

The *Wednesday*



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group at Albion Beatnik - Oxford

Editorial

The Relevance of Fichte

The Department of Continuing Education at Oxford University, based at Rewley House, is running a course on Fichte next term. It will be, as far as I know, the first time that a full course has been dedicated to this German Idealist philosopher at any British University. The course will be taught by Dr. Meade McCloughan. The only course that comes close to focusing on Fichte is the one on German Idealism by Professor Sebastian Gardner, at UCL, some fifteen years ago.

It may be argued that these figures are just filling the gap between Kant and Hegel. This may sound true, on the face of it. Reading Fichte and Schelling, one could see how Kant's thoughts could be developed but also shows where Hegel was coming from. His highly technical and obscure style of thought and writing becomes more intelligible in the light of Fichte's metaphysics, ethics and natural rights and also from Schelling's philosophy of nature and art. One comes to realise that these philosophers were not just filling a gap but made great contributions to philosophy in their time and now. They have provided concepts that are useful for philosophy, psychology, politics, aesthetics and literary theory.

To link this to our debate on identity in the editorial of the last issue, one finds relevant ideas in Fichte, especially on the social contract, the public sphere and the role of the scholar (or the intellectual.)

Fichte raises in his *System of Ethics*, the point of creating a new social contract, and by extension, a new identity, in a world losing its trust in the old system of a state and church. Fichte, unlike Rousseau, does not start from a radical point of creating a completely new contract but from what he calls the state of necessity (*Notstaat*). What he means is that you start from where you are and open the debate about what is an existing *symbol*

(or idea) that you all agree on and can work toward developing. What one needs is a symbol that becomes the centre of the debate and a group of an ever increasing circle of rational participants, mainly scholars. There will be a public sphere for this debate, such as the universities.

Fichte said that the church used to educate the public, but that this has now been taken over by the universities and the scholars. More important, the symbol of the old system is more rigid and taken for granted. The new system Fichte proposed is one that is provisional and continually in the making. It is an open symbol that gets rationally developed in an environment of complete tolerance.

But Fichte is not a disruptive revolutionary; he is more cautious, perhaps seeing the fate of the French Revolution. He distinguishes between private opinion and the requirements of reason in its objective existence. He also assumes the full cooperation of the state, even if you could see its shortcomings, but is still critical of its principles and functioning. He is not radical but a reformer who puts the main emphasis on rationality, high intellect and the independence of scholarly research and thought.

All the above thoughts are useful in the debate on identity. They suggest that any change should be rational, gradual and involve those who are qualified to enter the debate. They also suggest that the identity crisis is a crisis of the old symbols in Europe. There has been a huge shift from the old symbols as the basis of society and state and this needs to be recognised. Finally, they point toward an open symbol that needs to be developed within the parameters of the new realities.

The Editor

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*



The article below follows Kierkegaard's argument and his reflection on the story of the Sacrifice of Abraham. The concepts of the ethical and the religious lives are contrasted. The ideas of belief, the Absurd and the Knight of Faith are discussed and questioned. There are also discussions of the relations between the individual and the universal in Hegel and Kierkegaard, and a novel way of ranking them is suggested.

DAVID SOLOMON

Part 2

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard discusses the nature of faith and the relation of faith to the other stages of human existence: the Aesthetic life and the Ethical life. He does this through the story of Abraham and the God's command that he sacrifice his son Isaac. Faith is contrasted to the ethical because in human terms, the ethical is the highest stage of all. The ethical is the universal, it is what belongs to universal human values and to language, to what in the individual is open to other individuals, to what can be communicated and shared with other individuals. Unlike the ethical, the religious lies at an oblique angle to human existence and at a remove from

it. He describes it as 'incommensurable' to reality and as paradoxical to daily existence. As a result, it is fraught subjectively with doubt and uncertainty, and as regards others with incomprehension and the inability to understand. As the 'the father of faith', Abraham was unsupported by his family, friends and culture when he set off on his journey, unable to talk meaningfully about God's command. That he had to sacrifice his son by his own hand but nevertheless continue to hold fast to the promise made to him that he would be the father of a nation, could only occur 'by virtue of the absurd'. Abraham could never have any assurance that he was acting

from faith and not delusion, and certainly no other person could know this.

