

Italian Modernism as a Philosophical Problem? Review of Rocco Rubini's *The Other Renaissance: Italian Humanism between Hegel and Heidegger*

Paul Kottman

As Hegel indicated in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the spirit of modernity in Europe takes an uneven course as it passes from land to land. England has its naval tradition and the industrial revolution to which it gave impetus. France has its revolutionary tradition. And if the Germans gazed “across the Rhine at events whose modernity they were destined to experience vicariously,” they nevertheless “began to open a *Sonderweg*, attempting to furrow their own ‘special pathway.’”¹

“Italians,” argues Rocco Rubini in *The Other Renaissance*, “faced a predicament even more difficult” (OR 48). Rubini claims that Italy—even more than Germany—registered “modernity” as “a philosophical problem,” to borrow a phrase from the title of Robert Pippin’s well-known book.² In Rubini’s own words, the ambition of his book is “to describe the emergence and development of a philosophical tradition whose peculiar outlook was formed in confrontation with the elusive beginnings of modernity” (OR 355). But what would that ambition require? And is it, finally, an apt description of what Rubini has actually accomplished?

The story Rubini tells is befittingly as intricate and character-filled as the Italian Renaissance itself. And to his credit, Rubini treats the Renaissance not as some pre-modern historical past but as a crucial intellectual horizon from which modern thought emerges and that is therefore of ongoing relevance. On the one hand then, Rubini corrects a prevailing but facile assumption—which has been common ever since the publication of Jacob Burckhardt’s celebrated *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860)³—according to which the achievements of the Italian Renaissance were first recognized by a late nineteenth-century German tradition. Instead, Rubini sees modern Renaissance studies

as having developed within Italian philosophy between 1860 and 1947 as part of an internal reckoning with the very meaning of modernity, at least in Italy. He makes a very good case that the Renaissance and the humanist inheritance amounted to *the* central concern of Italian thought in the period that stretched from Italian unification through Fascism and on into the postwar era. The efforts of Eugenio Garin and Ernesto Grassi, among others, are seen by Rubini as making a reckoning with Renaissance thought indispensable for Italy's philosophical account of its own entrance into European modernity.

On the other hand, Rubini's book tracks—and positions itself (down to its very subtitle) as an intervention in—an Italian *agon* with a perceived primacy of modern German philosophy. That is, Rubini also thinks that we miss something crucial about German thought between Hegel and Heidegger without proper attention to the Italian humanist perspective, which he convincingly shows is presented most perspicuously in debates about Renaissance humanism in the twentieth century. So, we are treated to discussions of Eugenio Garin, Ernesto Grassi, Giovanni Gentile, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Oskar Kristeller.⁴ Most pointedly, Rubini argues that Grassi's work on Italian Renaissance humanism (written in Germany) was one of the targets of Heidegger's 1947 "Letter on Humanism"; and he shows how Garin's later work on humanism (commissioned by Grassi and published in the same series and in the same year as Heidegger's "Letter") should force a re-reading of Heidegger's anti-humanism (see OR 170–228). In the book's most overtly philosophical pages, Rubini shows how Gentile's response to the positivism, rationalism, and empiricism that prevailed in Italy was rooted in an engagement with humanism that "restores new freshness to the soul [. . .] and turns a cold shoulder to medieval science, art, religion, forms of a spirit that is no more" (cited in OR 99).⁵ In another vein, Rubini suggests that what he calls the "Vichian" tradition in Italian philosophy—Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) being the foremost philosopher in the Italian tradition—gave Italian philosophy its own anti-Cartesian cast, one that makes it compatible at least with aspects of German (i.e., Hegelian) philosophy (OR 357). Rubini's discussions of these matters are illuminating and rich; I can see no way to do justice, in the space of a brief review, to all the material he treats with erudition and intelligence over nearly 400 pages. But it seems to me that Rubini's basic provocation—following in the footsteps of Gentile, Garin, and Grassi—is this: "Humanism's merits lie in the philosophical legacy for which it 'prepares' with its philology" (OR 99).

