Comparative History of Philosophy

JUNE 9, 2017

Sala Crociera Alta di Studi Umanistici
Università degli Studi di Milano

PhD School in Philosophy and Human Sciences
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Keynote Address

Comparatio difficilis
Prof. Enrico Pasini (Università degli Studi di Torino)

All comparative disciplines are based on the operation of (cultural, anthropological, philosophical) comparison, whose legitimacy has been questioned on various grounds. For instance, if comparison needs commensurability, it might be the unfortunate case that radically alternative philosophical theories are subject to Kuhnian untranslatability. Deep historical differences in cultural traditions might bar comparison between European philosophy and other traditions of thought, although maybe traditions of thought do not exist but as historiographic or propaganda constructs. In the end, comparisons seem to be odious, but mainly they are difficult. On the one hand, it might be argued that comparison, as a technique to consider differences and similarities, is akin to explanation and conversation, that might often be difficult, but do seem to be possible. On the other hand, can we so to say naturalize the idea of comparison thanks to the undeniable existence of controversies?
Contributed Talks

Eclecticism again? Can we still think of it as an analytical category for periodisation in philosophical historiography?
Anida Hasic (Università degli Studi di Padova – Université Paris Sorbonne Paris IV)

Eclecticism is a category used in different ways by many scholars but without a specific and agreed definition and description of it, despite the monumental volume written by M. Albrecht, *Eklektik. Eine Begriffsgeschichte mit Hinweisen auf die Philosophie und Wissenschaftsgeschichte* or some less voluminous but still important contributions such as *The question of eclecticism*, edited by J. Dillon and A. Long.

The term eclecticism may cause dislike and disapproval when mentioned in a philosophical context. Indeed, the first thing we may think of when we mention the category of eclecticism is its use in the context of the history of philosophy as a synthetic type category when trying to consider this same history in the whole of its unity and development. In this sense, it is as if there was some sort of requirement, or mania, to see reunited somewhere the truth as a whole. There is a use of the category in the field of historiography which is, needless to specify, pejorative (E. Zeller, K. Praechter). In its historiographical sense the category is associated to the Post-Hellenistic period that coincides with the end of the great debates which moved the founders of different philosophical systems (Stoic, the Epicurean and Skeptical).

But can we re-evaluate the concept of eclecticism in the sense of an analytical historiographical descriptive and positive category by which better to identify the specificity of some of the early imperial age thinkers (i.e. Seneca, Apuleius, Cicero)? This is to think of it as a category deprived of historical prejudices and through which to describe the originality, the creativity and the different kind of relationship the authors of that period (1st Century B.C. to 3rd Century A.D) had with the philosophical tradition they dealt with. Can we think of eclecticism in terms of a philosophical methodology where philosophy occupies a practical and theoretical space which is different from the previous philosophical practices and in which the very identity of those who practice the philosophy has changed as well? A way of approaching philosophy in a particular age that, without undermining its importance, can be resumed with Seneca's words: *non inuenta sed quaerenda nobis reliquerunt* (Ep. 45, 4). That is to say a philosophy which is not made of doctrines one needs to assimilate but of the structuring of the great questions that one reformulates in his own way. The paper aims to provide a *status quaestionis* on the use of the category in the historiographical context and to advance a re-evaluation of it through some examples of eclectic method from Seneca’s philosophical prose. The outcome I hope in is to provide elements to judge and discuss about the appropriateness of eclecticism as a possible category that could help a more specific periodisation of what nowadays goes under the names of Post-Hellenistic Philosophy and Philosophy of Late Antiquity.
Notes toward a geo-oriented approach to the History of Philosophy. Looking at Kant in a geographical perspective

Tommaso Morawski (Università di Roma La Sapienza)

Recently, scholars like David Livingstone (2003) have significantly illuminated the idea of a geographical turn in the history of science and philosophy, clarifying that rationality cannot be conceived independently of spatial location and spatial awareness. In my paper, I will discuss the methodological implications of this geographical reorientation of the History of Philosophy and investigate the complex relationship between philosophy and location, focusing my attention on a special case: Immanuel Kant, who used to talk about the world and its global exploration, but never left Königsberg except for a few miles.


