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*What is Philosophy?**

Toward the beginning of the *Symposium*, we find Socrates and his friend Aristodemus headed to a banquet at Agathon's. Socrates is looking forward to the event. He had avoided Agathon's victory feast the day before because he was afraid of "the crowd" (τὸν ὄχλον; 174a); the more intimate banquet, however, is important enough for him to take a bath, oil himself, and even wear slippers. He wants to look beautiful, he says, "when going to beauty" (174a).¹

Despite Socrates' eagerness to join the party, his conduct on the way is awkward. Having encouraged the uninvited Aristodemus to come along, Socrates begins to lag behind, so that his companion ends up arriving at Agathon's house alone. Socrates comes later, having "turned his mind toward himself" (τὸν οὖν Σωκράτη ἑαυτῷ πῶς προσέχοντα τὸν νοῦν; 174d).² Even a slave who calls out to invite him in does not succeed in disrupting Socrates' contemplation. He joins the party, but he does so on his own terms, when he decides the time has come. At the very beginning of the *Symposium*, then, Socrates appears as a figure who exists in two worlds—one could perhaps say, between them.³ He is an outsider who is quite happy to participate in the activities that occur inside the society to which he belongs; or, conversely, he is an insider who is capable of transcending the mainstream, without however despising it; or, yet again, Socrates is a marginal figure who is nevertheless at home in the center. The philosopher is not shown as an alienated outsider—not in the opening pages of the *Symposium*.

The end of the dialogue returns to its initial characterization of Socrates, which it reaffirms but also nuances. Thus, Alcibiades in his speech likens Socrates to Silenus and the satyr Marsyas, beings half human, half beast who, close to the god Dionysus, possessed fabulous gifts that raised them above regular human society. In the case of Marsyas, however, these gifts proved to be very dangerous in the end: Apollo flayed him alive for challenging him in a flute-playing contest. Here we get a first hint that the margins may not always be a comfortable place for the philosopher to dwell in.

* This is the revised version of a lecture that I delivered at Maynooth University on June 14, 2017, at the invitation of Professor William Desmond of the Philosophy Department. I am grateful to Professor Desmond and to all my future colleagues for their warm reception.

¹ I am quoting R.E. Allen's translation, unless otherwise indicated: *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 2: *The Symposium* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

² My translation.

³ The reader familiar with William Desmond's philosophy of the "between" will notice considerable common ground between his conception of philosophy and the ideas expressed in this essay. On the philosopher as a figure existing "between," see, for example, Desmond's booklet *Being Between: Conditions of Irish Thought* (Galway: Centre for Irish Studies; Inverin, Co. Galway: Leabhar Breac, 2008).

Alcibiades' eulogy to Socrates continues. The philosopher's siren speech always manages to seduce this handsome but superficial young man, despite the fact that he entirely lacks a philosophic disposition: yet, in Socrates' presence he feels shame that, instead of turning to himself, he indulges in the honors bestowed upon him "by the multitude" (ὕπὸ τῶν πολλῶν; 216b). The tension is so terrible that Alcibiades has often wished to see his beloved teacher dead—or, as he puts it more obliquely, to see him no longer "being among humans" (αὐτὸν μὴ ὄντα ἐν ἀνθρώποις; 216c).⁴ Thus, the space that the philosopher occupies turns out to be precarious: the outsider at the inside fascinates intensely, kindling fervent admiration and love—until that love turns into resentment and hate.

Is it perhaps for this reason that Socrates makes sure his young admirers do not come too close? At any rate, when Alcibiades offers himself to Socrates physically, the latter discreetly declines. They sleep under the same blanket, but at the end of the night, the experience was as though Alcibiades had "slept with a father or an elder brother" (219d). No doubt there is also a pedagogical intention here on the part of the philosopher, who endeavors to teach Alcibiades the ascent from merely physical beauty to higher forms, and even to Beauty itself.

Let us interrupt our reading of the *Symposium* here, even though we have certainly not exhausted the motifs of Socrates' liminal existence in the dialogue. I would like to suggest that Plato's characterization of the philosopher retains all its value, some 2,400 years after it was composed. Philosophy leads a precarious existence that oscillates between immanence and transcendence in relation to every field of human experience. In this field, I distinguish four axes, namely (in addition to philosophy itself), the narrative, the religious, and the political.⁵

1. *Philosophy and Narrative*

Historically, philosophy arose out of story, which the Greeks called μῦθος. In particular, μῦθος is a significant story, one in which something is at stake for the speaker. Its truth is guaranteed by the Muses.⁶ Story—for which the preferred theoretical term now is "narrative"—is closer to human experience than philosophy. While all human beings tell stories to understand themselves and their place in the world,⁷ philosophy comes into existence only once such stories are subjected to critical examination. This happened in ancient Greece in what Wilhelm Nestle influentially termed the movement "from μῦθος to λόγος."⁸ Although Nestle's account of progress from "myth" to "reason" has been

⁴ My translation.

