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Perfectibility as Demagoguery in Francescantonio Grimaldi's Political Philosophy

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This paper examines the political thought of Francescantonio Grimaldi (1741–1784), an exponent of the Italian Enlightenment, through his major work *Riflessioni sopra l'ineguaglianza degli uomini* (1779–1780). It focuses on his critique of utopian accounts of perfectibility and abstract rationality, interpreting them through the lens of rhetoric and demagoguery. Central to this analysis is Grimaldi's epistemological framework, rooted in Newtonian empiricism and shaped by his engagement with philosophy of his times. This framework underpins his rejection of metaphysical speculation in favor of empirical observation, particularly in ethical and political matters. The paper argues that, in Grimaldi's view, abstract conceptions of perfectibility, when detached from empirical grounding, can be seen as fostering unrealistic and destabilizing visions of human nature that may lead to demagogic narratives. By highlighting these concerns, the study situates Grimaldi as a conservative Enlightenment thinker who offers a cautionary perspective on political consequences of false assumptions about human nature.

Keywords: Francescantonio Grimaldi, Italian Enlightenment, Newtonianism, perfectibility, demagoguery, rhetoric, Rousseau

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Introduction

Recently, renewed attention has been given, from a historical lens, to the problem of demagoguery and political rhetoric,[1] alongside a parallel exploration of the scientific foundations of Enlightenment political theory and its connection to the birth of the human sciences.[2] Scholars have increasingly examined how figures of the period, through empirical methods and philosophical skepticism, sought to resist both the utopian abstractions and rhetorical excesses that threatened to distort moral and political inquiry. Yet, within this evolving historiography, the Italian Enlightenment—apart from the specialized work of intellectual historians and the attention devoted to a few canonical figures—remains comparatively understudied. This paper examines Francescantonio Grimaldi's *Riflessioni sopra l'ineguaglianza tra gli uomini* as a compelling example of an empiricist and conservative voice within the Italian Enlightenment, one that offers a sustained critique of the rhetorical and demagogic uses of utopian accounts of perfectibility and human nature. Grimaldi challenges the speculative constructions advanced by thinkers such as Rousseau, revealing how appeals to human perfectibility, when detached from empirical reality, can serve as instruments of political illusion and manipulation. By situating Grimaldi within the broader tradition of Enlightenment political philosophy, this study also sheds light on a distinctive form of political anthropology, grounded in Newtonianism, shaped by philosophical skepticism, and informed by a teleological conception of nature.

A Newtonian Approach to the Study of the Human Nature

Francescantonio Grimaldi (1741–1784), a political philosopher from Seminara (Calabria, Italy), stands as a pivotal yet largely overlooked figure within the intellectual movement known as the *Illuminismo meridionale* (the Southern

[1] *Populism, demagoguery, and rhetoric in historical perspective*, eds. Giuseppe Ballacci and Rob Goodman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

[2] *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth-Century Domains*. Berkeley Cristopher Fox, eds. Roy Porter, Robert Wokler (University of California Press, 2023). https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520916227.

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Italian Enlightenment), as conceptualized by the intellectual historian Franco Venturi.[3] Grimaldi's principal work, *Riflessioni sull'ineguaglianza degli uomini* (*Reflections on the Inequality of Men*), published in three volumes between 1779 and 1780, represents a profound and systematic engagement with Enlightenment political philosophy and natural sciences. Despite its depth and ambition, the work has remained on the periphery of modern scholarship, though it has been described as an underappreciated yet potentially pivotal contribution to the political thought of the European Enlightenment.[4]

