

3877
ARMSTRONG, A. H.
1985

81

A. HILARY ARMSTRONG

THE HIDDEN AND THE OPEN
IN HELLENIC THOUGHT

Introduction

A "hidden course of events" or "Strom des Geschehens" must, if it is to concern us seriously at all, be not altogether hidden. We must be aware of it as flowing or going its way, and aware of it as not altogether disjoined from or without power over the course which we run in our ordinary, day-to-day experience, the common stream in which we swim or are ripples. People have always told stories about another world remote and detached from ours and reached, if at all, by hidden and difficult ways, the Land of the Hyperboreans, the Land of the Young. In Christian Europe this strange other world, which we inadequately call "Fairyland" came to be thought of as the world reached by the "third path" distinct from the two ways leading to Heaven and Hell,¹ and so

¹ I take this image from the ballad of *Thomas the Rhymer*, stanzas 10-13 (*Oxford Book of Ballads* pp. 2-3).

O see ye not yon narrow road
So thick beset with thorns and briers?
That is the Path of Righteousness,
Though after it but few inquire.

And see ye not yon braid, braid road
That lies across the lily leyn?
That is the Path of Wickedness,
Though some call it the Road to Heaven.

And see ye not yon bonny road
That winds about the fernie brae?
That is the road to fair Elfland
Where thou and I this night maun gae.

ARMSTRONG A. Hilary, *The hidden and the open in Hellenic thought* : Eranos-Jb LIV 1985 81-117. | Même si, de façon générale, la philosophie grecque proclame que la raison humaine peut atteindre la connaissance de toutes choses, il y a cependant derrière la réalité une part d'inexpliqué, et certains courants de la pensée révèlent des éléments d'ésotérisme. Ce sont l'orphisme, le pythagorisme, le platonisme, Ammonius, le maître de Plotin, et Plotin lui-même. [12048

sharply distinguished from and set against the worlds dominated by the hidden power which most people most of the time thought of as ruling the course of events, the often terrifying and oppressive mystery of God.

It is of course possible to moralize and theologize Fairyland and so bring it back into the Christian world. This was done with much subtlety and imaginative power by George Macdonald in *At the Back of the North Wind* and more obviously by C. S. Lewis in his stories about Narnia. The modern English writer who has most fully and vividly presented Fairyland as an independent world outside the Christian scheme of things is Lord Dunsany. In *The Charwoman's Shadow* the Magician manages to get to the independent world just in time and so escape God's power and condemnation. In *The King of Elfland's Daughter* and *The Blessing of Pan* the other world takes over small places in this world. In the first, the representative of Christianity, the "Freer", with his chapel and a small group of the faithful, is left as a little island of ordinariness in the midst of the village which has passed into Elfland. In the second the official representative of the Church, the Vicar, after a long spiritual struggle, joins his parishioners at the stone circle, and, to their great relief and satisfaction, performs the sacrifice to Pan which inaugurates the passage of the community out of the common world. In both, the communities pass altogether out of the ordinary course of events over which the Christian God has power. In the Hellenic tradition, because the Divine is differently, more widely and variously, conceived, there cannot be this sort of sharp contrast. The gods take those of their human friends and relations whom they will to the Islands of the Blest, and the land of the Hyperboreans is Apollo's own special holy land.

But, though this kind of hidden world has its own sort of meaning and value, its powers are not usually taken very seriously. This is certainly true in Hellenic thought and imagination. The land of the Hyperboreans, the land at the back of the North Wind, and the Islands of the Blest, in their early unmoralized form in

which they are something like a "fairyland," do not play an important part in it. That which is in some sense "hidden" about the stream of things is taken seriously and some knowledge of it, if such is possible, is desired, because it is conceived as power and truth not easily accessible, perhaps never fully accessible, which will help us here and now by enabling us to understand in some degree what is going on in the open world and to respond to it better. This is the kind of "hiddenness" whose place in Hellenic thought I shall try to explore.

The Hidden in non-philosophical Hellenic Thought

On the whole, the Hellenes had little belief in or respect for any hidden wisdom, any knowledge about or power to influence the stream of events, which was in the ordinary sense "esoteric" or "occult". (I take this "ordinary sense" to indicate a wisdom which is the secret possession of a group of spiritually privileged persons, who communicated it only to the select few whom they choose and initiate. Initiates into the mysteries of the ancient world did not form such an esoteric group possessed of an occult wisdom. What they had been initiated into were secret rites, which gave them a profound spiritual experience and a hope for a better lot in the next world not shared by non-initiates. They did not have secret doctrines.) I shall discuss real or supposed esotericism among the philosophers a little later: at this point I wish to concentrate on what ordinary thoughtful Hellenes thought about the hiddenness in the nature of things. One kind of hiddenness which certainly has something occult about it is the hidden power claimed by magicians. But, though the Greeks, like most other people, believed in magic, it was never of central importance in their society. The more primitive rituals of their religion certainly sometimes had a magical character. But in historical times they continued to be performed at least as much because that was the

way things had always been done as with any expectation of producing a practical effect. And magicians were not respected or generally thought to possess any wonderful or desirable hidden wisdom. Even in the lightly Hellenized world of the Roman Empire, when fear of magic became very prevalent, it was fear, as usual accompanied by hatred, not veneration, which magicians provoked. They were particularly dangerous criminals. Those philosophers who rose above the fear of magic because they knew that the magicians' operations could touch nothing which deeply concerned them, but still believed in magic, explained it, as they explained the venerable rituals of divination, in an entirely open and generally accessible rational and naturalistic way as due to sympathies and correspondences in the great organism of the universe: the finest example of this kind of explanation is the concluding part of the main body of Plotinus' great work on the soul (IV 4 [28] 30-end: chapters 40-43 deal specifically with magic in the ordinary sense). The reason for the much greater prestige of astrology, which most people incline to consider nowadays an occult or superstitious activity more or less on the level of magic, was that within the framework of the ancient understanding of the organic universe the astrologers could easily present their discipline as intimately related to the most dignified form of natural philosophy, the study of the heavenly bodies. Astrology could be seen as a sort of applied astronomy. Not by any means all serious thinkers were prepared to take it so seriously. Plotinus engaged in vigorous polemic against some astrologers' claims in two treatises (III 1 [3] *On Destiny* and II 3 [52] *On Whether the Stars are Causes*). But A. A. Long has shown very well² how complex the debate was and how varied the positions of philosophers, and how competently and cleverly the great astronomer-astrologer Ptolemy could defend his science against philosophical objections.

² A. A. Long "Astrology: arguments pro and contra" in *Science and Speculation: studies in Hellenistic theory and practice* ed. Jonathan Barnes and others, University Press, Cambridge and Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris 1982 pp. 165-192.

