

INTRODUCTION

1. *Prejudices and the philosophy of history*

Freeing oneself from one's prejudices is a task which the vast majority of modern philosophy sets as a condition for proper rational enquiry and for communication between men on an equal footing and without bias.¹ It is not easy, however, to recognise one's prejudices. In fact, it is very often he who feels immune that is most subject to its influence.² This is true of the thinkers considered here, ever ready to accuse others of prejudice, whilst being convinced of the irreproachability of their own point of view. The danger lies in forgetting that even our own point of view is both relative and conditioned. Within a tradition that transmits not only behavioural patterns, but also more or less explicit ready-made judgements, the question is whether to subject these judgements to rational observation and, through comparing and contrasting them, arrive at an argued and personally satisfying opinion, or close oneself within those acquired certainties, refusing "to submit oneself to the law of the best argument".³ In this case,

¹ For the importance of this requirement see Jürgen Habermas, *Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1992², 104, 218.

² For Gadamer's insistence on this point see his interview in *Hans-Georg Gadamer im Gespräch*, ed. Carsten Dutt. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 1993, 20.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, III, *Le temps raconté*. Paris: Du Seuil, 1985, 325-326, which recalls the well-known polemic between Gadamer and Habermas in their contributions to *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, ed. Karl-Otto Apel. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971. After pointing out that the term "prejudice" has various meanings, Ricoeur locates it "within the orbit of judgement" and compares it to the party to the case in a trial. If this party sought to set itself up in its own court, it would be like a claimant challenging his own magistrate. This is what prejudice does when it refutes the higher appeal of reason. For the importance of the critical moment in Ricoeur, see Gianni Paganini, *La filosofia francese nella seconda metà del novecento*, in *Storia della Filosofia*, previously edited by Mario Dal Pra, vol. XI, tom I, edited by Gianni Paganini. Padova: Vallardi-Piccin, 1998, 261-265, 279-282.

the force of prejudice is shown in its most negative sense. Challenging of person, who claims to be free of bias, is a necessary precondition for dialogue, but it is not the only one.⁴ Should this person refuse the search for truth implied also in the questioning of his convictions, then the dialogue loses its significance and fails even to be a pleasant conversation with others.⁵

All the philosophical positions considered here clearly reveal the influence of both environment and tradition, but there will also emerge differing reactions, even opposing, ranging from simple acceptance of the prejudices to criticism of them and from defence of one's own certainties to the search for more valid solutions. Obviously, we ourselves cannot expect to stand as unbiassed observers, as judges free from the influence of our time. That would be an even worse prejudice. The same historical distance that separates us from the period of time under study, with all the accumulation of experiences in-between, suggests pre-comprehension. In fact, we are confronting the debate over Judaism after the outbreak of anti-Semitism in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century, in particular after the shoah. While, on the one hand, it is essential to bracket these experiences and avoid reading the texts in such a way that will necessarily lead us to the subsequent consequences, on the other hand, it must be recognised that our interest is nurtured by the very experiences and problems arising thereafter and which still have relevance to us today.

If an indispensable part in the assimilation, defence or criticism of the prejudices is played by reason, our attention is drawn by that movement which, by antonomasia, upheld the need for rational control over one's own beliefs and presuppositions, namely Enlightenment. "Radical Enlightenment" has often been accused of having nurtured the impossible dream of an absolutely free and autonomous reason, forgetting that "imprinting", that "horizon" which defines us.⁶ Nevertheless, distinction is

⁴ For the hermeneutics of the dialogue in Gadamer, but also for the criticism raised by Karl-Otto Apel on the inadequacy of his methodology, see Paolo Spinicci, *Fenomenologia ed ermeneutica* and *Oltre l'ermeneutica* in *Storia della Filosofia*, XI, tom I, ed. Paganini, 609-616, 639-649.

⁵ On the need for criticism within dialogue and understanding, see Giuseppe Cambiano, *Ermeneutica e filologia*, "Rivista di filosofia", 1997, 3, 448-460, who complains that in Gadamer's interpretation of platonic dialogue there is a loss of the critical dimension "of doubt, of comparison" (448, 460), of confutation (456-457) and sustains Socrates' asymmetric position towards interlocutors and traditional language, confirming his objective of freedom from prejudice (458-459).

