

Interview with Luca Fonnesu

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ENG Abstract: Interview with Luca Fonnesu, conducted by Sandra V. Palermo, in which the Italian philosopher discusses how his philosophical research has evolved since his university days, what the philosophical and political climate was like during his formative years, and how his philosophical interests intersected with Kantian thought. The interview also discusses Kant's importance for contemporary moral philosophy and epistemology, the role of philosophical societies and the relationship between philosophy and history of philosophy.

Keywords: Kant, research, history of philosophy, moral philosophy.

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SP: The first question I'd like to ask you concerns your introduction to German idealism and Kant in particular. I know that your first work in the field of German idealism did not concern Kant, but Fichte, and so I would like to ask you how you came to encounter late 18th-century German philosophy, what reasons or concerns sparked your interest, and what role – if any – the professors at the University of Florence, where you graduated, played.

LF: My introduction to German idealism or classical German philosophy was mainly due to meeting Claudio Cesa, who was teaching in Florence at that time, between the late 1970s and early 1980s. As I believe has happened to others too, the choice was first and foremost about the person I had chosen to supervise my degree, and only later did it end up being about classical German philosophy (so, in the end, it's all a bit random...). The thesis I proposed to Cesa had nothing to do with German philosophy, even though I had attended Cesa's lectures on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and Kant's third *Critique*. I was interested in political philosophy, which had, in fact, been the reason I'd decided to study philosophy: those were very different years from today, of course. Within the German philosophical tradition, I'd been particularly interested in Marx, who was widely studied in Italy at the time, especially in Florence and Pisa, centres of intense debate on Marxism. Cesa was one of the few non-Marxist professors in Florence, although he had been influenced by great Marxist historians such as Delio Cantimori and Marxist philosophers such as Cesare Luporini, who had brought him to Florence and who had been his professor at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa. Since I wanted to write my thesis on a topic in political philosophy, Cesa suggested I work on the problem of social classes (the *Stände*) between Kant and Hegel, but the actual topic turned out to be different. At the time, the idea of working on these philosophers without knowing German was unthinkable, but the Erasmus programme did not yet exist. I therefore spent two months in Heidelberg attending a *Ferienkurs* and then received a scholarship from a small *Stiftung* in the same city, the Robert E. Schmidt-Stiftung (I do not know if it still exists). It was a six-month scholarship (3,200 Deutsche Mark for the semester) and required enrolment at the university for that semester as an 'auditor'. I attended some lectures and seminars – including Fulda's on Hegel – but understood very little! I was struck, however, by how much the German students debated, compared to us: the general standard wasn't high, but the discussions were very lively.

At the time, Cesa was mainly concerned with political philosophy, and I believe this was where our paths crossed. In fact, my undergraduate thesis, and later my doctoral thesis, were both on Fichte: the former with an approach straddling ethics and politics (ethics and society), the latter on a more distinctly moral theme (the question of *the Bestimmung des Menschen*), from which my first and only book on Fichte emerged.

Claudio Cesa was my mentor in many ways, even though I went on to study subjects very different from those that interested him. His characteristic approach was to give his students a great deal of freedom, something he explicitly advocated: he rarely assigned you a task or a topic to study, but waited for your own projects and told you whether he considered them interesting (rarely...) or nonsensical and unrealistic (more often). However, he did not interfere with fundamental choices, such as when I began to take an interest in

analytical ethics: apart from the odd ironic remarks, he continued to follow my work in that field too, even though it was not to his liking.

