

HEGEL AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY: THE CLAIMS OF HISTORICAL REASON

I. Philosophy in relation to its history: Hegel and the contemporary discussion

The history of philosophy, as a project of significant theoretical import, was inaugurated by Hegel¹. It was conceived by him as internal to the process of systematic thinking. From his perspective any progress towards the solution of the fundamental problems of rational inquiry (i.e. general ontology and the meaning of human existence) presupposes awareness of the stages in the development of intellectual culture, which laid the groundwork for the strides towards that goal characteristic of the present moment².

Given the retrospective character that Hegel ascribes to knowledge in general, it is natural that he also conceives philosophical thinking at each stage as the reasoned summation of the antecedent conceptual labors of humanity. This is not to be a compilation of viewpoints stitched through the mere accident of chronological succession. It is, rather, a synthetic enterprise melding together the elements of previous thought, which in some sense "caused" subsequent theoretical breakthroughs³.

The intellectual ascent thus pictured is supposed to be powered by an inherent developmental necessity, pointing towards the terminus ad quo that Hegel terms "absolute knowledge", i.e. towards the definitive solution of all theoretical riddles at the moment when the cultural life of humanity has also reached its peak. Philosophical illumination is, hence, an emergent structural fact in the overall makeup of the collective consciousness of humanity. And it is premised upon it having lived through, and subsequently left behind, its previous states of intellectual limitation. Wisdom is the recollected experience of the mind's past states, now viewed as a completed cycle from which it has escaped⁴. This

1. On the history of philosophy as written before and after Hegel, see A. Mc ARMSTRONG, *Philosophy and Its History*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, v. 19, n. 4, June 1959, pp. 447-465.

2. G.W. F. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Bd. I, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1971, 22

3. *Ibid.*, 28-33

4. *Ibid.*, 71-72: «Die Philosophie fängt an mit dem Untergange einer reellen Welt; wenn sie auftritt mit ihren Abstraktionen, grau in grau malend, so ist die Frische der Jugend schon fort...»

synthetic recollection of a completed past enables it gradually to ascend to the highest level of self-awareness and world-wisdom (*Weltweisheit*).

From this it follows that philosophy is identical with its history. The history of philosophy is not a parergon, but an essential methodological propaedeutic. The concepts and world-views dominant at any given stage are born out of the dissolution of those regnant during the previous one. And that dissolution is concurrent with the collapse of the collective form of life which they had summed up. Philosophy is concrete life (the organized mode of existence of a community) held together in thought. It transmutes into concepts life's tensions, presuppositions, values and goals. And, correspondingly, life is the attempt through time to realize in material and institutional terms the attitudes, value preferences and metaphysical intuitions that dominate the collective mind at any historical stage⁵.

This is the meaning of the Hegelian notion that history is the unfolding of Spirit (*Geist*), where Spirit stands for the unity of the two inextricably inter-linked dimensions of the human experience, i.e. the material and the spiritual⁶. Hegel's view of the history of philosophy is, thus, the cardinal example of what M. Mandelbaum calls «sociological monism»⁷, namely the notion that the philosophy of an age is an expression of the guiding beliefs pervading a totality of life. It elaborates and refines the symbolic expressions around which the teleological striving of a historical society acquires functional coherence and actuality.

The radicalism of the Hegelian program can be appreciated by comparison to the attitude of the Enlightenment towards history. Descartes and Bacon counsel a cleansing of the mind from the sediments of pseudo-knowledge deposited by the benighted past. The study of past thought has no scientific value. Only by overthrowing the «idols» of received authority can the human mind return to itself, namely to a correct understanding of its proper mode of operation, whose systematic application will then yield specimens of novel and well-founded knowledge. To this end, thought has to be shorn of its historical and its psychological dimension. For both history and psychology teach only of the inconstancy of mutually refuting opinions.

The goal of science, on the contrary, is intersubjective agreement around unshakeable truth, such as could only be based upon criteria of rationality not subject to ephemeral moods, preferences or interests. The facts of nature as well as the truths of reason are unaffected by the tumult of historical existence. Historical narratives cannot be checked as to the truthfulness of their assertions,

5. *Ibid.*, 73-75

6. *Ibid.*, 74.

7. M. MANDELBAUM, *The History of Ideas, Intellectual History, and the History of Philosophy, History and Theory*, v. 5, *Beiheft 5: The Historiography of the History of Philosophy*, 1965, pp. 33-66.

and even if they do contain true claims this is only by accident. This rejection of historicism, whose *historical justification* was the determination of the champions of modern science to break with the medieval paradigm of authority, was tersely summed up in Kant's distinction between knowledge *ex datis* and knowledge *ex principiis*. Purely empirical inquiry is nihilistic, in the sense that (as Hume had shown) even the most extensive accumulation of empirical evidence is not capable of producing certain knowledge, of the kind that science needs in order to make its predictions. So even though the empirical *reference* of scientific knowledge must be accepted, we still must assume the non-empirical (i.e. mental) origin of the cognitive forms that we employ in order to endow the world of our experience (phenomena, as Kant called them) with stable structure and order.

In this context, what significance could the history of philosophy have? Reference to past philosophers may be unavoidable, but only incidentally in order to show the salutary divergence of modern thought –as, for instance, in Kant's discussion of Plato's ideas. Whoever practices intellectual history must have other, non-philosophical purposes in mind. One might aim for edification, for undoubtedly among the beliefs of those called philosophers in the past one could light upon sound beliefs. Others are striking in that they can be interpreted as anticipations of truths that became dominant during the Christian era.

Hegel had in hand histories of this kind, such as those of Brucker and in particular Tennemann⁸. But although he did rely on them, he was critical of their philosophical assumptions. For in them he saw nothing but the stringing together of mere opinion in the ancient doxographic tradition. They were medleys of what great minds, admittedly, just happened to have come up with on diverse subjects. But what they lacked was any sense of the internal coherence of this body of ratiocination, of the way one line of thought impacted upon another to engender systems of what Hegel calls (always in an honorific sense) "speculation", i.e. life-altering attempts to fathom the deeper structures of ontological actuality. It was this defect that he set about to remedy.

His enterprise was, hence, an attempt to reverse the anti-historical bias of the Enlightenment. To do this he drew on insights already shaped during the previous century, primarily Vico's notion that the barbarian past of the human race saw the formation of the institutional arrangements out of which civilization sprouted, as well as Turgot's account of rational progress as proceeding even through the irrationality of human passions⁹. It was this "dialectical" un-

8. On Hegel's sources see W. H. WALSH, Hegel on the History of Philosophy, *History and Theory*, v. 5, *Beiheft 5: The Historiography of the History of Philosophy*, 1965, pp. 67-82.

9. K. LOEWITH, *Meaning in History*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1970, pp. 100-103, 115-136.

derstanding of historicity that Hegel applies to the development of philosophical thinking.

Hegel's program, whatever the difficulties of its execution, spawned a methodological debate, which ultimately validated his assumption that the history of philosophy is a serious theoretic undertaking in itself, and that investigation of past thought is integral to the self-understanding of the present.

An influential statement regarding the first point is Q. Skinner's attempt to define the criteria for an accurate historical understanding of philosophical texts¹⁰. Skinner's approach goes against the grain of Hegel's project of hitching past systems to the onrushing chariot of "absolute knowledge" with himself wielding the reins. But it does vindicate the Hegelian insistence that a philosophical problem or argument cannot be understood in disjunction from its socio-cultural environment. This implies avoiding a number of interpretative fallacies ("mythologies")¹¹, which impute intents, or even a vocabulary, that would not make sense given its author's own situation and theoretic appurtenance. It involves a sifting of the meanings of concepts, in order to determine which ones fit the text in question. It is true that any given text may plausibly support a number of diverging glosses, but there is a limit beyond which the attribution of meaning is just fanciful¹². This may not be easy to fix, but some such cut off point is necessary to escape the nihilistic trap (fashionable in some quarters nowadays) that a text is the sum total of its readers' responses.

Skinner's historical method does not preclude appropriating elements from past thought in order to redefine them in accordance with the concerns of the present, thus exposing the limitations of the older conceptualization. But their incorporation into the "philosophical conversation" of the present, to use R. Rorty's terminology, is not feasible without a prior understanding of their se-

10. Q. SKINNER, Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas, *History and Theory*, v. 8, n. 1, 1969, pp. 3-53. For a discussion of Skinner's methodology, see K. PALONEN, The History of Concepts as a Style of Political Theorizing: Quentin Skinner's and Reinhart Koselleck's Subversion of Normative Political Theory, *European Journal of Political Theory*, 1, 2002, pp. 91-106.

11. The most important of these are "the mythology of doctrine", namely the notion that a given thinker has worked out an identifiable point of view that can be fitted into a timeless scheme of "classical" theories; and the "mythology of coherence", i.e. the notion that there are no internal contradictions in his thought or, alternatively, if there are they ought to be somehow ironed out.