⁵ One is entitled to hear an echo here of Hegel's claim concerning the co-constitutionality of philosophy, art, religion, and politics in the unfolding of Spirit. While not wishing to embrace the Hegelian metaphysics, I believe Hegel was right in emphasizing the unity of the cultural field within which philosophy exists.

⁶ For this meaning of μῦθος, see Robert L. Fowler, "Mythos and Logos," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 131 (2011): 45–66, esp. 53.

⁷ This is due to the fact that consciousness has a narrative structure. On this point, see for example the helpful discussion in Owen Flanagan, *Consciousness Reconsidered* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), esp. 197–200 ("The Narrative Structure of Self-Representation"). Also see Richard Kearney, *On Stories, Thinking in Action* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), esp. chap. 1: "Where Do Stories Come From?" (3–14).

⁸ See Wilhelm Nestle, *Vom Mythos zum Logos. Die Selbstentfaltung des griechischen Denkens von Homer bis auf die Sophistik und Sokrates*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1942; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1978).

criticized as “simplistic”⁹ (and scholarship on this question has undoubtedly made progress since his seminal work), Nestle did not intend to claim that the development of early Greek thought was tantamount to some kind of final “overcoming” of myth. Rather, Nestle spoke of a “gradual movement apart” in the relationship between μῦθος and λόγος, despite their “manifold mutual interpenetration.”¹⁰ We can therefore say, in the spirit of Nestle himself, that the movement in question is never complete: philosophy never finally “emancipates” itself from story. Or, rather, if it does, it turns into science.

The *Symposium* testifies to the complicated relationship between μῦθος and λόγος. Plato approaches the question of love, ἔρως, through a succession of speeches, most of which are dominated by mythological elements. The central speech, Socrates’ own, even relates a view of love that Socrates declares to have received directly from a priestess, Diotima. The myth-based conceptions of love are, however, not accepted uncritically. The succession of speeches itself suggests an ascent from more basic to more complete accounts, which build on the ones preceding them. A remark from the beginning of Eryximachus’s speech illustrates Plato’s method: “Well, since Pausanias began his speech beautifully but didn’t end it satisfactorily, it seems it’s up to me to try to bring the account to a conclusion” (185e–186a).

Not only is Plato’s “theory” of ἔρως in the *Symposium* distilled from mythological elements; Plato inscribes the dialogue explicitly—though fictionally—into a network of oral transmission that is typical of myth. At the time when Apollodorus relates the story of the banquet at Agathon’s, the event has already receded into such a distant past that many of the accounts circulating about it have become nebulous. What we hear in the *Symposium* is, we are told, a more reliable version of the story, although even its origins are somewhat tangled. Apollodorus, who was not one of the guests that night, learned the story from Aristodemus, and even confirmed its veracity with Socrates. Yet the story we hear has an additional layer of mediation, for Plato makes us overhear a conversation between Apollodorus and an unnamed companion in which Apollodorus tells the latter of an account of the party that he recently gave to Glaucon. The element of confusion is deliberate here. Rather than giving us a “theory” of love, Plato introduces us into a complicated web of human relationships in which the story of Agathon’s banquet is transmitted due to its existential interest and significance.

Philosophy is not always as entangled in story as in Plato’s case. Aristotle moved away from the literary form of the dialogue. Whereas the early Aristotle composed many writings—now lost apart from a few fragments—after the fashion of his teacher, the mature works that have come down to us are all treatises or lecture notes.¹¹ Aristotle, however, gives up only one of the two central features of story, namely, chronological sequence. (The lectures of his *Metaphysics*, say, are not arranged in the order in which things have come to be, but rather according to the structure of causal knowledge.) He

⁹ The term “simplistic” occurs in the very first line of the abstract preceding Fowler’s essay, “Mythos and Logos” (cited in note 6 above), 45.

¹⁰ Nestle, *Vom Mythos zum Logos*, 18–19: “Trotz dieser vielfachen gegenseitigen Durchdringung ist aber doch ein allmähliches Auseinandertreten von Mythos und Logos unverkennbar, seit einmal das kritische Denken bei den Griechen erwacht ist, d.h. seit dem 6. Jahrhundert v. Chr.”