How to overcome the debated issue of “continuity” versus “discontinuity”? The case of a philosophical research on the history of physiognomics

Laetitia Marcucci (Aix-Marseille Université)

Is Philosophy not blind without the consideration of history? My PhD dissertation, I have defended three years ago, focuses on a “Philosophical History of Physiognomics from Antiquity to Classical Age”. To encompass a so broad period, from the invention of writing in Mesopotamia to the XVIIIth century with Charles Le Brun, in a field not covered very often by philosophers, I had to build relevant tools for my purpose. Before and during this research, and even today, I have compared the methodologies of several fields of research, such as classics, modern literature, history, sociology, to map out my own philosophical route in the field of knowledge. Furthermore, to cover historically and thematically the topic, I had to evaluate the “continuité” and “discontinuité” approaches, to consider the pertinence of paradigm theory in philosophy, and the meta-significance of the comparisons I drew on, the consistence of the glossary of terms employed, and similar (meta-)issues linked with the historical dimension of my research. Actually, I have compared and considered heterogeneous periods of the history of physiognomics. I decided to emphasise “continuity” instead of “disruption”. Nevertheless, this philosophical history is not a mere narrative historic record. The analysis of a various body of references dealing with physiognomics, including literary, medical, philosophical writings, art theory, visual representations, has made obvious the preponderance of two ways of thinking: the “paradigm of analogy”, from Antiquity to the medieval period is chronologically and logically linked with the “paradigm of expression”, which begins with the early modern age. It is the key point of my thesis. I have explored the patterns of thought, paying attention to similarities. This philosophical inquiry is thus closely linked with an history of mentality. In this talk, I intend to focus on the main methodological issues I have experienced regarding “comparison” within the framework of a kind of “long durée” approach. What can be compared and how, considering I have kept Foucault’s conceptual tools, but focusing on continuity? I’ll give first an overview on the specificities of my topic. Then I’ll explain the solutions that I have found out to overcome the difficulties, especially considering the debated issue of “continuity” and “discontinuity” in this genuine philosophical research on physiognomics throughout the ages.
The paradigm of affective epistemology: A case of “resurgence” in the history of philosophy (early 19th century-present)
David Romand (SPHERE, Université Paris Diderot-Paris 7)

My aim is to revisit the history of affective epistemology on the long duration, by showing how a paradigm that emerged in the early 19th century and ebbed in the early 20th century has been unvoluntarily “rediscovered” by modern thinkers. A recently appeared expression, “affective epistemology” refers to the study of the role of affectivity (emotions and cognate mental states) in the origin and the manifestation of knowledge. For a couple of decades, it has become one of the most innovative domains of philosophical research. Against the common opinion, I would like to demonstrate that affective epistemology is not new, but is an old field of investigation that has re-emerged, actually in a very partial way, within the framework of current philosophy.

In the introduction of their 2008 monograph, Epistemology and Emotions, Brun, Doğuoğlu, and Kuenzle (2008) nicely analyzed the paradigm of affective epistemology as it has developed during the last decades. They basically reached two conclusions: 1) while insisting on the importance of affectivity in the manifestation of knowledge, modern “affective epistemologists” advocate a “weak” version of affective epistemology, emotions being, in their view, first and foremost subjective accompaniments of knowledge that are in particular unable to answer the question of justification; 2) affective epistemology has emerged only very recently, in the wake of the debates about internalism and externalism and the rise of philosophy of emotions. As I will demonstrate, this second assumption is totally untrue: Not only the issue of the link between affectivity and epistemology emerged as soon as the early 19th century, but it aroused considerable interest among philosophers until the beginning of the 20th century, mostly (although not exclusively) in German-speaking countries.