As for Kant, I only came to him later, when I began to move more decisively into the realm of moral philosophy, even though I had studied Kant's ethics during my doctoral studies. I had started out with Fichte and Hegel, then began to take an interest in analytic ethics, and it was in this context that I became more interested in Kant. Ultimately, I thought he was the only philosopher of classical German philosophy who could truly be considered a point of reference for a reflection in moral philosophy that was not limited to the historical aspect – something that was predominantly the case in the Anglo-Saxon world, with rare exceptions, and within the analytical tradition. My turn towards Kant was also influenced by my friendship with Claudio la Rocca, my fellow doctoral student and a close friend to this day. This shift did not, however, mean I lost interest in classical German philosophy as a whole, and I have returned on various occasions to the thought of Hegel and Fichte. I have never, however, been a 'Fichtean', unlike many scholars of my generation and those that preceded it. My studies on Fichte developed within the context of the revival of Fichtean studies led by Reinhard Lauth, in which the general view held that transcendental philosophy constituted, with Fichte, the fundamental moment of Western thought, the culmination of a 'transcendental' tradition that began with Descartes and continued with Kant, but was realised with Fichte. Hegel and Schelling were thus regarded as the 'traitors' of transcendental thought. For years there was an atmosphere of this sort, which in my view overlooked many elements common to these philosophers, which were the ones that interested me. In this attitude, I was influenced by Cesa, who, although Hegel was certainly 'his' philosopher, had made significant contributions regarding all three of the great idealists (though less so on Kant). In Germany, this was done by two great scholars, Dieter Henrich and Ludwig Siep. In conclusion: I never paid much attention to Schelling, whilst I focused heavily on Fichte – a philosopher whom I consider, for various reasons, to be 'eccentric' and a transitional figure between two centuries – and I believe that Hegel is a fundamental philosopher (and certainly has been for me), but I also believe that Kant is the most important philosopher for those engaged in moral philosophy today.

SP: Throughout your research and your career as a teacher, you have moved between the history of philosophy and moral philosophy, and within the framework of the latter you have engaged with Anglo-American analytical philosophy. Given the controversy that has been running through almost all philosophy departments in European universities – and beyond – for several decades, concerning the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy, I would like to ask you what your position is on this matter. After all, in your research, Kant seems to occupy the intersection between these two philosophical traditions.

LF: I have always been rather confused and inconsistent in my interests, partly because they have sometimes depended on contingent circumstances. I began to look into theodicy, a subject I still consider of great interest, by chance: I had to apply for a DAAD scholarship and needed a letter of invitation, which was supposed to come from Klaus Düsing so I could go to Cologne, but his letter was slow in arriving (and indeed arrived late), so my friend Sonia Carboncini got me a letter of invitation from Albert Heinekamp to go to the Leibniz-Archiv in Hanover, where I then spent two years. In Hanover, I was working on my book on Fichte and, at the same time, I was engaged with the eighteenth-century debate on theodicy. But the most important experience was meeting many people with whom I would become friends, such as Concha Roldán and María Rosa Antognazza, the great Leibniz scholar who passed away in 2023, and I came into contact with all the leading Leibniz scholars, who were then passing through the Leibniz-Archiv thanks to Heinekamp's great organisational skills.

As for your question, I believe that philosophy and the history of philosophy are, in principle, *distinct* disciplines, both of which have philosophical relevance and also overlap in certain respects, if only because one can engage in philosophy in a systematic, or more properly theoretical, sense through the texts of the tradition. The controversy between philosophers and historians of philosophy is often more academic than scientific in nature, but it is not merely specious, and I believe it has interesting aspects which I am unfortunately unable to explore fully here. Certainly, the attempt to utilise a philosopher in a theoretical key is predominantly theoretical in nature, as when, to speak of the topics I know best, one proposes a version of ethics inspired by Kant. And it is precisely in the moral sphere that philosophical discussion is largely dominated by an 'analytical' approach, or at least one inspired by it.

SP: In recent years you have been deeply engaged with epistemological issues; you have addressed the theme of the forms of belief, the relationship between faith and knowledge, and, most recently, the question of prejudice. These are, I would say, issues that are not confined to Kantian thought, but which you have often approached starting from Kant or with a focus on Kant's works. I'd like to ask you how these issues have taken shape within your research framework, or rather, how you came to them? And the importance of Kant for thinking through these questions.

