

Comment

Giulio Preti (Pavia 1911 – Djerba 1972):
A Critical Rationalist*Luca Maria Scarantino*

The philosopher Giulio Preti belongs to that generation of young intellectuals who, in 1930s Italy, called for a profound regeneration of philosophy, arts and culture. Known by the name of 'critical rationalism', the movement formed in Milan around the philosopher Antonio Banfi (1886–1957). Luciano Anceschi, Vittorio Sereni, Enzo Paci, Antonia Pozzi, Remo Cantoni, as well as painters like Aligi Sassu and Ernesto Treccani were the young people who, under the banner of an anti-fascism that was at first cultural then openly militant (several of them were thrown into prison by the regime), aroused an intellectual fervour that was the marker of a thorough-going renewal of Italian culture. Journals such as *Corrente di vita giovanile* attracted eminent figures like Eugenio Montale, Salvatore Quasimodo, Elio Vittorini or Carlo Emilio Gadda and linked up with other intellectual groupings, like the circle of hermetic poets in Florence (Mario Luzi, Piero Bigongiari, Carlo Bo, Oreste Macrì, Alessandro Parronchi) and the painters from the Rome School (Scipione, Guttuso, Mafai, Afro . . .). Young film-makers like Alberto Lattuada and Luigi Comencini also made their debut with the movement.

From 1940 to 1944 and 1946 to 1949 the philosophical journal *Studi filosofici* grew out of this intellectual movement. Giulio Preti, Enzo Paci, Remo Cantoni, Giovanni Maria Bertin and Maria Adalgisa Denti ran the journal which, under Banfi's direction, aimed to carry out an anti-idealistic philosophical reconstruction. Its objectives were to achieve a 'scientific, therefore rational' orientation of thought, and at the same time to open the reason to 'the inexhaustible richness of experience and life' (which led, for instance, to Enzo Paci's profound existentialist vocation). Ludovico Geymonat, Nicola Abbagnano, Luigi Pareyson and Guido Calogero, but also Nicolai Hartmann, contributed to the journal.

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Banfi's philosophy had arisen out of an acute and precocious sense of the crisis in contemporary philosophy and culture. He taught his pupils and disciples to detect in the changes in habits, culture and society the signs of a radical historical watershed. But this tragic, and in a way even Nietzschean, sense, far from giving way to a vitalism or a resigned or ardent irrationalism, became for Banfi a quest for a rational reconstruction that followed on from the philosophical tradition of Kant and Husserl (combined with other strong influences like German philosopher Georg Simmel's thought).

Banfi's teaching had a profound influence on these young people, and on Preti in particular. The intertwining of the world of lived experience with the 'rational resolution' of it, which makes thought 'the conceptual translation of the content of experience', the refusal to hypostatize epistemological concepts (which inspired his critique of Giovanni Gentile's 'actualism') and the 'substantial identity of structure' between philosophy and science became the central elements of Preti's philosophical education, inherited from Banfi and already visible in *Idealism and Positivism*, his 1943 book, which outlined an initial synthesis of these ideas.

But in the 1940s Preti was also engaging with other strands of thought. His writings reveal a growing attraction for logical empiricism, which the concurrent activity of Federigo Enriques and, more especially, of Ludovico Geymonat had introduced into Italy – but also the gradual discovery of American pragmatism, a current of thought whose introduction into Italy dated back to Giovanni Vailati and Mario Calderoni. Encountering these movements was crucial for Preti and reinforced his critical background. Henceforth his search for a 'new rationality' was carried on chiefly around four main axes: the neo-Kantian tradition (Cassirer, the Marburg School), Husserl's phenomenology, logical empiricism and American pragmatism.

This philosophical reconstruction remained linked to a long-term cultural project that was strengthened by Preti's involvement in the resistance during the Occupation: building a culture that was 'rationally' founded on the free consent of the other rather than on an external authority, creating the forms of a knowledge that would be capable of escaping from the logic 'of faith, myth and obedience' peculiar to classical substantialist metaphysics.