Grimaldi's philosophy has been situated within the broader currents of what scholars have termed 'barrier literature' (*letteratura di sbarramento*)[5]: a genre marked by its opposition to reformism and the rejection of all forms of radicalism, including that which drew inspiration from Rousseau in the years following *Riflessioni*. In this respect, Grimaldi has also been placed within the intellectual constellation of what Pocock termed as the *Conservative Enlightenment*,[6] a tradition that did not reject the Enlightenment outright but rather engaged with its ideals critically, emphasizing, as I interpret it, order, hierarchy, and skepticism toward abstract visions of equality and perfectibility. Methodologically, Grimaldi's political thought reflects the influence of key Enlightenment figures, including the contributors to the *Encyclopédie*, Adam Ferguson, David Hume, and the Newtonian physiologist Albrecht von Haller. Yet it is Isaac Newton (though rarely named explicitly but present through parallels between gravity as a force and sensibility, a central element of Grimaldi's theoretical framework[7]) who exerts the deepest structural influence on Grimaldi's epistemological

[3] Franco Venturi, "Il movimento riformatore degli illuministi meridionali," *Rivista storica italiana* 74, no. 1 (1962): 5–26.

[4] Vincenzo Ferrone, *The Politics of Enlightenment. Republicanism, Constitutionalism, and the Rights of Man in Gaetano Filangieri*, trans. Sophus A. Reinert (London, New York,: Anthem Press, 2012), 52.

[5] Giulio Gentile, *La Repubblica Virtuosa. Jean Jacques Rousseau nel Settecento Politico Meridionale* (Napoli: Morano, 1989), 15–20.

[6] John Greville Agard Pocock, "Conservative Enlightenment and Democratic Revolutions: The American and French Cases in British Perspective?" *Government and Opposition* 24, no. 1 (1989): 81–105, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.1989.tb00109.x.

[7] Cf. Francescantonio Grimaldi, *Riflessioni sull' ineguaglianza tra gli uomini. Parte I* (Mazzola-Vocola, 1779), 164. *All translations from the original Italian, in this paper, are my own.

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framework: an influence that, though filtered through the Humean science of man—which remains central to his thought—runs deeper than scholars have thus far acknowledged. Echoing the *Regulae Philosophandi* of Newton's *Principia* (1687), with particular attention to the reduction of principles employed to explain a phenomenon,[8] the Italian philosopher eschews deductive speculations and hypotheses, beginning instead from *observation* and *analysis*. In doing so, he grounds his political philosophy in the empirical study of human nature. In this sense, Grimaldi rejects the assumption of universal principles from which to derive, through abstract syllogisms, knowledge of the particular and the real. Instead, he proceeds in the opposite direction: from what is known to what is lesser known, never misusing hypotheses,[9] in line with the Newtonian *hypotheses non fingo*. Additionally, there is an intention to approach morality with the same rigor as the most advanced physics. This reflects not only one of the goals of Newton's *Opticks* (1704) and the moral Newtonianism that emerged during the Scottish Enlightenment, but also the Newtonianism embraced by the leading figure of the Neapolitan School, Antonio Genovesi (1713–1769).[10] Informed by this Newtonian framework, Grimaldi critiques central tenets of Enlightenment political theory: most notably, the concept of the state of nature. Throughout *Riflessioni*, this notion is presented as a metaphysical fiction rooted in the rationalist tradition of natural law, linked to what the *Encyclopédie* decried as the *esprit de système* (spirit of system):[11] the imposition of abstract theoretical constructs onto complex historical, social and empirical realities. Grimaldi's empiricism, closely aligned with the historically grounded political anthropology of Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), rejects the notion of man as an isolated individual in a hypothetical pre-political state. Instead, he insists on understanding human beings as inherently social, whose inequalities must be interpreted through the lens of an observable and providential natural order.

[8] Grimaldi, *Riflessioni. Parte I,* 178–179.

[9] Ibid., 1.

[10] Cf. Niccolò Guasti, "Antonio Genovesi's *Diceosina*: Source of the Neapolitan Enlightenment," *History of European Ideas* 32, no. 4 (2006): 385–405. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2006.08.003.

[11] On this point cf. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment,* trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln, James P. Pettegrove (Princeton University Press, 2009), xiii.

