

Philosophising with and against systems

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My contribution will look into the relations between system, method and forms of scientific rationality in the history of early modern philosophy. My initial thesis is that the birth of the 'history of philosophy', understood as an autonomous scientific discipline, has origins that are by no means simple, emerging on the contrary from cultural battles between conflicting models and traditions. The issue concerning the meaning of this research method essentially coincides, in the 17th and 18th centuries, with the question concerning the status of the Enlightenment as an enquiry into the forms of knowledge that arose in the modern age, including history, philosophy, literature, the arts, hermeneutics, historical research, law, medicine, anthropology, and the discourse on method. The history of philosophy is caught up in all these realms, because studying philosophy implies an investigation of the 'philosophical practices' that influence it within the framework of an entirely human encyclopaedia, with its own disciplinary transgressions and elements of crisis. At the centre of this change in the forms of classification and enunciation of knowledge stands the concept of the 'system'. Indeed, philosophical thought became aware of its own 'history' through a confrontation with its systematic counterpart, which the modern age placed under the dispute between *esprit de système* and *esprit systématique*.

By retracing the two great theoretical frameworks of the 17th and 18th centuries – on the one hand the Cartesian order of reasons, and on the other the Baconian ideal of an encyclopaedic tree of knowledge – I will attempt to delineate the new forms of classification and intelligibility of philosophy in the modern age. From systems of knowledge to systems of the world, from the natural sciences to the sciences of man and society, the period of history that produced systems of everything – man, politics, plants, the stars and the arts – presents new methods for the critical exposition of knowledge. While for ancient physics, both celestial and terrestrial, the term 'system' indicated an ordered set of elements, and in philosophy it expressed the order of the parts of a reasoning, over the 17th century this term lost, thanks to the attacks inflicted by thinkers such as Pascal, Bayle, and Gassendi, its traditional status as the perfect science and became an obstacle in the search for truth. Descartes in turn became the theorist of an abstract order of reasons; Spinoza was interpreted as the architect of an aporetic and 'monstrous' metaphysical system, to take up Bayle's famous accusation. A systematic conception of knowledge fuelled the encyclopaedic sensibility of the 18th century (Condillac, d'Alembert) and contributed to founding new disciplines, eventually attacking the 'illegitimate systems' of the previous century.

Furthermore, the concept of 'system' proved not to be simple to deal with even in 20th century philosophy. A fair amount of contemporary philosophy, from Nietzsche to Derrida, via Bergson and the theorists of the Frankfurt School, rejected the vocabulary involving systems and formed a precise philosophical programme around this rejection. An articulation between the notions of system and totality is found, for example, at the centre of Horkheimer and Adorno's critical reinterpretation of the Enlightenment, when they interpret Bacon and Descartes' project of science as an expression of the 'terror' felt by reason when faced with that which lies beyond its dominion. Archaeology, as Foucault in turn wrote, is always a history of 'terminal systems', i.e. systems that, having reached the apex of their regime of truth, anticipate their own overcoming.

In short, conceiving philosophy from the viewpoint of its history means conceiving of historical-philosophical activity not as a mere technical practice which is developed at the margins of 'authentic philosophy'. On the contrary, the history of philosophy is subject to an essential tension between systems and history, that turns the work of the historian of ideas into what Eco called an 'open work'. My contribution is thus dedicated to the problematic relationship between the various levels of historical-philosophical enquiry and their effects in the broader debate on the status of a systematic philosophy today.