LF: Kant is an inexhaustible source, like all the classics. I like to recall a remark by a great Italian historian of philosophy, Valerio Verra, when he said (I don't know if he ever wrote it down) that the question of *the relevance* of the classics is misplaced, because the great classics, or classics *tout court*, are not relevant but *permanent*: relevance, by its very nature, passes; it is transitory, whilst permanence, again by its very nature, never passes.

Here too, I must say that I arrived at Kant's epistemological reflections by chance, starting from the status of faith and knowledge in a small section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* dedicated to *Meinen, Wissen und Glauben*, long ignored by *Kant research* but studied excellently since the beginning of this century (to name a few: initially Capozzi and Stevenson, then Chignell, Pasternack, Gava, La Rocca). It was realised almost suddenly just how fruitful Kantian thought could be in this direction too, which in many respects came as a

surprise: twentieth-century epistemology certainly did not view Kant with particular favour. Whilst working on these themes revolving around the concept of *Fürwahrhalten*, the holding-to-be-true, I realised that many issues had to do with the relationship between ethics and epistemology, with the ethics of belief and so on. In this, I was helped by a fellow epistemologist, Tommaso Piazza, with whom we discovered common ground, so much so that we organise seminars together on this topic in Pavia. Many of Kant's reflections on these themes are also interesting from a contemporary perspective, and prejudice, which forms part of this conceptual constellation, is a good example. Topics that are hotly debated today and very much present in philosophical discussion—such as prejudice, false belief or self-deception—find extremely interesting treatment in Kant's writings. More than a century before Freud, Kant consistently expressed great scepticism regarding introspection and the privileged access of the first-person perspective. The theme of *Schein*, then, in its various aspects, is extremely significant, as demonstrated by the *Transcendental Dialectic* but also by the reflections on the concept of *persuasion* that have attracted much interest in recent studies (by Gava and La Rocca, for example)

SP: You were president of the Italian Society for Kantian Studies for several years. I'd like to ask you what role national scientific societies play today. Do you feel there is adequate collaboration or coordination between the various societies?

LF: National academic societies do not communicate much with one another, either within the same country or between different countries. This seems to me to be an obvious fact. All these societies, including the Kantian societies, have two sides: a positive one and a negative one. The positive aspect is the creation of a network for research and collaboration among philosophers working on related topics, and this is naturally very important, as it enables the formation of a research community and the promotion of joint initiatives. However, there is also a negative side, probably inevitable, which has to do with the formation of factions, rivalries and conflicts of very little actual significance— but which create effects that are extremely counterproductive precisely for research in philosophy. I believe it is important to view academic societies for what they are – 'fragile' institutions tied to cultural interests – whilst minimising internal conflicts and fruitless controversies as much as possible. I realise I have stated the obvious, but these are obvious truths that are often forgotten.

LF: In 2024, during the celebrations marking the 300th anniversary of Kant's birth, there was much talk of Kant's 'relevance'. In your view, on which issues or challenges of the contemporary world does the thought of the philosopher from Königsberg still have something to tell us?

It must be said that research on Kant has expanded incredibly since the end of the 20th century, and has increasingly demonstrated the vitality – which is linked to 'permanence' – of Kant's philosophy. In this regard, it is always worth recalling the preface that one of the leading figures of this *Kant-Renaissance*, Onora O'Neill, published in 2013 to introduce the new edition of her 1975 book, *Acting on Principle*. That book, together with Thomas Nagel's *The Possibility of Altruism* (1970) – though this was not yet known – marked a renewed interest in Kant's moral and political philosophy, understood not merely as a subject of works on the history of philosophy. Onora O'Neill emphasised in 2013 that when the book was published, almost forty years earlier, the climate in moral philosophy was certainly not particularly favourable towards Kant's ethics. Within a few years, however, things changed rapidly, and the Anglo-American world as a whole, largely in the wake of Rawls's philosophy – with whom both O'Neill and Nagel had in fact studied – began to pay ever greater attention to Kant's thought. As I mentioned, it seems that contemporary epistemology has also begun to show some interest in Kant, and the same could be said of aesthetics, a field in which Kant's presence is undeniable. The spread of Kant in the Anglo-Saxon world has in fact also meant a significant cross-fertilisation with the analytic tradition, which today is a philosophical tradition of enormous importance, whatever one may think of it.

