

Preface

The theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher was not only the founder of modern Platonic scholarship, but also acknowledged as his master by August Boeckh, who in his turn ranks with Gottfried Hermann as one of the twin founders of modern classical scholarship in general. In a striking passage of his *Aesthetik*, he remarks about the need to ground the appreciation of a work of art in its historical context:

So ist also eigentlich ein Kunstwerk auch eingewurzelt in seinen Grund und Boden, in seine Umgebung. Es verliert schon seine Bedeutung, wenn es aus dieser Umgebung herausgerissen wird und in den Verkehr übergeht. Es ist wie etwas, das aus dem Feuer gerettet ist und nun Brandflecken trägt.

Really and truly then a work of art is also rooted in its native soil, its ambience. It loses its significance, if it is wrenched out of this ambience and put into circulation. It is like something rescued from the fire, still bearing the marks of its burning.

This does not mean that the work of art does not possess absolute value. But its origins can never be neglected.

G. W. F. Hegel, who lectured in the 1820s on aesthetics alternately with Schleiermacher at Berlin, was to repeat this insistence. Even though in the last analysis the identity of particular characters and particular historical details taken up into the work of art may no longer be important, we must check their credentials before they disappear.

Nowadays a student in a typical department of philosophy would probably scan the lecture lists for a course on aesthetics in vain. But both Hegel and Schleiermacher were philosophers, and the striking feature of their aesthetic theories is that they do not wish to exclude philosophy—artistically presented philosophy, as Greek philosophy is—from them. The form is part of the content and, in the Greek world, the form raised certain expectations in its audience. A philosophical poem, for example, was not simply a prose discourse coated with literary, and on the whole rather regrettable, sugar. That is not true even of the Lucretius who uses this image. Nor is a dialogue

merely a convenient pedagogic means of setting out simply views which otherwise might tax or fatigue the amateur reader with his limited attention span. All ancient literary forms are grounded in and structured by pre-literary, and certainly pre-philosophical, usages. They presuppose at least one interlocutor: many of them presuppose in that role the whole polis, even the pan-Hellenic community. A polis might well offer a more motley and less schooled audience than that of the university lecture. Yet the authors who present themselves before it will be alert to their listeners' diversity. Schleiermacher was a Prussian clergyman, but he understood amazingly well that literary art cannot always be taken *au grand sérieux* :

Die Kunst beweist daher ihre Freiheit durch die spielende und lössere Seite, und ihre innere Notwendigkeit durch die symbolische und höhere. (Die größten Künstler zeigen uns dieses Zusammengehören oft in einer sehr leicht mißverständlichen Unmittelbarkeit . . .).

Art therefore shows its freedom through the playful, less trammelled side, and its inner necessity through its symbolic, higher side. (The greatest artists show us this relation quite often with a very easily misunderstood directness.)

Among the examples of this he cites Shakespeare, whose puns are defended, and Plato.

Wilamowitz used to speak of the disaster that overtook German education in the nineteenth century. It has taken a long time for the modern interpreter of Plato or Aristotle to rise to Schleiermacher's insight, that a Greek philosophical work is essentially an act of dialogue. Schleiermacher added to the statement of his *Aesthetik* a whole hermeneutic doctrine. It had a twofold import. The interpreter must concern himself carefully with the elucidation of the meaningful connections within language. He must also seek for the formation of language and its thought-content within the creative individuality of the speaker or author.

This sanctions in the event both grammatical and psychological explanation. Grammar will naturally concern itself not only with the details of linguistic forms, but also with the entire context of language and its spiritual content. Psychology will seek the origin of language in the creative spiritual processes within the author's individuality. The original creative process led from psychology—what Schleiermacher calls the *Keimentschluss* or seminal decision—to grammar. Understanding the author leads from grammar to psychology.

Yet, although every student of Wilamowitz or his pupil Eduard Fraenkel on the poets will recognize these scholars as in Schleiermacher's tradition, the literary or pre-philosophical approach to

philosophers has often seemed arbitrary and irrelevant, as irrelevant as talk about "spirit." Gottlob Frege said that logical explanation in his day was "psychologisch verseucht," "sick to death with psychology." If a man is concerned with truth, why trouble about his cast of mind? And if he says what he means, in a close, naked, natural way of speaking, do style and convention matter?

