

Antonio Genovesi and the Making of Modern Heroism

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Abstract: The student of Giambattista Vico and father of the Neapolitan Enlightenment Antonio Genovesi (1713-1769) invested his academic life in educating the Neapolitan youth on the principles of public happiness. Like Eugenio Garin stated, Genovesi's adopts the Vichian humanistic dialectic between metaphysics and experience, by making the study of the past the starting point to act upon the present in preparation to a better future. In this respect, Genovesi endorses an ideal of human growth that never occurs as a neat rupture with the past, but rather as a karstic process of progressive education and reforms. By focusing on Genovesi's reflections on heroism that as a file rouge traverses his work, this essay advances the idea that part of Genovesi's reformist agenda lays in educating «young philosophers» to a new ideal of civil philosophy and nobility, in which both intellectuals and upper classes are called to help those in need.

Keywords: Heroism, Humanism, Giambattista Vico, Antonio Genovesi, Imperialism

*Vis tu cogitare istum quem servum tuum vocas ex isdem seminibus
ortum eodem frui caelo, aequae spirare, aequae vivere, aequae mori!
Tam tu illum videre ingenuum potes quam ille te servum.*

Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, XLVII

Among the features of the so-called Italian thought lies the contiguity between past and present through an historical treatment of the non-historical, in which remote and current evoke and question one another at the same time. It is in being at the same time a philosophical thought and a criticism of intellectual self-referentiality, in wanting to realize itself in the political that the Italian thought distinguishes itself from other philosophical traditions. In this regard, as Roberto Esposito declares in his *The Living Thought*, «Unlike the tradition between Descartes and Kant, which was founded in the constitution of subjectivity or

theory of knowledge, Italian thought came into the world turned upside down and inside out, as it were, into the world of historical and political life»¹. It is a civil philosophy, which, in its tension outward, often takes on artistic and literary forms becoming an «impure reason,» as Remo Bodei happily synthesized².

On the threshold between past and present, Italian Renaissance humanists and their Enlightenment progeny redefined the ancient question of heroism as part of the broader reflection on the relationship between philosophy and politics via epic representations. In Antiquity, distinction and excellence were connected to courage in military contexts. In the *Iliad*, for instance, Achilles, the hero par excellence was willing to die for a higher cause and to be remembered by posterity. His heroism lied in his will to sacrifice his life in the battlefield which makes the demigod Achilles an example of military virtue, due also to his noble descendance from the divinity.

Plato subordinated the heroes to the sovereignty of philosophy, guiding the transition from military heroism to an intellectual and moral one. In the *Republic*, the philosopher received a military education and exhibited warrior qualities, and yet his virtues are those of the mind. In Plato, there was continuity between military and intellectual heroism and, at the same time, the overcoming of the former in the latter. Plato's Socrates is on the threshold between military heroism and intellectual one; he had fought several battles, including that of Delio, and in the *Apology*, he compares himself to Achilles, while, at the same time, the divine part of Socrates, gives him an intellectual and moral rigor. A different sort of courage, his heroism does no longer lie in military strength but in following his moral *daimon*, even if that means putting his life at stake. Both Achilles' and Socrates' tragic heroism reveals a connection with a metaphysical, superhuman entity that works with them through them.

The text that marked the beginning of modern philosophy, Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*, begins with an anti-heroic agenda. As Descartes asserts the necessity for philosophy to emancipate from the past, Descartes states that an education based on the study of languages and history not only fills us with doubts and makes us feel more ignorant than before, but it makes the philosopher become «stranger in one's own country,» because when one spends too much time traveling and with the mind elsewhere, he finds himself ignorant of the present³. The problem for Descartes was both epistemological and ethical, where the stories of the past being fictions, fables and not science, do not represent the facts as they really developed, since they omit «all the circumstances which are the

¹ R. Esposito, and Z. Hanafi. *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012, 10.

² On Bodei's notion of "impure reason" applied to Italian philosophy, see R. Bodei, *Langue italienne: Une philosophie, aussi, pour les non-philosophes*, in Barbara Cassin, ed., *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), pp. 625–43.; and *Il noi diviso: Ethos e idee dell'Italia repubblicana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998).

³ R. Descartes, D. Weissman, and W. Theodore Bluhm. *Discourse on the Method: And, Meditations on First Philosophy*. Rethinking the Western Tradition. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996, 6.

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basest and least notable» and instead exaggerate minor traits for the pleasure of reading, of traveling, therefore, abandoning the reader to bad literature since «those who regulate their conduct by examples which they derive from such a source [histories], are liable to fall into the extravagances of the knights-errant of Romance, and form project beyond their power and performance»⁴.

In 18th century Italy, Vico challenged Descartes' posture and made the study of past civilizations at the service of the present, constituting both the continuation of Renaissance humanism and the beginning a more than rationalist, alternative modernity, that starting with the work of economist Antonio Genovesi (1713-1769) shaped the mind of many young intellectuals who arrived from the provinces of the Reign on Naples to attend his university lectures on civil economy⁵. This essay explores how it is also through a redefinition of heroism that Genovesi participated in the making of an alternative modernity that reformed the relationship between philosophy and civic life.

To be precise, a formal discussion on heroism is nowhere to be found in Genovesi. Yet, references to the heroes of Italian 16th-century epic poems traverse Genovesi's work, making it possible to identify a file rouge between those scattered instances. In fact, the professor of civil economy Genovesi – «who had been a disciple of Vico» as the historian of the Neapolitan revolution Vincenzo Cuoco (1770-1823) recalls – refers to epic novels to give imaginative substance to his ideal of civic philosopher⁶. Before Genovesi, it was Vico, «famous metaphysician, philologist, and critic of his time» as Genovesi remembers him, who returned to the question of heroism to rethink the connection between philosophy and civic life, on the one hand, and to engage in the discussion on human equality and the rights of man, on the other⁷. Genovesi attended Vico's private school in Naples, and «having devoted his service to him, he [Genovesi] had the honor of his friendship,» as Genovesi reports in his first autobiography.

Genovesi believed that long-lasting social change could only occur slowly, given the fact that even the most corrupted systems favor the private interests of some, so that all revolutions provoke a counter-revolution as a reaction. «Among those who before others predicted that the French Revolution would arise within the French state for domestic reasons was our own Antonio Genovesi,» Cuoco writes in his *Historical Essay on the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799*, «he [Genovesi] saw the direction in which both the writers' opinions and the course of events were heading: his prediction was worthy of Vico...,» suggesting that Genovesi understood the political effects of a non-organic emancipation from the past⁸. Hence, according to Genovesi, because «there are certain evils in the political

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Note that unless stated otherwise, English translations of extracts from Genovesi's works are mine.

⁶ V. Cuoco, F. Nicolini, and N. Cortese. *Scritti Vari*. Bari: G. Laterza & figli, 1924. I, 304;

⁷ On Vico, the school of Genovesi and the question of the rights of man, see V. Ferrone, *La società giusta ed equa. Republicanesimo e diritti dell'uomo in Gaetano Filangieri*.