Though there was little occult hiddenness in the world of ordinary Hellenes, it was by no means all bright and clear and easily comprehensible. On the contrary, as anyone who has read their literature will know, it was full of darkness and mystery and the unexpected interventions of hidden powers. The dark and the wild always surround, and may invade, the small areas of clarity and order which we manage to establish for a time: and one never knows what is going to happen. The hidden powers which work in the world and determine the course of events in ways which we cannot understand or anticipate are the gods: and the gods in non-philosophical Greek religion are what straightforward experience and observation of the world would suggest that its hidden powers are, unaccountable, unpredictable and multifarious in their purposes, which are dark not in the sense of being evil but of being unpredictable. There was a fairly general belief in earlier times that the gods had a persistent tendency to resent and to bring down great power and prosperity. This was expressed as divine "jealousy" or "envy" (*phthonos*). It seems closely bound up with the Hellenic sense that *too much* of anything is dangerous: it carries people beyond the proper human limits, and the higher the rise, the harder the fall. This, after all, seems to have a good deal in our ordinary experience to commend it. When Solon in Herodotus says to Croesus "Though all the divine is envious and liable to cause trouble, you ask me about human affairs" (Herodotus I.32.1), the tone is not one of criticism or resentment, but of acknowledgement that this is the way things are, as the rest of the speech shows. But the operation of this "envy" is no more predictable than any other operation of divine power. In Solon's discourse *tuchē* or *sumphorē*, "chance" or "accident", quite naturally often replace *theion*, "the divine". And in Hellenistic and Roman times the arbitrary, chancy aspect of the operation of divine power became detached and was worshipped in her own right as *Tychē* or *Fortuna*. M. P. Nilsson regards this development as evidence of the decay of genuine religion "ein Zeichen der Entgöttlichung der Welt". But it is most interesting to see in his, as

always, admirably precise and careful account of Tychē³ how quickly she developed into a perfectly normal goddess with statues, temples and a regular cult. It was not so easy in the ancient world for even the irreligious or superficially religious to get away from the divine as it has proved to be in the officially Christian world.

In all Hellenic thought not deeply affected by philosophy, down to the end of antiquity, there is always plenty that is hidden and dark in the universe, plenty going on in the world of the gods, whose powers and proceedings only become perceptible to men dimly and fleetingly from time to time. But there is not a secret order, a hidden system of the cosmos – though it is certainly not conceived as an anarchy either. And there is no group of superior persons who are believed to have esoteric knowledge of the hidden course of things. This is a most important determinant of the course of Hellenic and of later European thought about the divine. The gods did indeed give signs and omens and oracles, and there were religious craftsmen with professional skills in interpreting them. But the interpretation of the signs was always considered to be a tricky business, and it was recognized that the interpreters, even if skilled and honest, might be wrong. Nor did the reputation of seers for honesty and faithfulness stand very high in real life. We can see this at least as early as the sixth century B. C. Onomacritus, the great Athenian oracle-specialist at the court of the sons of Pisistratus, must have acquired quite an aura of esoteric wisdom before he was found out. But we can read in Herodotus how he was remembered as a forger and unscrupulous manipulator of sacred texts (Herodotus VII 6).⁴

³ M.P. Nilsson *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* (München 1950) II pp. 190-199. The remark quoted above is on p. 191.

⁴ This reputation persisted in later times. cp. Pausanias I. 22.7.

The Hidden and the Open in Philosophy

It is generally, and rightly, considered that philosophy for the Greeks was a very public and open activity. It seems to have developed from the endless uninhibited conversations about everything, in any public place where it is possible to stand or sit about, which are characteristic of the open-air life of Mediterranean males, and in which the Greeks have always indulged more freely and wide-rangingly than others, and with remarkably lasting effects. Of course we should not forget the presence in it, probably from the beginning, of a strong contemplative and at times introspective tendency. Heraclitus was certainly introspective, though not in a way which prevented him from looking outwards, for the Logos he encountered in himself was one and the same with the Logos he encountered in the world. And very intense meditation must have preceded the flash of intuition symbolically described in the Poem of Parmenides. Even before them, the Milesians must have spent a good deal of time in Aristotelian *Thauma*, gazing and wondering at the things up in the sky (*ta meteōra*) before they started talking and writing about them. Perhaps Thales never really fell into that well: but he and Anaximander and Anaximenes must have done a good deal of star-gazing – and, in the case of Thales, perhaps mud and mist-gazing by the Maeander, which would have seemed even odder to his fellow-citizens. But on the whole the object of Hellenic philosophers was not only to discover but to declare as clearly as possible the things that seemed to be hidden about the universe and the nature of man and the divine. We shall consider later what doubts and diffidences some philosophers had about their powers to do this and how in the end a mystery was apprehended before which philosophers must be silent. But first I propose to examine some cases of real or apparent esoteric discipline or procedure among philosophers.

Orphics and Pythagoreans

We must begin, of course, with the Pythagorean Brotherhood. But, before considering them directly it seems desirable to say something, very briefly, about those rather esoteric-looking people, the Orphics, whose beliefs clearly connect with one side of Pythagoreanism. I do not propose to spend long on them, as I agree with those scholars who do not think that there is sufficient evidence for supposing them to be as ancient, original, and important as has sometimes been claimed. The view of them which seems to me to fit the scanty and puzzling evidence best is that of Walter Burkert, very well and convincingly explained in a recent essay.⁵ He shows that the only people who were clearly and certainly called "Orphics" were the wandering *telestai*, initiatory priest-magicians of whom we read in Plato (*Republic* II 364A-365A) and Theophrastus (*Characters* XVI *Of Superstition* 28). These went round in the Greek world offering to cure (for a consideration) the troubles of individuals and communities by performing for them the *telestai*, initiation-rites, contained in their voluminous sacred literature (which may have varied considerably from priest to priest: there was no Orphic canon of scripture). They certainly made esoteric claims as individuals to a superior hidden knowledge, revealed in the ancient poems which only they possessed, which enabled them to deal with the dark chances of life. But they did not form an esoteric brotherhood or society like the Pythagoreans, though some *telestai* may have gathered round them little *thiasoi*, small groups of disciples and devotees.

The Pythagorean Brotherhood in its earlier years had a very different sort of esoteric solidity. The *hetaireiai* founded by Pythagoras in Greek Italy, the organisation as well as the doctrines of which were probably due to his original genius, were unique

⁵ Walter Burkert "Craft versus Sect: the Problem of Orphics and Pythagoreans", in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition III*, S.C.M. Press, London 1982, pp. 1-22.

and unparalleled in Greece, and perhaps in the whole history of esoteric movements. For a short time and in a limited space they actually exercised the political and social authority of which other occult groups have dreamed. It does seem to be true that their doctrine was secret, and that the secrecy was preserved by a strict discipline. And from the little we know about them it does seem likely that it was this doctrine of the great numerical-musical order of the cosmos, to which human beings must conform themselves and their communities, combining as it did concepts and precepts which we should separate out into religious, scientific and political, which inspired this powerful form of organisation (to whose power the secrecy must have contributed, though it may also have helped to provoke the final catastrophe) which brought about for a short time a reformed polity in Croton and elsewhere. Old Pythagoreanism, like the thought of Plato who was so much inspired by it, was eminently a practical philosophy. But this esoteric order broke up and finally disappeared in the course of the fifth and fourth centuries: some later Pythagorean groups (of which we know very little) may have imitated the original esotericism in their small and uninfluential conventicles, but the Pythagorean tradition which influenced Plato and, in its revival in the last centuries B.C. and first centuries A.D., the Neoplatonists, was a public philosophical tradition, transmitted by books and public teaching like other Hellenic philosophical traditions.