Many heroic people can give up all hope of happiness on earth, becoming the 'Knight of Infinite Resignation'. But to make the opposite movement – to become the 'Knight of Faith' – is something incomprehensible to the writer. The Knight of Infinite Resignation is poetical. The Knight of Faith by contrast makes a movement in the opposite direction from the infinite back into the finite world. There is nothing poetical about him. He is totally at home in the world. The author imagines that he meets him while strolling about in Copenhagen. He gives an ironic account of the meeting.

'I have not found any such person, but I can well think him. As was said, I have not found any such person, but I can well think him. Here he is. Acquaintance made, I am introduced to him. The moment I set eyes on him I instantly push him from me, I myself leap backward, I clasp my hands and say half aloud, "Good Lord, is this the man? Is it really he? Why, he looks like a tax-collector!"' However, it is the man after all. I draw closer to him, watching his least movements to see whether there might not be visible a little heterogeneous fractional telegraphic message from the infinite, a glance, a look, a gesture, a note of sadness, a smile, which betrayed the infinite in its heterogeneity with the finite. No! I examine his figure from tip to toe to see if there might not be a cranny through which the infinite was peeping. No! He is solid through and through. ... One can discover nothing of that aloof and superior nature whereby one recognizes the knight of the infinite ... And yet he is no genius, for in vain I have sought in him the incommensurability of genius. In the evening he smokes his pipe; to look at him one would swear that it was the grocer

over the way vegetating in the twilight. He lives as carefree as a ne'er do well, and yet he buys up the acceptable time at the dearest price, for he does not do the least thing except by virtue of the absurd'.

Kierkegaard leaves open the twin possibilities that faith does not exist in the world in any form or else the opposite: that every person he meets is living in the world through faith 'by virtue of the absurd'. It is impossible to tell, to make faith foundational or part of a system that is grounded in a foundation.

Most of *Fear and Trembling* is taken up by three questions connected with the story of Abraham. We will approach it in a sequence of questions:

1) Is the teleological suspension of the ethical possible?

As a parallel and contrast to the story of Abraham, Kierkegaard discusses the episode from the *Iliad* where Agamemnon is required to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to appease the goddess Artemis, in order for the Greek fleet to be able to depart for the war. The parallel between Abraham and Agamemnon is not exact because in Agamemnon's case the conflict is between one moral duty (the duty of a parent towards his child) and a higher moral duty (the duty to the community). He becomes a tragic hero because he has to sacrifice one moral imperative for the sake of a higher one. The whole conflict takes place within the realm of the ethical (one ethical duty conflicting with another) and is discussed openly and publicly. Once the decision has been taken to sacrifice Iphigenia, Agamemnon, tragic though his situation is, has the support of the community and of the moral law. He does not suffer from the doubt that he might be deluded. According to Hegel, if the individual prefers their particular subjectivity to the universal ethical, they are sinking below the level of the

ethical and are 'either sinning or subjected to temptation (*Anfechtung*)'.

Abraham on the other hand lives in the paradox of faith whereby his subjective individuality is higher than the universal ethical. Consequently, he cannot be comforted by what is resolvable through debate in the community. He is thrown back on to himself, with all the anguish and doubt that involves. He is unsupported by language and cannot communicate meaningfully.

'For faith is this paradox, that the particular is higher than the universal – yet in such a way, be it observed, that the movement repeats itself, and that consequently the individual, after having been in the universal, now as the particular isolates himself as higher than the universal. If this be not faith, then Abraham is lost, then faith has never existed in the world.'

Abraham is not a tragic hero like Agamemnon. Notably Kierkegaard does not say that there is such a thing as faith, but that if there was, it would paradoxically have to cut across the contrast between ethics and individual egoism.

2) Is there an absolute duty towards God?

If ethics is the highest form of existence, 'God' becomes a vanishing point, no more than a synonym for ethics. To speak of disobeying God, would mean the same as acting selfishly and not doing one's duty. Having an absolute duty towards God, would be to be willing not only to sacrifice one's wish but also one's duty. When Abraham was preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac, he still loved him and regarded his love as the highest duty (the love of a parent towards his child). Otherwise it would not have been a sacrifice. But he was about to sacrifice the ethical as well as his wish. He was not going to do this for the sake of a higher universal, but for his own sake and for God's sake, which in this instance become

indistinguishable. Is this possible? Once again, we are thrown back on to the paradox.

'The absolute duty may cause one to do what ethics would forbid, but by no means can it cause the knight of faith to cease to love. This is shown by Abraham. The instant he is ready to sacrifice Isaac, the ethical expression for what he does is this: he hates Isaac. But if he really hates Isaac, he can be sure that God does not require this, for Cain and Abraham are not identical.

