THE ECLECTICISM AS PROGRAMME: PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE IN EUROPE IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Abstract: The author suggests that eclecticism is one of the core traits of philosophy in the second half of the 19th century, as a result of the placing of philosophical problems in general – in the first half – in the main doctrines and currents (as is the case of those of Comte and Hegel). He upholds that such eclecticism was fostered by the need to provide a philosophical framework for a whole new, broad and complex scientific problematic, from physics and biology, to psychology and sociology. Furthermore, he suggests that eclecticism, far from being a mere confusing and disorganised blend of ideas from different sources, is somewhat underpinned by a common programme, which is transversal – in time – to the whole of philosophical thought. The author concludes by analysing the implications and impact of this programme on 20th century philosophy.

Keywords: Comte, eclecticism, idealism, Hegel, Hegelianism, historiography, materialism, positivism, spiritualism, theory of science.

Resumo: O autor sugere que o ecletismo é um dos traços essenciais da filosofia na segunda metade do século XIX, em consequência da colocação dos problemas filosóficos de maneira geral, na primeira metade, pelas principais doutrinas e correntes (como é o caso das de Comte e de Hegel). Defende que um tal ecletismo foi desencadeado pela necessidade de fornecer um enquadramento filosófico para uma problemática científica inteiramente nova e complexa, da física e biologia, à psicologia e sociologia. Além disso, sugere que o ecletismo, longe de ser uma simples mistura confusa e desorganizada de ideias provenientes de fontes diferentes, foi de alguma maneira norteado por um programa comum, que, na altura, era transversal ao pensamento filosófico no seu conjunto. O autor conclui analisando as implicações e impacto deste programa na filosofia do século XX.

Palavras-chave: Comte, ecletismo, espiritualismo, Hegel, hegelianismo, historiografia, idealismo, materialismo, positivismo, teoria da ciência.

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Introduction: lending coherence and consistency to eclecticism

Speaking in “Europe” in the title of this article, I mean – in the first place – not only its countries in general, but its philosophical (or transnational) space as a whole, and particularly the reception of the German’s authors in (namely) France, United Kingdom or Italy, and vice-versa. This kind of historiography is not always practiced by the monumental History of Philosophy which develops mainly at a national level, but, as we will see, is absolutely essential for understanding the issues of this article. The reception I mentioned (as that of France regarding Germany) involves several factors which are not strictly philosophical and that we must take in account; for example, not all the works of the main German’s authors in the first and in the second half of the 19th century have been translated into French or English; and when this happened, in this or that particular cases, the presuppositions of the translators seem to be very disputable. August Vera’s translations of Hegel’s works, in France, are an example of what I just said (Hegel, Logique de Hegel; Philosophie de la nature de Hegel; Philosophie de l’esprit de Hegel). But – in the second place – by that term, contrary to the monumental historiography, I do not mean simply the authors (more or less relevant) in that period; I have in mind essentially the themes and problems that have crossed philosophical research as a whole. That such themes and problems have in fact existed, and that they have been, in some sense, common to the different currents of thought, can be explained by the existence of a close connection, at that time, between philosophy and science, which is unique in the history of Occidental philosophy since the ancient Greece.

One of the most remarkable features of philosophy in Europe – so considered – in the second half of the 19th century is the proliferation of the so-called “minor philosophers”. They were authors who had not produced any – more or less systematic – original thought or doctrine which would determine the course of philosophical ideas and should, therefore, allow them to figure prominently in the history of occidental philosophy. After the decease of Hegel (1831) and Schelling (1854) in Germany, and Comte (1857) in France, the exceptions – like Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, or Nietzsche – can be counted on the fingers. However, what can be said about E. von Hartmann or W. Wundt in Germany, H. Spencer and J. McTaggart in the United Kingdom, or V. Cousin, F. Ravaisson and É. Boutroux in France, to name only a few? It was the time when all what the “minor” philosophers generally supposed did, for the most part and in the absence of truly original thought, was to transform and reformulate the thought of the “great philosophers”. Copleston’s concept of “The transformation of Idealism”, in his monumental History of Philosophy, can be given as