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MIGUEL BAPTISTA PEREIRA - Retórica, Hermenêutica e Filosofia

MARINA RAMOS THEMUDO - Ao Princípio era a Acção? Observações acerca das notas 611-660 das Philosophische Untersuchungen de Ludwig Wittgenstein

MARIA LUÍSA PORTOCARRERO F. SILVA - Retórica e Apropriação na Hermenêutica de Gadamer

BEN SCHOMAKERS - The Blindness of Contemplation. On thinking according to Aristotle

AMÉRICO LOPES DA SILVA - Reencontro com Albert Camus

ANTÓNIO MANUEL MARTINS - Wallace e a Lógica da Descoberta científica em Galileu. A propósito da edição recente dos Tratados Lógicos de Galileu

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THE BLINDNESS OF CONTEMPLATION *
ON THINKING ACCORDING TO ARISTOTLE

BEN SCHOMAKERS
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Denn weil

Die Seligsten nichts fühlen von selbst,
Muß wohl wenn solches zu sagen
Erlaubt ist, in der Götter Namen
Teilnehmend fühlen ein andrer,
Den brauchen sie.

For since

The most blessed themselves are unfeeling
Must, if it is allowed to
Say so, in the name of the gods
Partakingly feel another,
And him do they need.

Hölderlin, DER RHEIN

Infertile philosophy

Philosophy - and this holds true too for the engaged study of the history of philosophy - is not an activity that you can suspend until the hours of leisure arrive (or of course the other way round, when you have the luck to earn your living as a philosopher), and it is impossible to keep the thoughts that you conquered through serious efforts isolated from the gestures and the utterances that you display outside your philosophical anchorage; thoughts are able to mix up with your blood and thus they will

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influence your behaviour within the community where you are supposed to live your life with other people; putting it in words that are somewhat more pathetic, they determine your view on reality. And, of course, that can be wholesome, because philosophy can be a means to reopen the eyes for reality as it is, it can be useful to keep hope and expectations alive, and it is, I think, of vital importance for example in the situation of the countries in Western Europe, where it might help to realize that other people are really different and that there is no reason to adapt them to the widespread but poor solitary ideal of the economic man. Etcetera. Philosophy can exert a sound and fruitful influence on your confrontation with reality. But philosophy can be dangerous too.

The following example might make this clear. There are many circumstances that can persuade you to undertake the often laborious approach to a certain philosopher; sometimes your interest will have been aroused by your environment, because teachers were devoted fans of let's say Parmenides or Plotinus or even Derrida, or because you were rooted in a continuous tradition or because you are unable to resist what is en vogue; in other cases you'll be a victim of sheer coincidence. But the most sincere and most promising grounds for a fertile meeting are procured by something like an initial, many times intuitive recognition; the rhythm of a sentence strikes you, or a quotation or perhaps only a table of contents, and you get the impression that a philosopher has something very valuable to say to you which might be worthwhile to discover.

In my case it was an expression that appears in many handbooks and that dominates the renewal of the interest in Aristotle in the continental part of Western Europe, that appealed and convinced me that it was necessary to turn to Aristotle. Because the theme of his first philosophy was the study of ‘being as being’ ὑπ' ὑπνόμην as he called it himself, and for me the message contained in these words seemed to be clear before any serious interpretation; Aristotle wanted, to put it as vague as my initial recognition was, to do fully justice to reality and consider everything as it really is; and you probably don’t call a certain branch of knowledge your ‘first philosophy’ when you do not attach the highest value to it; Aristotle seemed to protest against a superficial and perspective glance at reality and instead of it pleaded an attitude that expressed the willingness or even the necessity to pay due attention to all things. That was what I thought.