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Situated within this broader Enlightenment endeavour to extend the epistemic virtues of natural philosophy to the domains of ethics and politics, Grimaldi's project aligns with a tradition that sought to render moral inquiry as precise and methodical as the physical sciences. His ambition is thus to bring the same clarity and systematic rigor to the moral and political domain. His *Riflessioni* exemplifies a conservative engagement with Enlightenment principles (particularly those concerned with reason, nature, and historical development) and reflects a wider tendency among some eighteenth-century thinkers to reconcile scientific reasoning with a defense of existing social hierarchies. Lastly, Grimaldi's epistemological principles are also shaped by the realist tradition inaugurated by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527). The fifteenth chapter of *Il Principe* (1532), where Machiavelli urges readers to set aside imaginary ideals of what a prince ought to be and instead to focus on how political power is actually exercised, serves as a methodological precedent. Grimaldi echoes this stance in his rejection of the state of nature and abstract theories of equality, insisting instead on grounding political analysis in observable realities. On this basis, he constructs his methodological framework from the very outset of his work, privileging empirical observation over speculative abstraction:

> Here, then, is the method of my philosophizing: I shall strive to understand man *as he truly is*, by analyzing his physical, moral, and political essence, while simultaneously seeking to identify the force of order that leads men into a state of inequality. I shall therefore distance myself from the hypotheses and systems that were so highly esteemed by those who addressed a similar subject before me; and *observations* alone shall guide my reflections.[12]

Such a methodological commitment marks a clear rupture with abstract theorizations detached from the observation of human nature, and constitutes the theoretical and epistemological foundation of the entire introductory section of the work. Grimaldi's insistence on grounding philosophical inquiry in the observation of human phenomena – rather than in pre-established systems or hypothetical constructs – reflects a deeper conviction that the study of man and of politics must follow the same principles of empirical rigor that govern the natural sciences. For this reason, his science of man explicitly rejects the spirit of system, "so

[12] Grimaldi, *Riflessioni. Parte I,* xvi.

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hostile to the progress of the sciences" and "not yet abolished in inquiries into man."[13]

Grimaldi's attention to the physical, moral, and political dimensions of human existence resists the construction of explanatory frameworks based on idealized principles, insisting instead on empirical investigation: on observation and comparation between phenomena.[14] This orientation is emblematic of a broader shift within Enlightenment thought toward experimental models of knowledge, wherein observation, induction, and methodological parsimony replace the deductive excesses of rationalist metaphysics. Faithful to this line of thought, Grimaldi's position privileges explanatory economy and experiential grounding over axiomatic ambition.[15]

Perfectibility and its Discontents

The robust Newtonian-empiricist framework outlined thus far is central to Grimaldi's treatment of the Enlightenment concept of perfectibility. While he does not reject the idea outright, and indeed shows appreciation to some extent, he approaches it with sustained skepticism, particularly when it is detached from a concrete understanding of human nature and the constraints imposed by the natural order. He does not deny its existence (on the contrary, he acknowledges it as a faculty of human nature) but he firmly rejects the idea that it is universally innate or a guarantee of moral progress. Perfectibility, for many Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, Condorcet, and Lord Monboddo, denoted the human capacity for self-transformation through reason, education, and institutional reform. While often celebrated as a foundation for social and moral improvement, particularly in reformist projects, Rousseau understood it as an ambivalent faculty: it enabled both improvement and corruption, depending on social conditions. However, despite theoretical divergences, these accounts share a common

[13] Grimaldi, *Riflessioni. Parte I,* xviii.

[14] Ibid., i–xix.

[15] I take the liberty of referring the reader to a more detailed version of this introductory section that can be found in Francesco Cataldi, "L'empirismo politico di Francescantonio Grimaldi in dialogo con l'Illuminismo europeo", in *EUROAD. Percorsi della cultura europea tra filosofia e* scienza, ed. Corrado Giarratana (Rubbettino, 2025).

