty. Soon, thanks to the differentiation and specialisation of the disciplines, “science” took on the meaning of an organised, institutional and over-individual process: the subject can no longer have science, he can only enjoy it, since it infinitely contains more than one individual consciousness is capable of seizing and producing alone.

Antonio Rosmini – and it would suffice to think, for example, of the use that the Roveretan makes of the term “moral science” – still moves in a conceptual horizon in which “science” and “knowledge” belong, according to the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition, as part of a treatise on the concept of virtue. His considerations therefore appear to be a sub-

stantial distance away from today's sensibility: nevertheless, they provide an interesting point of reference for contextualising the relationship between science and knowledge in a historical context where, on the one hand, knowledge was becoming increasingly fragmented, losing its idealistic ambition to present itself as unitary and utterly comprehensible, and on the other hand, science was beginning to call into question the specificity of the method, prelude to the *Methodenstreit* ("method dispute") which, as we well know, would later be destined to inflate the epistemological debate of the early 20th century.

In order to establish the question of the relationship between Rosmini and the sciences correctly, it is necessary, in our view, to follow a documented research prospect, scanning different periods, based on a methodological level rather than chronological. The starting point consists of a timely reconnaissance of that which, these days, we call positive "sciences" and which Rosmini developed in his day, throughout its life, as aspects of a uniquely conceived field of knowledge: from mathematics to physics, from statistics to theoretical biology, from medicine to physiology, from psychological sciences to psychiatry. On this matter, one can not fail to take into account the results which have come to light thanks to Rosminian studies over the last two decades of the previous century, culminating in the 1997 international conference "Rosmini and the Encyclopaedia of the Sciences" of 1997 (*Rosmini e l'enciclopedia delle scienze*, Olschki Editore, Florence 1998). Yet much still remains to be done to complete the framework of the, as yet, insufficiently investigated "sciences" such as physics, theoretical biology, evolutive psychology and psychiatry. This is the direction that the Focus of this issue of "Rosmini Studies" will take.

The second period of research, that which relates to the study of sources, is more lacking. In Rosmini's works and personal library, the names of some eminent scientists are to be found, that the Roveretan read, interpreted and used in various ways: from Euclid to Ptolemy, Copernicus to Bacon, Galileo to Newton, Euler to Laplace, not to mention Stahl and Pinel. Something has been written, for example, about the relationship between Galileo and Rosmini, but in our view each confrontation should be guided by an initial in-depth philological analysis of the works and writings cited to understand and compare the hermeneutics applied by the Trentino philosopher to various scientists. Thus one might be able to establish the "weight" of the influx, not in any way uniform, that they exerted on Rosmini's thought and on his various explanations. Always in a historical vein, one might continue the investigation among contemporaries, such as the Milanese mathematician, Gabrio Piola, with whom the Roveretan also established a personal relationship.

However, the primary goal is to focus, with due precision, on the historical colloca-

tion of Rosmini's philosophy concerning sciences and each individual science. In this regard, it would appear that there are two indispensable steps to be taken, which correspond to the latter period of research. In the first instance, it is necessary to contextualise the Roveretan's thinking with some philosophers of the sixteen and seventeen hundreds, with whom he explicitly compares views and which represent an ideal range of different standpoints. Starting within the sphere of Italian philosophy, it would be impossible not to make a comparison with the great and original figure of Vico. As far back as the middle of last century, those who have studied Rosmini, from Bulferetti to Piovani, have brought to light various points of contact between Vico and Rosmini. Nevertheless, as far as their relationships with science goes, a clear difference seems to emerge: as far as the Neapolitan goes, who, in a famous passage of his autobiography declares that he has experienced "that to the minds, already made universal by metaphysics, the study of such minute ingenuity does not come easily, and he ceased to follow it, since it caused strain and anguish to his mind, already awash with much study of metaphysics, to span the infinite of the genres". We find, instead, in the Roveretan, a similar mind "from metaphysics made universal", but which proves in fact not to despise the "deliberate study of minute ingenuity". With his respectful and interested attitude towards science, Rosmini seems to lean more towards Muratori and his studies of the human imagination, of medicine and of other sciences. Passing through the country of France, an inescapable reference is without a doubt the Encyclopédie of Diderot and D'Alembert, of which Rosmini possessed a 1780-1782 Swiss edition. Likewise, the ideologues, such as Cabanis (cfr. S. Moravia, *The thinking of the ideologues: science and philosophy in France: Il pensiero degli ideologues: scienza e filosofia in Francia*, La Nuova Italia, Florence 1974), even though Rosmini is certainly closer to the philosophical tradition of the French Oratory, from Malebranche to Gerdil, who he knew very well and for whom, no incompatibility between scientific progress and religious truth exists. Along this same line of thought, Copernicus might represent, at the same time, one of the heroes of science and one of the standard bearers of the true Catholic religion. However, a similar consonance could also be brought to light with regard to Leibniz, whose influence on the Rosminian speculation has been demonstrated in numerous significant points, including that of mathematics, if it is true that Rosmini learned the infinitesimal calculus from no less than Leibniz's 1684 *Nova methodus*. Malebranche, for one reason, and Leibniz, for another, both, in their own way, turn to Descartes. So now, Rosmini – usually fairly critical of Descartes, whose conception of ideas often conflicts with his thesis of being ideal – seems to refer to the model of Cartesian philosophy, or at least ac-