Isaac he must love with his whole soul; when God requires Isaac he must love him if possible even more dearly, and only on this condition can he sacrifice him; for in fact it is this love for Isaac which, by its paradoxical opposition to his love for God, makes his act a sacrifice.'

3) Was Abraham ethically defensible in keeping silent about his purpose before Sarah, before Eleazar, before Isaac?

In this section, Kierkegaard cites a number of different stories in which the protagonists either choose to remain silent out of self-sacrifice, or to struggle against silence out of a sense of shame and humiliation, or to require submission to God in order to reveal themselves.

In the apocryphal *Book of Tobit*, the young Tobias marries Sarah, who has previously been married seven times. Each time a demon acting out of jealousy has slain her husband. Tobias marries Sarah and having carried out a ritual, slays the demon. Kierkegaard maintains that the real hero is not Tobias but Sarah, who has 'let herself be healed when from the beginning she has been thus bungled without her fault, from the beginning has been an abortive specimen of humanity.'



Details of a sarcophagus

In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Gloucester is placed outside the universal through no fault of his own because of his physical deformity, and becomes demonic as a result.

'Evidently the fact that he could not bear the pity he had been subjected to since childhood. His monologue in the first act of *Richard III* is worth more than all the moral systems which have no inkling of the terrors of existence or of the explanation of them.

.... Such natures as that of Gloucester one cannot save by mediating them into an idea of society. Ethics in fact only makes game of them, just as it would be a mockery of Sarah if ethics were to say to her, "Why doest thou not express the universal and get married?"

Sarah and Gloucester can speak and reveal their motives but their speaking psychologically goes against the grain of their suffering.

In the legend of the *Agnes and the Merman*, the merman is a demon who seduces innocent maidens who fall in love with him and are then dragged down into the depths of the ocean. He intends to seduce Agnes, but instead genuinely falls in love with her, and then repents of all his past. Kierkegaard puts the emphasis of the story on what happens following the merman's repentance. Does he attempt to cure Agnes of her love by cunningly and demonically revealing himself as cynical and cruel? Does he conceal his true past motivation but not rely upon his shrewdness, thereby losing her, and then retire to a monastery? Or does he by an act of faith reveal himself to her and trust he will after all win Agnes on genuine terms? The last instance requires submission to God's

The Sacrifice
(Image from the
Fitzwilliam Museum –
Cambridge)



will, and here Kierkegaard identifies religious repentance as standing on the border between the ethical and the religious.

‘But still he must have recourse to the paradox. For when the individual by his guilt has gone outside the universal he can return to it only by virtue of having come as the individual into an absolute relationship with the absolute’.

All of these stories involve the possibility that the protagonists can reveal themselves. They all have analogies to Abraham and approach the boundaries of his situation but still without being able to comprehend his case.

‘The examples were simply educed in order that while they were shown in their own proper sphere they might at the moment of variation [from Abraham’s case] indicate as it were the boundary of the unknown land.’

Abraham does not have the possibility of mere

psychological resistance in order to reveal himself; he also has nothing to repent of as he is a righteous man, not a sinner. But he has to go outside the universal so that he cannot talk even if he wanted to, because as soon as he speaks he is back in the realm of the ethical and can be condemned for his selfish and deluded action. We are again back in the paradox.

The Abraham who is depicted in *Fear and Trembling* is a paradigm for the situation of the individual unsupported by the universal. In a sense as far as human existence goes, the ethical really is the highest level. Our duty is to live in the universal or return to it if we have departed from it, not because we have a duty to the ethical (as if the duty was external to the ethical) but because the ethical is duty as such. But in this work, as in others, Kierkegaard wants to show how there might be something that needs to underlie and support the ethical (even by way of opposing it), something which he refers to as ‘absolute duty’, or ‘the absurd’, or ‘faith’. Whether this exists or not he wants to leave open, but this question is also part of the paradox of faith.

What is a Text?

What is a text? Is a poem a text in the same way a scientific paper is a text? How do we interpret literature?

