HISTORY OF FAILED SYNTHESIS

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Introduction

These proceedings contain the papers presented at the 1st Graduate Conference in the History of Philosophy, held in Turin, November 12-13, 2015.

Central to the graduate conference was the question of synthesis. This broad, sweeping issue is at the heart of several philosophical inquiries aiming firstly to collect and order all the elements and facets of reality, and secondly to put the "pieces" together by explaining their mutual connections and dependencies. As precondition of such a plan we have to postulate that, on one hand, reality is made more intelligible thanks to common, rational and acceptable principles while, on the other hand, it maintains some semblance of unity thanks to a system of knowledge that faithfully reflects each part and enlightens those principles governing its operating mechanisms.

The issue of synthesis can be a common ground for different kinds of philosophical investigations and it can also be of some interest for those disciplines whose fields and instruments momentarily overlap the philosophical ones. The issue comes from the need to observe or establish a relation between different demands, as can be seen in the early modern attempts to transpose mathematical methods from physics to medicine in order to interpret the processes of the living body. The basis of each attempt at synthesizing is indeed the ambition to compose the multiplicity of the real-whether that unification is perceptive, intellectual, a priori, or a posteriori.

History of philosophy grants us a privileged point of view on the issue since it can be interpreted as the history of philosophers' struggle for synthesis, for two reasons. Firstly, philosophers have always sought to articulate and hold together particular and divergent requests, being these ontological, epistemological, political, etc. In the end, we can detect the figure of synthesis at work in several philosophical projects: in Plato's attempt to subsume the mundane world under the eternal world of ideas, in Aristotle's

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systematization of natural phenomena and human thought according to general laws, in Descartes' unification of all knowledge through recognition of the knowing subject's centrality, in Kant's determination (and consequent knowledge) of reality by the transcendental subject. All of them, each in his own way, tried to bring unity to different kinds of multiplicity. This ambition to resolve the tension between the one and the many seems to have been shared, more or less consciously, by several philosophers from antiquity to the present day. Even when it is criticized or scrutinized, such an attempt is never erased, because the forms of synthesis seem to be essential to our relationship with reality, however this reality may be understood.

There is a second reason leading us to interpret history of philosophy as history of attempts at synthesis. Philosophers' reflections are usually informed and oriented by the changes that occur in the political, social, economic and technological contexts wherein they develop. At the same time they make use of (past) logical and theoretical acquisitions to interpret these contexts and create new syntheses. Philosophical systems are then compositions of the available ideas and logical connections in new and ever-changing forms.

Therefore, the succession of philosophical systems along history can be conceived as a set of conceptual instruments that has been assembled in various ways either to create descriptions of reality aimed at solving problems or, often and more ambitiously, to account for the whole reality. Philosophers used to recover ideas and instruments from those precursors who already offered one coherent account of reality; by doing so, they also overcame the tensions endangering the previous syntheses, thus actively solving problems or posing new questions. Kant, for instance, mixed some elements from empiricism and rationalism in a revolutionary way within his new transcendental philosophy.

But can these various syntheses – both as target of speculation and as fundamental configuration of the history of philosophy – be genuinely complete? As an act which aims to overcome all potential disagreements, synthesis still contains discord. Any synthesis implies two moments, namely the effort to disregard divergent elements and the necessity to encompass them. These tensions may reflect the irreducibility of the complex to the simple: thus syntheses occasionally fail. The purpose of the conference was to consider how philosophy has engaged this question throughout its history; and to shed light on the "unresolved tensions" that failed syntheses left extant. For instance, some tensions may appear because certain elements of reality resist against a "rational law" that tries to completely exhaust their meaning: therefore, they emerge as inconsistencies within a certain conceptual framework. Whenever this happens, philosophers are pushed to "adjust" their own thought, by accepting or rejecting ideas when they are looking for concepts that adequately fit in their schemes of thought. Far from being characterized by negative connotations, these tensions are therefore an expression of the quality and precious complexity of the philosophical thought.

The graduate conference was an opportunity to get close to the issue of synthesis as both a primary and failed philosophical ambition, and we hope that the proceedings will help to inspect and implement the issue further.

Stephen Gaukroger's paper aims to reconstruct the attempts to reach an all-encompassing form of knowledge throughout the modern age. The article originates from the assumption that the demand for unification has appeared mostly since the 13th century, when Christian Neoplatonism, which intended all being as the united product of divine knowledge and will, was replaced by scholastic Aristotelianism, aiming to conciliate natural philosophy with theology. Gaukroger shows how those attempts to reach a unifield knowledge which had been developed from the 17th to the 19th century, were diversified in terms of objectives, instruments, strategies. However, all these philosophical attempts were based on the same premise, namely that we attain the unity of knowledge as long as science reaches some kind of unity. For this reason we witnessed the competition among philosophical and scientific doctrines for delivering a coherent vision of nature: the unifying principle, the formal structures, or the supporting mechanism through which natural phenomena can be generally studied and investigated were the questions at issue. Gaukroger describes, from time to time, the limits of these attempts and the reasons why each of these attempts has been criticized, abandoned and outdated – and finally the reasons why these syntheses failed.