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emphasis on human malleability and conceive of perfectibility as an open-ended process of individual and collective transformation. Grimaldi engages with this tradition, particularly in the second volume of his *Riflessioni*, adopting his habitual cautious realism and maintaining a critical distance from utopian visions of human development, explicitly challenging Rousseau's conceptualization, which, with regards to human beings

> considered only their physical qualities, with the mere potential for *moral perfectibility*, and then, through this potential, he constructed the entire being of man as moral and social. Thus, in the 'savage' he saw a different man from the one civilized. And in this way, instead of considering the moral man in the physical man, he transformed the physical man into a moral man; and instead of observing how the faculties of the savage could become those of the civilized man, he claimed that the savage and the civilized were two men of a different nature.[16]

Apart from reflecting the broader late Enlightenment project of grounding moral and political philosophy in naturalistic principles,[17] here Grimaldi offers a sharp and nuanced critique of Rousseau's method, accusing him of a fundamental error in reasoning: rather than analyzing how human faculties gradually develop from simple to complex, from "savage" to "civilized," the Genevan philosopher essentializes the difference, treating the two as fundamentally different beings. What Grimaldi objects to is the speculative leap Rousseau makes from a physical state (the savage man) to a moral and political construction (the civil man) based solely on the abstract notion of perfectibility: a criticism that ties directly into Grimaldi's broader rejection of philosophical systems.[18] In his view, Rousseau turns perfectibility into a defining essence, and uses it as the foundation for an entire political and moral vision. By doing so, Rousseau constructs an idealized anthropology that is neither empirically grounded nor reflective of natural, observable human development. Instead of studying how real human beings evolve under specific material, social, and physiological conditions, Rousseau invents two "types" of human

[16] Francescantonio Grimaldi, *Riflessioni sull' ineguaglianza tra gli uomini. Parte II* (Mazzola-Vocola, 1779), 25

[17] Steven Gaukroger, *The collapse of mechanism and the rise of sensibility. Science and the shaping of modernity, 1680–1760* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 453.

[18] Grimaldi, *Riflessioni. Parte I,* i–xix.

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nature to suit a philosophical narrative. Grimaldi sees this as a dangerous abstraction, one that falsely legitimizes sweeping theories about morality and equality. It is an idealizing rhetoric: one that flatters the imagination but obscures the complex and constrained reality of human development. In this light, the concept of perfectibility risks being appropriated as a tool of demagoguery when deployed as a political and metaphysical construct detached from observation and real natural foundations.

Elsewhere, Grimaldi is more direct in his rejection of the idea of unlimited perfectibility, a framework famously developed later by Condorcet. He warns not only against the notion itself but also against the act of persuading others to adopt it. Even in this case, for Grimaldi, the danger lies as much in the rhetorical force of such claims as in their speculative content: "If someone were to foolishly try to persuade us that the perfectibility of the human species is unlimited, he would deserve the contempt of the philosopher with good sense."[19] This statement makes clear that the fault lies not only in the concept itself, but in the intellectual recklessness of its dissemination. Such claims, Grimaldi suggests, operate rhetorically to advance a vision of human nature detached from the empirical constraints of the providential natural order. In this context, persuasion becomes a mechanism of distortion, where rationality is employed to lend speculative theories an appearance of plausibility. For Grimaldi, this is precisely the kind of misuse of reason that experimental philosophy should guard against. This perspective reflects not only a rejection of 'speculative optimism' but also a deeper philosophical alignment with the kind of political skepticism articulated by David Hume.[20] Grimaldi questions both the practical assumptions and the speculative reasoning that underpin idealized visions of human perfectibility, emphasizing instead the importance of empirical observation and epistemological caution, in line with a Newtonian attitude of restraint toward hypotheses and hypothetical frameworks. He acknowledges that human beings are capable of improvement, but insists that such development must be understood within the bounds of nature, which, as we will explore in the following sections, is conceived through

[19] Grimaldi, *Riflessioni. Parte II*, 57.

[20] On this point and for other affinities between Hume and Grimaldi cf. Spartaco Pupo, "Hume politico a Napoli. Per una rilettura della fortuna del «celebre scozzese» negli scritti degli illuministi meridionali," *Il Pensiero Politico* 53, no. 1 (2020): 3–35. https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11770/307484 (accessed April, 2025).

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a normative lens as an ordered reality governed by internal ends and inherent constraints.