⁸ V. Cuoco, F. Sabetti, B. Haddock, and D. Gibbons. *Historical Essay on the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014., 41.

bodies, if you want to do good by eradicating them [the evils], you will be in danger of being nailed, as it was Prometheus in the Caucasus»⁹. Philosophers, as legislators of humankind, need to protect the scope of their reforms from those who would defend the status quo that keeps favoring them: «All the great legislators, who have tried to lead a corrupt people to virtue and happiness, have either been killed or have had to flee»¹⁰. The reformer is not a hero against the titans in that respect, but more like a farmer who daily cares for their land, who brings things to blossom without people even realizing: «you want to go slowly [*bel bello*] or not to irritate them [those who profit from corrupted systems]. Do not suddenly show them the great purpose of the reform, do it step by step and lead them without them noticing»¹¹. Part of Genovesi's moderate, karstic way of reforming civil life is his appeal to a new form of heroism for modernity. The following pages explore how Genovesi carries out Vico's redefining of heroism as a way of reforming the minds of young people and guiding society towards an organic change of values, of those shared ideals that constitute the unreflective glue of all societies, which Vico defines as common sense.

In both Vico and Genovesi, the reform of heroism takes two intertwined trajectories: a philosophical and a political one. The first section of this essay examines how redefining heroism is part of Genovesi's polemic against the subjectivism of metaphysic and rationalist philosophers, who are called to leave behind abstract questions, and engage, instead, in a «philosophy of things» [*una filosofia tutta cose*], useful to social wellbeing. The second section, instead, explores the possibility that, like for Vico also for Genovesi, the reform of heroism is intertwined with the historical criticism of social orders. In this respect, reforming heroism is part of the modern criticism of the privileges of the nobles justified on a natural superiority over the plebs. In this latter instance, the question of heroism intersects the affirmation of the natural equality of men over the false natural superiority of a few, and it becomes part of Genovesi's agenda to create the conditions for a returned «age of men,» as Vico called the third age of his ideal eternal history, marked by the recognition of human dignity and equality.

§1. *Reforming the Heroic Mind*

In *Dal Rinascimento all'Illuminismo*, Garin argued that what Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment have in common is the sense of urgency of rethinking the basis, the fundamentals of human life and experience, to create «that philosophy of man and the city of man so rooted in humanistic-Renaissance themes, and moreover so inserted in the most valid eighteenth-century

⁹ A. Genovesi, and E. Pii, *Dialoghi e altri scritti: intorno alle Lezioni di commercio*. Napoli, 2008, 220.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

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thought»¹². According to Garin, Genovesi's Enlightenment as a «philosophy of humankind» was a humanistic enterprise, which, as such, begins with a polemic phase against dogmatism:

It was an appeal rigidly humanistic to a science of humankind, a science operating among human beings, which appeared as a sign of little vigor of gnoseological and metaphysical thought. It was, on the contrary, the conscious beginning of a more decisive philosophy of humankind, which had to begin, in the same way as in Vico, with a polemic phase against the various forms of the dogmatism too much inclined to the omission of concrete experience. [...] The impulse itself that vibrated in the pages of the writers of the Renaissance vibrates here as well: philosophy must all be directed to the comprehension of the world of nations, and to reform it, added Genovesi.¹³

The making of a modern «philosophy of humankind,» in Genovesi, starts with a polemic of scholastic metaphysics and Descartes' rationalism. References to heroism are part of Genovesi's polemic stance and pave the path to reaffirm the humanistic ideal of the philosophers at the service of civil life. Particularly relevant are the references to heroism in Genovesi's second autobiography, the *Autobiographical Memories* [Memorie Autobiografiche] and in the *Discourse on the true end of letters and sciences* (1754) – the work that for its exaltation of reason Venturi applauded as both the manifesto and the highest intellectual achievement of the Neapolitan Enlightenment as a whole; a major turning point in Genovesi's intellectual biography and, as Garin suggested, a text worth re-reading [*tutto da riligere*]¹⁴.

As Genovesi offers the account of his education young in the province of the Kingdom of Naples, in the second autobiography, Genovesi narrates how he overcame his scholastic and Cartesian training thanks to a sudden passion for epic novels¹⁵. Thanks to a friend, the young Genovesi discovered a passion for Chivalric romances, which appears to correct and complement his scholastic education: «Don Saverio Parrilli, priest and gentleman of the first families of Castiglione, with whom I had a very close friendship, put the errant cavalry in my heart»¹⁶. Surprisingly enough, the epic genre leads Genovesi to appreciate Carte-

¹² E. Garin, «Vico e l'eredità del pensiero del Rinascimento», in E. Garin, *Dal Rinascimento All'Illuminismo: Studi e Ricerche* /, 2da ed., rivista e accresciuta (Firenze, c1993.), 207.

¹³ E. Garin, and G. A. Pinton. *History of Italian Philosophy*. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2008., 724 – 725.

¹⁴ E. Garin, «Antonio Genovesi Metafisico e Storico», in *Dal Rinascimento All'Illuminismo: Studi E Ricerche*. 2da ed, rivista e accresciuta. Firenze: Le Lettere, 1993, 260.

¹⁵ To the best of my knowledge, the question of literary references in the *Discourse* has been previously analyzed only by Raffaele Sirri, who in «The Literary In The Discourse Above The True End Of The Genovese Letters and Sciences» states that the references to Ariosto in the *Discourse* are of an exclusively ornamental nature or rhetoric: «In the *Discourse over the true end* – Sirri writes – there are very few quotations from and from poets and writers (Ariosto, some others, more for rhetoric vain than as a conceptual complement to a theme).»

¹⁶ A. Genovesi, *Memorie Autobiografiche*, in A. Genovesi, and G. Savarese. 1963. *Autobiografia, lettere e altri scritti*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 9.

sian philosophy: «At that time, I was studying Cartesian philosophy,» Genovesi writes with a veil of irony, «the taste for novels and the obscurity of Peripatetics made it dear to me»¹⁷. At the same time, due to how they portray the passions of humanity as motives for action, therefore, for their realistic side, epic novels bring the young Genovesi closer to the work of historians: «I reaped another fruit from reading those fables: – Genovesi explains – I began to love history»¹⁸. History, the empirical counterpart of rationalism, helped him recognize «what is the difference between the enchanted world and the real one,» setting him on the path to gradually emancipate himself from the skepticism derived from his early scholastic and Cartesian education.