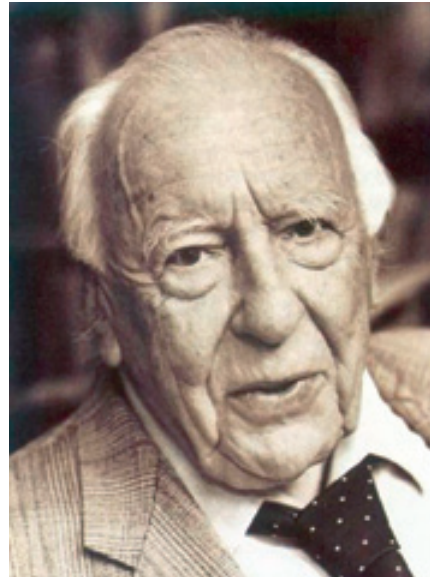
PAUL COCKBURN

A good place to start looking at texts is by looking at the work of philosophers such as Carnap and Wittgenstein etc. in the 1920s with logical positivism trying to reduce the whole of language to a propositional calculus where logic is king. Subjectivism is eliminated. All statements are true or false, and logical 'truth-tables' rule. We deal with texts as a series of sentences or statements. But as Bertrand Russell asked: can the statement 'the king of France is bald' have any meaning?

Wittgenstein, originally a logical positivist, turned his attention to other aspects of language in his *Philosophical Investigations* published after his death in 1953. Communication is now key. You don't necessarily need language to communicate: you can just point and show people what you mean. So, we move from objective propositions to inter-subjective communication. The subject re-enters the picture, and scientific objectivity is only one part of our mental and linguistic processes.

After Wittgenstein, French Continental philosophers such as Derrida deconstruct the text and the subject. The subject is ruled by drives and influences which can even be inferred from what has not been written. Philosophical language becomes convoluted, rhetoric and polemics re-enter the stage, even the idea of a text becomes problematic. There is a dialectic within the text. One philosopher who deals with texts and language in an interesting way is the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005). He believes in hermeneutics, trying to discover meaning in life from texts. These texts for example can be Bible passages or symbolic myths: he notes, as Gadamer does, that we are 'distanced' from texts, by such factors as time and culture. We don't necessarily have to understand the author's intentions; as a reader we can interpret texts in our own way, according to our own predilections. We can interpret texts in a number of ways: psychologically, psycho-analytically, from the point of view of gender, or economic factors.

So, Ricoeur writes about meaning in terms of good and



Gadamer

evil, narrative, myth, psychoanalytic truth, metaphor, ethics and politics. In terms of metaphor, he examines texts as formed at a detailed level by words, and then sentences. The meaning of sentences cannot be reduced to a simple sum of the individual words. Ricoeur analyses metaphors and figurative language, and holds that these figures of speech enliven language, and allow us to interpret truth imaginatively. Poetry is therefore the language closest to human truth. Narrative is linked to myth and psychoanalytic truth. We interpret stories in a hermeneutical way. It is important that we understand our lives as humans in the context of human time, where plots unfold and characters are forged, rather than time passing in a simple 'scientific' way measured in hours and days.

Texts can point us towards truths which are metaphysical. The original meaning of metaphysics is derived from Aristotle: it is literally 'beyond physics'. Ricoeur believes living metaphors, and the creation of new metaphors, allow us to increase our knowledge in a creative way. Philosophy is a 'reading of the hidden meaning inside the text'. Language cannot do without metaphor, but is there a non-metaphorical language, such as the logical positivists proposed, with which metaphor can be contrasted? How do we deconstruct text in a dialectical way? Does the self, whether reader or author, somehow disappear? Perhaps there is such a dialogue between the author and the text, and with the reader as well.