¹¹ Anton-Hermann Chroust’s research has shed much light on Aristotle’s lost dialogues; see, in particular, *Aristotle: New Light on His Life and on Some of His Lost Works*, vol. 2: *Observations on Some of Aristotle’s Lost Works*, Routledge Library Editions (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

retains the other, which is polysemy, at least in an attenuated form: his theory of focal meaning. The most important instance of this theory concerns the meaning of “being.” This may be said in many ways, but all of them are intelligible only in relation to *one* privileged sense (πρὸς ἓν).¹² Aristotle’s theory of focal meaning allows him to offer a unified account of reality which nonetheless acknowledges irreducible difference. Thus, none of the categories is reducible to any of the others; yet they are all said in relation to—and they cannot exist without—the first, substance. Again, there are several kinds of substances, which do not have a common source, but to account for their movement we have to assume that they are oriented toward a first, the Unmoved Mover.

In addition to the structure of the πρὸς ἓν, the Stagirite recognizes the importance of analogy in the texture of the world: “For in every category of Being the analogous (τὸ ἀνάλογον) is present—as the straight is in length, so is the level in surface, perhaps in number the odd and in color the white.”¹³ Πρὸς ἓν and analogy are not the same, in that the former requires two terms, the latter four; nonetheless both express a view of reality as a differentiated whole whose levels, while referring to each other, are not able to be collapsed into each other. Since Aristotle regards analogy as the foundation of metaphor,¹⁴ there is still a proximity in his thought between scientific knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) and story.

We can understand the movement that occurs within philosophy toward a more scientific method as a movement toward univocity.¹⁵ Science does not tolerate polysemy. A syllogism does not allow valid conclusions if its terms carry different meanings in the major and the minor premises. Even more so, quantitative science could not function if there were ambiguity within the numbers it employs. Put differently, there can be good, more good, and perhaps even a highest Good, but there is no such thing as more and most of the numbers 1 or 27. Narrative, on the other hand, thrives on the ambiguity of metaphor. The fact that a single term can have different meanings opens the text up to a multiplicity of interpretations that give it potential significance beyond the particular historical context in which it was composed. If we still read Plato’s *Symposium*, this is because the dialogue expresses transcendent truths through images—even mythological images, like Aristophanes’ story of the two halves. Philosophy, one could perhaps say, oscillates between two poles: on the one hand, its ground in the polysemy of story; on the other hand, the univocity of science. The sifting of story through the sieve of critical inquiry as well as the translation of story into theory occupy the middle ground.

When philosophy tends toward the scientific mode, as it has in much of modern thought, the price it pays for its precision is loss of existential significance. It sheds the ability to tell a story to help structure human consciousness, and therefore establish a sense of self. Understood scientifically, philosophy is no longer a way of life that en-

¹² For a classical treatment of πρὸς ἓν equivocity, see Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian “Metaphysics”*: A Study in the Greek Background of Mediaeval Thought, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), 107–35, esp. 118–23. The term “focal meaning” was coined by G. E. L. Owen, “Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle,” in *Aristotle and Plato in the Mid-Fourth Century*, ed. Ingemar Düring and G. E. L. Owen, *Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia* 11 (Gothenburg: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1960), 163–90.

¹³ *Met.* N6, 1093b18–21; the translation is borrowed from Owens, *Doctrine of Being*, 123.

¹⁴ For references, see Owens, *Doctrine of Being*, 123 n. 67.

¹⁵ To point again to parallels between William Desmond’s thinking and mine, univocity is one of the four senses of being that Desmond distinguishes in his metaphysics. See *Being and the Between*, SUNY Series in Philosophy (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1995), esp. 47–83.

deavors to make sense of “it all,” but becomes a discipline among many.¹⁶ It is for this reason that Heidegger speaks of the “end of philosophy” while emphasizing that a “task of thinking” remains, a task guided by a poetic attitude toward language.¹⁷ Scientific philosophy also, like all science, loses its ability to reach for truth that transcends history. There is a reason why a contemporary physician no longer studies Avicenna’s *Canon*: the progress of medicine has superseded earlier forms of medical knowledge in a decisive manner. The insights about love in the *Symposium* will never be left behind in this way.

Christian thought remains inextricably tied to story, unless it misunderstands itself fundamentally. Just as λόγος arose from the ground of μῦθος in ancient Greece, so in the Christian era of thought theology and philosophy (which were at first indistinguishable) came to be as an attempt to clarify the richly ambiguous biblical text. For a long time, biblical commentaries typified the nature of Christian reflection; that is to say, such reflection remained tied to the narrative logic of the biblical text. A decisive rupture occurred only in the thirteenth century, when—among other factors—the introduction of Aristotelian metaphysics into the Christian West led to the ideal of theology as a “science.” At that point we encounter texts such as Aquinas’s great *Summa theologiae*, in which the rigor of reasoning and system creates the edifice of a *scientia divina*.¹⁸ This edifice is as impressive as it is dry: Aquinas’s scientific language, which carefully distinguishes meanings and deploys analogies in a tightly controlled manner, cannot be as enjoyable and edifying to read as, for example, the rhetorically brilliant narrative of Augustine’s *Confessions*. The *Summa* is about as far as Christian thought can go toward science without losing itself.