As epic novels helped him overcome the abstractions and subjectivism of metaphysics and rationalism respectively, according to Genovesi, it is by first diverting the gaze of philosophers from the entities above us to a «philosophy of things» made of ethics, economics, and politics, that intellectuals can truly set the nation on the path to civil happiness. The revival of a “philosophy of things,» lost in the history of Western thought, is the main objective of Genovesi’s *Discourse on the true end of letters and sciences*. In the *Discourse*, Genovesi intends to «animate the present youth, to make that use of their reason, from which the happiness of men can be born, and the true glory of God expands»¹⁹. This call to action to incite the youth to apply themselves to the happiness of humankind echoes Vico’s address to the incoming students in the inaugural oration *De Mente Heroica* [*On the Heroic Mind*], where he explains to the new students what the university expects from them. The goals of their education are not wealth, Vico explains, nor honor. Following Plato’s lead, Vico transferred heroism from the military to an intellectual sphere²⁰. Yet, it is not even for the love of knowledge as an end in itself that students should apply themselves to acquire universal knowledge. Vico specifies that the heroism to which he is inciting the «noble students» is not the monastic ideal of the philosophers who taken by «the love of learning itself, enthralled by which almost all of them pass their whole lives withdrawn from the public light in order to get the full enjoyment from the tranquil working of their minds and nothing else»²¹. «Something far more exalted than this is expected of you» because the true goal is «to care for the whole human race, toward the well-being of all mankind»²². Happiness is the immanentization, making heroism a public, earthly service. This ideal moves beyond philosophy, and it touches the realm of material life. Both Vico

¹⁷ *Ivi*, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ A. Genovesi, *Discorso sopra il vero fine delle lettere e delle scienze*, in A. Genovesi, and G. Savarese. *Autobiografia, lettere e altri scritti*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1963, XIII.

²⁰ On Vico and the question of heroism, see M. Lollini, “Vico e l’eroismo moderno,” *Italian Culture*, 21, (2003): 79-94.

²¹ G. Vico, E. Sewell, and A. C. Sirignano. “On the Heroic Mind.” *Social Research* 43, no. 4 (1976): 886-903, 887-888.

²² *Ivi*, 888-889.

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and Genovesi reform intellectual heroism by accentuating the civic aspect, making it more than a philosophical task; its full realization is not in pure contemplation, but it occurs outward, in the public domain.

The extravagant heroes of Descartes's *Discourse on the Method* are not those who study the past but those whose study does not revolve around public well-being. As concrete universals crossing the history of European philosophy, in the *Discourse*, Genovesi opposes two philosophical models of the past which return to modernity. On the one hand, there is a form of collective wisdom that Genovesi calls the philosophy of the «old generation of men» [*la vecchia generazione degli uomini*] or «first philosophy;» on the other, there is a purely contemplative, metaphysical philosophy, which for Genovesi, both in antiquity and in present times, due to their agonistic and subjectivistic character, feeds skepticism, epicureanism, and cynicism, philosophical attitudes that according to Genovesi mine the foundations of civic life²³. In a reconstruction between myth and utopia, Genovesi tells instead of a time in ancient Greece, during a nebulous first age of the nations, when, in the schools of reason, wise men taught a philosophy of things concerning what is useful to the «support of life.» This philosophy of things was a «simple ancient wisdom,» existing before the fragmentation into competing sectarian schools. In an ideal of practical wisdom, in which thought and action, reason and common sense, philosophy and history were not yet separated, «the first and most ancient philosophy of nations was none other than [the moral sciences of] ethics, economics, politics.»; idleness was considered the germ of all vices and the sages «philosophized from the plow,» while all citizens benefited from their philosophical maxims expressed in simple terms²⁴. Philosophy, in this first age of the nations, had not yet become a form of exoteric knowledge.

In an extension of Vico's *De Antiquissima* (1710) to the whole history of Western philosophy, for Genovesi the elderly were the custodians of this first philosophy: «The first philosophers were at the same time the legislators, the fathers, the catechists, the priests of the nations»²⁵. Furthermore, private and public education overlapped, so much so that the city itself, its architecture, speaks and educates citizens. Borrowing the pedagogical architecture of Campanella's utopian nation in *The City of the Sun*, which, from the Italian literary canon, also recalls the «visible speaking» of the sculptures of Dante's *Purgatory* (*i.e.*, II, 10.95), in the reconstruction of early philosophy, Genovesi describes how on the doors of temples, on the statues, at the beginning of every street, and in the most popular places of the city, the wise philosophers inscribed «the most beautiful principles of life,» simple principles of daily wisdom, aimed at instructing all citizens to that public virtue that for Genovesi is the trustworthy source of happiness:

²³ A. Genovesi, *Discorso*, 234.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

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Some [marbles] said that “the Gods see not only the evil deeds of the wicked but also their most hidden thoughts.” Others said that “we will live like wise men when we refrain from doing what we most reproach others.” Others say that “the most important and at the same time the most difficult thing is to know ourselves.” Others: “Be imitators of the Gods, friends of all people.” Others: “Idleness will be punished, and it is just for everyone to accuse idleness.” Others: “Prefer your damage to unfair earnings, because that will pass, while the other causes perpetual damage.” A marble said: “Be observant of religion: love sobriety, tell the truth, respect the trust and friendship that has been given to you; don’t make fun of anyone; respect the elderly, who are the teachers of the school of nature; if you love your peace and your greatness, make sure you don’t harm others.” Another said: “Learn first to serve and then to command.” Another: “The greatest and most formidable army of those who govern is the love of people.”²⁶

According to Genovesi, those marbles were living beings speaking the wisdom of a people: «What a spectacle for a soul that loves the happiness of humankind!» because they were teaching the values of true religion and especially what is «just» [*giusto*] and «honest» [*onesto*].²⁷ However, «this first and simple philosophy did not last long,» Genovesi laments, for, during the «second age» of humankind – the one Vico called «the age of the heroes» and which for Genovesi still seems to ongoing in the Reign of Naples – the ‘most ancient wisdom’ of the old generations of men – and with it, people’s collective wisdom [*genio*] – gradually decayed with the emergence of the schools of philosophy, characterized by a divorce between reason and common sense, between philosophy and history, competing over an abstract form of truth. The philosophers of this second age «were no longer the fathers and teachers of mankind, but extravagant madmen whom the peoples, who believed that the same names eternally corresponded to the same things,» namely, that philosophers were the same of earlier times, «continued to venerate out of habit,» while instead «their lessons tended to throw men into the bestial state» and public unhappiness²⁸.

Among those «extravagant madmen,» Genovesi mentions Anaxagoras, for he said he was «born to contemplate the sun and the moon, not to take care of private or public things»²⁹. Genovesi wonders what would become of humankind if this ideal became a universal motto. In his attack to pure contemplation, Genovesi does not spare Socrates, the tragic hero of ancient philosophy, for, against the values of the previous age, he praised the abstention from practical work: «Socrates, the great Socrates, of whom it was said that he brought philosophy back from heaven to earth, taught that the richest and most beautiful possession of man is leisure [*ozio*], that very idleness which the old sages wanted to be punished as desolating vice of human life and virtue»³⁰. For Genovesi, Socrates’s

²⁶ *Ivi*, 235.