Plato and the Academy

The next instance of real or supposed esotericism which I propose to explore is that of Plato. The question of whether Plato taught an esoteric doctrine in the Academy different from, or going beyond, anything which we can find in the Dialogues has of course been interminably discussed and the literature on it is extensive. Here I shall simply give my own view, though I must acknowledge

considerable help in forming it from an excellent article by Dr. Thomas Szlezak.⁶ Our starting-points for this discussion in Plato's own writings are remarkably baffling and disconcerting: they must be, of course, the devastating observations on the inferiority of written to oral teaching in the *Phaedrus* (274C-276E) and the even more devastating reflections on the inadequacy of all language in the Seventh Letter (340B-344D).⁷ The implications of the latter passage, to some extent worked out by the Neoplatonists, are very far-reaching indeed. But at this point we are only concerned with our present question of how Plato regarded his own written works, and their relation to his oral teaching in the Academy and how we are to relate what he says to the brief and baffling statements of Aristotle about that oral teaching. Did Plato really think, as a first reading of the *Phaedrus* suggests, that his dialogues were trivialities, of little philosophical worth? If so, why did he continue to expend so much time and trouble in writing them? A more careful consideration of the *Phaedrus*, especially of 276D-277A, in the light of the dialogue as a whole and of Plato's writings as a whole, suggests a less drastic conclusion, which it is not impossible to reconcile with Letter VII.

We need here, as always in studying Plato, to remember what for him is the end and object of all philosophical activity. It is that which is shown in the great ascent of the mind to absolute beauty in the *Symposium*: to develop a good and wise man who has attained to the highest well-being possible to mortals, who has the light of eternal reality in himself and no longer needs any outer guidance because he has seen (*Phaedrus* 277A: cp. Letter VII 341C-D, 344B-C). If we keep this fully and continually in mind it becomes easy to understand why Plato thought that this goal

6 T. Szlezak "Dialogform und Esoterik: Zur Deutung des Platonischen Dialogs 'Phaidros'" *Museum Helveticum* 35. Jahrgang pp. 18-32.

7 The genuineness of the letter is of course disputed. But it was part of the Platonic canon in antiquity, and had great authority for later Platonists, as we shall see. I myself find the philosophical digression here referred to an excellent piece of Platonism, not unworthy of Plato, whoever is the author.

could not be reached just by reading books. To attain this kind of enlightenment and liberation,⁸ what he thought was needed was an intimate personal association, like that which he had had with Socrates, in which there was the sort of endless conversation and thinking together about great subjects of which he speaks in Letter VII (341C). In this much would inevitably be said or suggested which would not go into any written work. This may possibly be why he says in the passage just referred to that there is not and never will be any *sungramma* of his about the most important matters, the ones which he takes really seriously. This, however, remains difficult. Szlezak has shown⁹ that there is no good ancient evidence for the common modern view that *sungramma*, here or elsewhere, can have the meaning of "formal treatise", in a sense which excludes or contrasts with "dialogue": any prose work can be called a *sungramma*. So the usual modern escape-route of supposing that Plato is not referring to dialogues here is blocked. The statement certainly accords well with the powerful demonstration of the inadequacy of all language, spoken as well as written, which follows (342-344). And I do not regard this as un-Platonic, or a reason for doubting the genuineness of the letter: though its full implications perhaps did not begin to be worked out before Plotinus. But this does not of course remove the difficulty of Plato's apparent denial of his own writings. All one can say is that, assuming the Letter to be genuine and the account of the circumstances of its writing which it gives correct, Plato was stung to an extreme and paradoxical negativity ("of course I didn't really write anything about the matters I take seriously") by the sort of transcendental chatter in which Dionysius had been indulging.

But, however inadequate Plato may have sometimes thought that any language was when the philosopher neared his goal, if we

8 I have deliberately used words here which are commonly employed in the West when speaking of Indian wisdom, to indicate my growing conviction that the Indian and Hellenic traditions have a great deal in common.

9 Szlezak, art. cit. pp. 25-6.

go back from the end of the philosophical way to the beginning, the *Phaedrus* seems to give us no reason to suppose that Plato did not think that the right kind of writing might be very helpful. The right kind would be that to which he himself devoted so much time and trouble: that which was an image of philosophical conversation designed to start the minds of its readers on the path of true dialectic. Writing for Plato is "play" (*Phaedrus* 276D), but play for him can be serious. The second part of the *Parmenides* is a *pragmateiōdēs paidia* (137B) – a very serious game indeed! And in the *Laws* the best thing about us trivial human creatures is that we are god's toys, and the most serious thing we can do is to play beautifully before him (VII 803C-D). The image of Socrates in these play-dialogues might, Plato seems to have thought, lead at least a few of the properly gifted and well disposed to what I believe was still a truly Socratic living, talking and thinking together in the Academy. We know too little of what went on there to be sure about anything. But a consideration of the evidence and of the persons involved suggests that it was something very different from the handing down by the Master of an esoteric dogmatic teaching to humbly receptive disciples. To say nothing of Aristotle, a collection of highly independent-minded and very diverse thinkers like Speusippus, Xenocrates, Eudoxus and Heracleides of Pontus would not have tolerated that sort of thing for long. Though I do not at all points agree with J.N. Findlay's interpretation of Plato, the following passage does seem to me to give a good idea of what Plato's teaching and relationship to his disciples in the Academy may have been like:

The Platonic Dialogues are not, taken by themselves, the sort of works in which anyone's views on any matter could be clearly set forth: they point beyond themselves, and without going beyond them they are not to be understood . . . The historical sequence of the Dialogues . . . is also no clear document of the development of Plato's thought. It rather documents, on the view to which I come, Plato's ever-changing willingness to divulge parts of a long-held, profound programme, unclear as regards both goal and method, to which he felt ever varying attitudes of confidence and criticism, of impassioned defence and

despairing retreat, all inspired by the vivid controversies in the Academy of which we can have only the dimmest imagination.¹⁰

If this is anything like a true picture, we are not dealing here with anything like the esoteric doctrine and discipline of the Pythagoreans and other esoteric groups. Plato's oral discussions of the matters with which he was most seriously concerned were not, perhaps, usually accessible to those members of the general public who might wish to attend: though we need to take into account here Aristoxenus' account of Aristotle's anecdote about the lecture (or course of lectures) on the Good: the very unphilosophical people who attended this and were so disappointed by the absence of any instructions on body-building or money-making can hardly have been members of any sort of inner circle (Aristoxenus *Harm. Elem.* II 30). But even if we discount this or regard it as untypical, I do not think that we can discover in the Academy more than a well-developed example of the sort of selectivity and reserve common to nearly all Greek philosophical teaching, and indeed of a great deal of other teaching where the teachers have a reverence for their subject and a realistic estimation of the differences in human capacities for understanding. Even in a modern university one does not talk about everything to everybody. It seems to me rather confusing and misleading to speak of this sort of reserve and careful selection of one's hearers or partners in discussion as "esoteric", even when it is spoken of or commended in solemn language derived from the mystery-religions.¹¹ Aristotle's brief references to *exōterikoi logoi* (*esōterikos*, significantly, is a late and not very common word), if they are references to his own works

10 J.N. Findlay *Plato, The Written and Unwritten Doctrines*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1974 pp. ix-x.