2. Philosophy and the Divine

The stories upon which philosophy builds are not just fairy tales. We have already seen that the Greeks endowed μῦθος with a particular authority, that of the Muses. “Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα,” the text of the *Odyssey* famously begins: “Of a man sing me, o Muse . . .” The notion that the poet relays a voice, or lends his or her voice to a message received from a higher authority, is by no means obsolete. In one of his last songs, “Going Home,” the late Leonard Cohen audaciously wrote of himself in the third person, as someone addressed by a higher power:

He wants to write a love song
An anthem of forgiving
A manual for living with defeat
A cry above the suffering
A sacrifice recovering
But that isn’t what I need him
To complete

¹⁶ On the topic of philosophy as a way of life, I refer to the well-known book by Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

¹⁷ See Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” trans. Joan Stambaugh, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1977), 373–92.

¹⁸ I have explored this topic in my 2003 Aquinas Lecture at Maynooth; see “*Sacra pagina* or *scientia divina*? Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas and the Nature of the Theological Project,” in *Thomas Aquinas, Teacher and Scholar: The Aquinas Lectures at Maynooth, volume 2: 2002–2010*, ed. James McEvoy, Michael W. Dunne, and Julia Hynes (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), 50–70.

I want him to be certain
 That he doesn't have a burden
 That he doesn't need a vision
 That he only has permission
 To do my instant bidding
 Which is to say what I have told him
 To repeat¹⁹

All the poet must do is say what he or she has been told to repeat. There is no burden to be original, to have what we call a "vision." All that comes from elsewhere.

The insight that the poet expresses here concerns the radical heteronomy of human existence. Not only have we been "thrown" into a world not of our own choosing, as Heidegger would say; the stories that make sense of it all come to us from elsewhere: from the depths of history, like the Homeric myths, or from on high, like biblical revelation—and perhaps these two types of origin are in fact the same.²⁰ These stories constitute the ground on which we stand, even if we choose to question or repudiate them.

Poetry, then, is close to prophecy. In some cases, they even coincide, as we can see in some books of the Old Testament, like the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. One of the differences between poetry and prophecy no doubt concerns the explicit divine authority that the prophet claims, as well as the specifically religious message he or she conveys.

If what I have just said is true, then philosophy stands in a necessary relationship with the divine. It is a reflection on the meaning of human existence within the horizon of authoritative stories associated with a divine source.²¹ In the case of much of Western philosophy, these stories have been the biblical ones that talk about God's relationship with his people, and his life among men aimed to bring back home a humanity that has departed and deviated from its source.

For a philosopher wishing to distance him- or herself from the religious tradition, there are two ways to attempt to shake off the influence of its stories: one, which we have already touched upon, is the insistence on univocal language. Thus, Wittgenstein in his justly famous "Lecture on Ethics" declares that ethics, understood as a science of absolute value, is an impossible endeavor. For we cannot know anything like a good in it-

¹⁹ I have previously commented on this Cohen song in my essay, "Vernacularity and Alienation," *Existentialia* 23 (2013): 139–54.

²⁰ The idea according to which Christian revelation is the pleroma of a more general revelation in which God spoke to all human beings at the beginning of history is Augustinian. In the *Retractationes* (Book I, chapter 12) the Bishop of Hippo declared: "for the thing itself that is now called the 'Christian' religion existed also among the ancients and was not absent from the beginning of the human race, until Christ came in the flesh, from which point true religion, which already existed, began to be called 'Christian'" — *nam res ipsa, quae nunc Christiana religio nuncupatur, erat et apud antiquos nec defuit ab initio generis humani, quousque Christus ueniret in carne, unde uera religio, quae iam erat, coepit appellari Christiana* (Sancti Aureli Augustini *Retractationum libri duo*, ed. Pius Knöll, Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum 36 [Vienna: Tempsky; Leipzig: Freytag, 1902], 58; my translation). On this Augustinian assumption, since divine inspiration comes from the depths of history, treating the biblical texts as historical documents is not fundamentally opposed to regarding Scripture as divinely inspired.