²⁷ *Ivi*, 236.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 236.

²⁹ *Ivi*, 237.

³⁰ *Ivi*, 236-237.

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praise of leisure caused the ultimate detachment of philosophy from the wellbeing of civic life; philosophers started to entertain themselves with the «toys of reason» [*bambole di ragione*] of metaphysics; Plato with his «abstract forms,» Aristotle with his «entelechies,» rational, subjective phantasies that throw humanity back into barbarism³¹. The contemplative exceptionality of these new philosophers, who perceived themselves above or outside the human world, according to Genovesi, abandoned a humanity in need. For Genovesi, modern thought must overcome the metaphysical mistakes of past philosophy – enduring in the present – to return to a modern philosophy of things, in which philosophers walk among men. When reason ceases to concern with what is useful for the preservation and happiness of people, philosophy itself becomes a battlefield of competing schools, in which philosophers are, Genovesi says, «merchants of their own dreams»³². The result at the epistemological level is that of private, sectarian, esoteric knowledge, incomprehensible to the rest of the citizens who are now looking at the philosophers with admiration only because people do not understand them, which Genovesi describes as a tumult of thoughts that reason could no longer contain, while «men would roam the earth like the wild beasts of Africa,» since, according to Genovesi’s moral Enlightenment, «human happiness is not proportional to the degree of knowledge but to the degree of virtue,» that is when thoughts and actions match the principles of justice (*verum est aquum* for legislators, Vico says.)³³

The comparison Genovesi chooses to give imaginative depth to the character of the enduring aristocratic heroism of philosophy is with the madness of the paladin Orlando narrated by Ludovico Ariosto in canto XXIII of *The Frenzy of Orlando*. In Genovesi’s philosophical transposition, Orlando’s frenzy means at the same time the madness of a pure reason without rules and the violence of passions that takes over humanity when philosophy neglects what is useful to humanity:

And ‘gan that phrensy act, so passing dread,
Of stranger folly never shall be said.
So fierce his rage, so fierce his fury grew
...
Who a tall pine uprooted at a pull,
...
He many others, with as little let
As fennel, wall-wort-stem, or dill, uptore;
And ilex, knotted oak, and fir upset,
And beech, and mountain-ash, and elm-tree hoar.³⁴

³¹ *Ivi*, 237.

³² *Ivi*, 235.

³³ A. Genovesi, S. Casalanguida, *Lettere familiari*, Carabba, 2019, 226.

³⁴ L. Ariosto, R. J. West, W. Stewart Rose, S. A. Baker, and A. Bartlett Giamatti. *Orlando Furioso*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968. The original reference to Ariosto in Genovesi’s *Discorso* is «Gli

In those lines, the mad Orlando – who just discovered that Angelica, the elusive object of his love, has married the Moor Medoro – walks through all the trees in the forest where the two lovers engraved their names and eradicates them. Exhausted, Orlando takes off his armor, every weapon, and every garment; completely naked, motionless, he lies down on the lawn for three days, undoing his heroic image, broke down in total brutalization. This is also an image that helps Genovesi criticize philosophy as *furore*, *mania*, which disrupts philosophers from human life. Indeed, the «wanting to know too much,» is counted in the *Elements of Logical-Critical Art* (1745) among the errors that lead reason to deviate from its course and from the task of guiding men towards public virtue³⁵. In addition, heroes tell philosophy of the shared, collective ideal of virtue. Both ancient barbarism [*tempi barbari primi*], and the one that Vico calls the last barbaric times [*tempi barbari ultimi*], after the fall of the Roman Empire (the end of Antiquity saw a returned barbarism, the barbarism of the mind of the European Middle Age) find their representation in epic poems. Homer's poems are the histories of the first barbarism, while 11th-century epic poems hold the mirror to an age of human development in which the principle of justice was physical strength. For Vico, this is the case of *La Chanson de Roland*, in which «we are told of the stupendous strength and bodies of the likes of Roland or Orlando and the other paladins of France, or, in the Kingdom of Naples, of the forty Norman heroes who defeated entire armies of Saracens»³⁶. Those were true stories, Vico claims, because «barbarians lack reflection, which, when ill-used, is the mother of falsehood,» and, therefore, only philosophical, enlightened centuries are able to lie³⁷. An interesting in-between is the status of those Italian poets like Boiardo and Ariosto «who came in an age illuminated by philosophy» who still «took the subjects of their poems from the history of Bishop Turpin of Paris»³⁸. Vico is not explicit on this point but he seems to suggest that the difference between ancient and modern epic poems is that the seconds, those of Boiardo and Ariosto, differ from the firsts for they are characterized by that antiphrastic relationship between words and meaning that is irony and therefore are in reality a criticism of heroism, of the false heroism of barbaric times. This hypothesis is supported by Genovesi's use of Italian early-modern epic poems to criticize the dissolute epistemology and morality of modernity to incite the transition to a returned age of men, in which human equality of nature and rights would be recognized again, and heroism reconducted to its true nobility. In this respect, as a satire of the abstract metaphysics he intends to overcome, the range of Genovesi's quotes

cominciò la gran follia sì orrenda, /che de la più non sarà mai chi intenda, /In tanta rabbia, in tanto furor venne /[...]Che un altro pino al primo crollo svelse, / E svelse dopo il primo altri parecchi/ Come fosser finocchi, ebuli, o aneti, /E fe il simile di querce, e d'olmi vecchi, /Di faggi, e d'orni, e d'elici, e d'abeti.»

³⁵ A. Genovesi, *Elementi dell'arte logico-critica*, 30.

³⁶ G. Vico, *The First New Science*, §360, 204.

³⁷ G. Vico, *New Science*, §817, 279.

³⁸ *Ivi*, §817, 279.

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to epic poems also reaches those the comic-heroic tradition, such as Francesco Berni (1499-1536) and Lorenzo Lippi (1606-1664)³⁹.