11 A recent article by Jean Pépin, who does not make the distinction between reserve and esotericism which I suggest here, gives a good account of the use of mystery-language by the Platonists ("L'Arcane Religieux et sa Transposition philosophique dans la Tradition platonicienne" in *La Storia della filosofia come sapere critico*, Franco Angeli, Milano 1984 pp. 18-35).

or philosophical activities at all,¹² seem to indicate the same sort of distinction between talks and discussions in a select group and works designed for a larger public.

The Pupils of Ammonius

I now move on to consider the most notable case of apparent esotericism in the Platonism of late antiquity. Porphyry in his *Life of Plotinus* (3 25-35) describes an agreement between three pupils of Ammonius Saccas, clearly those closest to him, Erennius, Origen and Plotinus, not to publish the teachings of their master. The real significance of this agreement has been very variously understood. Heinrich Dörrie,¹³ who pictured Ammonius very much as a Pythagorean, saw it as springing from a Pythagorean esotericism which imposed on the group of his disciples the discipline of a mystery-religion. Richard Harder, on the other hand,¹⁴ saw it as a simple and quite un-esoteric agreement between the three that none of them should publish under his own name material resulting from their common work with the master in the group. The agreement was soon broken, first by Erennius, then by Origen (the Hellenic Platonist, not the Christian). Finally Plotinus proceeded, though rather slowly and reluctantly, to publication. In assessing the nature of the agreement we need to take into account the fact that it was broken by all three, and especially that it was eventually broken by Plotinus, of whose high character and deep reverence for his master we know something. This seems to rule out any breaking of a sacred vow or oath like that of a mystery-initiate, or even of an obligation of honour not to publish common property as his own. Neither could really be excused, for

¹² See the discussion of *Metaphysics* M. 1076a 28 in Ross's commentary (W.D. Ross *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1948, II pp. 408-410).

¹³ H. Dörrie "Ammonios, der Lehrer Plotins" in *Hermes* 83, 1955 pp. 439-77.

¹⁴ R. Harder *Plotins Schriften* V c. Felix Meiner, Hamburg 1958 pp. 86-87.

a man like Plotinus, by the fact that others had broken the agreement first. The most satisfactory account of the matter seems to me that given by Szlezak in another excellent essay, and adopted by H.-R. Schwyzer in the latest and best account of what is known and not known about Ammonius.¹⁵ According to this interpretation of Porphyry's story Ammonius was a Platonist who took the Seventh Letter very seriously indeed (it remained a text of great authority down to the end of Neoplatonism). For this reason he wrote nothing himself (this is one of the very few things we know about him for certain), and did not wish his disciples to write anything though of course he had no objection, to their continuing the sort of oral teaching and discussion with carefully selected persons in which he had spent his life. The three disciples mentioned in the *Life* agreed to continue to follow their master in this, probably, as Schwyzer thinks, shortly after his death in Alexandria. But we can easily see that, after the other two had broken the agreement, Plotinus could have felt free to decide for himself how far he should continue to follow the practice of Ammonius. In the last section of his essay¹⁶ Szlezak gives an account of the development of his thought and practice, faithful both to the relevant texts from the *Life* and the *Enneads* and to the spirit of Plotinus. He moved, it appears, at first rather slowly and hesitatingly, from the extreme reserve of Ammonius (to which Porphyry does manage to give a somewhat esoteric colour) to a willingness not only to give lectures to which all comers were admitted and to write, but to permit his writings to be prepared for general circulation, to a position, in fact, very much nearer the normal practice of Plato himself. And he did so because he had come to see that there was no need to take precautions to keep the final mystery inviolate, because it was inviolable. Szlezak con-

¹⁵ T. Szlezak "Plotin und die geheimen Lehren des Ammonios" in *Esoterik und Exoterik in der Philosophie* ed. Holzhey & Zimmerli, Schwabe, Basel/Stuttgart 1977, pp. 32-69. H.-R. Schwyzer *Ammonios Sakkas, der Lehrer Plotins*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen 1983.

¹⁶ Szlezak, *l.c.* (n. 15) pp. 61-63.

cludes his essay with an observation which, as he says, has been made before, but which needs continual consideration if we are to understand at all what the Neoplatonists have to tell us about the hidden in and beyond the world:

Die Untersuchung mündet ein in die paradoxe (nicht hier zum ersten Mal gemachte) Erfahrung, daß Plotin, der eindeutige Mystiker unter den Neuplatonikern, zugleich auch derjenige ist, der in allem – auch in der Frage der Esoterik – am eindeutigsten der Vernunft verpflichtet ist.

I shall try to explain the full significance of this a little later. But first it will be desirable to say something about the diffidence which generally accompanies the high confidence in reason of the Greek philosophers.

Philosophical Diffidence

Those Greek philosophers who were not Sceptics generally held the nature of reality to be understandable in principle. From the beginning they were trying to discover by observation and reasoning what things are and, at least in some senses of the question “why?”, why things are. But for them “understandable in principle” did not mean easily understandable, or understandable by all. Their confidence in ultimate intelligibility was compatible with a great deal of diffidence about the difficulty for human intelligence of attaining to it. Xenophanes in most of the surviving fragments of his works appears remarkably confident in his dogmatism about the divine and well assured of his superiority to other people. But he is also the author of the earliest, and one of the best, expressions of this diffidence.

No man knows, or ever will know, the truth about the gods and everything I speak of: for even if one chanced to say the complete truth, yet oneself knows it not: for seeming is wrought over all things.