In the post-war years, Preti took a fairly regular part in the philosophical and cultural debate carried on in the particular ethical climate of the late 1940s and 1950s. It was the expression of an intellectual commitment that was profoundly inspired by the work of the American philosopher John Dewey, and was shared by other post-war Italian philosophers, giving birth to a theoretical movement called 'New Enlightenment'. It was this ethical impulse underpinning his thinking that motivated his rational, empirical, pragmatic choice:

Logical empiricism and pragmatism appear to be the philosophy of people who have confidence in themselves, their sensibility and their experience; who hold out a better destiny for human beings than remaining imprisoned in an order and a hierarchy. It is a democratic philosophy *par excellence*, a childlike common-sense philosophy, a philosophy of seeing with your own eyes. A human philosophy, with no myths and no beliefs, no gods and no masters. This is why nowadays, in this clash of wills to power, control over the masses, exploitation of the masses, mobilization of the masses, this philosophy exasperates leaders, fanatics and mercenaries.

Now for Preti this experience is formed by all immediate and total experiences: these are the 'practical immediacies that make up human life'. If someone tells me 'here is a dog', I have an immediate perception that, to be understood, does not require scientific, metaphysical or any other investigation: this statement 'does not mean anything else but the fact of seeing this dog that breathes, whines, wags its tail and scratches'; it is not the 'image of an unverifiable relationship between unverifiable 'objects': it is the statement of an event, the verifiable statement of a verifiable event'.

Such immediate statements possess 'an immediate pragmatic certainty' and signify what Preti calls *common sense*, a notion that acquires a precise epistemological value in his thinking: 'Let us call it common lived experience (*Erlebnis*), and let us call *common language* the language in which it is stated. This language, with its pragmatic self-evident character, represents the lower limit of verifiability, and thus what, in the final analysis, gives meaning to all our discourse.' This explains Preti's criticisms towards George E. Moore's programme of a 'philosophical reconstruction of common sense':

... this kind of 'Weltanschauung of common sense' does not exist. *Weltanschauung* means constructing facts through their meanings: normal, systematic, technicized construction that has criteria (that may even turn out to be pseudo-criteria) for deciding between true and false, real and unreal. Common sense does not have any criteria other than immediate pragmatic appearance.

In fact for Moore common sense is a cultural category whereas for Preti it becomes an epistemological concept. Its statements are 'certain because they express, communicate, organize and give a meaning to acts and behaviours that form my daily life'; they 'imply and are implied in a series of other statements of the same kind, through which the lives of individuals and the life of society itself is performed'. So, to Preti knowledge is not the mirror of a pre-existing external reality. On the contrary, he refuses all ontologism conceiving the subject and object of knowledge as two realities in themselves, assuming that none of them 'are things, but functions of knowledge'.

The transition to the rational brings about 'a veritable revolution in human reality', opening up a new dimension, the 'logical dimension, i. e. the dimension of meanings. Events become *objects*, simple presences become meaningful presences'.¹ A meaning has 'a power of selection by which not all events can be accepted, and even those that are, are reduced to particular meanings'. The 'scientific images' of the world, produced by the different forms of 'rational reduction' of experience, describe identities that are always partial.²

We can observe how Preti's theory of meaning and experience combines the phenomenological, pragmatist and logical empiricist influences. Since, according to the holistic issues of logical empiricism, verifiability is required for a system in its totality, and therefore for its operational capacity, the meaning of a discourse lies in its operational ability to produce *forecasts* onto experience. Furthermore, Preti states that the principle of verification 'acts as the basic theorem of a positive gnoseology', arguing that 'this is very close to Husserl's theory of *Bedeutung* and *Erfüllung*, which

some writers, like Findlay for example, have resolutely imported into neo-positivism'. Husserl's notion of *Erfüllung*, the achievement of meaning that fixes and validates the relationship between theoretical systems and empirical reality, coincides therefore with the system's ability to intervene at the level of experience and consequently to produce *forecasts*. The *Erfüllung* of meaning is interpreted here as verification, in the operational sense, and this extends as far as the ultimate level of the communicable, the level of behaviour: 'only final, ultimate experiences are the full achievement of meaning, the full and total revelation of what meaning was limited to aiming at'.