Upside Down World

**Where justice walks sedated
and the cries of the children
are no longer heard.**

**Where the air has lost its purity
and we breathe in and out
gamma rays.**

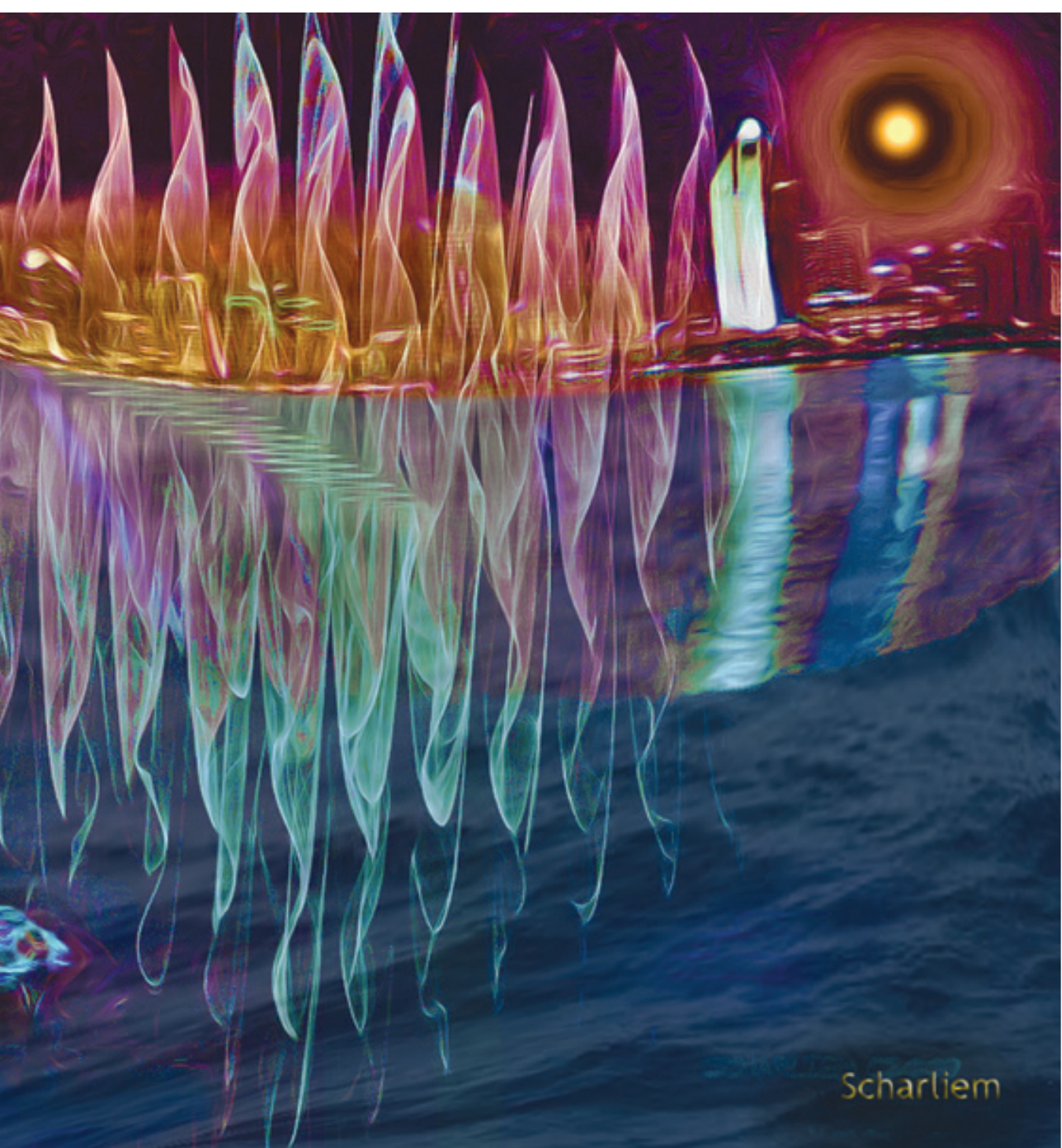
**Where ignorant voices
of momentary celebrities
count more than those
of the healers and helpers.**

**Where animals are dying faster
than an eye can blink
and robots are given lifelines.**

**Where skies intensify
with invisible rays
and clouds are laden
with toxic metals.**



Poem and Painting by *Scharlie Meeuws*



Nietzsche And Natural Science

Where does Nietzsche stands on science? Is he anti-Enlightenment thinker? What is the relationship between philosophy and science? Where does Nietzsche's thought lead?

EDWARD GREENWOOD

If the reviewers are correct, Steven Pinker is the latest to enroll Nietzsche in the anti-Enlightenment camp. If he does so, he is making a bad mistake. Nietzsche is, to borrow Isaiah Berlin's useful dichotomy, a fox whom commentators persist in turning into a hedgehog. Has Pinker read *Human All Too Human*, that sustained plea for enlightenment and science? In aphorism 91 in Kaufmann's edition of *The Will to Power* Nietzsche rejects the pessimistic kind of Romanticism that is reacting against the Enlightenment for the very reason that it is anti-Enlightenment. He endorses Voltaire as against Rousseau. In that aphorism he says of himself 'I am a few centuries ahead in Enlightenment.'