Moreover, within Enlightenment thought, perfectibility is often conceived as the defining faculty that sets humans apart from animals: not merely as one capacity among others, but as the very trait that elevates the human species to the status of moral and rational agents capable of historical progress. A particularly influential and distinctive articulation of this idea appears in Rousseau's *Discours sur l'inégalité* (1755), where perfectibility does not refer to moral perfection, but to the open-ended human capacity to learn, adapt, and transform over time. This faculty, he argues, not only distinguishes humans from animals but also explains the transition from the state of nature to civil society. For Rousseau, perfectibility is thus an essential and uniquely human characteristic central to both the distinctiveness of our species and its potential for development. Grimaldi, on the other hand, from a position we might define as neo-naturalist and conservative, rejects such a conception of humanity, seeing it as rhetorical and demagogic; an abstract construction that overlooks the human being as it truly is: always and naturally situated within civil society, and conditioned by physiological mechanisms, individual sensitivities, and external circumstances. Additionally, humans are not qualitatively separated from animals at all. They are organisms of greater complexity, but still "a phenomenon, similar to all other phenomena of nature,"[21] to be studied as such. In this view, the distinction between *ars* and *natura* is clearly contested on multiple levels, and perfectibility is not conceived as an open-ended or defining faculty, but a conditioned possibility, dependent on concrete factors, always unequally distributed and grounded in nature. In other words, Rousseau's conception of perfectibility as an innate, universal, and distinctly human faculty is, for Grimaldi, a misleading abstraction. It risks grounding political systems in speculative ideals by attributing to human nature a rational and moral potential that not all individuals—due to their differing constitutions and circumstances—are able to actualize. The persuasive dimension of demagoguery arises precisely here: in the attempt to convince people that, despite natural inequalities, moral and political inequalities can be overcome, since they are the result of artifice and human conventions.

[21] Grimaldi, *Riflessioni. Parte I,* xviii.

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To synthesize the argument thus far: what emerges is a Newtonian epistemological framework that stands in sharp contrast to the speculative tendencies outlined above. Grimaldi's rejection of what may be termed "abstract perfectibility" crystallizes a realist framework grounded in observation, sustained skepticism toward abstraction, and a conception of nature that is at once normative and teleologically ordered. Rousseau's conception of perfectibility posits that humanity has the capacity to transcend natural inequality through culture, creating moral and political structures that mitigate physical differences. This vision, however, also introduces a sharp divide between nature and culture, suggesting that human beings can evolve beyond the constraints of their natural state. As previously mentioned, Grimaldi firmly rejects this dualism. For him, nature is not something that can be overcome, but rather a providential and rational order that defines the limits and direction of human development. In a key passage from the second volume of *Riflessioni*, this vision is clearly outlined:

> Rousseau, like all the others who, having invented the state of nature as a hypothesis, and the natural man according to their whims, did not care much about forming a clear idea of the voice of Nature, and instead followed the common prejudice that often confuses the imperfect with the natural in their determination of perfection; a prejudice that stems from the ignorance in which *the laws of order (which are the laws of Nature)* are found, which lead, step by step, an entity from its principle to perfection, to which the same laws direct it. They recognize in man the principle of perfection, but seem to believe that the development of that principle is against the order and destiny of Nature.[22]

Once again, within Grimaldi's framework, philosophical theories of perfectibility that are not rooted in scientific observation are not only speculative: they are potentially dangerous. They open the door to distorted views of human potential that can be exploited to justify political agendas under the guise of moral or rational improvement. Reiterating the central point of his critique, Grimaldi rejects Rousseau's idealized account and insists that any meaningful understanding of human nature must remain grounded in empirical observation. Theories that detach themselves from this grounding, whether they overstate the equality of individuals or imagine undetermined human perfectibility, contribute to

[22] Grimaldi, *Riflessioni. Parte II,* 29–30.