⁶ See Gadamer, *op. cit.*, 19.

made between legitimate and illegitimate prejudice,⁷ and therefore the superior criterion of reason is re-proposed. What is more, complete freedom from prejudice maintains its sense as the “governing purpose, even though unreachable, of philosophic thought”, faced with the unavoidable and never-ending task of self-correction.⁸ Naturally, reason cannot be considered as having just one version, any more than communication can be considered in just a scientific sense.⁹ However, during the period of Enlightenment, there emerged a far more articulate awareness than is commonly admitted of the play between reason and prejudice.

This awareness not only accompanied the defence of the Bible and the Church,¹⁰ but also the struggle for emancipation and criticism. We need look no further than Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) and Kant himself, neither of whom were particularly condescending towards the common mind. The former rose above a condition of misery and social exclusion thanks to personal endeavour and the assimilation of a foreign culture. A Jew by birth and by choice, he risked his own literary prestige in order to denounce the serious discrimination endured by those of his faith and to ask for equal rights. Nonetheless, he admitted the naturalness of prejudice, rooted in language and tradition, to the extent that, even with one’s best friend, with whom one was believed to share the same thoughts, very often it was not possible to agree on “certain truths of philosophy and religion”. This was due to the fact that “different ideas” could be connected “with the same words”.¹¹ This suspicion of a profoundly-rooted incomprehension, an unbridgeable distance, also spoilt the long-lasting friendship with Lessing. Even before Jacobi made public this suspicion, thereby embittering the last days of the Jewish philosopher, Mendelssohn had observed a historical-

⁷ See Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode, Gesammelte Werke*, I. Tübingen: Mohr, 1986, 281; for this observation Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, 325-326.

⁸ Georg Simmel, *Die Hauptprobleme der Philosophie*, it. tr. A. Banfi – P. Costa. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1996, 6; *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie. Eine erkenntnistheoretische Studie, Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Otthein Rammstedt, II. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989, 326, 333.

⁹ For insistence on this point, also with respect to the position of Habermas, see Raymond Boudon, *L’idéologie. L’origine des idées reçues*. Paris: Fayard, 1986, it. tr. Gregorio De Paola, *L’ideologia. Origine dei pregiudizi*. Torino: Einaudi, 1991, 7-8, 125-129, 134-135, 136.

¹⁰ In this sense Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 282 saves the so-called *Populärphilosophie* of the German Enlightenment.

¹¹ *Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum*, 1783, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Jubiläumsausgabe (*JubA*). Stuttgart: Frommann, 1971–, VIII, 134-35, tr. Allan Arkush, Hannover and London: University Press of New England, 1983, 67, see also *JubA*, III, 335-36.

philosophical judgement forming in his friend, which struck at his own belonging to a people and to a religion. In fact, our investigation gets under way with an earlier episode in which Mendelssohn had explained prejudice in what might be called an etymological sense, linking it to tradition and the education received. “Habitual concepts, preconceptions and the principles assimilated” could lead “two men, brought up and educated according to opposing prejudices” to “think very differently on many judgements and opinions”. The necessary condition for a respectful and tolerant dialogue was to admit that we have been “brought up and educated according to prejudices”.¹² From here, though, it is necessary to move forward and recognise the role of pluralism at the basis of humanity and rationality. Kant, too, while maintaining the contiguity of truth and error, acknowledged the widespread prejudices deriving from imitation, habit or inclination, and warned against an attitude which sought to “repel immediately and directly each and every prejudice” as “something good may be found” in them.¹³ Meanwhile, verification of that content, just like the distinction between “convenient prejudices” and “harmful prejudices”,¹⁴ came within the sphere of reason. While it was neither possible nor even desirable to examine everything,¹⁵ no opinion, on principle, could avoid having its legitimacy questioned. The prejudices may “not always be false”, but, on the other hand, to assume them only because of their force is “harmful”.¹⁶

In this context, Kant also indicated convictions about the various eras of mankind as being subject to prejudice.¹⁷ In fact, not only religious disputes, but also the philosophy of history, which, after all, was originally linked to theology and eschatology, has often been tainted by prejudice, relegating rejected mentalities and behaviour to a more remote and primitive stage, and setting up a chosen civilisation or at least its aspirations as the culmination of

¹² *Gegenbetrachtungen über Bonnets Palingenesie*, *JubA*, VII, 98-99.

