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Introduction: Philosophy and Geography

by

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Introduction: Philosophy and Geography

Ernesto C. Sferrazza Papa *

This number of the Journal of Interdisciplinary History of Ideas hosts a special and thematic issue focused on the relation between philosophy and geography. It is the result of a call for papers that was launched in 2016 with the aim of answering at least some of the relevant questions concerning the historical connections between philosophy and geography, while also exploring the possible theoretical intersections between them to which this history points. This Introduction intends to provide readers a general overview on the topic.



This number of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History of Ideas* hosts a special and thematic issue focused on the relation between philosophy and geography. It is the result of a call for papers that was launched in 2016. When we decided to invite contributors and scholars to write on this unusual topic, what inspired us was the perception of a strange “lack”: the recognition that the relationship between philosophy and geography has gone generally overlooked. As editor of this special issue, I would like to provide readers a general overview on the topic.

The starting point for a historical as well as theoretical reflection on this “odd scientific couple” is quite clear. If philosophy began with Thales of Miletus, in the Western tradition geographical knowledge began with the measurement of the circumference of the Earth by Erathostenes of Cyrene. Before anyone else,

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Erathostenes identified with the term *geo-graphêin* those who wanted to “write the earth”, that is, to scientifically investigate the spatial dimension inhabited by humans¹. However, the real contact between philosophy and geography had to wait until Strabo’s *Geography* took place. Strabo described the relationship between philosophy and geography in these terms:

The science of Geography, which I now propose to investigate, is, I think, quite as much as any other science, a concern of the philosopher².

From this moment on, the association is established. If philosophy is a holistic knowledge that comprehends all dimensions characterizing human existence, then geography will not be an exception. It will be a part of the whole, a part of the human love of wisdom. However, Strabo continues with a radicalization of the comparison. He argues that geographical knowledge *as such* is philosophical knowledge. With this gesture, Strabo establishes a silent but deep epistemological and morale alliance between philosophy and geography:

Wide learning, which alone makes it possible to undertake a work on geography, is possessed solely by the man who has investigated things both human and divine knowledge of which, they say, constitutes philosophy. And so, too, the utility is manifold, not only as regards the activities of statesmen and commanders but also as regards knowledge both of the heavens and of things on land and sea, animals, plants, fruits, and everything else to be seen in various regions the utility of geography, I say, presupposes in the geographer the same philosopher, the man who busies himself with the investigation of the art of life, that is, of happiness³.

As underlined by Myrto Hatzimichali, “Strabo links geography and philosophy by virtue of the fact that they both involve wide learning, which characterizes those who display an active interest in all things divine and human”⁴.

¹ See *Eratosthenis Geographicorum fragmenta*, ed. by G.C.F. Seidel, Vandenhoeck et Ruprecht, Göttingae, 1789 ; G. Aujac, *Eratosthène de Cyrène, le pionnier de la géographie. Sa mesure de la circonférence terrestre*, Paris, Éditions du C.T.H.S., 2001.

² Strabo, *Geography*, translated by H.L. Jones, Loeb Classical Library 49, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 1917, 1, 3. On Strabo’s geographic work see also G. Aujac, *Strabon et la science de son temps*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1966; D. Dueck (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Strabo*, Routledge, London-New York, 2017.

³ Strabo, *Geography*, 1, 3-4.

⁴ M. Hatzimichali, *Strabo’s philosophy and Stoicism*, in D. Dueck, *op. cit.*, 11.

However, even though geography since its early childhood should be inscribed on the rut of philosophical knowledge, historically the relations between these disciplines remain umbratile, hidden. Despite their ancestral “mixture”, they are still waiting to be showed.

Undoubtedly some authors of the Western philosophical canon have explicitly made geography the object of their philosophical investigations. For instance, we can think of Kant’s *Physische Geographie* or Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* as the more significant examples of the philosophical interest for geography. However, despite these fundamental junctions of the history of thought, the historical relations between these disciplines remain essentially unexplored. Certainly, guiltiness for this lack in history of ideas is equally shared: on one side, geographers’ isolation; on the other side, philosophers’ disinterest. How can we fill this gap? Strabo had really grasped the idea that human being is a “geographic being”¹—therefore philosophy and geography should have interacted.