But I want in this short paper to cover a narrower topic, that of Nietzsche's relation to natural science. Now it is notorious that the German term *Wissenschaft* covers a wider range of knowledge than that of the natural sciences. It means any knowledge acquired through disciplined and critical investigation in such fields as classical philology and history as well. But this does not mean that he regarded natural science as just one perspective among others as Derrida and Rorty suggest. Nietzsche's view of textual interpretation was the antithesis of Derrida's. In section 270 of *Human All Too Human* he writes of 'a strict philological elucidation' as involving 'a simple desire to understand what the author is saying.' True he speaks of 'the text of nature' in section 17 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, but that is because he wants to compare the metaphysician who gives an unscientific view of nature with

'deep explanations', with the philologist who misreads a text. It is not that he 'subjectifies' science by assimilating it to philological exegesis, but rather that he wants to emphasize the objectivity of philology by comparing it to science.

Nietzsche stresses that scientists do not want us to accept their claims by regarding them as 'convictions', but as a result of their severe methods. Convictions are the enemies of science. It is a mark of science that there are no martyrs to it in the same sense that there are martyrs to religion. As aphorism 455 in Kaufmann's translation of *The Will to Power* says 'Faith is created by means antithetical to those of research.' *Intellektuelle Rechtschaffenheit*, or 'intellectual honesty' is central to Nietzsche's conception of the scientific method.

It is true that in section 112 of *The Gay Science* Nietzsche seems to see science as descriptive rather than causally explanatory, somewhat in the way of the instrumentalism (as opposed to realism) of Mach, and this may be a mistaken view of science, but that is not pertinent to the matter at hand, which is that Nietzsche's view is that the scientific method is our best way of arriving at both the truth about nature and the truth about history. Nietzsche does not seem to make Dilthey and Windelband's nomothetic and idiographic distinction, but again I do not think this affects my thesis of the connection Nietzsche makes between science and truth seeking. Nietzsche wants science to aim at 'the refinement and rigor of mathematics... as far as this is at all possible.' (The Gay Sci-

ence translated by Walter Kaufmann, aphorism 246). In aphorism 293 he writes of 'the severity' of 'the service of science', 'its inexorability in small as in great matters.' Aphorism 300 of the same work acknowledges that a science like chemistry may have originated in the alchemical quest, but this does not affect the fact that chemistry is now a science which gives us truths about the constitution of nature. Aphorism 344 of the same work maintains that science is rooted in a kind of faith, but that this is not the faith demanded by religion, but rather is rooted in the belief that one can attain truth by the resolute effort not to deceive first oneself and then others. The whole of section 347 is a splendid, psychologically penetrating, account of the way in which the need to believe can lead to the martyrdom of 'Petersburg nihilism', for fanaticism is the only kind of strength of will that 'the weak and insecure' can find. As he writes at the close of *The Genealogy of Morals*.

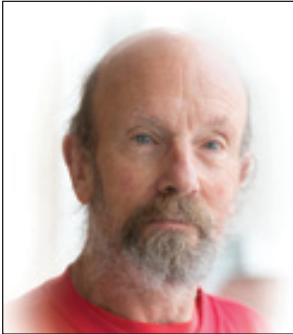
In Francis Golfing's translation 'man would sooner have the void for his purpose than be void of purpose.' In aphorism 344 of *The Gay Science* Nietzsche writes that 'In science convictions have no rights of citizenship', science requires 'a provisional experimental point of view.' On page 238 of his translation of *The Gay Science* Kaufmann quotes a very striking note of Nietzsche's: 'A very popular error: having the courage of one's convictions; rather it is a matter of having the courage for an attack on one's convictions.' Here surely is the scientific spirit in a nutshell. It calls us to think that our views might be wrong, might be falsifiable, but without Popper's methodological limitations, for Nietzsche has no objection to critical inductive reasoning, unlike Popper. But if Nietzsche was an apologist for the objectivity of science, he was not guilty of the scientism of figures like Dawkins, Hawking, and Steve Jones. In his own time he saw such scientism as evinced by the work of a thinker of huge reputation at the time, Herbert



Nietzsche

Spencer. When in aphorism 373 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche acknowledges that a scientific interpretation of the world might be a stupid one, it is obvious by the context that by 'scientific' here he really means 'scientistic.' He is attacking the assumption that science has the solution to all problems. He sees the world of nature as portrayed by the natural sciences as a meaningless world in that it is a world involving what I A Richards in his *Science and Poetry* would call 'the neutrality of nature'. The world it gives us is, in itself, devoid of moral meaning. That only enters with human consciousness. It is the philosopher's task to replace religion by giving the world a moral interpretation which is truer than the 'moralism' which has reigned up to now.