(Xenophanes fr. 34 DK tr. G. S. Kirk)

This diffidence recurs continually in later Greek philosophy, though all philosophers do not share it. It is of course much easier

to maintain that clear and certain knowledge of everything can be attained, and that one has oneself attained it, if one thinks that there is only one cosmos, the world of our ordinary experience: and dogmatic self-confidence seems to have reached its highest point in the great one-world philosophical systems of the Hellenistic period. One should be careful, here as elsewhere, of generalizing too sweepingly about the Stoics: though the lack of dogmatic confidence about the nature of things in Marcus Aurelius is certainly not at all typical of Stoicism and marks his Stoicism as personal piety off rather sharply from the confident philosophical world-view of earlier Stoics. But there can be no doubt about the calm confidence of genuine Epicureans that they know everything and can explain everything about the world, which makes them so strikingly resemble later rationalist philosophers and Christian sectarians. When one comes to believe in some divine reality behind and beyond our world of sense-experience which is itself supremely intelligible and gives our immediate environment such intelligibility as it has, there is a good deal more room for diffidence, especially in the ancient form in which the wisdom which is the secure possession of the gods is contrasted with the human quest for wisdom: and there is plenty of this in Plato and Aristotle.¹⁷ The works of Plato, even if one excludes the Seventh Letter, contain a good deal which can be, and has been, read as supporting a very considerable diffidence about the possibility of human knowledge of divine and ultimate reality. I would like here to discuss briefly one very odd passage which has not, I think, been much considered in this context. This is the description in the *Symposium* of the great *daimōn* or intermediary spirit Erōs (203B-

¹⁷ Two recent English books on Aristotle, *A History of Greek Philosophy VI Aristotle: an Encounter* by W.K.C. Guthrie (University Press, Cambridge 1981) and *Aristotle the Philosopher* by J.L. Ackrill (University Press, Oxford 1981), though approaching Aristotle in very different ways, are both rightly concerned to point out that Aristotle is by no means the rather complacent “Master of those who know” of older Aristotelian and anti-Aristotelian tradition, but a much more tentative, open-minded and self-critical philosopher.

E). He is clearly and explicitly presented as the spirit of philosophy, representing symbolically not only the power which drives us on to seek wisdom but that within us which seeks it. It is therefore not unreasonable to look at the passage in the hope of finding some indications of what Plato thought philosophy was like: but if we do, they seem rather disconcerting. They occur where Diotima is describing the paradoxical inheritance which Eros derives from his ill-assorted parents Beggary and the Entrepreneurial Spirit (*Penia* and *Poros*). She says:

He philosophises all through his life – he's a terribly clever conjuror and druggist and sophist: he's not naturally immortal or mortal, but on one and the same day he's at one time alive and flourishing, when it's going well with him, at another he dies, and comes alive again by his father's nature, but what he acquires is always running away, so that Erōs is never without resources or rich, and is in the middle between wisdom and ignorance.

(203D7-E5, tr. A.H.A.)

The only way in which I can make sense of this in its context is to take it as a description of the practice of philosophy, based on Plato's experience, which makes the contrast between divine wisdom and the human search which immediately follows (204A) very sharp indeed. The philosopher, it appears to be saying, will find again and again that the brilliant arguments which he thought so convincing are sophistic trickery, that he has been drugging and hallucinating himself and other people with words. The vitality and euphoria which he experiences when he thinks he has got it right and seen the truth will disappear very quickly. He will die many philosophical deaths, and what he thinks he has acquired will always be leaking away. But he will always, in the power of Erōs, begin and begin again.¹⁸ And this seems to me something

¹⁸ The truest Christian Platonist whom I have known, the late Mother Maria Gysi, always insisted very strongly on this: in this life, she thought, the genuine philosopher must always be beginning again. The following, from a Socratic conversation with a bricklayer on death, may give an idea of how she understood Platonism:

Then B: "But we cannot be certain – not quite certain"; then I answered, would

that could very well be thought and said, though not perhaps always or consistently, by the author of the Dialogues. It is certainly an understanding of philosophy, and a way of being a philosopher, which leaves plenty of room for the hidden.

But this should not be pressed too far. Plato and Aristotle may at times have had a stronger sense of human limitations and inadequacy than most Platonists and Aristotelians; but in general the high intellectualism of the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition aspired to know not only the cosmos but the higher realities on which it depends (though what it means by "knowledge" at this level is very different from what people in the West usually mean by "knowledge" now-a-days). This knowledge is indeed hidden from most men, but it is held to be attainable by philosophers, even if with great difficulty and perhaps only for brief periods. It is therefore the more impressive that it was this great intellectual tradition which, by its own processes and in its own way, came in the end to the recognition of a final mystery.

The Mystery in Later Platonism

Very soon after the revival of dogmatic Platonism, in the first two centuries of the Christian era, suggestions begin to appear that the first principle of reality is beyond speech or thought, because it is

it not be terribly sad if we *knew*? for that would mean that it would again be something as small as our minds and this life. And B. took it and said it was true, and there was a peace when people died which was nowhere else. The peace which passed understanding. And I said that at last we would reach our final beginning – not always begin and begin again, but BEGIN. I was amazed, and I shall never forget this . . . which gave me a sudden realization that Christian Platonism is that which minds, who think and can no longer take the everlasting assertions of the Church, need and love and which has a force of consolation which no assertion can ever convey. But can one put it forward? Is it teachable, other than as an answer to an endeavour; to an anguish and need?

(From a letter of 20 June, 1967, in *Mother Maria. Her Life in Letters*, ed. Sister Thekla, Darton Longman and Todd, London 1979, p. 120.)

"beyond being" that is, beyond the *ousia* which divine thought knows in secure possession and human thought strives to know. It is difficult to be sure when and where this conviction of the negative transcendence of the supreme divinity first appeared. It is found in these first centuries of our era among Gnostics as well as among Hellenic philosophers, and perhaps the best indication of the sort of thinkers among whom it may have originated is that it is expressed from its first appearances among the latter in a Pythagorean way. Platonized Pythagoreans or Pythagoreanizing Platonists, developing hints and suggestions in Plato himself and in his successor Speusippus, thought of the first principle as the absolute One from which all number, and so the multiplicity of beings, must proceed. This transcendental unitarianism, if it had not developed beyond its beginnings in Platonic-Pythagorean thought before Plotinus, might not have been of much more than historical interest. It was its powerful development by Plotinus which made it something very much more. For him and his Neoplatonic successors "One" is not an adequate name or description of God any more than the other preferred Platonic name "Good", or any other name or definition or concept. It simply points us on to the awareness that beyond the highest level to which philosophic intellect can attain, the realm of divine being which is divine intellect, there lies something beyond even divine thought, and so beyond any thought, attainable only in a union or encounter which is ineffable because it is incomparably more than what can be thought or imaged or spoken, though thoughts and words and images can lead us towards it.

We should notice at this point more carefully than has always been done (the Neoplatonists themselves can mislead us here) that according to this way of thinking we do not simply follow the path of discursive reasoning up to the very threshold of the mystery, the point where thought stops. To suppose this would be to misunderstand seriously not only Neoplatonism, but the whole tradition of Platonic-Aristotelian intellectualism. In reading Aristotle himself we need often to recall to our minds the conclusion of Stephen Clark's observations on Plotinus' critique of him:

Plotinus castigated Aristotle for retreating from his earlier suspicion that there was some yet more perfect thing than *nous*. In the *Peri Eucheis* (fr. 1 Ross) we are told that "the god is either *nous* or something beyond *nous*". Similarly in the *Eudemian Ethics*, "*logos* is not the source of *logos*, but something greater is, and what would be greater than knowledge or *nous* except God? (E. E. 1248a 27F). For the most part *nous* and the god are identical (cf. N. E I 1096a 21F); but this divine *nous* is not the same as *diánoia*, and is likely to be as far removed from ordinary thinking as Plotinus' One.¹⁹

And Plotinus and his successors make it clear that Divine Intellect does not reason and when we reach its level we must stop reasoning if we are not to get it hopelessly wrong. Proclus, who might at times be reasonably suspected of pushing discursive, defining²⁰ reasoning a good deal further than it will go, even to the Henads which are above Intellect, makes this point more than once with great force. He says in the *Platonic Theology*:

Every knowledge applied to an object which has nothing to do with it destroys its own power: for if we speak of sensation as applying to the object of rational knowledge it will do away with itself, and the same is true of rational knowledge (*epistēmē*) if applied to the intelligible: so that if there could be a *logos* of the ineffable, it never stops turning itself upside down and fights against itself.