12. This applies a methodological point that M. Mandelbaum makes with regard to what he terms "general history", an account of the institutional and cultural structure of a whole society or period. The number of ways that this structure can be described is constrained by the state of the world to which this description refers. "Special histories" on the contrary describe selected human activities from a particular area of life as grouped together by the choice of the interpreter. In this case there is no real object to delimit interpretation. See M. MANDELBAUM, *The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

mantic integrity. One cannot criticize or supersede a theoretical claim, unless one has previously penetrated its meaning on its own terms. This hermeneutic internalism may be difficult to carry out, but to deny it in principle occasions a slippery slope of foisting upon a text arbitrary construals that serve the ideological and political preferences of the interpreter.

Regarding the usefulness of past thought for contemporary intellectual debate, we may again note a consensus favoring Hegel¹³. This relation is formulated in a much looser way than Hegel himself would prefer, because its necessitarian core is as a rule excised. But it retains recognizably Hegelian elements. If the significance of ideas is the way they are “objectivated”, i.e. take on tangible shape as institutions and norms, then today’s culture descends from past modes of this “objectivation”. Further, if we do not favor a rigid monism in modes of thinking, it is wholesome to be aware of the diverse ways in which philosophical problems have been dealt with. Past modes of philosophizing thus enrich the theoretical sensibility of the present. If philosophy is an open field of divergent conceptualizations of what is, then its history is its present. It cannot just be a symptom of some intellectual disease that we keep going back to the method of Socrates or to Kant’s “critique”, even if including them in our “conversation” does involve a reworking of their assumptions.

The presence of the past is a prerequisite for theoretic pluralism, which is our common heritage following the collapse in our time of various self-enclosed orthodoxies. For it is a *historical fact* that all sorts of campaigns for the suppression of “metaphysics” (from Hume’s “burning of the books” onwards) have failed, to the point that today their significance in the formulation of theory is recognized even in the field of experimental science. What appeared a few short years ago as triumphant paradigms eliminating all other intellectual tendencies (logical positivism, ordinary language analysis, even post-modernism) have themselves by now been demoted to transient trends. Theoretical criticism, in other words, has shown *their* historical limits.

These considerations validate the moment of “difference” or “negativity” in the unfolding of thought. There is always theoretical life even after some grandiose philosophical single-mindedness, whether Hegelianism itself or Oxford analysis. The Hegelian understanding of the progress of reason laid the emphasis upon the multiplicity of perspectives this progress involved, even if in the end it was to be welded into some supreme identity. But still this identity is

13. W. BARRETT, Logical Empiricism and the History of Philosophy, *The Journal of Philosophy*, v. 36, n. 5, 1939, pp. 124-132; F. COPLESTON, Philosophy and Its History, *Philosophy*, v. 67, n. 261, pp. 357-365; C. FRANKEL, Philosophy and History, *Political Science Quarterly*, v. 72, n. 3, 1957, pp. 350-369; P. O. KRISTELLER, Philosophy and Its Historiography, *The Journal of Philosophy*, v. 82, n. 11, 1985, pp. 618-625; J. PASSMORE, The Idea of a History of Philosophy, *History and Theory*, v. 5, Beiheft 5: *The Historiography of the History of Philosophy*, 1965, pp. 1-32.

named by Hegel an “identity-in-difference”, and it is this inner differentiation of philosophical practice that we wish to privilege here. Hegel’s methodological virtuosity lay in showing how each partial view was necessarily challenged by an opposing vision, springing from alternative cultural and spiritual choices. This is the cash-value of the Hegelian “dialectic”, one that harks back to the Sophistic-Socratic notion of argument and counter-argument, rather than to its Platonic construal as the “cancellation of hypotheses” (αἴρειν τὰς ὑποθέσεις) ushering some supra-logical ontological vision.

II. Aristotle and Hegel as historians of thought

Hegel is a philosopher writing the history of philosophy, and so too was Aristotle. To what extent did the Stagirite’s summation of his predecessors serve as Hegel’s model? Aristotle’s accuracy as a historian of thought has been challenged, most notably by H. Cherniss¹⁴. The claim is that the interpretative framework applied by Aristotle to the Presocratics in particular does not fit their theoretical intentions as we can read them off the surviving fragments. Aristotle assumes that their notion of the Ἀρχὴ is an earlier (and clumsier) formulation of the problematic of primary natural causes as he himself formulated them.

But this is questionable. Aristotle imputes to Presocratic physiology the notion of ἀλλοίωσις or ἑτεροίωσις. This implies the existence in nature of an unalterable substratum upon which the visible modifications issuing into the objects and processes of experience supervene, while that substratum itself remains unchanged¹⁵. This corresponds to the Aristotelian concept of the ὑποκείμενον or the underlying essence of a natural entity (of an individual or a collective sort). This essence, being the logical precondition for the comprehension of the phenomenal process, is not itself discoverable by empirical observation. It is rather posited by a noetic act, by some intellectual intuition (to use a later term), which springs from the mental necessity (as Aristotle assumes it) to “close” the otherwise open-ended series of appearances for the purpose of reducing empirical multiplicity into ontological oneness. Overall reality is then arranged into a coherent and hierarchical system of forms.

14. H. CHERNISS, The Characteristics and Effects of Presocratic Philosophy, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, v. 12, no. 3, 1951, pp. 319-345. For a defense of Aristotle’s authority as a historian of Presocratic thought, see W.K.C. GUTHRIE, Aristotle as a Historian of Philosophy: Some Preliminaries, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, v. 77, Part 1, 1957, pp. 35-41. For a discussion of the Cherniss-Guthrie debate that upholds the former on the grounds that the Guthrie case is built only on indirect and circumstantial inferences, see J. B. McDIARMID, Theophrastus on the Presocratic Causes, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, v. 61, 1953, pp. 85-156.

15. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, 983b 8-14: «That of which all things that are consist, the first from which they come to be, the last into which they are resolved (the substance remaining, but changing its modifications), this they say is the element and this the principle of things, and therefore they think nothing is either generated or destroyed, for this sort of entity is always conserved...» (tr. W. D. Ross).

These “first principles” of natural Being are thus “better known than” the data supplied by the senses: the latter are deduced from the former. This means that phenomenal processes are as they are (and could not be otherwise), because they are the fulfillment in perceptible terms of the purposes specified for each class of natural entities in the definition of its essence. The kaleidoscopic infinity of sensuous reality is, thus, brought under the discipline of “categories” (modes of “talking about” things). This in turn leads to a tabulation of appearances in terms of substantial classes interacting in definite ways, the most significant being teleological interaction (one thing or class of things being the purpose for the existence of another).

If we assume that one plausible source for the table of categories is the logical constitution of language, then we conclude that in Aristotle the pursuit of the logical structure of reality trumps the interest in cataloguing the profusion of forms in natural becoming. Aristotle is interested in natural description, but this is subordinated to the theoretical aim of containing the flow of appearances within a coherent system of essential classes, themselves beyond change. This is the philosophical thrust of his claim in the *Physics* that movement is for the sake of rest and in *De Generatione* that perishability affects the individual and not the species which is imperishable.

If something like the above is Aristotle’s aim, then we can see why it is unfair of him both to attribute to the Presocratics the search for the immutable foundation of sensuous appearances and to accuse them of not having brought that search to successful fruition. For however “inarticulate” (ψελλιζομένων) and primitive their conceptions might have been, they derived from an intention other than the one that Aristotle foists upon them. Their purpose was “natural history”, ἱστορίη in its original sense, namely the study of natural phenomena as an end in itself together with the excitement and joy generated by such abandonment without preconceptions (especially mythological ones) to the elemental power of physical becoming.

The Odyssean journey through the uncharted breadth of the natural world is an end in itself, and whatever awareness of a pattern in the flux of things might be gained is generally *ex post*. First comes *pathos*, i.e. submission to the powers of nature, and then *mathesis*. The phenomena themselves dictate rhythms and periodicities pertaining to them, usually modeled on the revolution of the heavens and the succession of seasons. It is not an antecedent act of the mind which harnesses appearances to implicit logical order.

Even Heraclitos’ notion of the Logos, for instance, is a verbal sign that stands for the physical, perceptible process of Fire, in which all kinds of “antithetical” materials are consumed while the flame fed by them maintains itself in perpetuity. The visible tumult of appearances themselves is transcribed in abstract terms and labeled Logos or God. One can actually see the physical mutation of night into day, hot into cold, small into large etc. And it is by analogy to the physical process that the relation of the moral opposites is sketched. The “hidden harmony” that Heraklitos intuitively in nature is not, Cherniss stresses, a self-

existent conceptual order apart from phenomena. It is the very order of phenomena themselves. It is to be discovered in the same way that we discover, behind the internal chaos of ever-changing feelings and impressions, the underlying unity of our own self: through introspection, i.e. a glance that goes deeper than what is immediately perceived. Hence Heraklitos' epistemological critique of *polymathie* amounts to the claim that the uneducated senses of the common man fail to see a pattern immanent in the flux of sensible existence, remaining fixed instead upon individual things as static and separate. Aristotle's God, on the contrary, is the invisible, but logically necessary *πρῶτον κινουῦν* that stands *behind* the chain of physical motions of things as apprehended by the senses.