Walking in Vico's footsteps, it should come as no surprise that Genovesi recurs to literature and, therefore, to imagination to give substance to his anti-dogmatic polemic. For Genovesi, the knight Orlando is an imaginative universal representing the false heroism of metaphysic philosophy, and the archetype of an age. «Fantasy – Genovesi writes in one of his *Logic for the Youngsters* – represents us incorporeal things in corporeal forms, so it happened that poets not only give a body to all the virtues and all the vices, but they also described their genealogies,» how they became such and not otherwise⁴⁰. “Do you want to destroy the brightest truths? – Genovesi challenges the constructions of metaphysics – Bring them from the level of reason to that of fantasy. They all become suspicious first and then false,» they will show their true nature⁴¹. Similarly, fantasy unmasks false virtues. This is what Homer represented for Plato, as Genovesi points out in a letter addressed to his friend Alessandro Serti. According to Genovesi, even though Plato rightfully criticized Homer's heroes, those representations of human vices are necessary for those who want to understand humanity accurately:

It is true that Plato in book III of *De Republica* [...] takes up Homer for having painted his heroes full of childish weaknesses, womanish superstitions, and low and rude vices. But do you know why? Because these portraits were not meant to form free, magnanimous, and virtuous souls. Plato spoke like a politician. But the historian of humanity will love nothing in Homer as much as those portraits.⁴²

The literary component is part of both the philosophical and historical discourse of Genovesi, to which he adds a dramatic, urgent piece. In fact, according to Genovesi, heroism is nothing but the masking of human bestiality, not a nature:

We can see that the greatest men have always been animals as foolish and subject to all the bestial filth as they are now and will be in the future. Heroism is a mask and not a nature. Alexander the Great was strong, but drunk and weak for sweet sex. Caesar was brave and educated, but he was the husband of all wives and the wife of all husbands.⁴³

³⁹ Within the heroic-comic genre, Genovesi quotes for examples also passages from *La Bucchereide* by Lorenzo Bellini. In addition, Genovesi includes quotations from comic lyrics, such as *Le Rime Burlesche* by Antonfrancesco Grazzini or *Rime Piacevoli* by Giovanni Battista Fagioli. For instance, in the *Lettere Filosofiche a un Amico Provinciale* (1759), Genovesi resorts to extracts from comic-heroic poems to criticize and defend himself from his «dearest friend» the abbot Pasquale Magli (1720-1776), who denounced as unorthodox Genovesi's early work on metaphysics. Genovesi accuses him to be someone «who only cares about high and pilgrim things» [“che non vuole/se non le sole/alte cose e pellegrine”], by resorting to references to epic genre to unveil Magli's hermeneutic malpractice.

⁴⁰ A. Genovesi, *Logica per gli giovanetti*, 5.

⁴¹ A. Genovesi, *Scienze metafisiche per gli giovanetti*, 66.

⁴² A. Genovesi, *Lettere Familiari*, 61.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

Thus, in Genovesi's references to Ariosto or «our Homer,» as Genovesi calls him, the one who depicted the Italian minds of returned barbarism, it is possible to reconstruct the critique and reform of metaphysics that Genovesi aims to implement. It is a pedagogical reform of the intellectual that wants to create a new philosophical heroism, without gaps between thoughts and just, honest actions. However, it is up to the individual and the city, to private and public education to «unfold» the human mind's semi-divine potential. Here is the role of education and culture to make public heroes out of men. Rather than the contemplative one, the modern intellectual is for Genovesi the legislator philosopher, who recognizes the human common essence and rights belonging to a single species, to a single nobility of nature.

In the *Discourse*, the philosophical model Genovesi elects from ancient times is the Roman Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, military commander and farmer who worked his garden and «with peasant sweat» went to the city to fulfill his duties as a defender of the homeland, jurist, and sage⁴⁴. The philosophical ideal that Genovesi proposes addresses all citizens. Philosophical heroism resides in this sort of intellectual moderation and, insofar as excellence, intellectual virtues are not aristocratic. In this respect, philosophers are not exempted from physical labor, and their knowledge is a form of practical wisdom based on experience and participation. If Cincinnatus is embedded of military virtues, the paradigm for the heroism of modern times is for Genovesi the Tuscan agronomist and promoter of Newtonian mechanics Bartolomeo Intieri (1677-1757). For Genovesi, Intieri embodied the returned philosopher of things, in which theory and practice, contemplation and action go hand in hand. Intieri was at the same time the author of a small treatise on the conservation of wheat, *On the perfect conservation of wheat* (1754). Still, he was also the inventor of something very concrete such as the stove, adopted in several countries as an effective means to prevent wheat from rotting. The *Discourse* is dedicated to Intieri, representing an intellectual figure «whose philosophy is all real and all addressed to the true advantages of men»⁴⁵. The encounter with Intieri had led the same Genovesi to abandon «the study of ideas and sterile contemplations» and apply himself «to thoughts closer to human things,» such as that the study of civil economy.

In fact, in the 50's, as Genovesi decided to let go of theological and metaphysical disputations, he found intellectual protection under Intieri, who played a fundamental role in Genovesi's decision to contribute to the civil renovation of the Reign of Naples through the study of economy. After decades as manager of Tuscan families' lands in the Southern Italy, Intieri had actively participated in the scientific renewal of the reign, between 1732-44 as a member of Celestino Galiani's *Accademia delle Scienze*, then by gathering Neapolitan young intellectuals – such as Genovesi and the other economist Ferdinando Galiani – in his villa on the hills of Sorrento, to discuss possible reforms to improve the state of trade

⁴⁴ A. Genovesi, *Discorso*, 235.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, 276.

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and mechanics in the reign. The friendship between the Neapolitan Genovesi and the Tuscan Intieri culminated in the realization of two cultural milestones for Genovesi, a theoretical and concrete one: on the one hand, the foundation of the chair of Commerce and Mechanics at the University of Naples, which, upon Intieri's endowment, was held by Genovesi himself; and, on the other, the publication of the *Discourse*. In the summer of 1753, from Intieri's villa on the hills of Massa Equana, Genovesi started to assemble the first (soon to be delivered) lectures in political economy and finalized the writing of the *Discourse*. As a result of the intellectual liaison between Genovesi and Intieri both projects saw the light in 1754. Keeping this in mind, when in the famous letter to his friend Romualdo Sterlich, Genovesi announces that «the metaphysician is close to becoming a merchant, » that he is leaving aside metaphysical disputations and philosophical divisions to apply himself to the study of a territory rich in natural resources, which over the past centuries foreign invaders have known better than the locals, Genovesi is reforming the image of the intellectual as the one belonging to an aristocracy of the mind, and who, instead, must take the civil responsibility of being part of that one society that is the society of humanity⁴⁶.

§2. *Reconsidering Nobility*

In the introduction to *Integral Humanism* (1936, 1947), Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) reflects on the relationship between heroism and humanism, hoping for a heroic, religious humanism in modern times. It is commonly agreed upon, Maritain says, that humanism, in the broader sense of the return to man, is the overcoming of heroic times, that is, the radical secularization of man, and the refusal of an “above time” layer of metaphysical being, the divine. Maritain problematizes the question as follows:

[...] do not the humanist periods, in the diverse cycles of culture, present themselves in opposition to the heroic periods, and do they not seem as a decline of the latter into the human, or as a reconquest of the human over them, as a more or less general refusal of the superhuman? Is it, therefore, that humanism would be compatible with heroism? [...] Can man know himself only by renouncing at the same time his sacrificing himself to something greater than himself?⁴⁷

Maritain's objective in this work and others is to advocate for a revival of Christian humanism to create a renewed sense of brotherhood and community beyond the «human too human» material life. The search for a «heroic humanism» that Maritain proposed was already attempted by Renaissance Neoplato-

⁴⁶ A. Genovesi, “A Romualdo Sterlich”, in *Lettere Familiari*, 88.

