



# *Italian Philosophy: an Open Question*

*In recent years, an intense debate has developed in Italy in which there has been much discussion about the nature, value and specificity of the tradition of thought which began in Italy – or, to be more precise, in our peninsula – and has continued through the centuries, until more recent times. First of all, there was an attempt to identify the distinctive characteristics of this tradition, underlining in particular its purely or predominantly historical, civil and political vocation. But there were also questions about its origins, finding them mostly in the Humanistic-Renaissance Age. The relationships with other European philosophical traditions have been investigated, highlighting analogies and differences and establishing comparisons with very fruitful results. Nor has there been a failure to reflect, from a more general perspective and beyond the individual Italian case, on what is the true underlying methodological and substantial problem, that is, on the very possibility of speaking of a ‘national’ philosophy or, in any case, linked to a specific linguistic and cultural tradition. The result, overall, is a conspicuous series of studies and in-depth research – as well as discussions – of which various assessments have already been attempted, among which the one offered by Corrado Claverini in his monograph *La tradizione filosofica italiana. Quattro paradigmi interpretativi* (Quodlibet 2021), stands out for its rigour and precision*

*Furthermore, this debate has been accompanied by a growing interest in Italian philosophy at an international level. In Europe and beyond, in fact, there are quite a few academic institutions, scholarly journals (among which the American “*Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*” and the English “*Journal of Italian Philosophy*” stand out), editorial initiatives and the various types of research that have paid – and still pay – specific attention to it. And this is not limited to the disciplinary field of Italian Studies or to more contemporary authors, as demonstrated by the book *From Kant to Croce: Modern Philosophy in Italy 1800-1950* by Brian and Rebecca Copenhaver, published by Toronto University Press in 2012 (and now also*



translated in Italian: *Filosofia in Italia (1800-1950)*. Uno sguardo dall'esterno, *Le Lettere* 2023): a book which proposes a significant interpretation – particularly attentive to the historical-political context of the period taken into consideration – of a crucial segment of Italian philosophy; and which, among other things, has the merit of dealing with (and, in certain cases, presenting for the first time to the Anglo-Saxon public), alongside the work of the most well-known thinkers, also that of some lesser-known or less studied figures, but no less important from the perspective of an overall evaluation.

It should, however, be pointed out that Italian philosophy as such has also been a topic under discussion in Italy in the past. In this sense, it is obligatory to mention first of all the *Prolusione e introduzione alle lezioni di filosofia nella Università di Napoli (1862)*: by Bertrando Spaventa, a work better known by the title given to it by Giovanni Gentile when he had it reprinted in 1908, i.e. *La filosofia italiana nelle sue relazioni con la filosofia europea*, in which the famous and successful thesis of the 'circulation' of Italian thought was advanced, according to which – to summarize it very briefly – it is precisely in Italy that, during the Renaissance and above all with Bruno and Campanella (and, later, also with Vico), the foundations of modern philosophy would have been laid, which would then have developed (due to the unfavourable political and religious conditions of Italian history after the sixteenth century) in other European nations and especially in Germany, to return finally to Italy with Galluppi, Rosmini and Gioberti. And also on this occasion, as in our times, the topic was the subject of extensive discussion. On the one hand, Spaventa's thesis itself constituted, in fact, an explicit alternative to the idea of an ancestral and autochthonous Italic wisdom, an idea formulated by Vico in *De antiquissima italorum sapientia (1710)* and taken up, among others, by Vincenzo Cuoco in his *Platone in Italia (1806)*, by Terenzio Mamiani in *Rinnovamento della filosofia antica italiana (1834)* and, lastly and mainly, by Gioberti in *Il Primato morale e civile degli italiani (1843)*. On the other hand, Spaventa's interpretation of the events relating to Italian philosophy in turn immediately aroused, both enthusiastic support, as well as criticism and decidedly negative reactions. To give just one example, in the book *La philosophie contemporaine en Italie. Essai de philosophie hégélienne*, published in Paris in 1868, Raffaele Mariano, a student and follower of Augusto Vera and an exponent of the 'Hegelian Right' in Italy, said he was willing to concede to Spaventa that the Italian thought of the Renaissance and early modernity had been trampled at home by political and religious oppression and, therefore, forced to 'emigrate' abroad; but he denied that it had then returned and flourished again, since the most recent expressions of national philosophy (primarily Galluppi,

Rosmini and Gioberti 'exalted' – so to speak – by Spaventa) did not contribute in any way to the progress of thought tout court, in fact representing – he maintained – a phase of decadence.