But the notion that we have access to the truth (whatever that may mean) through abstractions, which really means in an inhuman way, is an illusion. What is accessible is thought, and thought is clothed in language. Hence the philosopher and the philologist do in fact meet in a common quest.

The student of Greek philosophy then must know Greek. But more than this. He must study the prejudices and expectations about etiquette of a society often tantalizingly different from our own. There is an etiquette even of the intellect. We have been taught to crave the absolute, and wars have been fought by those who were convinced they had this privileged key to reality. The Greeks certainly fought enough wars. But their civilization in its best moments was based on the recognition of compromise. There is no absolute right in the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey's* right is only that of a man to his wife and family and home. The delicate reserve that pervades the Greek of Plato and Menander, philosopher and poet, with its play of particles, its optatives, its modal verbs, is a noble Athenian contribution to this national insight.

Compromise is the basis of political life, and the dinner party was peculiarly the place where such compromises were evident. Again, already Homer knew this, when in the *Odyssey* he condemned the Centaurs, and this is the symbolism of the meal at which Priam and Achilles learn to accept death at the end of the *Iliad*. Xenophanes shows that the religious and philosophical meal persisted, as it does in the *Symposia* of both Plato and Xenophon.

But to accept this ambience and this language is already to place limitations on the kind of truth at which such inquiries may arrive, since who is very clear next day about what seemed so plausible the night before? Who has not yielded a point for the sake of his table companions and his host which more privately he might have cherished to the death? What is important about these occasions is not so much the absolute claims of whatever truth was agreed, since even agreement may only be an agreement to differ, but our impressions about the character of our fellow guests. And there we may well set more store by the man who was able to lighten a heavy moment with a well-timed anecdote that raised a laugh than by the professor who set out to summarize the views of Kant for his glassy-eyed listeners.

These are the kinds of boundaries between which Plato so often moves, even when he abandons the formal setting of the dinner party while retaining the essential dialogue (the “feast of words”). The vexatious imprecision of his arguments is rightly pinpointed by scholars. Paradoxically, it has never affected his status as one of the greatest luminaries of our civilization. This is because everyone recognizes that *ἀπορία* may sometimes be the right strategy in certain kinds of discourse, in company, certainly, but also in encounter with the numinous. St. Augustine’s *omnia exeunt in mysterium* is simply another way of putting this. Both sorts of discourse coalesce at a locus with which, as the instance of Xenophanes already mentioned proves, pagan antiquity was perfectly well acquainted, the sacred meal.

We need not go as far back as Augustine. The end of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is familiar. Increasingly nowadays, when we are seeking to do justice to the oeuvre, Wittgenstein’s life and character also enter into evidence; his quixotic village schoolmastering, his service as a hospital porter. Coming from the British empirical tradition, Sir Frederick Ayer in the 1930s took the Viennese Circle to which Wittgenstein belonged to be saying that metaphysical assertions, since they could not be empirically validated, were worthless. What they were really saying is that they were nonsense. But nonsense has its rights too, and this is also part of one kind of British, or English, tradition. It is curious that anyone from the same University and College as Lewis Carroll, the mathematician Charles Dodgson, should not have understood this. In the face of the mystery constituted by the universe (“*alles, was der Fall ist*”) perplexity is a proper reaction, and statements in and about the presence of mystery may well be technically nonsensical. There is no *techne* to deal with them, and this is seen exactly at the moment in any civilization when technical knowledge is promising its best fruits and is becoming best understood. But since this means that the claim to reduce the universe to a matter of technical expertise is fraught with uncharted difficulties, absolute knowledge of the truth (to be totally *sophos*) is *hybris* for all men. All that is left is *philo-sophia*, and the *philo-sophos* must exhibit *sophrosyne*, not simply as a demonstration of disinterested morals, but as the proof of his fitness for his profession. Pythagoras, another mathematician, was the first to speak of the *philosophos*. It is part of the same mentality that he also was a religious leader.

This is why Plato, mathematician and mystic, is so concerned with the moral stance of his participants in dialogue. Whatever the vagueness and ambiguities of their conclusions, which may be regarded as inevitable, the important question, after all, is whether they are

living out their lives honorably, authentically, or not. That is a question that may not be avoided.