But while I studied Aristotle, and I might even say: while I devoted myself to him, something strange and unexpected happened; the life of reality as it struck my eyes didn’t become more intense, although that was what I had hoped, but it weakened and waned. Of course, I had developed a great ability in describing reality in abstract and structural terms, but
on the other hand I had become infertile and wasn’t able to respond to the detailed and concrete reality any more. And by and by I even lost the inclination to live my life in general concepts and when nevertheless some obligation forced me to do so I started to entangle myself sometimes without any conviction, but sometimes after a while with a certain passion too, in endless networks of abstract subtilties. Later I was able to interpret these infertilities as the result of a silent inner protest against the dissociation of thought and reality, or perhaps better: of thought and reality as it is of importance to the life of a human being. You might say that in my attempts to do in the aristotelian fashion justicetobeingasbeing, I locked myself up in the ivory tower of a structure-spinning philosopher and lost the sense for the reality of reality. And as I see it now, that dissociation of thought and reality is an inevitable consequence of Aristotle’s highest approach to reality. It will be the purpose of this article to provide a proof or a plausible argument for this, I’m aware of it, rather rude statement.

One might of course object in advance that it is unjust to blame Aristotle for the disturbance of the relation between my inner life and reality; it is more likely that it simply is the result of every exaggerated cultivation of a certain occupation or of a hobby, however innocent they may be in themselves. That may be true, but as I will try to show I don’t think Aristotle’s philosophical attitude can be considered innocent, and in any case it is evident that he doesn’t esteem the study of being as being purely a recreational activity. It is the aim of his first, and that also means his most important philosophy; but it is even more revealing that he explicitly adduced that study as man’s vocation. In spite of the beautiful words dedicated to man as a political animal (that means a living being within a society) and to human friendship, he arrives in the last pages of his Nicomachean ethics at a more profound confession. His words become elevated and rhetorical and thus betray a sincere involvement. He is speaking about the highest form of happiness that can be attained by a human being and suggests that it must be found in the contemplative, philosophical activity; and then he rounds off his discussion with a sentence that sums up the kernel of his anthropology; I quote, from the seventh section of the tenth chapter:

what is most proper to something is by nature what is the best and the most pleasant for it; for a man that is the life led according to his power of thought, because then he is in the most real sense of the word ‘man’; and that life thus will be the happiest. (1178a5-8)
If the use of the faculty of thought is equivalent to the keenness of eyes set on being as being (and that’s what really is the case), and the desire to do so produces the damaged relation of inner life and reality at which I hinted, then it seems inevitable to assume that Aristotle didn’t commit a marginal mistake but defended and proclaimed a philosophical man on the basis of an unsound anthropology; and that means: on the basis of a dangerous view on reality.

But that is what I only realized after I had dared to ponder on the sentence I just quoted. The expression ‘being as being’ is sufficiently unclear to safeguard for a long time hidden behind its enticing shield an obnoxious character. It appears only three or four times in the *Metaphysics* (to wit in Γ.1-2, Ε.1 and Κ.7) and the fact that it provoked a totally inconclusive debate among the scholars, occupying even radically opposed positions, can be reckoned an indication that in these instances Aristotle’s words are not unambiguous: is he talking about individual things - beings - that disclose their meaning and nature within the context of reality (and that was what I hoped for), or, in general, about the abstract categories and relations that must be valid for all beings, or is he even focussing upon the universal and perhaps divine trait of a being?

The passages in the *Metaphysics* in which the phrase appeared resisted a convincing interpretation, and thus I had to remain in the vague until I chose the anthropological confession as a point of departure for the reflections on my feelings of uneasiness and my eventual inner reluctance to practise the study of being as being. That confession contained an important clue which permitted a grip on the problem, even though it was the theme of a notorious dispute itself. A philosophic life ought to be led according to ‘the power of thought’.

It is true that with respect to the power of thought and to thinking Aristotle is rather economical too and what is left are in fact only two enigmatical sections in the *Metaphysics* (namely the seventh and the ninth of the twelfth chapter), the very difficult fourth and fifth section of the third chapter of his treatise *On the soul* and some two or three hands full of scattered utterances, a couple of which are really tantalizing. What is, for example, the object of thinking and what aspects of reality are liable to be thought? And if the power of thought is, as Aristotle emphasizes again and again, impassible, that means unable to receive passions or influences - πάθη - and is thus locked up in itself, how is the trap of an intellectual solipsism to be avoided and what might guarantee an agreement of what is thought innerly and the external reality? And many times Aristotle alludes in intentionally ambiguous words to a relation of god or something divine to the power of thought and some interpreters iden-