¹³ See *Logik Blomberg*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Akademie Ausgabe. Berlin-Leipzig, 1900–(AA), XXIV, 169; for the wider view on prejudice pp. 161-94, also *Logik Pölit*, 547-556, *Logik Philippi*, AA, XXV, 424-33, *Logik Busold*, 640-44, *Wiener Logik*, 869-79; *Logik Dohna Wundl*, 737-42; on this subject, see Marina Savi, *Il concetto di senso comune in Kant*. Milano: Franco Angeli, 1998, 64.

¹⁴ *Logik Blomberg*, 170-71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁶ *Logik Pölit*, 551. On the relationship between Enlightenment and criticism of prejudices, see Werner Schneiders, *Aufklärung und Vorurteilsthese. Studien zur Geschichte der Vorurteilsthese*. Stuttgart: Frommann, 1983, especially pp. 56-65 for the part played by the tradition as natural prejudice, that is prior to the critical stance.

¹⁷ *Logik Blomberg*, 179-185, *Logik Pölit*, 552-556, *Logik Philippi*, 429-432, *Wiener Logik*, 875-9.

evolution. Time has become a sort of “ontological prejudice”, by means of which something old can be declared obsolete or untrue.¹⁸ On this very point, as we shall see, Mendelssohn distanced himself from Lessing and was criticised for doing so by, among others, Kant and Hegel. There is the well-known stance taken by Karl Löwith during the twentieth century against the historicist approach, whereby truth could be interpreted as an on-going process devoid of an eternal element, justifying someone in claiming their point of view as absolute.¹⁹ While there is an evident danger of the philosophy of history becoming ideology, self-justification or even liberty, it is also undeniable that a progressive framework can be applied to the struggle for human emancipation, as clearly shown by Kant himself, who employed it to proclaim the attainment of maturity²⁰ or the advance towards perpetual peace.²¹ Above and beyond any theological derivation, it may well be a reflection of human efforts to re-appropriate the past and reflect upon the meaning of the path chosen. Having taken into account its existential and practical value,²² though, it is indispensable that such a progressive framework not be the only parameter used in judging human practice. In this way, the risk may be avoided of setting up the present as ultimate judge of the past.

Surely a universal history would be a metaphysical entity difficult to embrace?²³ Wouldn't its outcome or its centre embody the sense of the

¹⁸ Claus von Bormann, *Die Zweideutigkeit der hermeneutischen Erfahrung*, in *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, ed. Apel, 92-94.

¹⁹ *Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus* (1952), in *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Klaus Stichweh, II. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1983, 310-320; *Wahrheit und Geschichtlichkeit* (1969/70), *ibid.*, 466-467.

²⁰ *Was ist Aufklärung*, AA, VIII, 35, 40.

²¹ *Zum ewigen Frieden*, AA, VIII, 386.

²² Benedetto Croce, *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, Laterza, Bari 1938², 38-9, 41. On the importance of this work in the development of Croce's thinking, see Manlio Ciardo, *L'infinito e la storia in Benedetto Croce*. Napoli: Guida, 1990, 59-68. In the comparison between Croce and Salvemini, Eugenio Garin (*Osservazioni preliminari a una storia della filosofia*, 1959, in *La filosofia come sapere storico*, Laterza: Bari 1990) explains the “contemporaneity” of the history (p. 33) as a two way link between the present and the past (p. 78) in the necessary projection towards the future and recalls the remark of Droysen that “amongst historical materials there are also the consequences [...] consequences that contemporaries did not know, and had no presentiment of” (p. 73).

²³ On the discussed question between the late eighteenth century and the beginnings of the twentieth century and on the emerging difference between ‘Universalgeschichte’ and ‘Weltgeschichte’, see Fulvio Tessoro, *Il senso della storia universale*. Milano: Garzanti, 1987.

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