

Journal of Italian Philosophy

Volume 6 (2023): Neglected Paths in Italian Philosophy

Contents

Articles

- Marco Andreacchio, 'Poetic Soteriology: Dante's Heroic Defence of Classical Heroism'....1-13
- Jan Prins, 'Adoardo Gualandi (?-1597) – A Forgotten Innovator in Moral Philosophy'....14-27
- Wolfgang Rother, 'Sebastiano Franci: A Forgotten Philosopher, Enlightener and Feminist'.....28-43
- Paolo Furia, 'Towards a Holistic Concept of Landscape: From Croce to Pareyson'.....44-63
- Alberto De Vita, 'Giorgio Colli's Concept of Expression and the Problem of Subjectivity'.....64-76
- Andrea Righi, 'Eternity as Relationality: The Problem of the External Foundation of Time in the Thought of Emanuele Severino'.....77-94
- Damiano Sacco, 'Emanuele Severino: A Testimony of the Language that Testifies to Destiny'.....95-116

Varia

- Roberto Mosciatti, 'Exclusion as a Blessing: The Italian Retrieval of Cynicism'.....117-133
- Alessandra Montalbano, 'Hannah Arendt's Embodied Theory in Giorgio Agamben's Biopolitics and Adriana Cavarero's Vulnerability'.....134-153
- Biographies*.....154-156
- Previous Issues*.....157-161
- Forthcoming Issues*.....162

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Address for Correspondence

Journal of Italian Philosophy
Department of Philosophy
University of Newcastle upon Tyne
Tyne and Wear
NE1 7RU
United Kingdom

E-mail: michael.lewis@newcastle.ac.uk

Website: <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/italianphilosophy/>

ISSN 2515-6039

Neglected Paths in Italian Philosophy

There are a great many reasons for being forgotten, and for forgetting. To some extent we are dealing with the question of the formation of a canon, which differs across both history and geography, to such an extent that those considered essential in one epoch and one country can remain — or can become — utterly unknown in another. The universities are responsible to a large degree for this canonisation, but it is not just up to them. In any case, to open a series of spy holes onto certain of these figures, we present a selection of essays here.

They are perhaps necessarily eclectic, their subjects dispersed, scattered: for when one has been abandoned, as if in a wood, far from the ‘right road’, and the undergrowth has sprung up all around so as to obscure one’s very existence, it is difficult to make connections and chart possible ways between these overgrown patches. We are dealing with something slightly different to that which Heidegger spoke of as a clearing, which one finds at the end (or the beginning) of a tree-feller’s path.

One of the joys of Jan Prins’s text on Adoardo Gualandi, for instance, is precisely the delicate work of navigating a way through the near impenetrable thickets that have buried this Renaissance Aristotelian in a historical obscurity so absolute that one reader was moved to aver that he had exerted not one single detectable trace of influence on anyone in the subsequent history of philosophy. That someone should be capable of being so absolutely cast into shadow is in itself interesting; but the genuinely scholarly detective-work that is involved in unearthing the clues that will allow one to forge a path towards such a figure has its own arcane satisfactions.

The same may very well be said for Wolfgang Rother’s pursuit of the Italian Enlightenment figure, Sebastiano Franci. And yet here, more traces remain, and it becomes clear that one of the reasons why a historical figure can become buried in obscurity is that he is a near perfect exemplar of a certain type: in this case, the very model of an ‘enlightener’. These figures are essential to the progression of history and yet it is the very perfection of their embodiment that ultimately leads to their blending in with the many others who contributed to the march of history in a similar fashion. It seems that only those who grow in such a way as to develop an eccentricity or an outstanding difference, or who lead to an epochal change, rather than — as is perhaps the case with Franci — the establishment of an epoch that had already begun, receive prominent places in our historical memory. In this respect, it is a historical injustice that this place has not been received by Franci himself in respect of one of the aspects of his work: his prescient ‘Defence of Women’, which

Rother brings adeptly to the fore. Historical memory can, after all, be revived, and the constellation that illuminates our own skies may change.

Others such as Dante are nothing like forgotten in the same sense, but are remarkably absent from the curricula of English Philosophy degrees. One can also come too late upon the scene, in the always reckless if not presumptuously avowed desire to drag a supposedly forgotten figure from the shade and into the spotlight: the inevitable delays involved in writing, editing, and publishing can cause one to miss the boat and a figure that was without lustre may in the meantime have lost some of its tarnish: such might well be the case with both Emanuele Severino (almost entirely unknown in English whatever his illustriousness in Italy) and Giacomo Leopardi, if not Giorgio Colli – although to a lesser degree. Colli is another of those whose gradually waxing apparition in English-speaking circles we owe to Agamben (cf. his *Autoritratto nello studio*, 128). The texts of Andrea Righi and Damiano Sacco are both devoted to the first of these three, whose obscurity demonstrates that even the publication of translations is not enough to bring about an immediate sea-change in awareness. More are forthcoming, not least from the pen of Sacco himself, and we can hope that a more serious assessment will be made easier by these translations and the essays we are presenting here. The actions of a good editor – together with an energetic advocate – can by themselves allow those fortunate – and deserving – thinkers to shrug off their eclipse.

The period of Italian Philosophy from the early part of the twentieth century which runs from Benedetto Croce, whose name is only really known, in England, by the title of a book devoted to Hegel (with regard to ‘what is living and what is dead...’), which is invoked far more often than it is read, to Giovanni Gentile, whose association with the word ‘fascism’ has proved excuse enough to set him aside, and Luigi Pareyson, has in its entirety been overshadowed by more recent Italian work in biopolitics. All of these figures, whose very names now sound antiquated to our ears, were translated at the time, and indeed quite widely in the cases of Croce and Pareyson – not forced, but entirely natural in its context – in his pursuit of a concept of ‘landscape’, a problem which has come to the fore in recent days, particularly in what has been called, by the inextinguishable academic desire for categorisation and naming – for ‘reification’ in the most interesting and broadest of its senses – the ‘New Nature Writing’.

The issue closes with two reflections, which tread more familiar paths within the tradition, and yet they lay stress on certain elements within it which might have been forgotten by it, or by its readers: in the first case, a certain trend within the influential work of Hannah Arendt, and in the second, a certain inheritance from the Cynics.

Alessandra Montalbano presents us with an important reading of Hannah Arendt that sheds new light on an implicit debate that was struck up between Adriana Cavarero and Giorgio Agamben in the period during which the final two

essays of the collection were conceived. Montalbano shows that the fundamentally passive conception of natural or natal life that Agamben and Cavarero inherit in different ways – Agamben stressing the vulnerability of bare life to sovereign power and Cavarero the vulnerability of new-born life to the care of others – risks neglecting the activity of Arendt’s conception. If one thing seems to unify any number of strands within the contemporary Left, it is a kind of mistrust of the individual’s own ability to rescue themselves from the conditions into which they have been thrown, and thus a tendency to interpret the human being as a ‘victim’. Perhaps we can read Arendt for some suggestions as to how one might find a way out of this perhaps unintentionally disempowering attitude.

Roberto Mosciatti demonstrates the way in which certain features of Italian thought, including perhaps some of those to which Montalbano addresses critical questions, may be rendered more intelligible in light of a certain heritage stemming from the ancient Greek ‘kynicism’ of Diogenes, who whilst confining himself to a barrel remained a citizen of the world.

* * *