(*Platonic Theology* II 10. p. 109 Portus, II 64, 4-9 Saffrey-Westerink tr. A. H. A.)²¹

Jean Trouillard, whose death in November 1984 we lament, is the person who, in my lifetime, seems to me to have gone furthest in understanding and helping others to understand the full significance of this Neoplatonic awareness of final mystery and its relevance and helpfulness for our own thinking at the present time. I myself owe him a very great deal, not only for help in understanding the Neoplatonists but for the way in which his

19 Stephen R. L. Clark *Aristotle's Man* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975, reprinted 1983) pp. 174-5.

20 The German *definierendes Denken* is helpful in understanding what is at issue here.

21 See further A. H. Armstrong "The Negative Theology of *Nous* in Later Neoplatonism" in *Platonismus und Christentum*, ed. H. D. Blume and F. Mann (Aschendorff, Münster 1983) pp. 31-37.

writings both confirmed my faith in God and liberated my thought about him at a time of spiritual and intellectual crisis. In what follows I shall be treading in his footsteps, as I have been for some years: though of course I have also been interpreting and developing him, as he interpreted and developed the Neoplatonists. He was sometimes accused of reading more than was "really there" into the texts. This is, of course, a thoroughly Platonic thing to do, and something which anyone who is concerned to make an ancient way of thought alive and powerful in a later time must do. But, as a scholarly historian who at this point feels irresistibly impelled to go beyond the limits of scholarly history (which it is proper to conceive narrowly) I must admit that here the ancient texts will sometimes be read in a way in which it is unlikely that the ancients would have read them.

The part of Trouillard's interpretation which is particularly relevant to our main subject is that in which he shows how the Neoplatonists understood the inviolability of the final mystery, and what the consequences of this understanding must be for philosophy and theology. In one of a number of articles in which he explains this he says:

Dès lors, la notion de "Dieu caché" change de sens. Le Dieu de saint Augustin et de Saint Thomas est caché parce que étant la plénitude infinie de l'intelligibilité, sa trop grande clarté nous éblouit, comme le soleil regardé en face offusque nos yeux. L'Un néoplatonicien est nocturne parce qu'il refuse tout contenu intelligible et toute pensée. Il est au delà de l'ordre de la connaissance. Il n'a donc pas de secret, c'est à dire d'essence qui se déroberait au regard.²²

What does this mean from the point of view of our enquiry into the hidden? It means that God, or the One, or the Good, the ultimate mystery, is in one sense totally hidden because he is totally undiscoverable by any intellect, human or divine. But in another sense this Unknowable is not hidden at all, and does not hide itself. There is no need of closed doors and passwords and

²² J. Trouillard "Théologie négative et autoconstitution psychique chez les néoplatoniciens" in *Savoir, faire, espérer: les limites de la raison* (Publications des Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, Bruxelles 1976), p. 313.

initiation rites to protect the inviolable. There is no need for the mystery to surround itself with mist, like the gods in the Iliad. There is no need to dazzle the eyes of the intellect, which can see it no more than the eyes of the body. The hidden stands absolutely open, and is none the less absolutely hidden.

But what interest or relevance can this utterly Unknowable have for us? And why are the philosophers who are aware of it driven by their very awareness, not to abandon philosophy, but to pursue it more passionately than ever? Why does it intensify the Platonic *erōs*? Let us follow Trouillard a little further:

Cela ne veut pas dire qu'il ne peut pas se communiquer et qu'il reste muré dans une transcendance inaccessible. Evitons encore un contresens qui serait un anachronisme. Chez les néoplatoniciens, la transcendance n'est pas exteriorité ni absence. Immanence et transcendance sont non en raison inverse, mais en raison directe. Le plus élevé est en chacun le plus fondamental: ce qui est déjà là, ce qu'on ne peut jamais précéder en soi-même. Le transcendant est moins le terme d'une visée qu'un point de départ inépuisable.²³

What Trouillard says here about immanence and transcendence is essential for the proper understanding of all the great traditional religions, including Christianity (though some Christian language and thought about the Incarnation is difficult to reconcile with it). That which is utterly beyond us and cannot be expressed or thought is by its very transcendence of distance and difference most intimately present. The Neoplatonists express this with particular force: it was from them that Christianity and Islam learnt their understanding of the unity of transcendence and immanence. Plotinus, for instance, says:

But the Good since it was there long before, to arouse an innate desire, is present even to those asleep and does not astonish those who at any time see it, because it is always there and there is never recollection of it; but people do not see it, because it is present to them in their sleep. . . . The Good is gentle and kindly and gracious, and present to anyone when he wishes.

(V 5 [32] 12, 11-14 and 33-34 tr. A.H.A.)

And this most intimate and immediate of presences is, as Trouillard

²³ Trouillard *l.c.*, n. 22. continued.

excellently puts it, the presence of an "inexhaustible starting-point": starting-point and source of our existence and life and all our activities, and so of that activity which, though it can never reach that starting-point, seeks to lead us back towards it, Platonic philosophy. When one speaks of philosophy like this one is already giving it a distinctive character which would seem to mark it off rather sharply from most modern understandings of the discipline, and is liable to cause it to be dismissed rather summarily as "religious" or "mystical". But Trouillard has gone deeper than this, and has discovered something else about Neoplatonism which is best expressed in the title of one of his most valuable articles, "Valeur critique de la mystique plotinienne".²⁴ What Trouillard draws our attention to here, and in many other places,²⁵ is something which was latent rather than apparent in the ancient Neoplatonists, though there are some signs of it in the last of the Platonis Successors at Athens, Damascius. In developing Trouillard's insight and trying to apply it in my own way I have sometimes felt that I was rather closer than the Neoplatonists would have approved to a very different kind of Platonism, that of the sceptical Academy. But without it, it is very difficult to understand, or to justify, that harmonious union in Plotinus of mystical experience of the highest order and a complete faith in philosophical discussion, as free and critical as any in the Hellenic tradition, as the way to that experience, which E. R. Dodds and Szlezak (see above p. 95) and others have noted.

In the article whose title I have just referred to Trouillard says:

Mais alors surgit un autre problème. Au lieu du Plotin rationaliste qu'on nous présentait jadis, n'allons-nous pas avoir un Plotin infidèle à l'intellectualisme hellénique? Ne faut-il pas craindre une exténuation de la philosophie, si l'essentiel est acquis avant son intervention?