²¹ This is a claim Josef Pieper makes in his book, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, trans. E. Christian Kopff (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2010), esp. 63: "After and insofar as I as a person am actually participating in a tradition or, to put it another way, insofar as I actually accept the *tradita* of sacred tradition as truth for whatever reasons (but of course not uncritically or arbitrarily), then and only then do I have the capacity to practice philosophy seriously"

self, which does not correspond to an empirical state of affairs; all we know is particular goods, especially if they are measurable quantitatively: “This man is a good runner,” Wittgenstein explains, “simply means that he runs a certain number of miles in a certain number of minutes”²² If we are always limited to such empirically verifiable statements, then, Wittgenstein continues, “we cannot write a scientific book, the subject matter of which could be intrinsically sublime, and above all other subject matters.”²³ In his very disciplined insistence on empirically based, univocal, scientific language Wittgenstein reduces philosophy to inquiry regarding the proper usage of terms. He realizes that this conception constitutes a narrowing of the scope of philosophical questioning, but he believes his asceticism is necessary to safeguard the intellectual integrity of the philosophical enterprise. Furthermore, Wittgenstein sees with great clarity what the problem is regarding ethical and religious language: it is metaphorical. He writes:

Now all religious terms seem in this sense to be used as similes or allegorically. For when we speak of God and that he sees everything and when we kneel and pray to him all our terms and actions seem to be parts of a great and elaborate allegory which represents him as a human being of great power whose grace we try to win etc.²⁴

For Wittgenstein, the polysemy of religious language is sufficient reason to eliminate it from the field of philosophic inquiry. There simply cannot be any scientifically responsible discourse regarding the absolute. The Austrian philosopher arrives at this conclusion with regret, perhaps even with pain. His “Lecture on Ethics” ends with the words:

Ethics, so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.²⁵

The second way for a philosopher to try to step outside the religious tradition is to combat narrative with narrative. This is Nietzsche’s strategy. Since Nietzsche believes that all language is metaphorical, accusing Christianity of using unscientific language is not a viable strategy. Nietzsche does not maintain that there is no possibility of speaking about the meaning of life, but rather that the Christian story has promoted counter-values. To undermine its slavish loser morality, the early Nietzsche draws on Greek mythology, as in his description of the Apollonian and Dionysian forces in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The later Nietzsche, by contrast, constructs his own counter-narrative in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. He invents a mythology of the prophet Zarathustra’s attempts to convert humanity—not to God, however, but to the idea that God is dead. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is a parody of a sacred book, even mirroring the language of the Bible, but with a radically anti-Christian message. For Nietzsche, the point is not to get rid of religious stories, but to tell the right ones—namely, those that will hasten the birth of the overman.

My claim, then, is that philosophy, if it wants to remain meaningful, cannot shake off its religious roots. This does of course not mean that every philosopher is condemned

²² Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*, ed. Edoardo Zamuner, Ermelinda Valentina Di Lascio, and D. K. Levy (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 45.

²³ *Ibid.*, 46. The comma after “book” is obviously a mistake. Wittgenstein does not want to say that we cannot write a scientific book; thus, the relative clause that follows “book” must be restrictive.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

to be a theist. It may be impossible, however, at least at this point in the development of the Western philosophic tradition, to philosophize outside an ultimately religious horizon. Thus, for example, Marx's dream of an absolutely just social and economic order draws its force from the transposition, onto secular terrain, of the religious longing for the healing of the world's wounds in an eschatological future.²⁶ Heidegger's radical "destruction" of Western metaphysics has been shown to constitute a philosophical adaptation of a key concept in Lutheran theology.²⁷

3. *Philosophy as Critique*

One of the most important functions of philosophy in relation to religion is critical. Wittgenstein is correct that religion has the tendency to represent God or the gods by means of metaphors that are anthropomorphic. From the point of view of a critical examination of the stories of religion, which the believer considers to be divine revelations, it is easy to accuse these metaphors of being naïve projections of human hopes and fears. Nonetheless, the asceticism with regard to metaphorical language that we find in Wittgenstein is not foreign to the religious tradition itself. "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," the philosopher famously declares in the last line of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The mystical overtones of this statement have not escaped scholarly attention.²⁸ It is reminiscent of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, whose *Mystical Theology* culminates in a denial of the applicability of every human concept to that which transcends all speech. Shockingly, even key terms of the Christian faith such as divinity, godhead, goodness, fatherhood, and sonship fall under Dionysius's censure of inadequate conceptions. Yet the radical critique of the *Mystical Theology* is not meant as a denial of the reality of God, but rather as an affirmation of the hyper-reality of that which the soul encounters in the cloud of unknowing. The Pseudo-Dionysius wants to guide his readers in an ascent that requires a radical purging of the mind to free it for the ineffable.