Unfortunately, the ancient knowledge was not seriously taken into account through the history of philosophy, and Strabo’s intuition has been mostly ignored. Of course, it’s not just matter of a radical disinterest, but rather a general underestimation, with few significant exceptions. There is no doubt that the history of philosophy presents constantly an interest in ideas that come from a geographical ground. Isn’t it true that the description of the world proposed by Aristotle in his “scientific” works is filled with geographical issues? Furthermore, we might consider the powerful Aristotle’s influence on medieval thought and its intersection with theology in order to explain the strange status of geography in Middle Ages. According to historian Clarence Glacken, medieval philosopher’s interest in geography derives essentially from the tension between man and God, human finitude and divine infinitude. From this point of view, for medieval philosophers, the knowledge of the earth as God’s creation, that is the geographical knowledge, was meant to get close to the work of God:

en tant que conception générale du monde physique, la nature, œuvre par excellence du Créateur, apparaît d’abord, dans la pensée chrétienne, et ce de façon récurrente, comme

¹ This expression is used in another context, but with the same meaning, by A.C. Diener, J. Hagen, *Borders. A very short introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, 1.

un grand livre, complément à la Révélation, susceptible de permettre à tous d'atteindre à la connaissance de Dieu¹.

However, this line of reasoning entails the abandonment of geography as a codified knowledge, a betrayal of the effort made in ancient times by geographers such as Erathostenes and Ptolemy. In a certain way, we could say it implies also the annihilation of geography *in itself*, as it implies the idea that the knowledge of the Earth can be entirely delegated to philosophy and theology. Apart from some random attentiveness, in Middle Ages the relationship between philosophical and geographical knowledge is marked by a steady decline of geography as a science in itself².



This decline will be interrupted only on the verge of modernity. Maybe solely during the modern era, in the age of discovery and exploration, philosophy started taking a systematic interest towards the geographic space. Doubtless discoveries, and especially the discovery of a new world, have been an accelerator for the geographical knowledge³ and, more generally, human knowledge. From this point of view, to investigate the relationship between philosophy and geography in the modern age would bring about a radically interdisciplinary dimension of the history of ideas, in which political and legal studies, historical knowledge and the nascent anthropology are constantly mixed together⁴. After all, an overseas expansion presupposes a geographical and cartographical

¹ C.J. Glacken, *Histoire de la pensée géographique*, vol. 2, *Conception du monde au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Éditions du C.T.H.S., 2002, 13.

² See P. Claval, *Histoire de la géographie*, PUF, Paris, 2001, 17-23.

³ On the relation between geographic knowledge and explorations see D. Lecoq, A. Chambard (eds.), *Terre à découvrir, Terres à parcourir. Exploration et connaissance du monde XII^e-XIX^e siècles*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1998.

⁴ See G. Gliozzi, *Adam et le nouveau monde. La naissance de l'anthropologie come idéologie coloniale: des généalogies bibliques aux théories raciales, 1500-1700*, Théâtète, Lecques, 2000.

knowledge¹ that, at the same time, contributes to produce. Because of this virtuous circle, modernity is witness to an explosion of the geographical knowledge and a continuous increase of philosophical interest for geography.

Several moments in the history of philosophy intersect geographical knowledge, and it's impossible in this brief introduction to sort them all out. However, we at least have to mention the philosopher *par excellence* of the Western philosophical canon, Immanuel Kant. Kant devoted more than 50 academic courses to physical geography². Moreover, Kant's interest in geography is neither aleatory nor ephemeral, but rather is a linchpin of his attempt to "refound" modern epistemology. As noted by Richard Hartshorne, according to Kant *Physische Geographie* is not just occasional knowledge, but it is "the essential propaedeutic for an understanding of our perceptions of the world, whether those received directly by travel or indirectly by reading"³.



In general, the 18th century is the most relevant moment in the history of the relationship between philosophers and geographers. Perhaps, this is due to the circulation of Buffon's *Natural History* and the updated interest for the

¹ See D. Woodward, *The History of Cartography*, vol. 3, *Cartography in the European Renaissance*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2007; B. Riffenburgh, *Mapping the World. The Story of Cartography*, Carlton Books, London, 2014.