I will show how “the first paradigm” of affective epistemology was formalized in the early 19th century and flourished between about 1850 and 1910, within the context of the rise of affective psychology and the “psychologization” of German philosophy (Romand, 2017a). I will discuss, briefly, the new role given to the concept of feeling (German: Gefühl) in philosophy of mind, theory of knowledge, but also theory of science, logic, and linguistics. More specifically, I would like to highlight the existence of a “strong” research program in the affective epistemology of that period. Launched by Beneke (1825), this research program was continued by Avenarius (1890), Petzoldt (1900), Lipps (1902; Romand, 2017a), and epitomized by Gomperz’s “pathempiricism” (Gomperz, 1905, 1908; Romand, 2017b). I will show that, unlike modern affective epistemologists, these scholars were radical internalists who tried to refund epistemology on the basis of affective psychology. Moreover, I will try to understand the contextual reasons why the first paradigm of affective epistemology dramatically collapsed in the early 20th century and eventually fell into oblivion. Finally, I will analyze the conditions of the “re-emergence” of affective epistemology within the context of modern philosophy, by emphasizing the fact that we are dealing with a “resurgence” and not a “revival”, insofar as current philosophers seem to be totally unaware of the affective epistemology studies carried out between the early 19th and the early 20th centuries.

As a conclusion, I will question why the first paradigm of affective epistemology remains forgotten by modern affective epistemologists, while insisting on the importance of revisiting its ins and outs, not only for the sake of the history of philosophy, but also that of current philosophical research.
“Philosophical Schools” in the Context of Professionalized Philosophy: Sharpening an Old Historiographical Tool
Matteo Collodel (Independent scholar)

Two proposals lately advanced within the tradition of sociological studies of intellectuals and of philosophical knowledge, namely Neil Gross’s version of the “new sociology of ideas” and Patrick Baert’s version of “positioning theory”, can help revive methodological reflection in the historiography of philosophy and develop promising tools for the construction of insightful historical accounts. The main aim of this paper is twofold. First of all, I shall show how the apparent tension between Gross’s and Baert’s proposals can be dissipated by focusing on the micro- and meso- levels in the social dimension of philosophical research. Secondly, I shall emphasize how such a reconciliation leads to a refinement of the age-old historiographical concept of “philosophical school” and to a fruitful approach in the historiography of philosophy.

Both Gross’s and Baert’s proposals examine the social contexts in which intellectuals operate and the social processes that shape intellectuals’ outputs and professional careers, affecting the genesis, development and reception of intellectual work. According to Gross, what ultimately guides intellectuals’ choices are the typological narratives about their intellectual identity which intellectuals develop during their formative years, to which they tend to stick throughout their careers, and which can be reliably reconstructed through detailed biographical investigations. On the other hand, Baert suggests to set aside inescapably speculative quests for “intellectual selves” and rather look at intellectuals as agents engaged in power struggles over both symbolic and institutional recognition as well as over scarce financial resources. I submit that research groups and networks as more or less formal settings within a specific intellectual field are key in connecting the biographic dimension of intellectuals’ individual lives to the social dimension of academic disciplines. Research groups and networks provide intellectuals with significant means which help them moulding their intellectual selves and effectively positioning themselves and others in the intellectual arena. These means include models of intellectual integrity and strategic conduct as well as narrative accounts about the state of the art and the past development of their discipline.

Such a focus on the social dimension of philosophy infuses new explanatory power into the traditional historiographical concept of “philosophical schools of thought”. This was originally inspired by the institutionalization of philosophy in the Hellenistic era and has since been put to use, both in the doxographic tradition and in the modern historiography of philosophy, as an effective conceptual tool to map the internal and external boundaries of the field, but in two distinctly separate ways: either in outlining a system of “successions” linking individual thinkers along a small number of mostly artificial scholastic lineages as well as connecting schools with one another; or in delivering systematic and contrastive, but similarly artificial, accounts of alternative philosophical doctrines, movements or trends. The biographical and institutional aspects and the doctrinal one, however, have rarely been combined in historiographical research, possibly due to a prevailing conception of philosophy as a spiritual, disembodied, truth-seeking enterprise, or to a lack of solid theoretical and methodological frameworks. Here the approach sketched above comes to rescue highlighting the psycho-social dimension of philosophy as an intellectual activity that thrives in the institutional context of an academically professionalized discipline. The potential of such an approach will be illustrated in a case study examining the twists and turns in the intellectual trajectory of Paul K. Feyerabend (1924-1994) across 20th century philosophy of science.