When Kant writes, in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that he "had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith" (B xxx), his philosophical strategy in addressing the claims of religion still bears a certain resemblance to the tradition of negative theology in which the Pseudo-Dionysius was such a central figure. Kant, admittedly, was no mystic who wanted to guide his readers toward God. Nonetheless, the philosopher from Königsberg also regarded his rigorous delimitation of the rightful use of reason as a necessary precondition for a properly understood religious life.

The origins of negative theology, of course, lie in the celebrated passage from Book VI of the *Republic* where Socrates declares the Form of the Good to belong in a realm "beyond being" (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας; 509b). It follows that the Good eludes any attempt to capture it in direct, univocal knowledge, so that Socrates has to approach its nature by means of the Simile of the Sun. According to this understanding of the limits

²⁶ Karl Löwith describes Marx's transformation of biblical eschatology in less charitable terms, speaking of a "pseudo-morphosis of Jewish-Christian messianism" (*Meaning in History* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1949], 46).

²⁷ One of the most detailed treatments of Heidegger's indebtedness to Luther's notion of *destructio* is Benjamin D. Crowe, *Heidegger's Religious Origins: Destruction and Authenticity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 44–66.

²⁸ See Russell Nieli, *Wittgenstein: From Mysticism to Ordinary Language* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1987), as well as the same author's "Mysticism, Morality, and the Wittgenstein Problem," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 9 (2007): 83–141.

of philosophic inquiry, philosophy operates within a space that is opened up by the erotic quest for Beauty and the Good, but delimited by the impossibility of ever reaching that which is highest—or at least of grasping it intellectually. Another way to formulate this idea is to say that philosophy is propelled toward the Absolute by stories that place the human being in relation to the divine, but that its critical functions show these stories to be what they are: metaphorical language attempting to speak of the unspeakable. Philosophy, then, confronts us with our finitude, but it cannot promise us salvation.

4. *Philosophy and Society*

Alcibiades' love for Socrates places him, as we have seen, in a tension-filled space between his teacher and the multitude. The multitude prevents him from turning toward himself, instead showering him with superficial and distracting honors. Alcibiades experiences the conflict as so painful that he imagines Socrates' death as a possible solution. Philosophy is a dangerous enterprise.

The Allegory of the Cave in Book VII of the *Republic* confirms this impression. When the person who has managed to break free from the shackles inside the cave and to emerge into the daylight of reality rejoins his former fellow prisoners, they mock him or her for the inability to function in the cave-world. More than that, should the freed individual who has seen the light attempt to unshackle the cave-dwellers, they will resist to the point of attempting to kill their liberator.

Does the picture Plato paints in these passages provide a convincing representation of the relationship between the philosopher and the “crowd” (or, as we would say, society)? Does the philosopher stand in danger of being shunned and persecuted for his or her generous attempts to draw others toward Beauty and Goodness?

In the twentieth century, there is one philosopher who has made the conflict between the philosopher and society the center of his thought. I am referring to Leo Strauss, the author of “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” who argues that the only way for the philosopher to escape persecution—and possibly death—is to write between the lines, as Plato himself did.²⁹ To divulge the truth to the masses—to those who have no idea what the philosopher is talking about when he returns from the light to the cave—is both futile and dangerous. Strauss suggests that all the major philosophers in the Western tradition have practiced this art of writing, which includes not only the ability to bury sophisticated hints at deeper meanings in superficially straightforward passages, but also the willingness to tell Platonic “noble lies” when this is necessary.

One of the assumptions underpinning Strauss's position—and Plato's as well—is that the philosopher stands totally outside the crowd, being able to separate him- or herself entirely from the prejudices of the many and to rise to transcendent levels of insight. This is a claim difficult to uphold in the wake of Hegel, one of whose achievements was to bring to consciousness the inextricable connection between being, truth, and history. For Hegel, the philosopher is not the one who rises above the conditions of his time but, quite the opposite, the one who is capable of articulating the level of self-consciousness that Spirit has reached at a particular stage of its historical unfolding. Truth, rather than

²⁹ Strauss incisively articulates his method of reading in “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” *Social Research* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1941): 488–504. This seminal essay was reprinted in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (New York: The Free Press, 1952), 22–37.

standing above time, realizes itself historically since being itself does.