A good example of Kant's presence in contemporary thought is political philosophy, a field in which, until a few decades ago, one of the key points of reference was Hannah Arendt's interpretation, according to which Kant's political philosophy was not to be sought in his political writings, his theory of law or his philosophy of history, but extrapolated from *the Critique of Judgement*. The idea that there is no political philosophy of Kant to be reconstructed on the basis of his writings dedicated to these questions is not taken seriously by anyone today. On the contrary, themes that are particularly important and debated today, such as the public sphere, cosmopolitanism and migration processes, are addressed using Kantian approaches. On the first topic, it is essential to mention Jürgen Habermas, who highlighted the relevance of this issue in Kant as early as 1962; indeed, Pauline Kleingeld, author of important studies on, among other things, cosmopolitanism and republicanism, studied with Habermas. Another important recent book is that of a young German philosopher, Karoline Reinhardt, on migration, translated into several foreign languages, including Italian, on the initiative of Roberta Picardi. Even outside the circle of more strictly Kantian philosophers, studies and reflections on peace have often drawn inspiration from Kant, including Italian philosophers such as Giuliano Pontara (a utilitarian!), a long-standing professor at the University of Stockholm and one of the world's leading experts on Gandhi's thought, the issue of non-violence and the theme of peace. Pontara and Luigi Ferrajoli explicitly draw on Kant in proposing a 'constitution of the earth' as the only possible way to address not only the issue of peace, but all the challenges facing humanity, such as the climate and environmental crisis.

But I would say that from an even more general perspective, one of Kant's great contributions to philosophical thought is his critique of every form of conservatism and every proposal to adapt to the status quo. If you like, it is a critique of that cynicism so widespread today – with some justification, given the dark times we are going through – according to which the world is as it is and could not be otherwise. Kant's practical philosophy, ranging from ethics to politics, is founded on this radically *normative* perspective, as is his critique of ethical-political empiricism, which is based on facts and tends to conform to them. Kantian normativism is

not without realistic considerations, of course, in the mediation between theory and practice, but it refuses to resign itself to the present state of affairs.

In the debate on moral philosophy, in particular, Kant is a constant presence, and the philosophical climate is, in this sense, completely different from that in which Onora O'Neill's first book—which I mentioned earlier—was published. An ethics inspired by Kant, which takes into account many of his inspirations and his conceptual framework, is one of the major alternatives available, even if this does not imply accepting all aspects of 'Kant's' ethics (for example, his highly demanding theory of the freedom of the will). Kant's famous question 'What ought I to do?' remains, at heart, the most appropriate way of giving expression to the concrete experience of human beings: this is the question we ask ourselves most frequently when we have to deal with moral issues. It is the question that best corresponds to ordinary moral thought, which must not be accepted uncritically, but which cannot be ignored, if only as a starting point for our philosophical reflection. As is well known, the main alternative consists of all forms of consequentialism, starting with utilitarianism, whose limitations I cannot address here, but which do not strike me as any more adequate, despite continuing to enjoy widespread acceptance: there is a sort of 'eternal return' of utilitarianism, whose demise is periodically declared, only to witness its resurrection.

To tell the truth, virtue ethics is also enjoying considerable success today, shifting the focus from actions to character and the person, but apart from the fact that Kant too, as is well known, spoke of character and virtue, I believe we should view with suspicion those ethical systems which, instead of looking at what people *do*, attach great importance to what people *are*: it strikes me as an excessive claim on moral judgement, which ends up dividing people into good and bad, whereas most human beings are neither radically good nor radically bad, assuming these categories are even truly applicable (which I doubt). Kant was very cautious in expressing moral censure and condemnation, despite often being regarded as one of the most 'moralistic' philosophers, all the more so if such censure and condemnation were to strike at a person's supposed moral essence, which might be unchangeable (as Aristotle believed).