² I. Kant, *Physische Geographie*, zweite durchaus umgearbeitete Auflage von J.J.W. Vollmer, Vollmer, Mainz - Hamburg, 1801-1805. See A. May, *Kant's Concept of Geography and its Relation to Recent Geographical Thought*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1970; M. Marcuzzi, *L'écriture de l'espace. Récit historique et description géographique dans la Géographie physique de Kant*, in J. Benoist, F. Merlini (eds.), *Historicité et spatialité. Recherches sur le problème de l'espace dans la pensée contemporaine*, Vrin, Paris, 2001; S. Elden, E. Mendieta (eds.), *Reading Kant's Geography*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2011.

³ See R. Hartshorne, *The Nature of Geography. A Critical Study of Current Thought in the Light of the Past*, Lancaster, Derwent Whittlesey, 1939, 36.

science of the Earth in the Enlightenment¹. We might think of the development of the nexus between geography and climate theory in Montesquieu, an author crucial for the history of political thought², or of the nexus between peoples and natural environments established by Herder in *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*³.

From this conceptual crucible, Hegel's speculation on geography emerges. Perhaps Hegel's philosophy of geography is the most relevant theoretical moment for the relationship between the two disciplines⁴. In accordance with his philosophical system, Hegel argues that geographic space is the "place" in which the spirit expresses itself. Geographic space is nothing but the Spirit's incarnation in rivers, lakes, mountains, forests and woods: if history is the manifestation of the Spirit in time, geography is the manifestation of the Spirit in space. In this way, the march of reason through history intersects its march through space. Hegelian philosophy of geography emerges in a clear way from the *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*. It's the manifesto of a philosophy of history *more geographico demonstrata*, of which the test bench *par excellence* is the New World, where native's spiritual immaturity and geographic immaturity are deeply connected:

¹ G.L. Leclerc de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du Cabinet du Roi*, Imprimerie Royale, Paris, 1749. On the relation between Enlightenment and geography see N. Broc, *La géographie des philosophes. Géographes et voyageurs français au XVIII^e siècle*, Editions Ophrys, Paris, 1975.

² See Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois*, J. de Bonnot, Paris, 1999.

³ On the relation between peoples and geography in modern philosophy see M. Crépon, *Les géographies de l'esprit. Enquête sur la caractérisation des peuples de Leibniz à Hegel*, Payot, Paris, 1996.

⁴ I should like to remark that at the University of Berlin Hegel was a colleague of Ritter's and Humboldt's, i.e. of the founders of modern geography. Doubtless, Ritter's geographic determinism was extremely influential on Hegel's philosophy of history. However, the theoretical nexus between their theories has been elaborated above all by Ernst Kapp, a young Hegelian geographer. Kapp argued that "geography, as history, should be the subject of a philosophical investigation" (E. Kapp, *Philosophische oder Vergleichende allgemeine Erdkunde als wissenschaftliche Darstellung der Erdverhältnisse und des Menschenlebens nach ihrem innern Zusammenhang*, Braunschweig, Westermann, 1845, t. I, VI). See also G. Chamayou, *Présentation*, in E. Kapp, *Principes d'une philosophie de la technique*, Vrin, Paris, 2007, 8-10. On Hegel and geographic knowledge see the well-known work by P. Rossi, *Storia universale e geografia in Hegel*, Sansoni, Firenze, 1975, *cui adde*, on the relationship between Hegel and Humboldt, D.W. Bond, *Hegel's Geographical Thought*, "Environment and Planning D: Society and Space", 32 (1), 2014.

World history (...) is a series of spiritual shapes that lead to the actualization of the principles of spirit and that end in such a way that spirit grasps itself. A necessary principle is allotted to each world-historical people. These principles have a necessary succession in time, and likewise a concrete spatial specificity, a geographical position. So we speak here about geography in world history. (...) The new world is new not only relatively [in regard to its relationship to the old world]; it is [also] new in regard to its physical and spiritual properties. (...) The new world has shown itself to be much feebler than the old world, and it lacks two resources, iron and horses. America is a new, feeble, powerless world¹.

This very brief overview should be sufficient to show the importance of the historical dialogue between philosophy and geography and to underline how much it has been overlooked by scholarly research. A theoretical issue that should intrigue philosophical minds, that was clearly pointed out by the first geographers, is that geographic knowledge is concerned immediately with human existence, with the primary experience of being in the world. Humans are geographic beings, and precisely this θαυμάζειν—the wonder for this spatial localization²—inaugurates the conceptual relation between philosophy and geography since the very beginning. Therefore, if the theoretical nexus between these two fields of sense seems to be evident, the reconstruction of their historical dialogue, constant or inconstant, could be an interesting research program for the history of ideas.

