The dark side of *phrónēsis*: revisiting the political incompetence of philosophy

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**Abstract.** In his *Ethics*, Aristotle joins *sōphrosunē* and *phrónēsis* as synonyms. In approximately the same time frame, Xenophon provides a Wittgensteinian account of a go-and-look instance of what *sōphrosunē* looked like in one ancient Greek context. We have a disturbing description of *sōphrosunē* in action. It leaves a reader with quite a different picture of the meaning of these two key words from the staid, peaceful, deliberative contemporary interpretations, particularly in Continental philosophy, that attempt to make both *phrónēsis* and *sōphrosunē* the foundation for a praiseworthy ethics and politics. Continental philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer attended closely to Aristotelian *phrónēsis* (not the Xenophonic variety), but were unable to put that learning into practice in their own ethical and political lives, making one wonder why followers of Heidegger and Gadamer continue to insist on ethical programs based in the Heideggerian and Gadamerian phronetic tradition, where Aristotle has supplanted Odysseus as the model most associated with *phrónēsis* and *sōphrosunē*.

**Keywords.** *Phrónēsis*; *sōphrosunē*; Aristotle; Xenophon; prudence; Gadamer; Heidegger; National Socialism; esotericism.

Wie steht der Philosoph zu der politischen und gesellschaftlichen Wirklichkeit? / Where do philosophers stand in relation to political and social reality?

– Hans-Georg Gadamer, *On the political incompetence of philosophy*

Phronesis ist immer Unterscheidung und Wahl dessen, was man für das richtige hält. / Phronēsis is always the process of distinguishing and choosing what one considers to be right.

– Hans Georg-Gadamer, letter to Richard Bernstein

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