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a form of anthropological and political unreality.[23].In this gap between speculative "idealism" and empirical reality lies the risk of demagoguery. The theoretical account of demagoguery proposed here does not depend on the presence of a charismatic political leader or overt rhetorical performance. Rather, demagoguery is understood as a mode of persuasion rooted in false or unfounded assumptions, often presented as epistemically authoritative despite their speculative basis. Within the context of the late eighteenth century, Grimaldi's concerns reflect a deep awareness of how speculative philosophy, particularly in the form of idealized conceptions of human nature, could be mobilized for political purposes and manipulated to destabilizing effect. For him, the only safeguard is to anchor moral and political philosophy in nature as it is: teleological, ordered, unequal, and governed by laws discoverable through observation and experience, not invention or abstract reason. Other interpretations are, in Grimaldi's view, based on false assumptions about nature and human nature. Like the metaphysical and natural law theorists he critiques elsewhere,[24] utopian interpretations are themselves metapysical and tend to overestimate human equality across natural, moral, and political dimensions.[25] Such frameworks risk fostering unrealistic visions of human progress that, under specific historical conditions, can create fertile ground for demagogic tendencies[26]. Thus, Grimaldi's account suggests that certain views of perfectibility function less as empirical truths and more as idealized constructs.

[23] The importance of such theoretical framework in Rousseau's philosophy was well observed by Leo Strauss. In a seminal work, speaking of Rousseauian perfectibility: "[...] everything specifically human is acquired or ultimately depends on artifice or convention. Man is by nature almost infinitely perfectible. There are no natural obstacles to man's almost unlimited progress or to his power of liberating himself from evil. For the same reason, there are no natural obstacles to man's almost unlimited degradation. Man is by nature almost infinitely malleable." Cf. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, Illnois: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 271.

[24] Grimaldi, *Riflessioni. Parte I*, i–xix.

[25] While Rousseau, for example, maintains that there is a natural inequality, he ultimately considers moral and political inequalities to be products of convention.

[26] Although Grimaldi does not explicitly label utopian conceptions of perfectibility as demagogic, his critique – along with the broader arguments analyzed here—clearly targets the political dangers of abstract, rationalist, and overly optimistic conceptualizations of human nature.

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From this perspective, it can be interpreted as a form of rhetoric and demagoguery: a persuasive and emotionally compelling narrative that promises universal improvement while obscuring real constraints. If demagoguery is understood as the use of seductive, simplified, and emotionally charged ideas to mobilize belief, often at the expense of truth or complexity, speculative theories of perfectibility risk becoming just that. In this sense, the rhetoric of perfectibility performs a political function: it legitimizes utopian systems and revolutionary upheaval that ultimately rest on a false anthropology.

Newtonian Empiricism as a Conservative Response to Perfectibility

In order to better frame the connection between perfectibility and demagoguery as it emerges from Grimaldi's thought, it is necessary to turn to the broader question of the *ideological role* of Newtonianism, natural science, and physiology in his political thought. Before briefly addressing this point, an operative definition of ideology should be provided. By "ideology," I refer to the concept defined by Carl Joachim Friedrich as "action-related systems of ideas" that are intimately tied to the prevailing political and social order, with the aim either to transform or to defend it.[27] In this view, ideologies are not detached intellectual constructs; rather, they serve as frameworks for concrete action and influence the organization and direction of societies. Moreover, ideologies are intimately tied to theories of human nature: they embed particular assumptions about human characteristics, which then justify specific models of governance, social organization, and authority structures. Without an underlying theory of human nature, ideologies would lack coherence and normative force. In this case, the perfectibility (or imperfectibility) of human nature constitutes the anthropological core of the theory.

[27] Carl Joachim Friedrich, *Man and His Government: An Empirical Theory of Politics* (McGraw-Hill, 1963), 89. Although such a conceptualization belongs to a later intellectual context, it remains useful for analytical purposes. A moderate form of rational reconstruction, closely tied to contextualist methods and conceptual genalogy adopted in this paper, is employed here to elucidate the conceptual dynamics at work in Grimaldi's philosophy without the intention of retrojecting modern frameworks onto his thought.