To return to the basic issue raised at the outset, because Rubini also wants to intervene in discussions about the very relation of modern philosophy to the advent of European modernity, I want to devote a

few words to this aspect of his book. After all, what could it mean to see modernity as a *philosophical* problem in Italy (or elsewhere)? What could it mean to see modernity as raising a problem that is essentially philosophical, rather than historical or intellectual-historical?

First, let me outline a straightforward query. It was not clear to me from what Rubini has said that we should think of modernity as a *philosophical* problem for Italy, any more than the emergence of banking in Tuscan hill-towns should be said to have posed a philosophical problem. Why not just assume that for Italians European modernity as well as Italy's own traditions (I mean not only Renaissance humanism but also a whole host of cultural and historical features that distinguish modern Italy from modern Germany or England) have presented certain kinds of cultural-historical puzzles and possibilities concerning national identity, the reception of Greek classics in Italy (an issue of great importance to Gentile), the role of tradition in modern life, geographical isolation, the Risorgimento, world wars, and so on—all of which are woven into a series of remarkable historical developments and scholarly practices, but which are not obviously philosophical problems? In other words, my question is: are the cultural and intellectual-historical issues treated by Rubini of live philosophical interest? And, if so, how?

For the most part, Rubini seems interested in following Grassi, Garin, and company in “endow[ing] humanism with a *traditional* value. For it is only within the well-determined internalist horizon offered by culturally embedded traditions that anachronism is impossible” (OR 370). That is to say, it is only through the kind of scholarship advocated by Rubini (following the Italian tradition) that the ruptures of modern thought start to seem less like contingent ruptures and more like explicable developments. To this, one wants to say, “yes”: Rubini's approach shows how much our understanding of the history of philosophy stands to gain from learning about its humanist context. This context also includes, as Rubini passionately emphasizes, the human or lived formation of philosophers' own first-person cultural horizons. But Rubini also wants to say that once this clarity is achieved, modern philosophy writ very large (Hegelian phenomenology, Heideggerian anti-humanism, or all of “continental philosophy,” as Rubini sometimes calls it) will look less “historiographically insouciant” (OR 364). Maybe so. But this seems to reduce some very large philosophical problems—starting with the modernity problem in Europe about which Rubini seeks to provide a distinctive treatment—to a matter of doing the right kind of intellectual history. Indeed, Rubini's most ambitious aim seems to be to show by example that philosophy's own disciplinary self-understanding needs the corrective offered by this kind of intellectual history.

Yet, all this raises a very large question, which is also endemic to modern philosophical discourse, about the relationship between intellectual history and philosophy. After all, for many working in the history of philosophy—Rubini included, it seems—the goal of philosophy is not to grapple with “perennial questions” about the nature of things. Instead, the goal is to locate philosophical writing in its proper historical context as fully as possible in order to illuminate as many interlocutors and influences as one can and to discuss the way in which ideas and problems are taken up by successors across generations. To work on the history of philosophy is, for many, to engage in a kind of intellectual history (perhaps requiring a certain training in the specialized language of philosophers). But even if we accept the basic outlines of the intellectual history that Rubini provides, including his helpful correctives to dominant narratives in the history of philosophy, and even if we also agree that philosophy is not reducible to a set of perennial questions faced by every age, it is still not clear that anything about modern history since the Renaissance has been treated *philosophically* by Rubini; nor is it clarified what a philosophical treatment of (Italian, German, or European) modernity would even amount to.

So, the question that hangs over Rubini’s book—to me, at least—is: what would a philosophical treatment of modernity amount to once we leave aside the perennial questions approach (precisely because we are interested in the historicity of modernity, in the very problem of there being something like a modern age)? Is intellectual history our only remaining alternative? Moreover, isn’t this very question perhaps the most pressing issue raised by the distinctiveness of the Italian humanist tradition in modern thought when considered alongside the reception of Hegelian philosophy over the past two centuries?