⁴⁷ J. Maritain, *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom*. [Notre Dame, Ind.]: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973, 3, 7.

nism as well as 18th-century Catholic thinkers, among them Vico and Genovesi, whose humanism was indeed a reform of heroism, implying a transformation of the relationship with the superhuman, as Maritain also calls it.

Both Vico and Genovesi resolved the duality between the religious and the secular, between the heroic aspiration to comply to a superior will and humanism by introducing a providential order that via nature acts on the human world⁴⁸. Notoriously, in the *New Science*, providence works throughout history, revealing the natural laws of civil life, that is, the entire course of development of a nation in three recurring ages, the product of a constant dialectic between mind and things («spiegarsi» is the verb Vico resort to indicate the development of human mind), which he describes in the following terms:

(1) The age of the gods, in which the gentiles believed they lived under divine government, and everything was commanded them by auspices and oracles, which are the oldest things in profane history. (2) The age of the heroes, in which they reigned everywhere in aristocratic commonwealths, on account of a certain superiority of nature which they held themselves to have over the plebs. (3) The age of men, in which *all men recognized themselves as equal in human nature*, and therefore there were established first the popular commonwealths and then the monarchies, both of which are forms of human government, as we observed a short while ago.⁴⁹

The three ages are the result of the reconfiguration of the relationship between divine and human, which is among the scopes of Vico's *New Science*. Vico says at the beginning of the *New Science* that his objective is to find the laws of metaphysics starting from the human world, rather than on the natural one, something that, according to him, nobody attempted before. Through exploring the dialectic between metaphysics and experience, in Vico's reconstruction of the course of ancient nations, human ages are indeed the modification of heroic times. Both in

⁴⁸ On the link between the modification of the rapports between divine and human throughout the three ages, see the Angela Maria Jacobelli Isoldi's contribution on myths in Vico's work, in her essay "Il mito nel pensiero di Vico". In the essay, Jacobelli Isoldi retraces how the understanding of human dignity depends on men's representation of their derivation from the divine, which is universalized during the age of men: «Con l'affiorare del senso del numinoso si inizia, secondo Vico, *l'età degli dei* caratterizzata dallo sforzo di interpretare la volontà del *numen* nelle sue diverse manifestazioni e di stabilire dei rapporti securizzanti con quelle forze soprannaturali. La narrazione mitica di quelle prime esperienze sviluppa la coscienza di una mediazione, di una continuità fra gli uomini e gli dei. Questo rapporto diventa a sua volta oggetto di elaborazione emozionale e si esprime nelle narrazioni mitiche di una filiazione divina degli *optimi*, cioè di coloro che per primi sentirono il nesso con il divino. Questo complesso di miti nei quali, come vico precisa nella sua ultima orazione inaugurale *De mente heroica*, si esprime la primordiale coscienza emozionale dell'indistruttibile legame fra la mente umana e dio, caratterizza per Vico l'età degli eroi. A loro volta i miti di questa età svilupperanno la coscienza della dignità umana che si porrà come un ideale da conquistare, dando vita a quel tipo di lotta per i diritti civili che caratterizza *l'età degli uomini*», Jacobelli Isoldi, Angela Maria, "Il mito nel pensiero di Vico", in G. Vico, and A. Corsano. *Omaggio a Vico*. Napoli: Morano, 1968, 37-72.

⁴⁹ G. Vico, *New Science*, §31, 18.

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ancient «barbaric times» and the «returned barbarism» [*barbarismo ritornato*] of modernity, human ages rise step by step from aristocratic ones, in which social inequality is justified on the basis of alleged natural differences between social classes. The recognition of the natural equality of men that all humanity shares a common nature resides in recognizing reason as the semi-divine, heroic mind that all human beings are born with, expanding natural nobility to all men alike. Human times, times of the unfolded reason [*ragione spiegata*], are those when the heroic nature is universalized, so to speak, since people who were considered subhuman in barbaric ages (e.g., slaves, the plebs) in human times reclaim their nature and rights. True heroism still coincides with the contribution to public wellbeing by helping those in need. The heroism of human times differs from that of the sons of Jove. With Platonism reinterpreted in a Christian key, everyone is God's creation. The divine part of the human, although having metaphysical roots, can only come to maturity with work, with that culture of the mind that is education.

In the reconstruction of the history of Rome, Vico highlights how the spring that sets in motion the recognition of human equality and the acquisition of equal rights comes from the plebs, since «the weak wants the law; the powerful withhold them»⁵⁰. The overturn of the oppressive master-slave dynamic, between the patrician heroes and the *famuli*, the plebs occurs «once they [the plebs] know themselves to be of equal nature with the nobles,» who, at that point, «naturally will not submit to remaining them inferior in civil rights»⁵¹. Consequently, the Roman plebeians began to achieve equality with the patricians in civil liberty until they entirely changed the Roman commonwealth from an aristocratic to popular forms of governments.⁵²

Similarly, to redefine the laws of civil life, Genovesi starts with the reconsideration of metaphysics to pave the way to the coming of human times. «We cannot start well if we do not start from the sky,» Genovesi announces in the preface to his late work on metaphysics, the *Metaphysical Sciences for the Youngsters* (1767), second volume of Genovesi's tripartite project of a philosophy for the youth, which presents as epigraph – almost as a reminder that the old metaphysics is ready to be assimilated into a new one – a stanza from another heroic-comic epic poem, Lorenzo Lippi's *Il Malmantile Racquistato* [Malmantile Regained] parody of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* [The Liberation of Jerusalem]⁵³. In-

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, §283, 76.

⁵¹ *Ivi*, §1087, 370.

⁵² «Vico: The Plebs and the History of All the Cities of the World» in M. Breaugh, L. Lederhendler, and D. Howard. *The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom*. [New York]: Columbia University Press, 2015. In the *The Plebeian Experience*, Breaugh, Lederhendler, and Howard dedicate a chapter to the Vico's reading of Roman history, and his reconstruction of the passage from aristocratic governments to the popular commonwealth.