In part 6, section 204 of *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche rightly calls the contempt of some natural scientists for philosophy 'arrogantly naïve.' They despise philosophy because it does not seem to be making the incremental progress of natural science. But this arises from their complete misconception of the nature of philosophy. The task of the philosopher is to get rid of metaphysics as the offshoot of religion that it is, and to endow a morally meaningless universe with moral meaning of the right kind. In short, the task of the philosopher is nothing less than the overcoming of nihilism.



Chris Norris

The Matter of Rhyme

The poet is like a painter who will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling; and his picture is good enough for those who know no more than he does, and judge only by colours and figures.

Plato, *The Republic*, Book X

With the truth, all given facts harmonize; but with what is false, the truth soon hits a wrong note.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*

(Note: This extended villanelle is imagined as written by an early fourteenth-century philosopher trained up in scholastic habits of thought but discovering, in his later years, that he wants to write poetry of the kind influenced by newly-imported Troubadour lyric forms. His conflict of allegiance is here dramatized in the tensions between verse-music (rhyme and metre) on the one hand and doctrinal (including theological) adherence on the other.)



What's wrought the change in me I cannot tell.
Why rhymes so haunt me now God only knows.
All thoughts aspire to form a villanelle.

It's those thought-teasing rhymes that cast their spell
Though words once served thought's purpose as I chose.
What's wrought the change in me I cannot tell.

So strange, the way my thinking seems to dwell
On everything that signals verse, not prose.
All thoughts aspire to form a villanelle.

Not that I'd want the clock turned back to quell
This sudden need for that which rhyme bestows.
What's wrought the change in me I cannot tell.
Time was I didn't care how accents fell
But now it's these verse-stanzas I compose.
All thoughts aspire to form a villanelle.

Once it was my chief joy to reason well
And keep the logic-choppers on their toes.
What's wrought the change in me I cannot tell.

How think straight when they're chiming like a bell
At each line's sense-to-sound subduing close?
All thoughts aspire to form a villanelle.

They say: why let mere sound-effects compel
Your thought, mere rhyme decides the way it goes?
What's wrought the change in me I cannot tell.

I say: just blame the troubadours who sell
Verse spin-offs from the Roman de la Rose.
All thoughts aspire to form a villanelle.

Yet errors lurk within that formal shell
Such as I'd once been quick to diagnose.
What's wrought this change in me I cannot tell.

They say such errors rock the citadel
Of faith since they conspire with logic's foes.
All thoughts aspire to form a villanelle.

Perhaps a special spot's reserved in Hell
For anyone whose verse too sweetly flows.
What's wrought this change in me I cannot tell.

Maybe they'd rather have it rush pell-mell
Till metrics and speech-rhythm come to blows.
All thoughts aspire to form a villanelle.

And yet, and yet – why all the parallel
Verse-structures, the accentual highs and lows?
What's wrought this change in me I cannot tell.

An age ago it seems when I'd excel
In framing ways their nonsense to expose.
All thoughts aspire to form a villanelle.

That's why some brethren deem me infidel,
And lose no chance to glory in my woes.
What's wrought this change in me I cannot tell.

Some times there are when almost I rebel
Against my art, so deep the conflict grows.
All thoughts aspire to form a villanelle.

Yet should each rhyme resound like my death-knell
Still I'd affirm the living truth it shows.
What's wrought this change in me I cannot tell.
All thoughts aspire to form a villanelle.

The Curse of the Gods The Fertile Ground

The second of a number of articles on the development of philosophy in Greece, this one looks at the early stage of philosophy or, as some claim, the Greek miracle.

NONA M. FERDON*

A rectangle can be drawn connecting Messina, in Sicily to Taranto to the north east and as the base of the rectangle, connecting Messina with Soki on the Aegean coast of Turkey south of Ismir. In this region, within less than 150 years, were born Anaxagoras, Parmides, Zeno, Pericles, Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus, Socrates, Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Protagoras, Plato, and Aristotle. Push the time back another century and we have Thales, Anaximander Anaxagoras. This is the Hellenic Epoch of Classical Greece, an epoch not anticipated by any prior age and unmatched thereafter. Why?

A number of theories have been presented:

One: a slave economy which permitted scholars the freedom to think and argue;

Two: long periods of sunshine and clear skies which lessened daily concern for shelter;

Three: cultivation of perspectives by foreign influences imported by peninsular Greek commerce.