La réponse est qu'il reste à la philosophie une fonction indispensable qui est essentiellement critique.

²⁴ *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 59 (août 1961) pp. 431-444.

²⁵ A bibliography, selected by Trouillard, is to be found in *Néoplatonisme: Mélanges offerts à Jean Trouillard* (Cahiers de Fontenay 19-22) Fontenay-aux-Roses 1981, pp. 313-316.

He continues to develop this theme in a thoroughly Platonic way by showing how this critical function of philosophy is indispensable because it is a purification. And he shows later how radical the consequences of this purification are:

Quelle qu'ait été l'intention de Platon, on voit à quoi tendent les néoplatoniciens: à une disjonction entre l'ordre noétique et l'absolu. C'est par une négation radicale que l'esprit se rapporte à la présence génératrice. En conséquence, si l'analyse régressive remonte au Principe, jamais la dialectique ne parviendra à s'y accrocher. Car l'Inconditionné n'est aucunement intelligible. Il n'y a pas de première vérité qui contienne nos raisons ni à quoi nous pouvions en suspendre la chaîne. Dès lors la pensée demeurera hypothético-déductive et sans doute pluraliste. . . . Le caractère inintelligible de l'Un pourrait écraser l'esprit. En réalité, il garantit la relativité de toute intelligibilité et de toute norme.²⁶

The "sans doute pluraliste" should be noted. Trouillard here alludes briefly to the very close and intimate connection which those who follow this way soon discover to exist between the awareness of the universal presence of the open but inviolable mystery and the great Hellenic, Indian and Far Eastern conviction that there is not one path only to so great a mystery.²⁷ The liberating presence of that which is beyond speech and thought frees one from one's little local self and its ways of thinking, imagining and worshipping. Freedom does not mean abandonment, repudiation or contempt. One is still oneself, and these are the only ways in which that self has skill: and one must now think, imagine and above all worship more intensely than ever. The Neoplatonists have discovered that if one ceases to be active at any level – the mystery is present at all levels – including those of creative imagination and discursive reason, one may fall as far as one can (though never completely) below all ways into formless

²⁶ *Loc. cit.* (see footnote 24) p. 442 and 443. Another article which adds some important points and makes clear the necessity of the continuing practice of philosophy for the Platonic mystic is "Raison et mystique chez Plotin" in *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* XX (1974) pp. 3-14.

²⁷ This, and much else, is well expressed in the last two chapters of Stephen R. L. Clark's *From Athens to Jerusalem: The Love of Wisdom and the Love of God* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1984).

and sterile fantasy or the mud of unawareness. So the ultimate silence must generate ever new critical discourse. But one will walk one's way in freedom, not taking oneself or it with absolute seriousness, playing before the mystery, and understanding in freedom that there are many other ways equal in honour, and eager to talk with and learn from those who walk them.

The Meaning of History

In considering how people understand what is hidden in the course of events it is desirable to ask at some stage how they understand the course of events itself. So I should like to conclude this paper with a few observations on how the Hellenes understood history. This is in itself a subject well worth returning to from time to time. The Greeks, after all, invented history as we know it in the West, and not only invented it but carried their practice of it to a very high degree of accomplishment. With all the immense and fruitful development of historical studies in modern times, it is still possible to read and honour Herodotus and Thucydides as very great historians, and to have a considerable respect for Polybius and Ammianus. It therefore seems very odd to classical scholars that some Christian thinkers, concerned to emphasize the importance of the Biblical and to play down the Hellenic element in our traditions, have for some time been addicted to saying that Greek thinkers lacked a "sense of history", that they were indifferent to or unconcerned about the significance and meaning of historical events. My "very odd" in the last sentence is in fact an example of the Greek rhetorical figure of *meiosis*. This Christian view tends to be regarded by ancient historians with such derision and contempt that I should hardly have dared to introduce it into a paper read before my professional colleagues, as the following quotation from the current *Classical Review* will show:

The broader context (some abstract nouns should carry a government health warning) seems to be the "widely agreed" idea that "for Graeco-Roman culture history is circular, repetitive, and therefore meaningless" whereas "for Judaeo-Christianity, history is linear, once and for all und therefore meaningful" (pp. 9F). Not surprisingly Press succeeds in showing the inadequacy of this notion: but it is revealing that he has to set up such a straw man in the first place.²⁸

Nevertheless, in a gathering like the present where many different disciplines meet, there do seem to be good reasons for considering this Christian critique of the Hellenes, and to do so may help us to understand an important difference between two kinds of human experience of history. Let us reflect a little on the phrase "the meaning of history". What does "meaning" here mean? A good starting-point for our reflection will be an observation by Peter Manchester:

Within any living historical experience, the past and the present and the future are woven together in mutual interaction; yet one or the other of the three can be dominant.²⁹

This indicates very well that the Christian criticism of the Hellenes springs from a profound difference in the kind of experience of time and history that is being assumed. The Christian assumption is that the normative experience, the only one which can give historical events true significance, is the future-dominated or apocalyptic, in which the New Age, the World to Come, is experienced as at hand, pressing upon us here and now, and this experience is so overwhelming that the whole course of events can only be seen as significant in so far as it leads up to and prepares for the apocalypse. It is the end of this world, the Judgment and the inauguration of the Kingdom, which alone can give meaning to

²⁸ T. P. Wiseman, review of G. A. Press *The Development of the Idea of History in Antiquity* in *The Classical Review*, N. S. 35.1. (1985), p. 108.

²⁹ Peter Manchester "The Religious Experience of Time and Eternity" in *World Spirituality: an Encyclopaedic History of the Religious Quest*, Vol. 15 *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, Crossroad, New York 1986. I owe much in what follows to this article, and to Manchester's other writings on time and eternity in ancient thought.

all that has come before. This was certainly the experience of the early Christians: but like all apocalyptic experiences, it could only dominate a small group for a short time in its full and authentic religious intensity. None the less, it transmitted to the soberer Christian reflection on historical experience which inevitably succeeded it, when the Judgment did not occur and the Kingdom did not come, the conviction that it is only in the perspective of the end of the world that human life and history has meaning. This remains true even when later Christian reflection sees that is part of the primary Christian experience that the decisive moment, the beginning of the End, has already come in Christ, so that Christians live between his two comings in the last days which his first coming inaugurated, experiencing the presence of the Kingdom to come while they pray, work and hope for its consummation when he comes again. This future-dominated understanding of history continues very powerfully in secularized forms in the post-Christian world and sometimes passes back from them to reinforce the conviction of the Christians: so that it can be assumed without question that only in future-dominated experience can history have a meaning. But of course this is untrue, as an examination of the Hellenic awareness of meaning in history will show.³⁰

In its beginnings Hellenic culture was an archaic peasant culture like others in its neighbourhood and throughout the world, and a great deal of its archaic quality persisted in it to the end. The historical experience of an archaic culture is past-dominated in the sense that the past in it is not remote but a powerful living presence now, to which those who share this experience are continually recalled by its regular re-presentation in the sacred rites which make that ancient time, that time in the beginning with its persons and events, present in all its living power here and now. In this kind of experience the present past is too powerfully dominant to

³⁰ For a fuller account of Christian views of time and history see Professor Ulrich Mann's paper in this volume, *Verfallende Zeit und zersprühender Raum* pp. 1-46.

leave room for history, which requires a certain standing away from the past into which it enquires. It was only when the grip of the dominant archaic past had somewhat relaxed, at least for an educated minority of the Hellenes, and their experience became neither past- nor future- but present-dominated, that historical enquiry and writing could begin. The most powerful and satisfying form of Hellenic present-dominated historical experience is that which came to be fully understood by the Platonists, in which there is indeed a transcendent presence which gives meaning and significance to all that exists or happens in time and history, but it is the presence not of past or future but of eternity. But before turning to this we should consider something much simpler and a great deal more widespread both in ancient and in modern times.