⁵³ «Quanti ci son che vestono armatura, / Dottor di schirme e ingoiator di scuole, / Fantonacci che fanno altri paura, / Tremar la terra e spaventar il solo/ E raccontando onor qualche bravura, / Ammazzan sempre ognun colle parole:/ Se si dà il caso di venire all'ergo, / Zitti com'olio poi voltano il tergo.» L. Lippi, *Il Malmantile Racquistato* (1676), (X,1).

stead of running after the «chimeras» of abstract reason, which «make us enthusiastic and fanatic, disturbing of [*perturbatori*] human life, since fanaticism [...] makes men proud and cruel, delighted only in sacrificing everyone to their whims,» for Genovesi, metaphysics must reconnect to human experience and become again the «foundation of moral disciplines,» by reforming the representation of the earthly divine order or providence⁵⁴. In this late enterprise, the *Metaphysical Sciences* are the foundations of the moral ones, meant to bridge together heroic and human, which is reflected in the order in which students are supposed to consult the volumes. The order of publication of the three books of Genovesi's «course of Italian philosophy» [*corso di filosofia italiana*] does not correspond to the order in which the young minds should consult them. The first one in order of publication, the *Logic for the Youngsters* (1766) should be read as the last one because it begins as the practice of emending the past mistakes of human reason; while the last one, the *Diceosina or On the Philosophy of Justice and Honesty* (1766, 1767), his manual on justice and morality should be read as the first one, to reestablish a just and honest relationship between people, and his works on political economy – part of the moral sciences – is the reconstitution of a different relationship between people and things. Yet, according to Genovesi, his «philosophical century» first needs to reconnect to «the original» and establish a new relationship between men and divinity. Born from the intuition that there must be something else beyond the mundane which gives meaning and purpose to human reality, this original experience lies in the belief that the world is «inside a certain intelligence that dominates in us, and for this lordship makes us sovereign over many other things that are around us» is common to all nations, and, therefore, following Vico's comparatist method, for Genovesi valid⁵⁵.

Based on both the «physical and political history of man,» Genovesi believes, as a deist thinker, that we cannot rely on reason as the absolute guiding principle to the making of human happiness, reason cannot be its own ruler [*regola a se stessa*]⁵⁶. If reason is undoubtedly the «calculating faculty,» the one that speculates about what are the most efficient means to achieve a specific end, human rationality to become a «right reason» needs to follow something more universal, beyond the individual, which can be «the compass of reason» [*la regola della ragione*] that enlightens and guides it towards what is right⁵⁷. For Genovesi – as well as for Vico – this rule of reason is «what all peoples recognize for its inherent strength,» which is that the world is regulated by a divine principle in nature, being it *himarmene* in ancient Greece, the *fatum* of the Stoics or the providence of Christianity, «a natural rule to distinguish right from wrong, virtue from vice» that throughout the history of humankind revealed itself by

⁵⁴ A. Genovesi, *Logica per gli giovanetti*, 27.

⁵⁵ A. Genovesi, *Scienze metafisiche per gli giovanetti*, 11.

⁵⁶ A. Genovesi, *Diceosina*, 27.

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, 28.

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awarding virtues people and punishing the vicious ones⁵⁸. The laws of just and honest behavior, those that allow people to live in harmony with others, are pre-rational, unquestionable principles that inhabit the same physical existence, the senses of humankind, since «we feel the world more than we understand it»⁵⁹.

Rising from the experience of the natural sciences, «the lighthouse of humanity» [*il fanale degli uomini*], Genovesi adapts the Newtonian forces of gravity that regulate the universe to Christian metaphysics translating them into a providential order apply to the human world. Since Newton's physics explained the balance of the universe through a combination of two complementary immaterial forces – one that pushes towards the center or the «centripetal force,» and another one that instead pulls outwards, the «centrifugal force» – which hold the planets together by making them rotate around those that constitute the center, like the sun, forming, therefore, an actual cosmos, of harmony between parts and whole, Genovesi's moral interpretation of the natural law of the universe, through the interaction of opposite forces preserve the balance in the whole, as it «attributes to everyone its properties and its limits,» regulating, therefore, the relations between people and things⁶⁰.

From the analysis of the natural laws preserving the harmony of the whole and continuing God's creation, in the *Diceosina*, the natural laws of humanity, according to Genovesi, show how people are mutually dependent, united by two complementary forces laying at the sensitive core of individuals: the heart. Thanks to a natural love for others, from the most proximate person to the furthest, individuals care for one's own family, country, and humankind as a whole. This love is a «vital strength» which «lies in the heart» around which all human communities are built, in the same way – following the new medical theories of his time on the circulatory system – Genovesi assumes the entire body of an individual grows around and after that first both material and spiritual nucleus that is the heart. The heart of people is guided by the same primeval affections, «both primitive» and «tied together»: self-love [*forza concentriva*] for which the individual wants everything for oneself, and compassion [*forza espansiva*], thanks to which the individual feels others' pain and, therefore, wants to help them, give everything to them. The balance between those two complementary directions in one's heart makes humanity naturally inclined to a temperate love before life experiences and education alter it. Human history is precisely the account of the modifications of this pre-birth wholeness, which humanity constantly aspires to preserve:

On what, then, does the present happiness of mankind and nations depend? From this, I believe: to find the law of balance between those two forces; to make it a regulative maxim [*massima regolatrice*], to stick to it and follow it with constancy.

⁵⁸ *Ivi*, 38.

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, 51.

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, 3.

Because then the two forces will conspire to the same point, which is that of the least possible evil.⁶¹

Since in his reconfiguration of modern heroism, Genovesi intends to teach the youth to understand «the relations that his nature [his human nature] has with other things, with which he is surrounded, and with which he must live,» these laws have the commonality of human suffering at the center, as a trait that unites all sensory beings and translated into the two simple maxims of «preserving the rights» (one's own and those of others) and of the «mutual aid» among men, «in venerating and helping man when possible»⁶².

The philosophers, as educators of humankind, must model themselves on the principles of divine providence: «To be useful to the human race the philosopher, just like providence, must raise and direct weak and fallen man, not rend his nature or abandon him in his corruption,» Vico had written⁶³. The philosopher, for whom truth and justice coincide, is called to educate others to comply to the natural order of things, to put the ordinary person at the center and substitute the heroism of violence of barbaric times with a heroism of friendship of human times. Civilization in barbaric times is a violent appropriation of others' rights through wars, invasions, occupation of others' lands, and the enslavement of people. In the making of human times, Genovesi agrees with Montesquieu on that commerce has the potential to bring universal peace, since the relationship between people as well as the nations can be fostered around goods exchange rather than invasion⁶⁴. In this respect, already in the *Discourse*, Genovesi elects a potentially parallel tradition, adjacent to the history of metaphysics, that focused on the empirical «causes of the wealth and greatness of a nation»⁶⁵. This alternative philosophy was that of Xenophon, «the only disciple of Plato whose philosophy was all things» as Genovesi's defines him, author of the *Oeconomicus*, who in his last work, *Ways and Means, or On Revenues [Poroi e peri Prosodon]* (355 BC) addressed the question of how Athens could recover from the financial ruin that followed Athens's defeat in the Social War without invading allied cities to

⁶¹ *Ivi*, 27-28.

⁶² *Ivi*, 142.

⁶³ G. Vico, *New Science*, §129, 55.

⁶⁴ Genovesi was in constant dialogue with Montesquieu and composed a commentary to the Neapolitan edition of Montesquieu's *Esprit des Lois* (1748), the *Spirito delle leggi del signore di Montesquieu con le note dell'abate Antonio Genovesi*, which will be published posthumously and incomplete in 1777.

