

PhD Program in Philosophy North Western Italian Philosophy Consortium

3rd Year Scientific and Didactic Relation

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(A) Didactics

Name of your tutor
Gabriella Silvestrini

(B) Research and diffusion

List of seminars and conferences you have participated

Religione e relazioni internazionali, Università del Piemonte Orientale (auditor)

Linguaggi e transfert linguistici della politica moderna, Università del Piemonte Orientale (auditor)

Seminario internazionale: l'insegnamento del diritto naturale e delle genti nella penisola italiana tra Sette e Ottocento, Università del Piemonte Orientale (auditor)

(C) State of the dissertation

This year has been devoted to the writing of the PhD dissertation. Leaving aside the “bigger picture” of the original project (which aimed at a reconstruction of common traits in modern political thought from Hobbes to Kant), the work is to be focused on Kant’s engagement with Rousseau’s conception of nature and man and on the development of Kant’s philosophy of history and political theory as a different answers to the problems outlined by Rousseau. Four out of five chapters have been completed. The dissertation shall be ready by the end of December.

The first chapter resumes and discusses the available literature on the topic. Building on recent works by Hont, Kapóssy and Schmidt, it underlines the effects of the emerging of a modern commercial society as the starting point of Kant’s engagement with Rousseau. The discovery of the *Discourses* and of *Émile* leads Kant, whose earlier interest mainly focused on natural science, to a more careful reading of society. The acknowledgement of the evils of civil society together with a keen interest in theodicy will lead the two authors to very different answers: a deep pessimism in Rousseau, which laments the development of sociability as an unavoidable tragedy; a cautious hope in

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future in Kant, whose analysis of the commercial society is committed to point out tendencies which can lead it to overcome its own evils.

Two different conceptions of the human being arise out of these opposed stances: according to Rousseau only the inhabitant of the state of nature is judged to be conforming to its own nature. Man, as opposed to the citizen of the civil world, is thus identified with a completely a-relational and a-historical animal.

To this representation Kant opposes a new conception of mankind, which is no longer meant to be a property of animal-like individual which becomes lost with the development of society, and becomes the idea of the totality of rational beings overcoming social antagonism by recognizing each others as ends in themselves and turning competition into cooperation.

In the second chapter I reconstruct Kant's stance on man before the reading of Rousseau. The philosopher's main ambition as it emerges in cosmological work *Universal Natural History and Theory of Heaven* is that of a theodicy which, drawing back from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, aims at the discovery of the natural laws which generate order and harmony into the universe. Society seems to make an exception to this picture, being described as lawless chaos because of the constitutive imperfection of men: scientific inquiry and aesthetic contemplation, leading to the discovery and enjoyment of natural order, seem the only way for men to secure happiness and flee from the evils caused by their irrational fellows.

The third chapter is devoted to the first encounter Kant had with Rousseau between 1759 and 1768. Rousseau seems able for Kant to cast an insight on the social world, being able to explain the grim human condition Kant had already deplored in his first works and absolving Providence at the same time. Moral philosophy acquires now for Kant a central role, since it can teach us how to recover the happiness lost with the advent of civilization and of comparative *amour propre*. Ethics as the art of renunciation is now for Kant the way to restore a form of existence which, being self-centered and no more relational, can secure a life according to nature. While Kant at a time adhere to Rousseau's idea of living according to nature, he also start distancing from him in the relationship between ethics and politics: political freedom is already in these years a necessary precondition of moral freedom. Slavery and dependent work are condemned as dependence is not compatible with a life according to nature: they must be removed before virtue can even be possible.

In the fourth chapter I outline how Kant develops his philosophy of history as a different answer to the problem of civil society as posed by Rousseau. The elaboration of the kantian notion of progress borrows from a new conception of nature and history which had already been developed by critics of Rousseau. Charles Bonnet's theory of natural species as progressively developing their predispositions and Isaak Iselin's philosophical account of history are the main source for a new vision of sociability as the only condition in which men can achieve happiness. As it was for Rousseau, history leads men to develop their perfectibility, but this is not seen as a fall anymore: happiness can only arise out of new sensations, experiences, discoveries, which are enhanced by sociability and community life. Rousseau's account of the happiness of natural man is

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criticized since men, being endowed with perfectibility, constitutively cannot content themselves with animal life. For Iselin, men can be happy only insofar they are able set even newer ends to themselves and to fulfill them. During history, men gradually understand the advantages of cooperation over conflict and a new political order can arise, in which antagonism is finally overcome.

While criticizing Rousseau, Iselin actually appreciates his patriotism as outlined in *The social contract*. Whereas for Rousseau political institutions are just “crutches” for an old man, and they can work as a fruitful remedy to the evils of civilization only for short times and not in every country, Iselin reads political freedom as the fulfillment of the human destination. Philosophy of history allows Iselin to rework Rousseau’s political project by making it an end which is achievable not just by a small community in given and very strict condition, but by the whole mankind as the outcome of the dynamics which lead men from the savage state to a more perfect form of association.

While Kant mainly follows Iselin’s outline, his optimistic tones are nuanced by a more careful analysis of conflict in civil society, which is influenced by the reading of Adam Ferguson, David Hume, Bernard Mandeville and Pietro Verri. Civil society deeply relies on antagonistic feelings which on the one hand foster the development of arts and sciences as a mean of individual and group affirmation, and on the other hand generate conflicts which become even more violent, both between individuals and between States. The acknowledgement of the necessity of a (cosmo)political order can thus arise only as consequence of the growing damages and risk which are the result of antagonism. As in metaphysics, critics (and thus enlightenment) can only arise out of the failure of egoistic (and dogmatic) behavior.

Rousseau’s theodicy, which states that men are not created corrupted, is preserved, but its pessimism on the social world is overcome by a theory which shows how men can historically realize “the germs of good” they have been endowed with.

In the last chapter, which has still to be written, I plan to offer further evidence of the centrality of the realization of a cosmopolitical order for Kant’s moral philosophy as precondition for full development of moral consciousness by analyzing Kant’s confrontation with August Wilhelm Rehberg. Rehberg criticized Kant and declared reason unable to legislate in the political domain and to be eminently formal, with no capacity to provide for ends which ought to be realized by men in this world. Rehberg’s account of reason, which sharply separates both theoretical and practical reason and morality and politics, has often been associated with Kant himself: by reconstructing the clash between the two authors I wish to make clear how far kantian reason is from being formal and how necessary was for his philosophy that the world commanded by reason could find concrete realization on this earth. Having linked the French Revolution to a grave misunderstanding of Rousseau’s political thought, Rehberg condemned the revolutionary aspiration to bring into reality a political order which was possible, in Rousseau’s own words, only for a city of angels. Kant political attempt was to demonstrate that the achievement of a just order was also possible for a city of devils, as long they’re able to understand their own interests.