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Conservatism, as a political ideology, holds that progressivism tends to place excessive confidence in transformation, in theoretical reason, and in the perfectibility of human beings. From a conservative perspective, reason is too often abstracted from the lived realities of human limitations, giving rise to utopian visions of society that neglect the complex, flawed, and historically situated nature of human life. Grimaldi's thought exemplifies a form of conservative Enlightenment that regards such aspirations with skepticism, favoring not an idealized model of human development but a more cautious and pragmatic approach to change: one that emphasizes continuity, tradition, and the stabilizing effects of institutions shaped by historical experience. It reflects a perspective on human affairs that is wary of abstract theorizing and revolutionary upheaval, placing its trust instead in the gradual refinement of institutions proven by practice.[28]

As seen thus far, within this framework, Newtonian science provides an epistemological foundation for such conservative outlook. Newtonianism, with its emphasis on empirical observation, economy of principles, analysis, and the rejection of speculative hypotheses, becomes more than a scientific method: when paired with a teleological conception of nature (Providence), it also provides a rationale for political and social hierarchy. The universe, in this view, is governed by a purposive order that can be discovered through observation and without metaphysical fancies such as the conceptions of perfectibility analyzed thus far. This providential order, grounded in sensory experience and manifested through history,[29] is seen as designed to "produce and preserve all beings of every species in a state of inequality."[30] In this way, Grimaldi's use of Newtonianism exemplifies an ideological project that seeks to naturalize and legitimize an unequal political

[28] Cf. Anthony O'Hear, "Conservatism," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London, New York: Routledge, 1998).

[29] In Grimaldi's political philosophy, history – or more precisely its political and ideological reinterpretation – emerges as the domain in which the "moral life of nations" takes shape, serving as a source of practical knowledge. This conception evolves alongside his ideological appropriation of natural science and can be considered another framework against the rhetorical and demagogic use of theoretical rationality. Cf. Melchiorre Delfico, *Elogio del marchese d. F.A. Grimaldi dei signori di Messimeri, patrizio di Genova e assessore di guerra e marina presso S.M.S.* (Vincenzo Orsino, 1784), XLIII.

[30] Grimaldi, *Riflessioni. Parte I,* 5.

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and social order, presenting hierarchy as the empirical expression of a providential design.[31]

This vision stands in direct contrast to the ideas of Rousseau, who famously challenged the notion of fixed hierarchies grounded in nature and rejected the belief that nature imposes a permanent social hierarchy. Pivotal to these conceptions is the idea of human perfectibility, analyzed earlier in this paper, as it encapsulates the capacity of human beings to develop and transform through culture and history. In his view, the inequalities found in civil society are not natural, but artificial products of social arrangements such as private property. Political inequalities, for Rousseau, are not justified by nature, but are historically contingent. Grimaldi, by contrast, holds a teleological view in which each being has a specific function or role that contributes to the overall harmony of the whole. Inequality, in this framework, is not an aberration to be overcome, but a fundamental aspect of natural and social order. Human societies, like the rest of nature, are structured in hierarchical ways that reflect an underlying purpose. For Grimaldi, this structure must be preserved in order to maintain stability and prevent the chaos that can result from utopian attempts to radically transform the human condition. In this light, Grimaldi's conservatism provides a philosophical justification for hierarchy and inequality. It warns against the dangers of ideologies that seek to impose idealized visions of perfectibility and equality without regard for the limits of human nature and the complexity of historical development. Such ideologies risk opening the door to demagoguery. This concern is borne out in the years following the publication of *Riflessioni*, particularly during the French (1789) and Neapolitan (1799) revolutions, when Jacobinism, deeply influenced by Rousseau's account of human nature, interpreted and mobilized his ideals to revolutionary ends.

In sum, Grimaldi's perspective highlights the dangers inherent in political ideologies grounded in unrealistic ideals of equality or human perfectibility. Such

[31] Grimaldi's appeal to Newtonian principles to justify hierarchical order reflects a familiar strategy within the conservative strand of Enlightenment thought, where appeals to empirical observation and natural law served to legitimize social inequality as part of a providential design. As in Burke's defense of inherited institutions through historical reasoning, or Maistre's theological reading of natural order, nature is not a realm of egalitarian potential but of divinely sanctioned gradation.