The essays printed in this volume are offered as examples of the modern approach to Greek philosophy. Already that philosophy is more than a synchronous dialogue. When Plato makes Socrates interrogate Parmenides, he is paying homage to the diachronic possibly of a "dialogue des absents," even a "dialogue des morts." In his turn, Socrates himself spoke ambiguously to posterity, and this posthumous conversation between old and new has continued down the ages with all the philosophers of antiquity just as much as it has continued with the poets.

Greek philosophy began on the fringes of its world, and perhaps in a too little explored dialogue with non-Greek world-views already old. Asia Minor in particular had its own contribution to make whether to religion or art. It is right that we should give pride of place to an examination of the first fragment of Heraclitus of Ephesus, since the influence of Heraclitus on Plato—and on Marx—is immeasurable. But that is why the comparison of Aristotle and Descartes on the soul is also profoundly relevant to our inquiry. In the intervening perspective, one of our most exciting pieces shows that a civilization too long silent in this inherited discourse, the Arab, is now beginning to be heard. If the conclusions drawn there are correct, how much the modern exegete will have to learn about the reliability of his texts! Elsewhere, a Christian apologist is shown to be a repository of Platonic and Stoic doctrine. What another Christian made of the tradition in Byzantium is now revealed in a poem published for the first time.

In elucidating the Greek thinkers, we have of course to listen very carefully to the idioms and patterns of a language not our own. Some of our most distinguished contributors excel in precisely this sensitivity. There is no way round this. Translations simply will not do. As the study of Greek diminishes and vanishes in the educational reforms of our time, we are both cheating our children, and impoverishing the understanding of our civilization, in a frightening way. Since the end of antiquity, Europe has always striven towards Greek. This is true even of the Middle Ages, so wrongly disparaged by the Greekless Petrarch. Thomas Aquinas had William of Moerbeke to help him, and Dante, whose poem has after all a Greek title, paraded what bits he thought he knew. We will not return to Chartres by ignoring

Greek, but to a remote barbarism unknown since the second millennium before Christ.

How the Greek philosophers organized their work in genres is another basic inquiry. Plato is a supreme literary artist glittering with kaleidoscopic contradictions, and a number of our papers focus on different facets of his iridescent genius, including his awareness that there are different types of time (Bergson). Is there a genre that will accommodate all these discrepancies, and is it perhaps what Plato always said it was, dialectic?

His dramatic qualities are clearly an outgrowth of his dialectic, and they commit him to a particular approach to truth, as the irresolutions of the Attic dramas still attest. We are told that he was an avid student of the mimes of Sophron, and this perhaps explains some of his irony, which may be diagnosed as attenuated laughter. But in failing to resolve his problems more decidedly or logically, in using faulty and imprecise methods, was he perhaps also more in debt to the Sophists than his language prepares us to believe? Were they much more influential as thinkers than we are commonly led to suppose, and was the ambiguity of Plato's attitude to them the result of the shock to the dialogic and musical principle they upheld administered first by Aristophanes, and culminating, as he perceived it, in the hemlock? How interesting, in any case, that he should have sought to come to final terms with Aristophanes in a *Symposium*, almost a Last Supper.

Aristotle, *il maestro di color che sanno*, "the master of those that know" according to Dante, has enjoyed a chequered career in the history of European thought. His universal brilliance is beyond question. Is it heresy to suggest that he might have been less criticized at certain periods if his literary dialogues with their *aureum flumen orationis* had survived? What we have is still dialogic, one side of a telephone conversation whose other end we cannot hear. But his laconic and staccato manner is heard too easily as dogma. This is unfair to the teacher of Alexander the Great, and to the staggering statement at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* that all men by nature stretch out for knowledge, one of the most gloriously optimistic remarks in history. Perhaps it is the proof that he was too much the product of his own people, with their prejudices as well as their strengths. Or perhaps again we have simply been in the habit of distinguishing too sharply between the Greek and Hebrew meanings of "know." Clearly Homer uses *εἰδώς* in more than an intellectual sense, and when on the façade of the Library of Celsus at Ephesus we find the four allegorical statues of Sophia, Arete, Ennoia and

Episteme we see that even in the age of Hadrian the intellectual and moral were not separated.

Marx once asserted that he was no Marxist, and Aristotelians have not always been faithful to their master's many-sided genius. Our volume pleads for a continuation of dialogue, with him, with the other thinkers discussed in it and, more largely, with all the indispensable founders of our civilization who first asked the kinds of questions that turned out to be best discussed "after physics"—after physics and after dinner.



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