Therefore, if the reflection of Italian philosophy on itself – also characterized internally by more or less heated controversies – is certainly not, upon closer inspection, a novelty, the situation is however different with regard to the international dimension. On this front we can record, for example, the great European success of Giordano Bruno between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries (from Naudé to Bayle, from Toland to Diderot, from Jacobi and Schelling to Hegel, there are quite a few who have recognised, in various capacities and with different nuances, the importance of the philosopher from Nola in the history of thought); or the philosophical readings of Leopardi by a large group of German-speaking authors (from Schopenhauer to Nietzsche, with a particular mention for the 'ultra-Leopardian' Philipp Mainländer); or, again, the notable diffusion, in the Anglo-Saxon area, of Rosmini's ideas (whom William James compared to the greatest thinkers of all time, from Aristotle to Hegel). And, still by way of example, we can also remember – it is perhaps a marginal but nevertheless noteworthy episode, to which attention has recently been drawn – that in 1874 Karl Hillebrand asked Francesco Fiorentino to write, for the nascent magazine "Italia", promoted by him and entirely dedicated to Italian culture, an article (which would be published the following year) aimed at illustrating the condition of Italian philosophy after 1860 (and – let it be said incidentally – Fiorentino will carry out his task fundamentally adhering to the interpretative paradigm established by Spaventa). But – it is barely worth noting – the examples of a significant reception or influence of Italian thought outside Italy, as well as those of a particular foreign interest in some of its moments or protagonists, could naturally be multiplied (suffice it – to add a further example, not strictly or exclusively philosophical but very famous – to recall the emblematic praise of the Italian Renaissance formulated by Nietzsche in aphorism 237 of the first volume of *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*). However, what would be difficult to find in other countries, in the course of time, is a real thematization of the role played by Italian philosophy as a whole and in its possible specificity. Nor, much less, could one easily find a debate like the one that in Italy starts from the operation carried out by Spaventa and continues, punctuated by the substantial historical-philosophical works of Gentile (starting from *Rosmini e Gioberti*, of 1898) and from fundamental texts such as Croce's *La filosofia di Giambattista Vico* (1911), at least up to *Cronache di filosofia italiana* (1955) and *Storia della filosofia italiana* (1966) by Eugenio Garin. Nothing comparable, in any case, to what happened and is

still happening in the old continent and overseas, between the end of the last century and the beginning of the new millennium. Apart from the obvious differences that exist between the different eras (historical and historiographical), we can then perhaps say that what we are witnessing, at an international level, is a truly new phenomenon.

The fact is that today the discussion on the topic is more lively than ever, both in Italy and abroad; and, in the light of the variety of positions held, of the points of view acting as starting points and of the judgments that are expressed, it seems evident that the question relating to Italian philosophy is and remains more open than ever. Precisely for this reason, there are many directions that one could take, wishing to participate in the above-mentioned comparison; but, without a doubt, among them there is also the one which, very simply, consists in engaging in studies and research on the authors and works of the Italian philosophical tradition, including the most recent, based on a rigorous theoretical and historical-philosophical approach. What this means is that it may be of some use just to concentrate, without necessarily posing the problem of the 'nationality' of thought (a problem that probably belongs to a season of now-concluded historiography), on what is, objectively, valid in Italian philosophy produced by identifying and appreciating, on the one hand, the contents of a purely theoretical nature and, on the other hand, carrying out thorough, wide-ranging investigations into the sources, historical framework and success of the texts. And it is precisely by moving in this direction that "Rosmini Studies" would like to try to make its modest contribution, certainly dealing, in the first instance, with Antonio Rosmini (a key figure – as can be seen from the rapid references to him – in the attempts already made in the nineteenth-century to delineate the Italian philosophical 'canon', as well as an author much studied in the twentieth century and at the origin of an entire current of spiritualist orientation) in a not secondarily European perspective, as happened in the case of the publication of numerous works on possible relationships between his philosophy and phenomenology; but also dedicating ample space to other names, of greater or lesser importance, from the past and present. Therefore, in previous issues, our magazine has hosted articles – including those by foreign writers – such as the ones (to limit ourselves to the "Excursus" section) on various aspects of Platonism between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, on the civil philosophy of the eighteenth century, on the relationship between idealism and transcendence in Piero Martinetti. And therefore, in this issue, there is (to limit ourselves to the "Open space" section) an article on ontology and metaphysics in Vittorio Mathieu and one on Giorgio Agamben as a reader of Franz Overbeck.

(f.m.)