According to Rubini, the Italian humanist tradition teaches that we are (still) “Renaissance men” attempting “to reconcile with the Western philosophical legacy (for what else is left for us to do?)” (OR 356). For Hegel, however, philosophy may yet turn out to be an effort at giving rational form to a way of life that is still ongoing, which means philosophy is not simply *post facto*, not just intellectual history or humanist scholarship. (Think here of certain strands of critical theory, feminist philosophy, or post-metaphysical Hegelian scholarship, and so on, as examples of live contemporary options in this regard.) As Pippin aptly put it nearly twenty years ago (almost as if he had read Rubini’s book):

If we do eventually come to understand ‘what happened,’ from Renaissance humanism to the Reformation . . . then we have made a philosophical claim about the meaning and significance of these altered ways of living . . . [but] we will need to answer scores of other questions before [such a claim] can seem satisfying.”⁶

In other words, whether or not a philosophical claim is satisfying to us (today) cannot be decided by intellectual history alone, since the claim itself can be at work in the ongoing way of life that sustains it. This is especially true for modern societies—as Gentile, for one, well understood—since modern societies base their claims to legitimacy not on revealed truths, but on explicitly philosophical claims about what they ought to be. So, while we can concede that any responsible approach to the history of philosophy necessitates a thoroughgoing scholarly preparation—a humanist approach that takes into account what a thinker was doing by writing certain works, in a certain time, for a certain audience—this is not, at least not obviously, the only approach we need (once the perennial-questions approach is shelved) in order to reckon philosophically with modernity. Rather, we might still ask: is a particular philosophical claim (e.g., about modernity and its manifold implications) *true*, worth our attention, or responsive to questions we still want to ask? Can we, with a humanist preparation, still ask *our own* questions to past thinkers, or is there nothing else “left for us to do,” as Rubini suggests, other than “reconcile with [our] philosophical legacy”?

One last way of putting my question: often it seems as though Rubini thinks that, with the right sort of scholarly attitude, modern philosophy can be shown to belong to, or at least to point unceasingly to, an acknowledgment of Renaissance intellectual history and the Italian humanist inheritance. But that is an enormous claim, and I do not see how it is a conclusion earned in the course of Rubini’s discussion. At the very least, he would need to show how the historical developments *since* the Renaissance that so preoccupied Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger (or Pippin or Habermas or Weber or any other philosopher working the German tradition on the modernity issue)—for instance, the burgeoning authority of the natural sciences, a new political language of rights and equality, expanding subjective consciousness, capitalist economics, modernist artistic movements, and so on—are taken up in the Italian tradition he points to in ways that would illuminate the post-Kantian German tradition by the lights of “the internalist or traditional vantage that was formed in Italy” (OR 370). That is an awfully tall order, one that Rubini’s admirable book, for all its scholarly value and ambitions, does not quite fill.

What we are left with is a compelling case made for the rewards that come from paying more careful attention to Italian scholarship on humanism within broader Anglo-German discussions of modern intellectual history (and so, to Rubini’s credit, not just within the disciplinary confines of Italian Renaissance studies). Likewise, Rubini has certainly reframed and reinvigorated the humanism debate, which is

no small feat. By these measures—notwithstanding the doubts I have raised about whether it really manages to account for “the emergence and development of a philosophical tradition whose peculiar outlook was formed in confrontation with the elusive beginnings of modernity” (OR 355)—Rubini’s book is certainly admirable and successful.

NOTES

1. Rocco Rubini, *The Other Renaissance: Italian Humanism between Hegel and Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 48; henceforth OR, followed by page number. For more on the German *Sonderweg* in connection to the French Revolution, see Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
2. See Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).
3. See Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (New York: Macmillan, 1904).
4. Kristeller fled Germany for the Scuola Normale in Pisa, where Gentile secured a position for him, before then fleeing Italy for America in 1939. In America, Kristeller went on to teach at Columbia and set much of the agenda for the study of Renaissance humanism in English.
5. Giovanni Gentile, *Storia della filosofia italiana*, vol. 1, ed. Eugenio Garin (Florence: Sansoni, 1969), p. 159.
6. Pippin, “Introduction to the Second Edition,” in *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, p. xvii.