Aristotle proceeds to state that in this intoxication with sensuous immediacy Anaxagoras' doctrine of the *Nous* was the first utterance of a sober person. This concept might be construed (as Socrates was later also inclined to do, initially) as pointing in the direction of the primacy of *noesis* over sensation. But as Aristotle rightly adds, Anaxagoras does not know anything more than the mere word *Nous*. His physical account plows on in incorrigibly sensationalist fashion. He even refers to the *Nous* as a physical entity albeit of an exceedingly "fine" texture (*χρῆμα λεπτότατον*). He does not know how to exploit his new-fangled concept as the starting point of a new epistemology.

Even Parmenides, despite his breakthrough of approaching "true reality" from a strictly logical standpoint, cannot apply his intuition of the eternal Oneness of Being to the explanation of empirical phenomena. When he begins to talk about observable nature he abandons the logical point of view (*κατὰ λόγον*) and reverts to the sensationalist discourse of Presocratic physiology. Thus it could be argued that *even from within Aristotle's own account* it appears illegitimate to burden the Presocratics with the theoretical intent of separating the truths of reason from the data of immediate sensation, a theoretic project that first begins with the mathematical philosophy of Plato.

That is why the historical excursus of *Metaphysics A* has the appearance of a digression. Aristotle assumes that the "truth" concerning the four causes has already been established in his *Physics*. "However", he adds, it would perhaps be of interest to investigate whether his philosophical predecessors had an inkling of them, or whether they had lighted upon another one apart from his own four¹⁶. The result of the investigation is, as we have indicated negative: the Presocratics managed only to "stammer" incoherently regarding the material cause and the origin of motion. To that extent they could be considered naïve and primitive precursors of a philosophical quest that culminates in his own systematic account¹⁷. But –and this is the decisive consideration– the study of that

16. *Ibid.*, 983 b 1-5

17. *Ibid.*, 985 a 10-18: «These thinkers, as we say, evidently grasped, and to this extent, two of the causes which we distinguished in our work on nature –the matter and the source of move

confused and childish pre-history is not necessary for an adequate understanding of physical truth. For the latter the only thing required is sound logical reasoning from first principles.

Aristotle thus conducts two contradictory operations in tandem. To the extent that he deigns to include the Presocratics in the philosophical tribe, he expropriates their thinking as inchoate and simplistic adumbrations of part of his own truth. On the other hand, he asserts that knowledge of that truth is self-standing and has no inner connection to any historical erudition. Classical thought in general, and Aristotle's quite self-consciously so, is anti-historicist. Aristotle's claim that history, in contradistinction with poetry, deals with mere accidental particulars without rising to the level of universal explanations is well known. It is thus to be expected that in his hands the history of philosophy is not incorporated into the growth of universal reason. *If it were to be thought as thus incorporated*, though, it would have to be trimmed down to those elements that could be used as presentiments of later completed truth.

Was Aristotle, then, Hegel's model? As regards the overall anti-historicism of Greek *theoria* it seems *prima facie* that the answer must be negative. This, however, must be modified as we pick out the Aristotelian elements incorporated into the Hegelian project. In the end, despite the theoretical enhancement of the history of philosophy, Hegel's execution of this program contravenes essential requirements of his declared historicism. It, thus, ends up as an ampler application of Aristotelian hermeneutic techniques.

There is a motive that ties the Hegelian procedure to the Aristotelian one in a particularly strong sense. And this is the claim that the aim of philosophy is to produce Truth, i.e. definitive rational insight into the nature of things and the meaning of human existence. This conception is natural for Aristotle to adopt, for in his time philosophy was assumed to be the supreme science, the final summation of the particular truths about cosmic and human reality that the particular sciences produce. By Hegel's time, however, science had emancipated itself from the tutelage of theological metaphysics and claimed sole jurisdiction over the Truth about existing things. Even since the scientific revolution of the 17th century, "truth" in the strict sense exists only within a context of experimentally controlled inference concerning observable phenomena (or alternatively within a logical space of deduction from axiomatic premises, which

ment-vaguely, however, and with no clearness, but as untrained men behave in fights; for they go round their opponents and often strike blows, but they do not fight on scientific principles, and so too these thinkers do not seem to know what they say; for it is evident, as a rule, they make no use of their causes except to a small extent». Also 993 a 10-16: «...All men seem to seek the causes named in the *Physics*, but they seek these vaguely; and though in a sense they have all been described before, in a sense they have not been described at all. For the earliest philosophy is, on all subjects, like one who lisps, since it is young and in its beginnings» (tr. W. D. Ross).

however does not pertain to reality but only to ideas in the mind). Philosophy is no longer the guardian of metaphysically prior causes, and thus loses its privilege of pronouncing over the legitimacy of the methods and findings of the particular sciences. Whatever the latter happen to come up with is by definition true (or an aspect of the truth). There is nothing “better known” in pure philosophy, to which the particular sciences ought to bend the knee. Philosophy, on the contrary, now takes its cue from the sciences. It follows their operations attentively, in order to abstract from them an understanding of the constitution and functions of the mind which make those sciences and their truths possible.

Hegel vehemently rejects this characteristically modern conception of the truth. He rejects any subjection of “first” philosophy to the “analytic” presuppositions of modern science, both mathematical and experimental. “Analytic” is the crucial notion here, which for Hegel is a term of the severest condemnation. It amounts to a methodological and ontological atomism, which refuses to begin with a “speculative” preconception (i.e. a purely intuitive vision) concerning the totality of the real as an organic whole. Modern thought focuses upon isolated segments of perceptible reality. These are in turn assumed to be composed of discreet elements, which the observing mind then tries to associate, by means of mechanical aggregation, in various hypothetical ways. But then, Hegel claims, we can never outgrow a view of reality as a haphazard collection of unconnected components, as a “sand heap” of atomic elements related to one another only externally. Ontological necessity goes missing here. This is the standpoint of “sensuous immediacy” and “finitude”.

Philosophical “truth”, on the contrary, is supposed to be the view of the Real as a Totality whose members are mutually dependent through necessary relations. These relations are internal to each thing. They define the very identity of individuals as precisely situated constituents of a hierarchically organized Whole. If severed from this encompassing unity these members cease to exist as an ontologically significant entity. This is a restatement of the Aristotelian principle that the whole is logically and ontologically prior to the parts, as illustrated by the image of the hand that, if separated from the rest of the living organism, is a hand only in name (homonymously) and not in reality.

From this “synthetic” premise, then, Hegel attacks mathematical reasoning, which ever since Descartes had served as a paradigm of the right method of thought. The law of the excluded middle is for him the abstract expression of the “analytical” fallacy. It separates as a matter of logical principle one uniquely defined individual entity from another and it forbids us to conceive of the “dialectical identity” of these different or antithetical beings. The full rhetorical blast of this anti-mathematical doctrine is famously sounded in the Preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*¹⁸. Hegel also proceeds to an equally militant refu-

18. G.W.F. HEGEL, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, New York and Evanston, Harper, 1967, pp. 100-105. See also Hegel's critique of “quantitative infinity” (i.e. mathematical reasoning

tation of the truth of modern natural science. In his *Philosophy of Nature* he excoriates the Newton's "atomistic" theory of light in favor of Goethe's organic, and hence "speculative", theory of colors. This condemnation of experimental physics resurfaces in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* as a justification of Aristotle's use of final ends as the most adequate explanation of the natural process.

These retrograde positions on truth undermine Hegel's historicist aim. The liberation of science from teleological metaphysics has a prime claim to being a mark of progress, if one assumes as Hegel does a rational necessity in the unfolding of intellectual beliefs. And yet the full ferocity of his genius is applied to tearing modern scientific developments out of their socio-cultural context and arguing for the discredited Aristotelian explanation of physical motion. This amounts to the resuscitation of a logocentric megalomania, which the much maligned Enlightenment had done its best to suppress, what with the insistence upon the insurmountable limits of human knowledge emanating from British empiricism as well as Kant's interdiction of egress into things-in-themselves. This return to Aristotelian grand ontology is an anti-historicist maneuver couched in historicist phraseology.

Another key insistence of *Metaphysics A* is that despite the jumble of incoherencies marking the Presocratic phase, one can also detect an implicit progression, whereby the postulation (as Aristotle sees it) of an unchanging substratum necessarily instigates the concomitant inquiry concerning the cause of observed motion. It is an inherent need and demand of reason to give an account of how, given the absolute immobility and sameness of the substratum, the physical entities "being born out" of it are characterized by incessant instability and alteration, "birth" itself being a form of primordial motion to begin with¹⁹. The radical *aporia* is, for Aristotle, this: how is that which of its essence is unmoved to be moved, given that it is inconceivable that it move itself? Once the process of ratiocination is commenced, an internal dynamic takes shape. Its unfolding takes dialectical form: an initial position of thought (the idea of immobility) brings into being its opposite (the idea of motion)²⁰. Presocratic philosophy was torn between these two logically irreconcilable theses. Both were thrown up, but no theory was able to synthesize them, something that was to be achieved through the Aristotelian distinction of *δυνάμει* and *ἐνεργεία*.

