
History, Being, and Absolutist Temptations

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The Human Project: The Year 2000, by Nicola Abbagnano. Translated by Bruno Martini and Nino Langiulli, edited by Nino Langiulli. *Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002. xxv+162 pp. \$30.*

Time Consciousness: The Philosophical Uses of History, by Gabriel Ricci. *New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002. xlvii+192 pp. \$59.95.*

The two books under discussion here—one a translation by Nino Langiulli and Bruno Martini, with an accompanying commentary, of a late work by the Italian philosopher Nicola Abbagnano, and the other a study of the relation between philosophy and history by Gabriel Ricci—exhibit shared features. Both are written by former Jesuit seminarians, Langiulli and Ricci, who share Italian ancestry plus a passionate interest in Italian philosophy. Each one, perhaps because of his theological training, is drawn to questions about being and looks at historical consciousness from a distinctly metaphysical perspective. But while Langiulli, who has introduced and

annotated this work by his now deceased teacher once associated with academic life in Turin, is making available to English-language readers the political views of a celebrated philosopher, Ricci is less constrained by his material. Thus he can discuss the philosophical uses of history from Vico to Heidegger and Gadamer without having to work around observations that touch only peripherally on what he wants to discuss. In Langiulli's case, what makes the translation done with Bruno Martini worth reading is, above all, his learned introduction, which focuses on the connection between Abbagnano as a (non-practicing) Catholic philosopher of being

and as a critic of Marxist millennialism and Abbagnano as an interpreter of the current state of Western society. Although these stated opinions of Abbagnano were published as far back as 1980, partly by way of a strenuous interview with the journalist Giuseppe Grieco, they could have come from someone looking at the Western world today. A word of caution might be in order: For anyone who is interested exclusively in Abbagnano's work in philosophy, which Langiulli has also knowledgeably explored, these critical observations may not be the best place to start.

What the text does provide, however, is a sense of Abbagnano as a man of his time. Although he certainly did not see as well as he might have the imprisoning bureaucratic structures of the present age and seems to lean toward what eventually became the politically correct prison of nationalities known as the European Union (EU), Abbagnano is a truer friend of freedom and critical thought than his longtime associate and fellow ontologist Umberto Eco. Unlike Eco, who wishes to impose "multiracialism" and diversity on European peoples by criminalizing opposition to his own progressive projects, Abbagnano warns against "the absolutist temptation" present in Islam. He also fearlessly observes that Western Christianity in both its Catholic and Protestant forms can accommodate philosophy in a way the Islamic world rarely has in more than a thousand years. (One wonders wheth-

er such a value judgment would now result in Abbagnano's arraignment as a fomenter of hate in France or Germany, where even less offensive published statements can lead—and, in fact, have led—to criminal charges being brought against hapless authors.) Finally Abbagnano harbors no illusion that European Marxists will take up "the task of philosophy to analyze reality" or will cross the threshold of faith toward which philosophy can lead without passing beyond. More likely, the gaping hole in consciousness that came with the intellectual disintegration of Marxism must be filled by some alternative faith substitute, which will inevitably bring its own apocalyptic expectations. The multiracialist ideologies embraced by the present Italian Left, and equally by the Catholic Left, may be exactly what Abbagnano had in mind.

Unfortunately he backs into his own "absolutizing standpoint," a position he tells us in the introduction is the "worst legacy of romanticism." The fact that Abbagnano appeals to a "humanity is the measure" standard to present us with what seem the afterthoughts of nineteenth-century positivists does not make his "third way" any more plausible as a "path of freedom." For starters, one would gather, Abbagnano desires overarching managerial control to deal with "the great availability of goods" in some places, which presumably lead to "scarcity" everywhere else, and to restrict "a tightening network of business

deals and mass communications [that] increase the economic disparities between the various socio-economic groups and nations." Happily Abbagnano went into the study of being and not into economic planning. Indeed it is easy to imagine that his "third way," which bears a resemblance to the present European socialism that operates in tandem with various versions of political correctness, would affect intellectual liberty as disastrously as economics.