From the philosophical standpoint this 'return to experience' explains the vitality of the rational: ideas are no longer 'objects of a *theory*, but *action plans*, invitations to action in accordance with a specific operational context'. Knowledge is anchored in human action in a way that determines the very forms of culture: our choices of categories, of rational principles, of meanings 'are closely related to historical evolution and also depend on their ability to match the concrete situations that philosophers and philosophies have to face, with their problems, trends and crises'. This historical rootedness goes far beyond the level of an evolution in the contents of philosophy and scientific description. It affects the most general principles of rationality, the logico-formal principles. Far from being 'eternal ideas that cannot change over time', these structures, which Preti sometimes brings together under the term of *perfect* or *ideal language*, are related 'to a specific function or functions that a given culture assigns to knowledge' and are historically constructed and variable 'according to the concrete requirements of a given historical culture'.

The evolutionary character of the logical conditions of acceptance or refutation of statements (and theories) leads Preti to contrast two different conceptions of the *a priori*. On the one hand a tradition that sees them as a 'constellation of fixed stars of thought, as forms (or even contents) independent of any human development and historical experience, and thus immutable'; on the other hand a conventionalist view that assigns to them the task 'of organizing experiences within discourse, creating a network of concepts that make experiences meaningful. This function can perfectly well be carried out by a historical, relative *a priori* that is active (operational) and actively constructed rather than pre-existing and discovered.' According to this second conception, the history of knowledge is 'the history of the formation and transformation of the ontologies through which human beings have thought their situation in the cosmos and in their own human society'. The closeness of these ideas to the 'pragmatist conception of the *a priori*' summarized in a famous passage by C. I. Lewis is striking:

The thought that both rationalism and empiricism have missed is that there are principles, representing the initiative of the mind, which impose upon experience no limitations whatever, but that such conceptions are still subject to alteration on pragmatic grounds when the expanding boundaries of experience reveal their infelicity as intellectual instruments. . . . Our categories and definitions are peculiarly social products, reached in the light of experiences which have much in common, and beaten out, like other pathways, by the coincidence of human purposes and the exigencies of human cooperation. Concerning the *a priori* there need be neither universal agreement nor complete historical continuity.

Conceptions, such as those of logic, which are least likely to be affected by the opening of new ranges of experience, represent the most stable of our categories; but none of them is beyond the possibility of alteration.³

At the level of rational knowledge the subject of knowledge is thus a 'social' subject. But this social subject should not be thought of in a concrete sense, as a particular social group or actor. On the contrary, it corresponds to the 'formal web of categories', the network of logico-formal norms, truth and validity criteria that shape our knowledge. This social subject is 'the repository of the forms, categories, meanings through which we select experience, decipher it and turn it into "the real world" according to the accepted forms of "truth".' We belong to this subject. Our lives are impregnated with it. It determines our way of looking at things and our most basic way of seeing them, our common sense:

. . . *experience* is not only feeling or perceiving, it is also inclining and desiring, connecting and evaluating; it is always full of meanings (references) and evaluations. But references, connections, evaluations are not (or only to the least degree) individual creations: they are a legacy, both biological and non-biological, that comes up from the whole past of the species and society. They are selected and typified responses, operational modes, orientations of evaluation and desire that our ancestors have passed down to us (with each generation modifying more or less the legacy it receives) and that we will modify and transmit to our children and followers – in fact, we are already doing so.

This is the reason why '*a democratic culture must be based on rational persuasion*' and why this rational persuasion, described in his major work *Praxis and Empiricism* (1957), rests on a knowledge that is 'public, inter-subjective and verifiable in common': unlike ontological realism, scientific discourse produces free and 'rational' agreement because its methods and forms of communication map onto the structures of this transcendental subject. For, if this subject whose mark we bear penetrates our way of thinking, seeing, hearing, acting, our *experience* in the widest sense – in short, our lives – then the 'rational' scope of discourse, its ability to produce a 'rational persuasion' is rooted in our flesh and in our vital historical experience: it is a discourse that accepts no other authority but the one that we all carry within us. All the power and all the limits of the rational are gathered together in it.

Finally, the transcendental subject carries within itself the potential to change things, and that is freedom's space. Experience must not be conceived as a mere acceptance of a subject-tradition whose contents would be all ready-made. On the contrary, scientific rationality nails the scientist's and the philosopher's responsibility, for 'choosing a philosophical position means adopting a particular attitude with regard to culture as a whole'. But this act, far from remaining abstract, is carried out on the level of the real, concrete forms of human behaviour, the level of *customs*: these are probably 'the most passive and closed aspect of a tradition: routine, inertia, the non-spiritual, uncritical, unfree moment of all our lives. But for this very reason they are the basic stuff of all culture. No cultural work is effective or lasting unless it reconstructs an *ethos*.' Touching this basic level of human life, philosophy reveals itself as a social discipline. It 'always obeys deep social needs, it is profoundly committed to the evolution and destiny of a society and its culture'; in fact 'philosophy

is never neutral or indifferent, and it has no right to be so. But it chooses one *ethos* from among others, and not one party among others.'