Hegel's history of philosophy is an application of this notion of self-moved rationality. Reason's teleological dynamic was first sketched in the *Metaphysics*. And it is here also that we can surmise the "identity of subject and object". For

based on discreet quantities) as the "impotence of the negative" (Ohnmacht des Negativen) in IDEM, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, I, Frankfurt a.M, Suhrkamp, 260 et suiv.

19. ARISTOTLE, *op. cit.*, 984 a 20-25.

20. *Ibid.*, 984 a 17-20: «...But as men thus advanced, the very facts opened the way for them and joined in forcing them to investigate the subject». Also 984 b 10-11: «men were again forced by the truth itself, as we said, to inquire into the next kind of cause» (tr. W.D. Ross).

as the activity of reason intensifies, fueled by an internal urgency to overcome the conceptual distinctions that its own progress throws up, the greater is the depth of objective reality penetrated by rational insight. Until in the end, whether that be the Aristotelian or the Hegelian synthesis, the full development of human rational power coincides with its perfect ontological adequacy: the totality of the real has been brought under the purview of logical categories.

This, Hegel says, is the theoretical import of the renowned Aristotelian formula that the truth is equivalent to τὰ ὄντα λέγειν. This saying has been construed since medieval times as claiming that the mind is passive vis-à-vis external nature, its cognitive void being gradually filled by the series of impressions deposited via the senses. But, Hegel claims, that this is a distortion of Aristotle. Perception is an active interrelation of the subject of cognition with its external object of reference. It is an operation that refines raw sensation into pure forms, leaving out the material dimension of things. The mind is thus a “barrier against” (ἀντιφράττει) empirical contingency residing in matter; it is an instrument for the extraction of logical essence²¹.

Hegel’s historiography, exactly as that of his model, also remolds past thought by fitting it into the ascent of rational self-knowledge. This further short-circuits the historicist enterprise. For the cultural and sociological dimension of the historicist method is left out. The elementary biographical sketches in Hegel’s *Lectures* are primarily reproductions of Diogenes Laertius. For the rest, as W.H. Walsh notes²², there is no elucidation of how ideas encapsulate the state of the social world. Or, alternatively, when such an association is attempted, the state of that world is depicted quasi-tautologically as the “appearance” of the ideas that ought to be explained as distillations of historical existence (c.f. Hegel’s discussion of the Roman period).

This cleansing of the history of ideas from empirical history (and of what is “merely” empirical in the history of these ideas themselves) is a strategy against the relativism with which any full-blooded historicism is inevitably saddled. Hegel, no less than Aristotle, is determined to claim that identifying (or, more loosely, relating) philosophy to its history does not imply dissolving away its one and rationally obligatory Truth into the multiplicity of theoretic viewpoints parading on the historical stage. The point cannot be that each one of these has its own truth, but that it exemplifies an aspect of a unitary, universal truth that will eventually emerge out of their mutual struggle. Hence the need to arrange them as preformations of an absolute Idea emerging by means, but equally in spite, of them all. But to do this that Idea must already be held in mind before one undertakes to reconstruct the spectacle of its self-generation through time²³.

21. G.W.F. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen*, I, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-209.

22. W. H. WALSH, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

23. On the way that Hegel’s notion of achieved method and truth in philosophy trumps the historicist dimension of his attempt to chart the journey of consciousness through the wealth of its historical forms, see G. A. KELLY, *Politics and Philosophy in Hegel*, *Polity*, v. 9, n. 1, 1976, pp. 3-18.

This, further, involves an axiological commitment not to the past that philosophy summarizes, but to the present in which philosophy has reached its peak (whether it be the world of the Polis or reformed Prussia).

If this is the case, however, the question as to the relevance of the history of philosophy to philosophy as logical system is opened a new. For intellectual and moral “satisfaction” (*Befriedigung*), to wit the experience of feeling “at home” in the world which is the existential goal of philosophizing, results from *being in the truth* as an actual state of the self. What is the profit, then, of rehashing those inferior stages of consciousness, apart from the contentment of knowing that we have at last overcome the limitations that once prevented humanity reaching its fulfilled condition? And what differentiates this contentment from the mere “edification” which the history of philosophy was supposed to guard against?

It would seem that Aristotle got it right in the first place. If one is in possession of the truth by strictly rational means, then it is impervious to the vicissitudes of temporality. And in this case the history of thought, i.e. the awareness of what it took in terms of historical experience for those rational means to be fully developed, cannot *in the present* be other than an afterthought coloring with a more emphatic hue of certainty the awareness of our fulfilled state. The pre-history of today’s perfect rational insight may indeed be said, in a Hegelian fashion, to have been necessary for that insight to reach its *entelecheia*. But to us *as holders* now of that ultimate wisdom the historical retrospect cannot add anything of substance to our self-consciousness. To be in the truth means to have escaped history.

And so we end up with a paradox. For our historical venture has mutated into the very belief that we struggled to shake off, namely that history is external to reason. That was, as we saw, the conviction of the Enlightenment. It also is the conviction of its more recent incarnation, namely analytic philosophy, which is quite as implacable in its determination to clear the Augean stables of thought of the dirt and debris of misconceived flights of the metaphysical imagination (especially the Hegelian one). This “analytical ideal”, as C. Janaway calls it²⁴, resembles the Aristotelian method in that it co-opts past concepts only if they can be cast as premonitions of current state-of-the-art philosophy. These are to be employed to fortify the contemporary consensus and not as independently worthy pieces of reasoning, let alone as alternative models of theory.

If it is true that Hegel’s historical program has fallen back on Aristotelian prototypes, then it also merges with the methodology of his greatest enemies in contemporary philosophy. How about this as an additional vindication of the Hegelian dialectic?

24. C. JANAWAY-P. ALEXANDER, *History of Philosophy: The Analytical Ideal, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, v. 62, 1988, pp. 169-189 and 191-208.

III. The stages of Greek thought according to Hegel

Hegel's account of the development of Greek philosophy (from the Seven Sages to the Alexandrines) is an application of the methodology sketched in the above. It involves a threefold division of its principal stages, each subdivided into philosophical schools. There follows a rather conventional, albeit highly selective, exposition of each doctrine, based upon ancient and contemporary sources. Then the three levels are linked, by means of intermediate interpretative commentary, in such a way as to show a teleological ascent in terms of the increasing metaphysical profundity of concepts as well as the subsumption of the older by the new and higher modes of "speculation".

To construct this hierarchy he employs the classic Aristotelian formula of the naïve, confused and childish nature of the earlier ideas, while simultaneously asserting that they are imperfect manifestations of later wisdom. This design has the rather paradoxical and counter-intuitive consequence that the theoretical "fulfillment" of Greek philosophy is declared to lie in Neoplatonic mysticism, whereas the truly foundational philosophies of Plato and Aristotle (despite Hegel's lavish praise) are demoted to preparatory phases.

The measuring rod for this rather startling evaluation is the requirement of "systematicity". Beginning with the Stoics, Hegel claims, universal reason explicitly sets as its ultimate theoretical goal the contemplation of absolute Oneness, otherwise named God. Empirical phenomena are here brought under the controlling jurisdiction of a living Absolute, understood as engendering the visible manifold out of an indwelling creative impulse. This "dialectical" ontology that brings the transcendent foundation of all being into living unity with empirical reality is expressed in the Neoplatonic doctrine of "emanations". Its concomitant requirement for an ecstatic "merging" of the thinking mind with God's essence is also a correct depiction of the ultimate end of theoretical reason.

This ranking of Greek philosophies has the additional advantage of ushering in Christianity as the next higher stage in the ascent of "world spirit". If we recall that Hegel, in his *Logic*, describes the accomplishment of his own philosophy as having "read the mind of God", we can see that his interpretation of Greek thought is also guided by the motive of explaining it as the first act in the production of his own system. In the *Lectures* the striking claim is made that there are only two world-historical forms of philosophic thinking, the Hellenic and the Teutonic one²⁵. The reason for this is that only in classical Greece there pertained for the first time conditions of intellectual freedom and criticism, without which the dialectical clash of perspectives is impossible²⁶. Greece was the fountainhead of rational freedom, in the same way that the Germanic world was meant to be its consummate realization.

25. G.W.F. HEGEL, *loc. cit.*, p. 131.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

Hegel's "first period" begins with the Presocratics and ends with Aristotle, in itself a rather remarkable grouping. In Milesian physiology he discerns an inchoate attempt to conceive of the "Absolute"²⁷. He thus, like Aristotle, imputes to them an intent and a terminology which they could not have shared. In fact his dependence upon *Metaphysics A* here is extensive. He shares Aristotle's assessment that Anaxagoras' *Nous* was the first truly philosophical idea of the Presocratic era, an attempt to think of nature in terms of the rational purposes realized therein. A high point in this analysis is the high status accorded to Heraklitos. Hegel declares that there is not a single thought of the Ephesian that has not been incorporated into his own logic. With Heraklitos, Hegel claims, the "dialectic became objective", i.e. the identity of opposites was declared to be visible within the very process of physical becoming.