Although Ricci's work is sometimes hard to unpack, it offers arguments that are worth making. Vico and Heidegger, both of whom are put appropriately on the front cover, frame the context of Ricci's discussion about the necessarily experiential character of historical thinking. What this book, which is heavily influenced by *Sein und Zeit*, does at some points is read back into earlier thinkers a recognizably Heideggerian framework. The notion of time consciousness that runs through these pages has a distinctly interwar German flavor. As a general observation it should be said that one could have made many of the judgments one encounters here without the recondite references. Ricci, who ranges widely among scholars besides Vico and Heidegger, like the early twentieth-century intellectual historian Ernst Troeltsch, could have reached his goal with fewer digressions. But perhaps I too bear blame for this overkill, inasmuch as the author acknowledges my "intellectual breadth" for the ultimate shape of his work. (Perhaps I went overboard

offering my own being and time.) More justifiably, however, Ricci invokes Goethe, literary modernists, and Dilthey's classic *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung*, all of which help undergird his argument about the lived and subjective nature of historical composition and historical speculation. Ricci does not say that history is merely autobiography under a different name. What he does note is that the reflective subjectivity that enhances the autobiographical art form plays a significant role in historical thinking. Cultures that lack such a dimension of life cannot produce true history, as opposed to strings of chronicled events, while even "scientific" historians like Vico have been aware of the subjective character of their work and studied historical stages in terms of "mental dispositions" that are accessible to the consciousness or *Verstehen* of other human subjects. Equally significant, Ricci stresses the providential sense of time that leads Vico and other Westerners into assigning transcendental importance to successive civilizations. Presumably this evolutionary and teleological perspective would not have been present in the pagan world; and while Vico assumes repetition in historical experience, he also assumes upward movement, a *ricorso*, or recurrence, in historical patterns.

Significantly, I found myself recently revisiting some of these arguments while reading the *Contra Apionum*, an apologetic text, originally composed in Greek, by the first-century historian, proud member of the

Jewish priestly class, and Roman court chronicler, Flavius Josephus. In this polemic against a Roman critic of the Hebrew Scriptures, who presented them as a factually inferior version of Greek historiography, Josephus offered several *elegxoi*, refutations, most of them mechanically defensive. He notes (incorrectly) that because the priestly class was concerned with its genealogical purity, it attended diligently to the keeping of Jewish records since the time of Moses. Presumably the Old Testament would fall under this special care prompted by priestly genealogical concerns. Josephus also observes that Hebrew Scriptures go back further in time than the works of the great Greek historians and are less corrupted by "inconsistencies" [*diaphoniai kai parekbaseis*] "than Greek accounts of the Trojan War or of later political events." From such evidence, Josephus tried to establish that ancient Jewish records, which were also considered divinely revealed, or in the post-Mosaic narratives, prophets, and sacred moral precepts divinely inspired, met the test of *akribeia*, factually grounded accuracy that Polybius and other Hellenistic historians found necessary for the study of *pragmateiai*, human events and actions.

In the end, the only proof marshaled by Josephus that may still seem relevant is that Jews "happily

gave up their lives for this received account of their history." They "died under torture" affirming its truth. Although this may not clinch the debate entirely, as Ricci makes us aware, it does raise the gravity of the discussion by a few notches. It turns ancient history from something produced for profit or out of *philotimia*, professional competitiveness, into a "time consciousness" that defines one's personal existence. The fact that the received record of Jewish antiquities is believed to reveal both the divine will and the providential role of the Jewish nation makes it for those who take these claims seriously more than a chronicle of events. The same is at least partly true for what was once the foundation of Greek moral education and national awareness, the Homeric epics, despite the fact that both Josephus and Plato disparage this literary masterpiece, in one case as historically inaccurate and in the other case for attributing immoral acts to the gods. Note that nowhere does Ricci suggest that historians do not have to aspire to *akribeia*. He is only saying that the best history is at some level experienced as well as factually reliable. To the extent it is both, it presupposes an existential dimension that finds its counterpart in literature, philosophy, and theology.