Chapter 15
“A Minority View”. Gian-Carlo Rota’s Phenomenological Realism
Invited Chapter

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Artists […] fail to give an accurate description of how they work. […] scientists […] believe in unrealistic philosophies of science. Gian-Carlo Rota.

In 1997 Rota’s second anthology was published, entitled *Indiscrete Thoughts*. The theses put forward in the book were “minority” positions in a United States cultural context that, after long having attempted to replace philosophy with logical analysis and the analysis of language (Hersh, 1997, pp. IX-X), was preparing to interpret it also in neuroscientific terms. Rota intended to show that he did not fear uncomfortable positions and chose the phrase “a minority view” as a provocative title for the philosophy section of the book, inspired by phenomenology. We cannot understand the importance of Rota’s intellectual figure, within the American cultural context of the end of the twentieth century, and the importance of his heritage if we interpret it in terms of architectonic of philosophy. In fact, Rota did not aim to create parts of a philosophical system or to realize complete phenomenological analysis. His goal was another, and we may assimilate it to the aims of the polemist and the antidogmatic intellectual, that have an important role in the tradition of the philosophy. I believe this is the right interpretation of Rota’s works, which allows a filigreed reading of his intellectual heritage. We see Rota’s precise choice of sides also in *The End of Objectivity*, the text of his course of lectures (Rota, 1991), which is an anthology of examples drawn from everyday life and scientific practice compiled in order to update phenomenology and transform it into an efficient instrument of critical culture. One of his principal philosophical references is represented by *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1927), which is examined and commented on in detail (Rota, 1991, p. 2). Let us recall the fact that Rota always tends to valorize the elements of continuity of the phenomenological movement to the detriment of its internal fractures and of its splits. He applies this interpretative perspective in particular to the relationship between Husserl and Heidegger, relegating the reasons for their disagreement to a

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muted background (Rota, 1997, pp. 189-90). This work of re-elaboration and updating of Heideggerian philosophy was part of the intellectual battle that Rota was fighting in proclaiming himself, simultaneously, antireductionist and realist. Let me provisionally define as “phenomenological realism” this dual reference that constitutes the synthesis of his “minority view” and shows the topicality of his reflection. My paper is dedicated to the analysis of this theoretical hallmark.

15.1 Considerations on the Problem of Realism

It was Kant who codified the contemporary opposition between idealism and realism. Kant based idealism upon an ontological interpretation that makes the totality of what exists depend on thought, in which, however, the meaning of “thought” is not univocal. Realism, by contrast, holds that reality possesses an existence that is independent of thought (see Costa, 2007, p. 27). Realism, moreover, has an epistemological variant, fundamental for our interests, which asserts the independence of the things known with respect to the knowing subject.

The celebrated philosophical topology proposed by Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) graphically refers the most important contemporary epistemological options (formalism, conventionalism, positivism and empiricism) back to the opposition between realism and idealism (see Bonicalzi, 2007, pp. 29-30). I also connect with this schema the opposition between objectivism and psychologism, examined at length by phenomenological research. Furthermore, I shall also use the terms naturalism, reductionism and scientism in a shaded and correlated way, as different perspectives that fore-shadow the same vision of the world.

At the conclusion of this paper I shall return to these Bachelardian coordinates that - while taking no part in Rota’s philosophical constellation - can help us to take our bearings and to individuate the place of phenomenology in a historiographic problem that is herewith too complex for me to discuss exhaustively.

For the moment, let me point out a significant theoretical custom: phenomenology is, in fact, usually presented as a sort of third way capable of getting through an insidious philosophical bottleneck and gaining a terrain that surpasses any form of realism or idealism (Heidegger, 1927, pp. 57-8). In most cases Rota, too, followed this tendency, yet there are some passages that constitute interesting exceptions. One of them emphatically describes phenomenology as “an extreme form of realism” (Rota, 1991, p. 1; see also pp. 51, 374). This is an important reference since it comes right at the beginning of *The End of Objectivity*, in the section bearing the programmatic title “Foundations of Phenomenology”. His position is not an illegitimate one: Heidegger himself declares that he pursues

a more precise characterization of the concept of Reality in the context of a discussion of the epistemological questions oriented by this idea which have been raised in realism and idealism (Heidegger, 1927, p. 228).

Rota’s intention, however, is different, since his vein is essentially polemical. He harbors no prejudices against the idealist tradition, which, on the contrary, played