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visions tend to reduce complex realities to simplistic slogans and promises, generating illusions that can ultimately destabilize society. In contrast, his approach offers a philosophical defense of order and continuity, not by denying the possibility of progress, but by insisting that political life be rooted in a realistic understanding of human nature and the enduring structures that sustain a stable society. At the core of speculative theories of perfectibility lies not only a false view of human nature, but a serious rhetorical risk: by promising limitless improvement, they create political myths that demagogues are quick to exploit.

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Streszczenie

Doskonałość jako demagogia w filozofii politycznej Francescantonio Grimaldiego

Artykuł analizuje myśl polityczną Francescantonio Grimaldiego (1741–1784), przedstawiciela włoskiego Oświecenia, poprzez jego główne dzieło *Riflessioni sopra l'ineguaglianza degli uomini* (1779–1780). Przedmiotem analizy jest jego krytyka utopijnych koncepcji doskonalenia (*perfectibility*) oraz abstrakcyjnej racjonalności, interpretowana z perspektywy retoryki i demagogii. Kluczowe znaczenie ma tutaj epistemologiczne zaplecze Grimaldiego, zakorzenione w empiryzmie Newtonowskim i ukształtowane przez jego zaangażowanie w ówczesną filozofię. To właśnie ten fundament epistemologiczny prowadzi go do odrzucenia spekulacji metafizycznej na rzecz obserwacji empirycznej, zwłaszcza w kwestiach etycznych i politycznych. Autor artykułu dowodzi, że, według Grimaldiego, oderwane od doświadczenia, abstrakcyjne ujęcia doskonałości człowieka sprzyjają tworzeniu nierealistycznych i destabilizujących wizji natury ludzkiej, które mogą zostać wykorzystane jako narzędzie demagogicznej narracji. Podkreślając te zagrożenia, autor interpretuje Grimaldiego jako myśliciela Oświecenia o orientacji konserwatywnej, który prowadzi krytyczną i stanowiącą ostrzeżenie refleksję na temat politycznych konsekwencji fałszywych założeń dotyczących człowieka.

Keywords: Francescantonio Grimaldi, włoskie Oświecenie, myśl Newtona, doskonałość, demagogia, retoryka, Rousseau

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Zusammenfassung

Perfektion als Demagogie in der politischen Philosophie von Francescantonio Grimaldi

Der Artikel analysiert das politische Denken von Francescantonio Grimaldi (1741–1784), einem Vertreter der italienischen Aufklärung, anhand seines Hauptwerks *Riflessioni sopra l'ineguaglianza degli uomini* (1779–1780). Gegenstand der Analyse ist seine Kritik an utopischen Konzepten der Perfektion (*perfectibility*) und der abstrakten Rationalität, interpretiert aus der Perspektive der Rhetorik und Demagogie. Von zentraler Bedeutung ist hier Grimaldis epistemologischer Hintergrund, der in Newtons Empirismus verwurzelt ist und durch sein Engagement in der damaligen Philosophie geprägt wurde. Genau dieses epistemologische Fundament führt ihn dazu, metaphysische Spekulationen zugunsten empirischer Beobachtungen abzulehnen, insbesondere in ethischen und politischen Fragen. Der Autor des Artikels argumentiert, dass laut Grimaldi abstrakte Vorstellungen von der Vollkommenheit des Menschen, die von der Erfahrung losgelöst sind, zur Entstehung unrealistischer und destabilisierender Vorstellungen von der menschlichen Natur beitragen, die als Instrument für demagogische Narrative genutzt werden können. Der Autor betont diese Gefahren und interpretiert Grimaldi als einen konservativ orientierten Denker der Aufklärung, der eine kritische und warnende Reflexion über die politischen Konsequenzen falscher Annahmen über den Menschen anstellt.

Schlüsselwörter: Francescantonio Grimaldi, italienische Aufklärung, Newtons Gedanke, Perfektion, Demagogie, Rhetorik, Rousseau

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