Rather than constituting a modern innovation that must ultimately undermine transcendent truth, Hegel's "historicism" (as Strauss termed this most abominable of philosophical positions) has deep roots in Christian revelation. For Christianity is not—or, rather, it is not only—the belief in an utterly other and transcendent God, but it also affirms that this ineffable God has become man; that is to say, that this God has become immanent, assuming the human condition in all its particularity and brokenness. The Father in heaven has granted salvation through the Cross of his Son on earth, through whom he has spoken to his people: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No man cometh to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6; Douay-Rheims). Since Jesus was a particular individual born into the particular conditions of a male body, a Jewish religious tradition, an Aramaic language, a Roman regime, and so on and so forth, the path to understanding his message—God's message—is a path that leads through historical particularity. Put differently, the Truth is accessible only in time. This aspect of Hegel's philosophy is not, it seems to me, a mere "counterfeit double" of the Christian conception but a legitimate philosophical articulation of it.³⁰

Nevertheless, there are no objective criteria to decide which of these conceptions is true, the Platonic or the Christian/Hegelian. They are however less totally in contradiction than it might appear at first sight. Surely, the Hegelian philosopher is not someone who is simply carried along by the everyday assumptions of the average subjects of history; rather, the philosopher is an exceptional individual through whom Spirit utters itself—comparable to the world-historical figure who, in the arena not of theory but of action, enables the violent transition from one historical epoch to the next, higher one. Note that the world-historical figure tragically falls prey to the ruse of Reason, like Caesar and Napoleon, who sacrificed themselves in facilitating the unfolding of a higher form of political order. Thus, interestingly, both in Plato and in Hegel the philosopher faces a perilous destiny. But the main point here is that, for Hegel as for Plato, the philosopher stands at a level of insight which by far transcends the everyday consciousness of the masses.

What, then, of Strauss's claim according to which the philosopher must hide his or her insights from the masses? The point we just made about the fate of the world-historical individual—and, therefore, perhaps of the philosopher—seems to validate this claim. Strauss is in fact right in drawing attention to a tradition of esoteric writing that was for a long time part of Western thought—including even Christian thought. For example, in his *Mystical Theology* the Pseudo-Dionysius warns the fictional addressee of the treatise: "But see to it that none of this comes to the hearing of the uninitiated (τῶν ἀμυήτων), that is to say, to those caught up with the things of the world, who imagine that there is nothing beyond instances of individual being . . ." ³¹ It is not Gnosticism to suppose that few believers possess the capacity to penetrate to the deepest mysteries of the faith. This reality does not mean, however, that the Christian thinker has to tell noble lies, withhold

³⁰ William Desmond makes this claim in relation to Hegel's understanding of God, which he rightly considers incompatible with an orthodox view of divine transcendence. See *Hegel's God: A Counterfeit Double?*, Ashgate Studies in the History of Philosophical Theology (Aldershot, Hants and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003).

³¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, chap. 1, # 2, in *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1987), 133–41, at 136. Translation amended.

knowledge, or write between the lines. Some of these strategies have indeed been deployed in the history of Christianity—one only has to think of the Church’s erstwhile reluctance to place the Bible in the hands of the ordinary faithful—but the most fundamental way of communicating insights to an audience that is composed of minds of greater and lesser capacity is much simpler. It consists in composing stories.

The stories of the Bible, just like the story of Augustine’s life in the *Confessions* and, indeed, just like the Platonic dialogues, can be read at different levels, according to the capacity of the reader. At the most basic level, a story is just a narrative of events, entertaining but not necessarily very deep. Thus, in the *Symposium* a group of men get together to give speeches regarding love. The speeches, some full of mythological detail, are enjoyable to listen to. But is there a particular logic to the order in which the speeches are given? Why is it that Socrates lags behind Aristodemus in joining the party? Why does he relay an account received from the priestess Diotima? Such questions lead to a more complete understanding of the story. Finally, the story may even have an apophatic level. Thus, perhaps Socrates’ refusal to have sex with Alcibiades is not merely meant to teach the latter the need to transcend physical desire; maybe it indicates the ultimate elusiveness of Beauty and Goodness themselves. That certainly is the point of the Simile of the Sun in the *Republic*.

5. Conclusion

So what is philosophy? Interpreting some key passages in the *Symposium* that portray the figure of Socrates, I have suggested that philosophy is of a hybrid nature. To adapt an image from Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, the philosopher walks a tightrope between his or her unified self, which is concentrated in contemplation of Goodness and Beauty, and the dispersed masses, who are attached to their dim cave-world with its superficial attractions. For the sake of souls like Alcibiades, Socrates has to attempt the tightrope walk, even at the risk of falling.

Similarly, in relation to its narrative roots, philosophy performs a balancing act. Philosophy arises from story, whether this is Greek myth or Christian revelation, but its function in this regard is one of critique. We have said that, grounded in the polysemy of story, philosophy moves toward the univocity of science. Among the Greeks, Plato and Aristotle embody opposed attitudes toward story. Plato embraces narrative, though the fictions he creates in his dialogues deploy narrative elements in the service of a philosophical project.³² Aristotle, on the other hand, opts for a presentation that is largely stripped of myth, save for the occasional quotation of a proverb.