Praxis and Empiricism, which appeared at a time of extremely acute political tension, following the Soviet invasion of Hungary, immediately became the focus for a very virulent polemic, which considerably exacerbated Preti's cultural and academic isolation. Professor at the University of Florence since 1954, Preti saw the respect inspired by his broad technical and historical competence paralleled by a basic failure of understanding, or even a frank lack of interest in his thinking. His isolation was softened by the friendship of a few colleagues, among them the hermetic poets he met again in Florence. The 1960s were thus his 'silent years', during which he published little and often in the pages of the general press, while his scientific texts became sporadic: years during which a reduced scholarly output concealed an intense meditation, witnessed by the great wealth of his notebooks. The gradual discovery of his unpublished work reveals in fact an extremely rich theoretical application, articulated in a multitude of notebooks where syntheses exist cheek by jowl with experimental texts: as if he were looking for new research fields, in the grip of a theoretical turbulence.

The last product of these efforts, *Rhetoric and Logic*, published in 1968, bears witness to a desire to understand a society and culture subject to radical change. But Preti also seems to be facing up, in a rather tragic way, to the rise of a new irrationalism that could not be encapsulated in the ludicrous phrase 'two cultures' but was also irreducible to simple 'propaganda' (as Preti had quickly outlined it in *Praxis and Empiricism*); and, accompanied as it was by a powerful liberalization of behaviour, it even seemed to escape being labelled as the thinking of authority. It was what Etienne Gilson, at one of his Venetian lectures in the autumn of 1964, had called the *mass society and its culture*. Preti's anxiety as regards this ambiguity of contemporary reality, which is also ours, marked the extreme boundaries of his thinking.

His sudden death, in the summer of 1972 while he was on the Tunisian island of Djerba, closed a tormented, conflicted philosophical itinerary, which by the end of his life succumbed to these new forms of the contemporary crisis. It also embodies our anxiety when faced with the advent of a radical historical crisis which invades our lives and whose contours remain as yet undefined:

But when these things draw near, or when they are,
Our intellect is void, and your world's state
Unknown save some one bring us news from there.⁴

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. In this context Jean Petitot pointed out that this is a transcendental function performed through a process of induction-abstraction, since for Preti 'induction should not be thought of as empiricists do, as a kind of generalization creating a bridge from the regularity of observable facts to laws, but rather, as for Aristotle, as a move from fact to meaning (a move to the typical, the generic)'.
2. This explains Preti's strong interest in the theory of partial reductions elaborated by Carl Hempel. And in particular it explains the inexhaustible nature of the object (as a real, lived object), which 'is not an ontological reality opposed to the phenomenon, but the end point of the series of phenomena' or, as Preti says elsewhere, the *infinite goal* of culture.
3. C. I. Lewis, 'The Pragmatic Conception of the A Priori', in H. Feigl and W. Sellars (eds), *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949, p. 293; Lewis's article reproduces the text of a lecture given at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association in December 1922. Now it would be tempting to compare Preti's position with Thomas Kuhn's 'scientific paradigms', even if Preti's ideas cannot be confined to philosophy and history of science. However, it is not without interest that we read in the article *Grammar and Logics*, published in 1955, that V. Bröndal and L. Hjelmslev's methods for historical linguistics introduce a 'diachrony between different systems', because the formation of the various languages within a single linguistic trunk 'cannot be resolved into a series of progressive phenomena. It is true that at a given moment . . . there was a shift to a different linguistic system: that, to stick with the problematic of systems, the paradigms changed.'
4. Dante, *Hell*, X, 103–105, translated and edited by Dorothy L. Sayers, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1949, p. 131. The literary critic Maria Corti, who was a pupil of Banfi's at the same time as Preti, has referred to 'the pig-headed suicide of Preti, who decided to travel to Djerba when he was ill without taking any medication with him'.

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