The dialectic had been invented by Zeno of Elea and applied most strikingly in the refutation of the logical possibility of perceived movement. Hegel had praised this as a breakthrough, for Zeno had shown that "mere" appearances have no true ontological standing²⁸. He called this exercise the first appearance of an objective dialectic. But now, in the context of his discussion of Heraklitos, he takes back the plaudits: Zeno's dialectic had after all remained "subjective"²⁹. This is another Hegelian swear word. Subjectivist interpretations of thought lose sight of the essential connection of concepts and reality, and thus cannot guarantee that the contents of consciousness are not insubstantial images devoid of truth. It was the merit of Heraklitos to cash in the dialectic by applying it to the natural realm and showing that it is an abstract depiction of physical becoming. But was Heraklitos really applying a pre-existing logical operation (borrowed from Zeno or elsewhere) to the interpretation of natural transitions? Or was he only trying to make sense, to hold together in memory, what he perceived as occurring in nature? On this we have commented in the previous section. Hegel validates a logicist understanding of Heraklitean flux, because only thus can he justify the aforementioned inclusion of Heraklitos in his own logic.

Hegel's discussion of the Sophists is stimulating³⁰. He is aware that the first Sophistic represents decisive progress and enlightenment in the Hellenic world. This judgment is significant as a counterpoint to the "idealistic" interpretation, which triumphed in Germany in the 19th century primarily through the great Wilamowitz and saw in the Sophists a phenomenon of intellectual and moral degeneration defeated by Plato. Hegel identifies the Sophists with the advent of "universal cultivation" (*Bildung*)³¹. He, thus, recognizes the democratic import

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 319-343. See p. 320: «Hier sehen wir Land; es ist kein Satz des Heraklit den ich nicht in meine Logik aufgenommen».

28. *Ibid.*, p. 305.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 319.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 406-440.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 409.

of their teaching and the progressive significance of their challenge to tradition. That philosophy was thus “brought down to earth” and connected inextricably with the living needs of society, and particularly its political ones, was a contribution that marked the subsequent phases of classical thought. Hellenic Sophism, he concludes, had a “positive” and even “scientific” dimension.

But Hegel was far from being an uncritical admirer of the Sophists. The revolution they wrought was necessary, but signified simultaneously the triumph of “common sense”, an attitude that Hegel despises³². What is at issue here is the claim, through the sophistic notion that “man is the measure of all things”, that the average empirical individual is the sole judge of truth and right strictly by reference to his contingent and ephemeral interests. This implies the victory of relativistic sensationalism in epistemology (as illustrated in Plato’s *Theaetetus*) as well as the undermining of all norms of social behavior. Society is thus dissolved into a cacophony of mutually refuting voices and the debilitating struggle of incompatible interests.

Unthinking veneration of tradition is indeed an evil, but at least traditional beliefs are informed by a notion of the community as a substantial whole that harnesses individual energies for a common cultural enterprise. A correct understanding of freedom is lurking here and it needs to be brought out. The self-referential freedom of the asocial individual, on the other hand, is a prescription for the dissolution of the polity, such as transpired in Athens in the era of the demagogues. The Sophistic easily mutates into a generalized negativism that destroys the legacy of culture, without putting anything in its place. And the thinker in whose person this tendency reached its apogee is, according to Hegel, that iconic figure, Socrates.

Hegel’s interpretation of Socrates is also challenging³³. He is, firstly, understood as an exponent of the Sophistic method. His reasoning is a reduction of theory to the platitudes of everyday experience, his notion of ethics a utilitarian calculation from the standpoint of individual interest. It is clear that Hegel’s account depends entirely upon Xenophon’s rendition of the “bourgeois” soberness of his teacher, and not on Plato’s depiction of the man as an inspired metaphysician.

At the same time, Socrates does not just represent the continuity of Sophistic negativism, but its intensification to the point of erecting an alternative world view that marks the end of what was uniquely creative in Hellenic culture. Socratism is the dawn of a new world. As a matter of fact it is the very outbreak of *modernity*, however paradoxical and anti-historical this may sound³⁴. For what crystallizes in the Socratic manner is the demand of individual consciousness to take upon itself alone the burden of deciding the essential questions

32. *Ibid.*, p. 408.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 441-516.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 404.

of existence. Subjectivity existing for itself alone is the principle of Socratic philosophy. The inward certainty of the cultivated self now breaks out of the shell of common institutions and mores that by tradition dictated and defined its very identity. This is the notion that was to achieve its consequent, and dysfunctional, triumph in modern society.

Socrates was, hence, the herald of a world-historical transformation, his teaching the fulcrum on which the “world spirit” took a fateful new turn. And it is in this that he must indeed be considered as a real hero of culture –not with respect to the insubstantial outcome of his aporetic meanderings. Hegel inaugurates here a substantial tradition of 19th century thought which singles out Socrates as a pivotal figure in civilization. And his assessments prefigure Nietzsche’s damnation of the Socratic spirit as the commencement of the “thanatic” turn in European culture, a judgment to be further radicalized by Heidegger³⁵.

But Socrates is also a tragic hero, for to remain true to his new-fangled conception of the absolute self he sacrifices his very physical existence. To uphold the right of individuality, which was the principle of the future, he comes into conflict with the substantial and supra-individual foundations of his community. This is a collision that in his standard fashion Hegel understands as one not between a right and a wrong, but as one between two antithetical notions of right. Antigone also went down in a similar clash of two incompatible notions of legitimate existence. But Antigone’s person is bathed in the beautiful glow of the passion for transcendence, whereas Socrates is the purveyor of the egotistic harshness of a workaday world fallen prey to crass interest. Hegel *loves* the poetic tenderness of Antigone’s beautiful personage; he merely *admires* Socrates as the intrepid pioneer of European civilization’s problematic future.

It is this metaphysical diagnosis that determines Hegel’s evaluation of the trial and death of Socrates. It is clear to him that “the state” was justified in calling Socrates to account as a corrupter of the foundations of communal life. This is the deeper meaning of the charge that Socrates was denying the gods of the Polis. Hegel is not merely saying that Socrates was a critic of the democracy, which given its precarious state had to fight back to suppress the oligarchic tendencies implicit in Socratic teaching (and exemplified by his personal ties to notorious anti-democrats). This is after all the interpretative consensus concerning the political import of Socratism. Hegel is claiming something much more radical: the Socratic spirit is incompatible with the very concept of law and with the institutional frame of social life whatever its political form.

This is again counter-intuitive, given Socrates’ “conservative” submission, in

35. For Socrates as an emblematic figure in 19th century thought, see A. W. LEVI, The Idea of Socrates: The Philosophic Hero in the 19th century, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, v. 17, no. 1, 1956, pp. 89-108. For an iconoclastic view that stresses the inner attachment of Nietzsche to Socrates despite the overt polemic, see W. A. KAUFMANN, Nietzsche’s Admiration of Socrates, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, v. 9, n. 4, 1948, pp. 472-491.

the *Crito*, to legal verdict despite its unjustness. But for Hegel if the validity of law is made dependent upon the sanction of individual consciousness, then even the actual submission does not abolish that initial refusal to acknowledge law as springing from a metaphysical order which supersedes individual rational judgment and its pretended certainties. When Socrates says, in the *Apology*, that he recognizes as “true judges” only those who voted to acquit, then he still reserves for the atomic self the prerogative of determining what justice is, even though he surrenders his body to the court. This is the intolerable self-certainty of the finite ego.

Socrates’ guilt is, for Hegel, his denial that law is something more substantial than the aggregation of individual opinions concerning right, even *cultured* individual opinions. His guilt is his denial that law springs from the metaphysical order of things, an order that the individual mind must come to see and to accept. In Socrates we have, thus, the first manifestation of *Moralität*, i.e. the belief that inner conviction alone is enough to deliver moral judgment. This type of subjectivism would come to fruition in Kantian ethics³⁶. This introversion of the ethical spirit has something demonic about it, aptly symbolized by the famed Socratic *daimonion*. For here the atomized self pretends to find the seat of God in its own its breast, a delusion that fills it with a pansophic kind of conceit. Socrates claim that he was following the injunction of Apollo is disingenuous, for he has declared *himself* an oracle of right³⁷.

This type of fervor is soon beset by a lethal dialectic. For without external foundation in social practice its inner conviction may prove to be deluded. Strength and sincerity of belief is no guarantee of its rightness, so that the object of its red-hot commitment may very well turn out to be evil. And evil was quite definitely Socrates’ counsel to the youth of Athens that they had the right to defy the authority of their parents in the name of reason³⁸. In an environment of atomistic relativism (“man the measure of all things”) one individual’s right is another’s wrong. The very distinction upon which ethics rests evaporates.

A paradoxical consequence of the above is that Socrates could be seen not the opponent of democracy, but indeed its champion³⁹. For what else could democ-

36. G.W.F. HEGEL, *loc. cit.*, pp. 467 sq.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 494-496.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 505.