In the Christian period, Augustine exemplifies a thinker who remains close to his faith understood as story. We witness this approach in his biblical commentaries, but also in the *Confessions*, an *opus sui generis* that attempts to place the reader on the path to salvation by drawing him or her into the gripping story of Augustine’s own conversion. The Bishop of Hippo’s more doctrinal works all focus on particular aspects of Christian teaching, such as the Trinity or question of free will and grace. Augustine never sets out to develop something like a “system,” in which the order of story is replaced by the logic of the “discipline” of theology. In this regard, Thomas Aquinas is his diametrical op-

³² On Plato’s use of myth, see the wide-ranging contributions in *Plato and Myth: Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, ed. Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, and Francisco J. Gonzalez, Mnemosyne Supplements 337 (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

posite. To be sure, Thomas composes biblical commentaries, but his oeuvre culminates in the *Summa*, which sets out to articulate the Christian faith as a tightly argued system which even claims to be a science in the Aristotelian sense.

In our own day, philosophy is characterized by the division into the analytic and Continental traditions. This division, too, can be understood as reflecting different conceptions of the relationship between philosophy and narrative. Nietzsche, undoubtedly one of the founding figures of Continental thought, regarded philosophy as inextricably connected with story. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, strove to rid philosophy of allegory and metaphor, which he considered unscientific attempts to speak of that whereof we cannot speak. The mystical streak in Wittgenstein's thought is remarkable, however, in that it points to limitations that he understood only too well—unfortunately unlike some of his successors in the analytic school.

“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”: Wittgenstein's phrase can be taken to point to the hybrid nature of philosophy in relation to the gods, and to God. Its rootedness in stories that tell of the divine as it were drags philosophy into a quest for the Absolute; yet its recognition of metaphor *as* metaphor brings philosophy to the sobering insight that there is something for which we long that we cannot know, something extremely important of which we cannot speak, except in images. Since philosophy is not faith, it cannot—qua philosophy—assent to the metaphors of myth or revelation, nor does it engage in mysticism. Philosophy can either be a preparation for faith, as in Thomas Aquinas, or it can insist that the space of the Absolute must remain empty, as in Nietzsche.

In relation to society or, more broadly, to the historical conditions of its existence, philosophy has a similarly ambiguous status. That the philosopher stands somewhat outside of society is not only what Plato's depiction of Socrates suggests; it is also evident from the tension that exists in our own time between philosophy as an academic discipline and the demand that universities provide a “useful” education leading to well-paying jobs. It is easy for medicine and chemistry to meet that demand—although even they need a space for disinterested research—an *Wd* even certain humanities, like modern languages, can easily argue for their so-called “relevance.” Philosophy must however, if it does not want to lose itself, keep its critical distance from society, just as it cannot allow itself to be absorbed into story and religion. Yet this critical distance, this element of transcendence, does not mean that philosophy is irrelevant. A society cannot function without critical distance to itself.

Take the example of Heidegger's critique of technology. What the philosopher discusses in “The Question Concerning Technology” will not help us resolve any of the particular technological problems we face, such as the massive collection of personal data or the way in which digital media are increasingly taking the place of reality in people's lives. Heidegger's analysis of the ontological status of technology does something else: it challenges the idea that the sophisticated and pervasive use of advanced technology will establish humanity as the “lord of the earth”; in fact, if we so delude ourselves, technology might end up making us into a “human resource” to promote its relentless drive toward efficiency and profit. We need to understand our finitude: at the ontological level, technology is not a set of man-made tools, but it is *Gestell*, the way in which being is “sent” in our age. This is structurally an apophatic move: as Heidegger challeng-

es our certainty regarding our understanding and “mastery” of technology, we are confronted with the elusiveness of the ground, namely, with the enigmatic *Ereignis*. There is no “solution” to this situation; only Heidegger’s recommendation that we approach the question of technology through art, in particular through poetry. For “all ways of thinking, more or less perceptibly, lead through language in a manner that is extraordinary.”³³

Thus, philosophy certainly rises above the level of “average everydayness” to an understanding of the conditions for the possibility of our contemporary world, indeed of being itself. These conditions, however, do not open themselves to the intellectual grasp of the philosopher, but remain a mystery. This means that, in the end, one of the fundamental functions of philosophy in our contemporary society is to teach not knowledge, but the limits of knowledge; not confidence in our ability to progress relentlessly, but humility in the face of finitude.

³³ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” trans. William Lovitt, in *Basic Writings*, 307–41, at 307.