This special issue of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History of Ideas* presents three papers selected through a blind peer-review process. We are very grateful to all the authors who answered the call for papers. The selected contributors come from different fields of research, and we are convinced that this heterogeneity is a concrete testimony to the interdisciplinarity required by our object. From each author's perspective, then, different facets of the relationship between philosophy and geography are shown. In his paper, Tanca proposes a sort of "combinator calculus" of the philosophical-geographical nexus, arguing that four different kinds of relationship have been historically entwined: geog-

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte. Berlin 1822/1823, Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte*, Bd. 12, Felix Meiner, Hamburg, 91-93. See also G.A. Kelly, *Hegel's America*, "Philosophy & Public Affairs", 2 (I), 1972.

² That is, for being necessarily in the world: we are talking about Heidegger's *Da-sein* in some way.

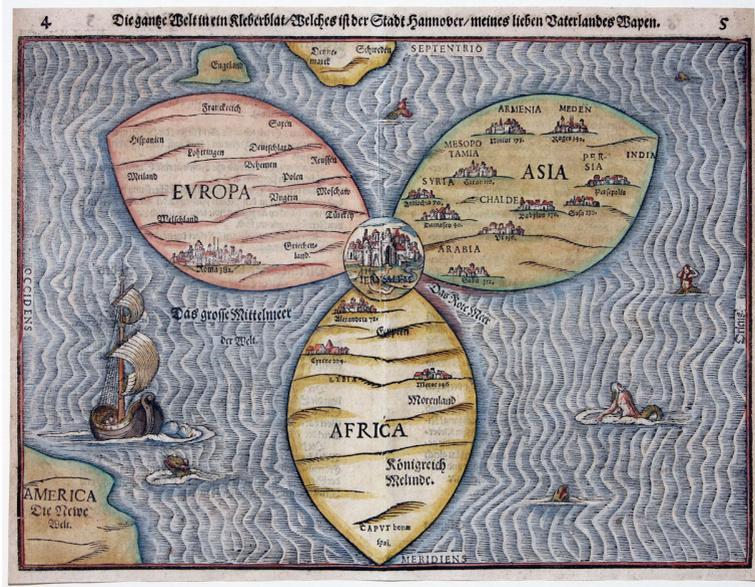
raphy of philosophy, philosophy of geography, geography in philosophy, philosophy in geography. Marano's essay analyzes one of the most relevant topics in the debate on geography and aesthetics: the landscape and, more specifically, the *idea* of the landscape in its original dimension. Santini's contribution deals in a sophisticated way with the dialectics of land and sea in Friedrich Ratzel's political geography, one of the most relevant junctions of philosophy and geography.

I would like to conclude this brief introduction underlining that it is not easy to provide a diagnosis of the current state of this strange relationship. We might notice that some elements of contemporary philosophical and geographical debate are promising. Doubtless, recent philosophy opened an inspiring and fruitful dialogue with geography. In the *analytic* approach, there have been multiple "intrusions" by philosophers into geography in order to define a metaphysics or an ontology of geography¹. The views of some authors of the *continental* Western tradition (i.e. Marx, Schmitt, Heidegger, Foucault) are already integrated into and shared by the so-called "Human Geography"².

However, the increasing and mutual interest notwithstanding, the history of the relationship between philosophy and geography, of their intersections and disciplinary trespassings, of their mutual interactions and their estrangements, still awaits to be written. Our hope is that this collection will be but a part of a wider research pattern, opening to new lines of investigation.

¹ Cfr. P.A. Burrough, A. Frank (eds.), *Geographic Objects with Indeterminate Boundaries*, London, Taylor & Francis, 1996; A. Varzi, *Philosophical Issues in Geography—An Introduction*, "Topoi", 20 (II), 2001, 119-130.

² See C. Minca, *Postmodern Geography: Theory and Praxis*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001; J.W. Crampton, S. Elden (eds.), *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007; P. Hubbard, R. Kitchin, G. Valentine (eds.), *Key Texts in Human Geography*, Los Angeles, Sage, 2008.



Heinrich Bünting, Die gantze Welt in ein Kleberblatt, welches ist der Stadt Hannover, meines lieben Vaterlandes Wapen (*The whole world in a cloverleaf, which is the coat of arms of my beloved fatherland the city of Hanover*), Magdeburg, 1581.