39. That Socrates had been a critic of the democracy has been traditionally the majority point of view, and his guilt as the subverter of the *demos* has of recent been forcefully reaffirmed, albeit in a popularized form, in I. F. STONE, *The Trial of Socrates*, Boston, Little-Brown, 1988. An influential statement of the opposite argument is in G. VLASTOS, *The Historical Socrates and Athenian Democracy*, *Political Theory*, v. 11, n. 4, 1983, pp. 495-516. Vlastos claims on textual and historical evidence that the laws defended by the Socrates in the *Crito* are precisely those of the democracy. A more systematic argument to the same effect, based upon the attempt to reconcile the defiant Socrates of the *Apology* and the submissive Socrates of the

racy be in practical terms, except the determination by arithmetical majority of prevalent opinion? Socrates is certainly a teacher who tries to educate the man in the street, so that his opinions are informed by adequate consideration of fact, enlightened interest and mutual benefit. But these calculations are of their nature contingent and reversible. Hence this does not make him a proponent of the substantiality of law. His philosophical practice still unfolds within the institutional and anthropological assumptions of the democracy. It makes use of the freedom of speech that democracy granted to the average citizen in order to improve its operation, but it does not challenge its principles. Hegel makes pointed reference to a contemporary of Socrates whose theoretical problematic enclosed, behind a comic veneer, the highly "serious" purpose of defending a "patriotic" concept of inherited law as the very meaning of individual existence against its Socratic subjugation to prevalent opinion. This is, of course, Aristophanes who in his notion of the "old education" pursues an anti-democratic philosophy of much greater conceptual depth compared to the frivolities of Socratic banter.

The censure of Athenian democracy, the identification of Socratism with its excesses and the elevation of Socrates to the fountainhead of the atomistic ethos of modernity is the cover under which Hegel conducts his campaign against the rise of democracy in his own time. This tide is seen to be underpinned by the empiricist and utilitarian biases of British philosophy, whose sources are detected in the sensationalism of the ancient Sophists and the Socratic privileging of the rational ego⁴⁰. And it is instructive to recall that the eventual anointment of Socrates as the hero of democratic freedom of speech and the rights of conscience as against the tyranny of received opinion was indeed the work of British utilitarianism, namely G.Grote and J.S. Mill⁴¹. Once again, Hegel's account of the historical rise of reason is a covert polemic against what he sees as the destructive tendencies of his own age.

Hegel's treatment of Plato⁴² and Aristotle is a continuation of the theme of

Crito, is to be found in R. KRAUT, *Socrates and the State*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984. Kraut's "liberal" Socrates is shown to depend upon the unlimited freedom of criticism accorded by the democracy for his very philosophical identity. And even in the *Crito* the "conservative", even "authoritarian" argument that we owe obedience to the Laws as to our parents still presupposes the right to criticize political authority, because according to Kraut the filial obedience of *mature* children cannot be *absolute and unquestioning*. For a refutation of Vlastos and the thesis of Socrates as a democrat which restates the traditional arguments, see E. M. WOOD-N. WOOD, Socrates and Democracy: A Reply to Gregory Vlastos, *Political Theory*, v. 14, no. 1, 1986, pp. 55-82.

40. G.W.F. HEGEL, *loc. cit.*, pp. 450-451.

41. J. S. MILL, *On Liberty*, New York, Henry Holt, 1879, ch. II (available at oll.libertyfund.org).

42. G.W.F. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Bd. II, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, pp. 11-132.

“the critique of finitude”. Since his account of Socrates is based upon Xenophon and Aristophanes, he considers the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues to be a spokesman of their author’s views. Given, moreover, that his reading of Plato relies upon the mature dialogues he is able to sidestep the thorny question of the indebtedness of Platonic theorizing to Socratic prerequisites.

Plato’s epistemological breakthrough is encapsulated for Hegel in the mental operation of *anamnesis*⁴³, which affords the possibility of going beyond the objects of perception. The senses remain mired in the multiplicity of evanescent phenomena, the true object of “speculation”, however, is the unity of form underlying the ever changing manifestations of things. The oneness of essential Being, both as ultimate Totality, and as a system of essential classes of ontologically necessary substances, is the ultimate *mathema* of philosophy. This is an Eleatic proposition, except that the Eleatics failed to explicate the interaction between the realm of essences and that of appearances. Plato’s is the first systematic pursuit of a synthetic perspective in which the intelligible essence is understood as the “cause” of perceptible things. Sense perception is now understood as the trigger that puts the mind on the road to the comprehension of the unitary idea, which is the unchangeable essence of entities apprehended as being somehow similar in experience. Physical objects “participate in” this essentiality, although qua material, and hence perishable, they “imitate” it only imperfectly.

The evanescence of the perceptible was the great teaching of Herakliteans, with whom Plato had associated in his youth. His philosophical project then can be restated as an attempt to validate this Heraklitean perspective on physical nature, without at the same time letting go of the supreme theoretic object of extracting an abiding core of Being from this spectacle of transience. Plato is for Hegel the first great teacher concerning the falsity of the “analytical” view of reality. “True Being” cannot be thought of as dismembered into an infinity of atomic ingredients. Knowledge based upon the external association of these fleeting elements of sense perception is mere haphazard opinion. The first act of liberation from the yoke of appearances is to comprehend them from the standpoint of mathematical (geometric) form manifested therein. This is the legacy of Pythagoreanism incorporated into Platonic epistemology. The sphere of mathematical entities is the first grade of true knowledge, the realm intermediate between conception of the ultimate ontological kinds and mere sense perception. Platonic dialectics, as opposed to the Socratic understanding, is not the perpetual to and fro between the assertion of a contingent entity or opinion and the denial thereof. It is rather the definitive refutation of the substantiality of analytical finitude as such.

This result is laid out in the famous conclusion of the *Parmenides*. This, how-

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-46.

ever, is not the end but the beginning of our theoretic ascent, the necessary propaedeutic to the grasping of the intelligible Oneness of true Being by means of pure thought alone. Hegel engages Proklos here as the authoritative commentator, for whom the *Parmenides* is the beginning of the true conception of God as a non-material being inaccessible to language and its analytical distinctions⁴⁴. This privileging of a Neoplatonic understanding of Plato is significant. It prefigures the teleological culmination of Hegel's reconstruction of Hellenic thought, as well as announcing his own philosophical self-conception.

With respect to ethics Plato's great achievement is said to lie in the formulation of the philosophical theory of "the state". Hegel considers this to be the heart of the Platonic teaching, in so far as "the state" is posited now as the objective actuality of thought, the necessary framework for philosophy. Intellectual and practical freedom is defined by Plato as a mode of life in subjection to laws and institutions directly imitating the intelligible order of the cosmos, hence the hegemonic position of philosophers.

This constitutes the notion of "social morality" (*Sittlichkeit*) which was the great contribution of Greek culture to humanity, the one precisely subverted by Socratic subjectivism. This is the progenitor of Hegel's own theory of the "organic" state, except that the latter will supply the "moment" missing in Plato's construction, namely an affirmation of the rights of individuality even though harnessed to collective ends⁴⁵. Hegel emphatically dissents from Plato's rejection of the nuclear family and private property.

It has to be noted that Hegel's translation of the Platonic concept of *Politeia* (as well as the Aristotelian one of the *Polis*) as "the state" is highly tendentious. It equates without further ado the ancient concept of a morally regulated common life (a complex mode of friendship among qualitative equals) with the bureaucratic mechanism for the protection of rights and the delivery of services which is a specialized sub-system of modern society. But the latter emerged only after the 17th century, following the emergence of a materialist conception of the self and the dissolution of the collectivist ethos and the holistic metaphysic that had stamped human existence before then. The terminology itself, thus, prejudices the existence of dialectical continuities that ought to be the object of historical enquiry.

With respect to Aristotle what can be added is that Hegel sees the *Metaphysics* as the core of his thinking. He identifies here the first successful philosophical attempt to envision the "Absolute" as a living unity of essence and existence, of pure thought and objective reality. Aristotle corrects the major deficiency of the Platonic doctrine of ideas, namely the separation between the realm of logical essences and that of physical being⁴⁶.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 105 ff.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 151-168.

Plato had correctly realized that these two levels of existence would have to be brought into a necessary form of interdependence, but he did not properly execute this program. He rendered the relation in terms of linguistic metaphors which simply re-described the problem without putting it away. And the reason for this is that he could not conceive self-motion, self-externalization as an inherent ontological attribute of intelligible Being itself. Aristotle was able to overcome this defect by thinking of the same unitary essence that underlies all existence from two distinct standpoints, those of potentiality and actuality, where the latter is the necessary “objectification” of the former.

Hegel here reads his own concept of “alienation” (Entaeusserung), the idea that “the essence must manifest itself”, into the Aristotelian doctrine of τὸ ἦν εἶναι. Nature is consequently projected as the external side of Spirit. When Aristotle applies himself to the study of physical entities and processes, this is not for him an end in itself. It is, rather, the systematic illustration of his metaphysical suppositions, an account of real entities as “instantiations” of deeper ontological laws. Hegel considers this as an entirely appropriate method of philosophizing about nature, fundamentally opposed –as we saw above– to modern empiricism.