⁶⁵ A. Genovesi, *Discorso*, 247. Xenophon challenged those Athenian leaders who affirmed that, although they knew it was unjust to plunder other cities to get the resources, «because of the poverty of the multitude» they were forced to that injustice, if they did not want to be even more unfair towards their own citizens, by not attending to their wealth. Xenophon challenged this statement to «consider whether the citizens would in any way be able to feed themselves from their own [land] which is also the most just way.» In doing so, Xenophon lists all the natural resources of Attica and the five causes of the wealth of a nation, which according to him, were government, nature of the soil, site, population, and industry. Like Xenophon, for Genovesi, the wealth of a country should come from its internal resources, not from imperialism.

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rob their resources and end, therefore, Athenian imperialism⁶⁶. Hence, Genovesi found in Xenophon a forerunner of his anti-imperialist position, which in the *Lessons of Civil Economy* (1765, 1769, 1770) becomes part of Genovesi's project of reconciling national growth and justice, by following a model of growth not based on exploitation⁶⁷.

If at the political level, the false heroism of barbaric times results in a fabricated superiority which justifies the exploitation of others, Genovesi believed that commerce would eventually substitute imperialism, both as means of getting material natural resources by plundering other countries, as well as imperialism as a justification for civilization, that «conceit of the nations» [*boria delle nazioni*] Vico is after in the *New Science*⁶⁸. The new trade routes had created new relations between European and countries overseas, as in the case of the Americas. The travel stories of the colonizers, the accounts of the slave trade from Africa testify to modern false heroism. Also in this case, the disparity in strength between peoples – as in the relationship between *heroes* and *famuli* in the *New Science*, or the rift between feudal lords and the plebs in modern Europe – is justified as natural inequality. If the Europeans, stronger in means, had not invaded the American continent, according to Vico, native Americans would have just continued their own course of development: «the American Indians would now be following this course of human institutions if they had not been discovered by the Europeans,» hence, if the providential cycle of their civil life had not been drastically interrupted⁶⁹. Genovesi was of the same conviction as Vico. «We, Europeans have kidnapped the whole of America, stripped and killed countless people,» Genovesi writes in one of his *Moral Dialogues* [*Dialoghi sulla Morale*], indirectly proposing a process of reparation: «Either there is no justice, or we have to give back what we took, but there is justice, therefore, we have to repay»⁷⁰.

Indeed, in the *Moral Dialogues*, considered marginal notes to his major works, Genovesi stages a dialogue between a philosopher and a young aristocrat, in which the question of overcoming the false superiority of nobility emerges when trying to educate the young man to the principles of justice and respect of man's rights. In the dialogues Genovesi assumes the voice of Dicearco – homage to the philosopher from Messina who in the *Life of Greece* wrote a history of Greek culture, from the mythical age to his time, with an evaluation of historical progress as a progressive increase in needs and interests – who teaches his pupil, the young Filarete (“lover of excellence”) how to reason and act as a real philosopher by being just and respect the rights, that is the true properties of God,

⁶⁶ Xenophon, and G. A. McBrayer. 2018. *The Shorter Writings*. Agora Editions. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

⁶⁷ On civil economy and the aspiration of internal growth without colonization, see M. Bazzoli, *Il Piccolo Stato Nell'eta Moderna: Studi Su Un Concetto Della Politica Internazionale Tra XVI E XVIII Secolo*. 1a ed. Milano: Jaca Book, 1990.

⁶⁸ G. Vico, *New Science*, §330, 85.

⁶⁹ G. Vico, *New Science*, §1095, 372.

⁷⁰ A. Genovesi, *Dialoghi sulla Morale*, 277.

of oneself, and others. Filarete, who wants to become a philosopher, starts the dialectic journey with Dicearco as the personification of false nobility and heroism. He is an inheritor [*rendiere*,] who therefore lives without working, in a life of leisure; yet he gambles, believing that he can increase his wealth by relying on luck rather than ingenuity; he reads *les philosophes à la mode* (e.g., Rousseau, Voltaire, Helvetius); and especially, he has a slave, convinced that social classes [*ordini*] conform to the natural order of things, so that as a nobleman he is naturally superior to his servants.

To educate Filarete to become a just philosopher, Dicearco resorts to the jargon of economics. He not only wants to convince Filarete to act morally, but he does it by explaining to the young man that «respecting the rights» is the only way to live happily, that is, with the lesser possible evil. In this way, Dicearco wants to convince Filarete that acting in conformity to the providential natural order of things is rewarding and that it is in his interest to operate in compliance with other people's rights: «The violation of rights is to go against the order of the world,» while justice is «the only way to live happily»⁷¹. The recognition of others' rights is based on Filarete's understanding that all human beings share the exact nature and essence. However, although Filarete, thanks to Dicearco's training, acknowledges in theory that everyone who «was born a man [...] is a man,» because of his noble birth, he unreflectively believes that social classes reflect natural differences between people⁷². «How do you treat you, Filarete, – asks Dicearco to challenge him – your lackey, your squire, your peasant, your shepherd, the little artists who lend you their services, the porters and the low plebs?» namely, those people in everyday life that he considers inferior⁷³. Upon his admission, Filarete claims that because «there is a difference in orders» between people «so there must be [different] treatments»⁷⁴. Dicearco's response challenges Filarete's conviction that some men are superior to others in nature, therefore in rights, so much so that it just for a man to own another man, and that the laws of slavery are, therefore, «null and void» in nature:

Here is what you only half understand. Nature, Filarete, generates only men, and men of a similar essence and with the same rights. Orders are not born, nor are they born out of human pacts and conventions. [...] These orders then only concern the government and the tranquility of the civil bodies, all the upper classes were born to rule, educate, protect, defend the classes of the common, not to degrade humanity, putting them in the number of beasts.⁷⁵

Going full circle to where we started, hence, to Genovesi's polemic of pure metaphysic philosophy in the *Discourse* intends to make philosophers again the

⁷¹ *Ivi*, 260, 277.

⁷² *Ivi*, 186.

⁷³ *Ivi*, 187.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

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fathers, educators, and legislators of humankind, in the reformed awareness that «as in the family, the father is no more of a man than the son, even though he is its sovereign and governor»⁷⁶. The relationship between those the philosopher – patriarch and the rest of the citizens is that of father-child, for Genovesi, not of master and slave, so that «the child owes respect for the father and obedience; and the father must govern him with love and with that degree of severity which serves the child's perfection and happiness»⁷⁷. Of course, patriarchic models of social development are also to problematize. Nonetheless, Vico's and Genovesi's contributed to the question of civil equality by asserting that all humans are divine in nature and that «true heroism is to put down the proud and give aid to those in danger» against those who deprive them of dignity and rights⁷⁸.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁷⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁷⁸ G. Vico, *New Science*, §18, 11.