Carlo Augusto Viano's paper takes into account the other side of history, namely the skepticism related to philosophical programs aiming to reach any kind of synthesis and the difficulties these programs have incurred. Starting from Locke's empiricism, with his criticism of the possibility of an authentic access to the substance, continuing with the *Encyclopédistes* and their image of the universe as an ocean with no intrinsic order, Viano describes in which sense several philosophers had one concern in common: they all noticed that it was impossible to accept those principles originally postulated by philosophy up until Descartes and the Cartesian era. The reflections of Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel are presented as answers to the disruptive challenge delivered by several English and French philosophies from the 17th to the 18th century. Each of these philosophers tried to detect some kind of unity in natural phenomena and morality (Kant), in History (Hegel) or in the very ontological fabric of being (Leibniz). Within this reconstruction, Viano also describes how the study of history quitted searching for a general unity of sense guiding history and embraced the idea of a constellation of ages, each oriented by a specific system of ideas and values. During the first troubled half of the 20th century, German philosophers such as Heidegger and Jaspers claimed that until that moment no philosophical syntheses had been conceived according to proper principles; on the contrary, it seemed that philosophical knowledge embraced those principles originally rooted in the scientific and technical kind of knowledge. After acknowledging the cultural and historical decline they witnessed, they both proposed forms of "negative" philosophical synthesis and traced the loss of the only authentic knowledge back to the very beginning of philosophy, namely Greek philosophy.

Sebastiano Gino's paper describes a failed synthesis example within Thomas Reid's work. The Scottish philosopher attempted to elaborate a

"faculty psychology", that is a unitary empirical description of all mental operations. Scattered throughout his works and private notes, Reid's claims about consciousness fail to deliver a coherent account of the psychological life: on one side, for instance, it seems that consciousness is completely self-transparent whereas, on the other, Gino finds evidence of the existence of unconscious mental operations. It therefore seems that, in Reid's case, the tension between different claims led him to miss the synthesis between the religious and the philosophical aspects of his thought.

Giada Margiotto's paper analyzes a (failed) synthesis between cosmological and philosophical systems. Tycho Brahe described celestial phenomena within an orderly and unitary scheme of the world. But he also tried to reconcile the recent discoveries of Copernicus with Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmology and metaphysics, thus trying to resist to the new cosmology for the last time. Margiotto explains how this attempt was doomed to failure and why Brahe's synthesis was at the center of Galileo's criticism of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmological system. In the *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* Galileo argued with Brahe's system. Nevertheless, curiously, Galileo chose not to mention him explicitly because, according to Margiotto, Brahe's cosmology could not provide for a synthesis of celestial phenomena as coherent as the one offered by Ptolemy and Copernicus.

Peter Sperber elaborates on the historiographical thesis sustaining the productivity of the failed syntheses: his paper deals with the paradigmatic case of failed synthesis between rationalism and empiricism as it was performed by Kant. From the beginning, several tensions run through Kant's transcendental philosophy as synthesis of rationalism and empiricism. Sperber then shows how these same tensions stimulated manifold discussions and interpretations that, in turn, fostered a wide set of Kant-related philosophies. Kantianism's richness constituted a tempting theoretical option for a vast and heterogeneous public of philosophers. Both Fichte and Fries developed their philosophies starting from different readings of the failure of Kant's synthesis. While the former embraced the rationalist side of Kant's thought, the latter clung to the empiricist one.

Marco Storni's paper deals with synthesis intended as system, and with system as one of the specific forms of philosophical theories. His article discusses what has been defined as a historiographical prejudice, according to which the 18th philosophical century was essentially driven by an eclectic, non-systematic and non-dogmatic attitude. This attitude, inspired by empiricism and Newtonian science, had been interpreted as one of the consequences of the crisis of the Cartesian philosophical system. Storni's paper intends to problematize this preconception by analyzing the Maupertuis case, which has been generally considered a paradigmatic example of a non-systematic attitude. Maupertuis' epistemology informed his metaphysical beliefs, his ethics and theory of language; it can be described as an empiricist or phenomenalist theory, rooted in mere perceptive data and therefore in a

subjective and arbitrary dimension. Storni then shows how Maupertius attempted to guarantee some form of "epistemological stability" by planning to apply to philosophy the mathematical method in a systematic manner.

Lastly, Robert Ziegelmann explains how the synthesis of perceptions described by Kant's first *Kritik* has been transposed and applied to different fields of study. While Kant originally employed the notion of synthesis to describe transcendental apperception, Sohn-Rethel and Adorno borrowed it in order to explain economic and political phenomena. Criticizing the presumed objectivity of the Kantian synthesis, both authors attempted to historicize it and to show its contingency. Sohn-Rethel showed how the forms of cognitive synthesis are the product of specific forms of social synthesis (in this case the capitalist one), whereas Adorno used the notion of synthesis as one of the keys to understanding mankind's domination over nature.

The success of the 2015 "Histories of Failed Synthesis" conference is due to several individuals and organizations. First of all, the organizers would like to thank the members of the scientific committee, who picked one fine selections of papers. Among them, we particularly extend our gratitude to Paola Rumore for her wise counsel and guidance. We also thank Enrico Pasini and Luca Vanzago, who keenly reviewed the selected papers and encouraged dialogue among participants. The two keynote speakers, Justin E.H. Smith and Nicolas De Warren, and the guests of honor of these proceedings, Stephen Gaukroger and Carlo Augusto Viano, all contributed significantly to the conference topic. Finally, we would like to thank those institutions that had an important role in the organization of the conference by offering us their financial and logistic support: we therefore thank the Turin Research Group on Early Modern & Modern Philosophical and Scientific Thought, the PhD FINO Consortium in Philosophy, and the Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences in Turin.