This is the reason that Aristotle’s qualitative understanding of the physical realm is theoretically correct, in contradistinction to the mechanistic model of 18th century science. For the point is to bring the empirical under the concept, to transmute appearances into thought. Aristotle eminently succeeds in doing precisely that, whereas modern experimentalism simply describes the empirically given as broken up (“analyzed”) into a “bad infinity”, i.e. a mere quantitative aggregation, of separate things and/or events. Aristotle’s “first principles” are thus judged to be more valid compared to the “laws of nature” as defined by modern science. For the latter are merely observed, and hence contingent, correlations of phenomena. Kantian epistemology which stamps the modern era is a theoretical justification of the analytic procedures of mechanistic science. We need, instead, a return to Aristotle’s synthetic or holistic ontological vision for a sound interpretation of nature. Kant himself had an intimation of this in his *Critique of Judgment*⁴⁷.

That said, Aristotle himself fell prey to the analytic fallacy in his logical treatises. Hegel drastically devalues Aristotelian logic, as a procedure that splits up logical form from concrete content. Logic in this sense is the thought of “finitude”, a conception of the atomic components of experience as final and absolute in their distinct identity (X is either black or non-black). It is, hence, founded upon the law of the excluded middle, famously defended by Aristotle against its Sophistic and Heraklitean detractors. But this pretended law of

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 174-181.

thought is the defeat of ontological holism and hence works against the grain of Aristotelian metaphysics⁴⁸. This is a sharp internal contradiction. Any reading of Aristotle that privileges the logic over the metaphysics and the physics is thus a denial of his most important contributions to thought.

Hegel's pronouncements here, systematically expounded in his philosophy of nature and the *Logic*, set up an opposition between empirical science and mathematical logic on the one hand and "dialectical reason" on the other that had rather deleterious consequences in European intellectual and political life, apart from their retrograde character as a historical narrative that was already noted.

Hegel's final verdict on Aristotle is that, despite his definitive foundation of speculative thought, his oeuvre still lacks systematic unity, and that is why "universal reason" would have to proceed beyond him.

It is provocative theoretically, and dubious in historical terms, to consider the Hellenistic systems as advances over Plato and Aristotle. But this is precisely Hegel's understanding. And the criterion for this judgment is a tendency he claims to perceive in the post-classical schools towards a deeper unity of principle⁴⁹. This alleged triumph of metaphysical monism, as well as an increasing emphasis upon the self-concentration of thought in the form of a transcendent Subject now openly named God, is the justification for considering Hellenistic philosophy as progress. In Hegel's history of culture Christianity is the next higher stage, and hence it appears natural to see in the theosophic and theurgic interests of the Alexandrian era a world-historical transition.

The turn towards the intelligible fountain of existence was prepared, according to Hegel, in two ways. Firstly through the recoiling of the subject away from the external world and towards its inner self as signaled by the ideals of *apatheia* and *ataraxia* cultivated by the Stoics and the Epicureans respectively. The philosopher now becomes the Sage, the intensified consciousness that draws wisdom from the depths of his own existence. Hegel correctly underlines the similarities of ethical outlook of these seemingly opposed doctrines, centered as they both are on the autonomous ego that has shaken off the bondage of physical necessity⁵⁰. He is remarkably fair to Epicureanism (whose sensationalist "criterion" of truth he, of course, rejects), by emphasizing that its hedonic ideal is oriented not towards the animalistic functions of the human organism, but rather to the satisfaction of our intellectual and spiritual needs.

In the only piece of genuinely historical analysis in his account of Greek thought, Hegel correlates philosophy's retreat into self-consciousness to the absolutist nature of political authority during Hellenistic and Roman times. "The

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 237-245.

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 246-249, 250.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 333-334.

state" now weighs upon the individual as an alien and threatening physical force, wherefore his defense takes the form of severing his ties of dependence on society and nature.

The second theoretic tendency of the era that brought about the consummation of Hellenic thought in Neoplatonism was the development of Skepticism. The skeptical state of mind, with its roots in the old Sophistic, is usually considered as the deadliest enemy of philosophy. But this is true, Hegel argues, only of its eristic or purely negativist manifestation, i.e. nay-saying as an end in itself. Hellenistic skepticism, however, is imbued with a serious theoretic purpose⁵¹. It is bent upon showing that any piece of knowledge founded on sense observation is nothing but probable opinion. It may be adequate as a practical rule of the thumb, but in no way penetrates to the region of ontological truth. This is a dialectical move of immense significance, for it clears the ground for the final assault on "true Being" by means of the spiritual power of the self alone. And this is what the Neoplatonists proceeded to accomplish.

Neoplatonism is, for Hegel, a truly synthetic philosophy that brought together all the previous strands of Hellenic thought⁵². It is Neoaristotelian as well as Neoplatonic⁵³. The categories of Aristotle, Aristotelian nomenclature and logic were its essential tools in the way that the sovereignty of divine Nous over matter, as well as the internal constitution of the intelligible realm (the relation of the absolute One to the Nous and the Psyche) was worked out. The Plotinian doctrine of the "emanation" from absolute Oneness of all grades of Being, from the higher spiritual ones to the lowest of dumb matter, is but an imaginative and colorful reworking of Aristotle's theory that God causes teleological movement in nature by inspiring love in all physical entities (κινεῖ ὡς ἐρώμενον).

But the Platonic intent emerges supreme in the end. For as in Plato, when the path of logical analysis exhausts itself pure thought (noesis) emancipates itself even from language. Consciousness fuses itself with the very being of God in silent inward contemplation. Philosophy becomes an ineffable rupture in the presence of the ultimate mystery, the very *fons et origo* of all possible existence. The philosopher, then, does not simply think God, but actually sees him and revels in his presence, and finally becomes one with him. From this standpoint, the ultimate significance of the *bios theoretikos* is as an existential exercise (askesis) meant to bring about the unification of the human mind with the Absolute.

The wordless ecstasy of the Neoplatonists has been vilified as crude irrationalism, as the inebriation of uncouth mystics. But this, says Hegel, is the slander of the philosophically untutored. In fact, Neoplatonism is the first consummated theoretical vision of the Absolute, an Absolute that in a choreography of

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 358-360.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 431.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 433.

dialectical moves first engenders out the plenitude of its actuality the sum total of worldly existence and then retrieves it all back into itself, so that it may exist not as an abstraction in the mind, but as a “concrete infinity”, a present universe of living thoughts and things.

If we recall the significance accorded by Hegel to the mysticism of Jacob Boehme, a marginal and arguably non-philosophical writer nevertheless considered by him as the very source of dialectical idealism in the modern period, and we couple this with the paean to the Neoplatonists, we understand that for Hegel these ecstatic overextensions of the theoretic imagination constitute a prefigurement of his own metaphysics. Hegelian epistemology also issues, after the erection of a much more intricate scaffolding of concepts, into an intuition of the dialectical oneness of all Being. For in answer to the question what exactly “absolute knowledge” is supposed to be, a negative description of it as the summing up of all previous thought is not satisfying. “Absolute knowledge” as a positive state of consciousness, as a thing in itself, cannot be rationally described, but only suggested by means of emotionally charged images and metaphors, such as the mystical union of the finite and the divine intellect evoked by the overflowing “Chalice of Spirit” in the very brief penultimate chapter of the *Phenomenology*⁵⁴.

Hegel’s history of philosophy is, *in fine*, a history of his own philosophy, the commandeering of past thought to perform foundation-laying labor for his own beliefs.

IV. Δῆμος νοημάτων: philosophy as a plurality of meanings

Philosophy is not about substantive Truth, or constituent parts thereof. It is about the way the mind positions itself vis-à-vis whatever shreds or simulacra of it are supplied to it by the sciences or ordinary experience. The Truth requires an external object of reference, about which something is said. Philosophy, however, posits its own objects⁵⁵. The object of philosophy is a set of “ultimate” perplexities defined as such by the very practice of it, and expressed in the language(s) employed in this practice. And its content is the sum total of propositions generated in the effort to deal intellectually with those conundrums (the existence of God, things-in-themselves, “minds in vats” or what have you), which a small subset of human individuals happen to consider of interest. Philosophers talk with themselves and among themselves, trying to make sense

54. G.W.F. HEGEL, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, *op.cit.*, p. 808. Compare also the conclusion of the greater *Logic*, that the absolute Idea is the “scientific comprehension of the concept of God” (die Wissenschaft nur des göttlichen Begriffs).

55. On the inherent indeterminacy of philosophical practice due to its lack of an object external to itself, see M. MANDELBAUM, *The History of Philosophy: Some Methodological Issues*, *The Journal of Philosophy*, v. 74, n. 10, 1977, pp. 561-572.

of what they mean when they use this or that term and what follows from such uses. This does not necessarily amount to a *philosophia perennis*, for the content of this conversation is at each stage affected by its socio-cultural context. For it is this latter that throws up the bits and pieces of truth or reality, in relation to which the philosophical community takes various positions even changing its understanding of its own ultimate *aporiae* in the process. Philosophy is not, can no longer be, guided by the assumption that it is an instrument in the production of truth or at least an arbiter of which item of scientific thinking is fit to be incorporated into a “deeper” level of ontological wisdom.