And there have been various other theories.

Slavery is virtually coeval with the history of civilisation. As far back as the evidence will take us the records are bloated with slave labour. No one had more leisure than the pharaohs of Egypt, but the long line of pharaohs yielded not one philosopher. The clear skies over Greece allowed the sun to scorch the earth and only 20% of Greek soil could be cultivated. Furthermore, the regions that contributed most Greek commerce were the ones the Greeks themselves had settled for that very purpose. But whatever all the elements were, the classical age was caused by historical circumstances and personal genius.

Our principal sources on the rise Greece from 12,000 BC are the epic poems of Homer and Hesiod, who wrote in the eighth century BC. These poems were created to be sung, to be recited, to be taught to children as lessons in history and rules of life. Each generation, each tribe and village, added something to the original. Thus, there were many Homeric poets by the sixth century BC. There is no question but the intellectual flavour of Greek life from the sixth to the fourth centuries BC was dominated by the sagas, idiosyncrasies and fortunes of Homer's heroic figures. We trace major battles, site the important buildings, sing praises to the major tyrants, and expose the weaknesses of the greatest gods. We learn of military strategies, taxation, customs, superstitions, cuisine, clothing, and population in a historic period that is otherwise nearly unknown. Other sources include the art and architecture of the period which tell so much about religion, standards of living, and technology, later, coins, tax rolls. Thus, history was being written before Herodotus (484 – 425 BC) or Thucydides (460? - 400? BC).

The epic poetry of the period was rich enough in metaphor to serve as a daily guide to a life of justice, courage, and hope. It did not associate particular forms of misconduct with punishment in the afterlife. The absence of such received principles permitted a freedom of interpretation and a creative approach to the spiritual dimensions of the Greeks of the ancient world who did not possess a body of received truths or a code of transcendent principles. The absence of such received principles of freedom of interpretation provided a creative approach to the spiritual

dimensions of life. This, we must assume, had a subtle but pervasive part in the evolution of philosophy. The ancient Greek appears to have been rather oblivious to religious convictions until the early philosophers presented a challenge to them. The gods were immortal, humans were not, and therefore humans was best advised not to pretend to any understanding of the divine. Morality or ethics are translated quite literally into habit or custom.

The pre-Socratic philosophers form the basis upon which Plato and Aristotle and those who followed them would eventually build the groundwork of philosophy. When we speak of the pre-Socratic philosophers we refer to records which began in the sixth century BC. Many were born well before this date and all but a few had passed their prime before the end of the fifth century. But, more important, they are considered to have preceded Socrates in philosophic terms as we shall see. They start by asking what there is and what causes it to be as it is. They pursue the deeper puzzle – ‘what is being anyway?’ They invite us to reflect on whether we can know what is real and what is not real, and whether what is real is different from what we seem to see. And if we were ever to discover the truth, how exactly could we prove it?

And the eternal question – WHY?

In the end philosophy asks for a reason, not just a scientific fact. Many of these men imply that one’s choice of lifestyle can affect the lot of the soul. They deal with ideas like intention, freedom



Pythagoras

of will, notions of good and evil, and punishment for wrongdoing. The laws of physics appear to be explained by appeal to moral agency.

We are not dealing with a few names here. Most histories include Thales, Empedocles, Xenophenes, Protagoras, Parmenieses, Melissus, Anaximenes, Democritus, Heraclitus, Antiphon, Anaximander, Pythagoras, Gorgias, Zeno

While I have no intention of dealing with each of these individuals separately I hope to go into more detail of their theories and impact on the development of Western philosophy in order to highlight their importance to our world view today and as a background to my search for philosophy’s changing concepts of our views and treatment of mental illness.

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The Wednesday

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Website: Currently unavailable

Published by:

The Wednesday Press, Oxford

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Not an old island with white washed walls, nor a finger-clicker lost in time,

But our own *Café de Flore*, a slip away from Oxford's choke and grind.

A space to settle, scratch heads, aver, propose, wrangle over stanzas.

Behind our leanings a wedge of spines, one is prised out - now and then,
and a life leaps from the covers, to be reconsidered.

Edging around volume stacks, Dennis quietly lifts the lid,
strikes up his piano: Bach or Jazz! Our noisiest disputes skilfully drowned.

How many times was the stage set in a shift of stock and a row of chairs?
Then there followed pure saxophone sound or a poetic voice.

Smoothed or shaken, my soul came out to give great applause.

David Burridge