comparing the more audacious metaphysical elaborations with a constant scientific exercise. Amongst these philosophers, we cannot exclude Kant, with his attempt at a philosophical foundation of science: recent studies (M. Krienke, *Sulla ragione*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2008) have systematically highlighted the diversified influence of Kant on Rosmini and the critical reception of the latter, but the actual chapter on science has not yet been dealt with. Whilst even this briefest of panoramas shows the Roveretan's attitude towards the sciences, if it is to be adequately understood, we should delve deeper, also in relation to the various philosophical traditions by which he is most immediately influenced. And all the more so if we wish to make a comparison with authors, such as Husserl, who have already been examined in the previous edition of "Rosmini Studies", as even in the great diversity of philosophical orientations, significant parallels of the theoretical approach exist.

The period following on from research is specifically aimed at reconstructing the position of Rosmini "from the inside". It is, without doubt, useful for the purposes of examining the positioning of the sciences in that vast encyclopaedic design of knowledge that the author conceived from 1817 onwards – in which mathematics, astrology, meteorology, chemistry, mechanics, zoology, medicine, botany and mineralogy all appear – and which he continued to perfect, at least up until 1850, when, in his *Introduction to Philosophy*, he re-introduces his philosophical system, developed back in 1844, with the sub-division of sciences into "intuition sciences", "perception sciences" and the "sciences of reasoning". But within this framework, perhaps the most fruitful investigation is to look for specific essays, (such as the one on statistics), or the long sections present in various works, from his youthful writings to his unfinished theosophy, in which some of the positive sciences are used concretely, so as to understand how Rosmini considers each one, to what extent he recognises them as an autonomous epistemological statute, in which way he justifies their use and their connection with a more general knowledge. One could, at that point, understand and evaluate whether and how the Roveretan has actually achieved his goal of "giving a philosophy that can be a solid foundation of the sciences", as he himself writes in the aforementioned *Introduction*. In this last work we can clearly see the ontological path that the Author pursues and which will find its fulfilment in Theosophy, but we should not overlook the logical path that, in the same years, induces him to insert Laplace's calculus of probability within his *Logic* (1853). Of particular interest is the connection that Rosmini establishes in his well-remembered Philosophical system among "general philosophy", aimed at investigating the ultimate reasons of all knowledge, and the "special philosophies", whose purpose is to find the ultimate reasons "of certain determined parts of

knowledge”, such as “the philosophy of mathematics, the philosophy of physics”, and so on (P.P. Ottonello, *Introduzione alla filosofia*, Città Nuova, Rome 1979, p. 225).

Nobody could fail to see how vast and challenging the research prospect briefly summarised here is, considering the first neo-idealistic and then spiritualistic legacies that have so far influenced, for the most part, Rosmini's interpretation. But, as we well know, great classics can have a different meaning in different times. The Descartes case is an eloquent example: “There is nothing left of Cartesian physics” – wrote Alexandre Koyré in 1937 – “Twenty years or so ago, it was written that science does not follow its self-etched path, and twenty or so years ago that was true. Today it is much less so, however. No doubt the current physics, the physics of Einstein and de Broglie, do not repeat the physics contained in the Principles at all. No more than the latter reproduced the physics of Timeo. And yet, for history, Cartesian physics were Plato’s revenge. Einstein's physics, which reduces reality to geometry, is likewise a Cartesian revenge; it continues, and in some places realises, the old dream of Descartes and Plato”. (Lezioni su Cartesio, Tranchida Publishing, Milan 1990, p. 86). But it was John Cottingham who, referring to the French philosopher, highlights what, on the side of the sciences, is perhaps essential and vital to Rosmini's thinking: “the Cartesian system offers an extraordinarily powerful exemplar of what I regard as philosophy’s most important task, the struggle to work out the extent to which the different areas of our conceptual landscape can be integrated into a coherent worldview. If we ever become such specialized creatures that such a task no longer interests us, then philosophy will have divided itself into extinction: the once great river of enquiry will have branched into so many isolated streamlets that eventually nothing will remain but a desert plain” (Cartesian Reflections. Essays on Descartes’s Philosophy, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, p. viii).