Plato and Aristotle could make such a claim because they were prime practitioners of the sciences of their own times, in fact its founders. There was then no other science than philosophy. But this presumption was put to rest by Kant, who summarized in this way both the scientific self-understanding of modernity and introduced the new mode of philosophizing compatible with it. Hegel’s attempt to return to Plato and Aristotle, and what’s more to a theologically tinged interpretation of their metaphysics, thus amounts to a reversal of the historical movement of culture.

Philosophy is not about truths, but about meanings, meanings that are not to be verified or refuted by adducing this or that physical datum or scientific finding. No amount of scientific or technological progress has managed to “cure” human culture, or even its most scientifically literate parts, of the notion of God. And no amount of “purgative” language-theoretical sophistication has managed to shake off our continuing fascination with Socrates, Plato, the Presocratics, even with medieval thought.

Philosophy is an ascription of significance to the real from within the confines of the thinking subject, “thought” being construed here in the Cartesian sense of whatever occurs in the mind (including imaginings) in the process of its operation. Reality appears to the self in a bewildering repertory of partial aspects. And to different selves, individual or collective, the same partial aspect appears in different ways. Reality is never “before” thought as a completely constituted unitary object. It is never for it a “given” fact. Facts are only particular constituents of an objective whole that eludes us. They are given to the philosophical mind by the sciences or empirical common sense. Philosophical reason then proceeds to invest them with meaning, or to make “abductive” extrapolations, in C.S. Peirce’s sense, based on them concerning whatever unifying frame might be lurking behind this infinity of apparitions.

Hegel is right in claiming that philosophy is an attempt to make reality exist “for us”, i.e. to see it as implicated into human purposes and needs. To that extent philosophy is truly “idealism”, namely the process of infusing with human form whatever segment of objective Being happens to be implicated in our mental and practical activities. But this cannot mean that the mind can possess knowledge of the real as a completed whole, let alone that the mind can, in some indefinable way, bring it into existence. The adequation of the human mind with that of God is a proposition that carries no decipherable sense.

The human self is terminally enclosed in its finitude, and over against it there stands the ineffable and unreachable substantiality of Being, its δεινότης. As against this “absolutism of Reality”, to use H. Blumenberg’s apt phrase, philosophy (as well as mythology, art, indeed even science) is a series of defensive maneuvers, i.e. attempts to mitigate the asymmetry of the relation by *giving names* to that infinite Object which escapes us and threatens us. By thus discoursing about it as if it were something familiar, something cognate with us, we hope to propitiate and even control it⁵⁶.

But there is not any one “correct” or obligatory way of going about this naming. And given the wondrous inventiveness of the talking animal in the production of signs, an activity that given the exhilaration of its creativity becomes eventually an end in itself, the endless proliferation of these images (even within a single natural language) is testimony to its usefulness in somehow stabilizing our worldly existence around shared meanings. This success is of course only relative, because in the depth of ontological time the unconquered power of Objective Being will wipe out the puny achievements of this culture-making animal. This is a source of profound philosophical concern, to which however there is no remedy as it signifies the terminal point of all “speculation”.

In the meantime –and all cultural activities unfold within the intermediate space “this side” (Diesseits) of that metaphysical horizon- what is our historical task? It is faithfully and accurately to record all the products of the representational activity of our species. It is to collect together all the “symbolic forms”, to use E. Cassirer’s term, around which the gloriously diverse manifestations of our civilization crystallized. And it is also to try to comprehend the core meanings ensconced in the expressive means that various human communities employed in order to negotiate their passage through the clashing stones of their specific reality⁵⁷.

Is it true that this or that meaning can be culled from a given text or cultural artifact? The task of historical rationality is to answer this question, not the question whether a given meaning is “true”. For all meanings are by definition “true” to those who hold them, “true” that is subjectively, emotionally, culturally. The rustle of the leaves of the oak is indeed a divine voice for those belonging to a given cultural community. The question is what the constitutive elements of this belief are and how it affects the community’s existence. From another angle, of course, the belief is plainly false: but this verdict is not rendered by philosophy.

56. H. BLUMENBERG, *Work on Myth*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1985.

57. On the plurality of philosophical orientations in relation to the historical situation, on the one hand, and the possibility, on the other, for the autonomy of the philosophic enterprise, see N. ROTENSTREICH, *Relativity and Variety of Philosophical Systems*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, v. 41, n. 1/2, 1980, pp. 187-203.

And thus we may say that an attenuated notion of truth is after all involved in the process of hermeneutic understanding. And this is the truth that to the best of our judgment this, and not another, set of meanings can be legitimately imputed to the text or artifact under study. It is in this context that the Skinnerian prerequisites kick in. But orthodox Hegelianism, surely, would not settle for such an emaciated and non-ontological notion of truth.

An aspect of this hermeneutical undertaking is undoubtedly the translation or interpretation of the linguistic constructs of one human group in the vocabulary used by another. In the history of philosophy this means the attempt to show the affinities between the conceptual apparatus of one system or epoch and that of another. This translation or interpretation does involve a “radical” methodological commitment, as expounded by W. Quine and D. Davidson. For in the interests of trans-cultural (and even trans-individual) communication the “charitable” assumption has to be made that a subset of meanings operative within the representational system of a given community (or individual) is equivalent to a subset of meanings in a different one⁵⁸.

For after all, in the broadest possible sense we all live and discourse, whatever our cultural milieu, within the same encompassing reality, in which case some of our affective reactions to this common environment must be of comparable character. This, however, cannot be understood in terms of a *reduction* of one representational system to another through the *elimination* of the signs that cannot thus be reduced. Even less should translation be guided by an assumption of the superiority of one representational paradigm over another.

For the rest, after all the strategies of communicative mutuality have been exhausted, there will always remain within a given system of symbols a treasure of untranslatable concepts and symbolic stances (that poetry of existing in a particular part of the world in a particular way), which can only be fathomed if the interpreter accedes to the world-view of their authors, i.e. learns their language and becomes one of them. For in an ineluctable sense what it means to be a bat only a bat can know⁵⁹.

The history of thought, if it is truly historical, is guided by the methodological requirement of interpretative pluralism. Philosophy is identical with the sum total of concepts and meanings historically produced within the scope of its practice: on this Hegel was right. But their exhilarating manifoldness cannot be pared down to a “canonic” selection subserving one preferred “truth”.

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58. D. DAVIDSON, On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 47, 1973-1974, pp. 5-20.

59. T. NAGEL, What Is It Like To Be a Bat?, *The Philosophical Review*, v. 83, n. 4, 1974, pp. 435-450.

HEGEL ΚΑΙ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΙΑ: ΟΙ ΑΞΙΩΣΕΙΣ ΤΟΥ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΟΥ ΛΟΓΟΥ

Π ε ρ ί λ η ψ η

Τὸ ἄρθρο ἀναλύει ἐν πρώτοις τὴν βασικὴ θεωρητικὴ θέση τοῦ Hegel ὅτι ἡ φιλοσοφία ταυτίζεται μὲ τὴν ἱστορία της καὶ τὴν ἀξιολογεῖ στὸ πλαίσιο τῶν συγχρόνων συζητήσεων. Ἕνα πρῶτο συμπέρασμα εἶναι ὅτι ἡ ἐγγεγραμμένη ἱστοριοποίηση τοῦ στοχασμοῦ ἔχει σὲ γενικὲς γραμμὲς δικαιωθεῖ. Στὴ συνέχεια γίνεται σύγκριση τοῦ Ἀριστοτέλη καὶ τοῦ Hegel ὡς ἱστορικῶν τῆς φιλοσοφίας, μὲ δεδομένο ὅτι τὸ Α τῶν *Μεταφυσικῶν* εἶναι τὸ πρότυπο ποὺ ἀκολουθεῖ ὁ τελευταῖος στὴ δική του ἀνασυγκρότηση τῆς ἐξέλιξης τῆς φιλοσοφικῆς σκέψης. Κατόπιν ἀναλύεται ὁ τρόπος ποὺ ὁ Hegel διατάσσει τὶς κύριες φάσεις τῆς ἀρχαίας Ἑλληνικῆς φιλοσοφίας, μὲ ιδιαίτερη ἀναφορὰ στὴν τελολογικὴ δυναμικὴ ποὺ θεωρεῖ ὅτι ἐμφαίνεται κατὰ τὴ διαδοχὴ τους. Περιγράφεται ἡ ἐρμηνευτικὴ προσέγγιση τοῦ Hegel στὸ πλατωνικὸ καὶ τὸ ἀριστοτελικὸ σύστημα, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἡ προβληματικὴ του πεποίθηση ὅτι ὁ νεοπλατωνισμὸς συνιστᾷ τὴν κορύφωση τοῦ ἀρχαιοελληνικοῦ στοχασμοῦ. Τὸ ἄρθρο κλείνει μὲ μιὰ συζήτηση τῆς σχέσης φιλοσοφίας καὶ ἀλήθειας, ὅπου ἀπορρίπτεται ὁ δογματισμὸς καὶ προκρίνεται μιὰ πολυαρχικὴ ἀντίληψη τῆς φιλοσοφίας ὡς καλλιέργειας ἐναλλακτικῶν νοημάτων.

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