This is the historical experience of the common historian. When some Hellenes had moved out of the archaic dominance of the present past sufficiently to look back from a conscious distance at the persons and events of years gone by, they soon began to enquire about them in that spirit of joyful curiosity in which they enquired into everything, which Aristotle in the first two chapters of the *Metaphysics* sees as the beginning of wisdom. The notable people and events of bygone time are among the most interesting things in the world. It is worth while to ensure that they are not forgotten, to enquire into them and record them, and so keep them in the consciousness of the community simply because they are what they are. They are part of ourselves, and to recollect them gives us depth and dignity. This is the historical spirit which animates, from its first words to the end, the first great history in our tradition, the enquiry of Herodotus into the Persian Wars and all that led up to them and all that had to be understood to understand them: and I think it still remains, or has again become, the dominant spirit among historians, in spite of the competition of future-dominated experience. If one is a serious-minded and politically and militarily active person like Thucydides, or wishes to commend one's historical work to such persons, one can of course add that history is not merely interesting and enjoyable but

useful, because events and situations of more or less the same kind have a tendency to recur (Thucydides I.22.4). But historians have been, and are, by no means unanimous about the degree to which their works are useful as handbooks for statesmen or generals, and I think this has usually been a secondary motive for their pursuing their historical activities. This account of the historical experience of historians shows clearly that history for them has meaning. The meaningless is not interesting or enjoyable, and is most unlikely to be useful. But "meaning" has a different meaning here from that which it has in future-dominated experience. Events and persons and deeds and works do not derive their meaning from pointing forward to or preparing for the end or consummation of history. Their meaning lies in their being themselves as they are for us here and now. This understanding of meaningfulness is one which modern historians of the ancient world share, and know that they share, with the great Hellenic historians. This is why they become so extremely irritated when the Hellenes are accused of seeing no meaning or significance in history, from the point of view of a future-dominated historical experience which they do not share and are often inclined to think ill-founded in its assumptions and pernicious in its effects.

In the Platonic form of present-dominated historical experience it is the presence of eternity which gives meaning to all that exists or happens in time and history. This is continuous with and conformable to the historical experience of Hellenic historians in a most important way. To speak of the Platonic relationship of time and what is in time to eternity in terms of image and archetype is of course correct if rightly understood: but to speak of it in terms of sign and symbol can be seriously misleading, because it may lead us to forget that it is precisely by being themselves that temporal things image their eternal archetypes. When Platonists speak of this world as a world of signs and images of eternal reality they are sometimes thought to be carrying on the activity, to which they have admittedly been much addicted, of finding symbolic correspondences in the universe with such a degree of

seriousness as to lose all touch with and interest in the perceived natures of things here below. But in the intelligible heaven of Plotinus one does not meet spiritual realities of which the horse and the bull and the lion are symbols. One meets the Horse and the Bull and the Lion, with their hooves and horns and teeth and claws (VI 7 [38] 9-10). A serious Christian Platonist should see the pelican not, first and foremost, as a symbol of Christ's piety but as a symbol of Christ's pelicanity: that is, of that in the eternal Logos which can only be expressed in creation here below as a pelican. Platonists should have no quarrel with a poet or painter or musician who insists that his poem or painting or symphony means nothing else but itself, and is not symbolizing Sacred and Profane Love or the Virtue of Critical Circumspection, or telling a story which could just as well have been told in plain prose. The light of present eternity, which gives their full value and significance to the events and persons of history as we apprehend them here and now, shines in them because they are what they are. The deepest meaning of a person, a work, or a deed does not lie in their pointing forward to some future result but in the presence of the Good in them in their own place and time. What I am trying to say here has been splendidly expressed by a contemporary thinker who can certainly not be classified as a Platonist, Hans Jonas, in the concluding section of his great work of moral philosophy *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*.³¹ I quote the following with particularly strong agreement because when I first read it I recalled over many years that I also had stood before that picture in Venice and shared that experience:

Als ich, ganz unerwartet, in der Sakristei von S. Zaccaria in Venedig vor Giovanni Bellini's Madonnen-Triptychon stand, überwältigte mich das Gefühl: Hier war ein Augenblick der Vollendung und ich darf ihn sehen, Aeonen hatten ihm vorgearbeitet, in Aeonen würde er, unergriffen, nicht wiederkehren – der Augenblick, wo im flüchtigen "Gleichgewicht ungeheurer Kräfte" das All einen

³¹ Hans Jonas *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1979) p. 381. The sixth chapter is devoted to a vigorous critique of Marxist Utopianism, and in particular of Ernst Bloch's *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*.

Herzschlag lang innezuhalten scheint, um eine höchste Versöhnung seiner Widersprüche in einem Menschenwerk zuzulassen. Und was dies Menschenwerk festhält, ist absolute *Gegenwart* an sich – keine Vergangenheit, keine Zukunft, kein Versprechen, keine Nachfolge, ob besser oder schlechter, nicht Vor-Schein von irgendetwas, sondern zeitloses Scheinen in sich.

“Absolute essential Present: no past, no future, no promise, no consequence, better or worse, no pre-appearing of anything whatever, but timeless Appearing in itself.” That is what “meaning” means to anyone who in any way shares the Hellenic present-dominated experience of time and history. Of course for a Platonist the light of the eternal shining in the present can illuminate not only what things are but what they ought to be. It can show the imperfections in the instantiations of the eternal realities here below, and so may urge to action to make the eternal better and more effectively present in time and history. Platonic contemplation should always lead to action when the occasion and one’s personal vocation requires it, because it is contemplation by assimilation to the creative and generous Good.³² And the Platonist in action may well feel herself a free collaborator of that great artist-figure whom Plato chose as his preferred image of divine activity here below in the *Timaeus*,³³ helping to bring forth new works of divine art in the image-world of time and history: and may have as much hope as a reasonable person should that

32 In speaking of the gods, Proclus says “For it is the mark of goodness to bestow on all that can receive, and the highest is not that which has the form of goodness but which does good”. *Elements of Theology* prop. 122, p. 108, 20-21 Dodds: (tr. E. R. Dodds). See further P. Hadot “Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus in Plotinus’ Treatise Against the Gnostics” in *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought* Variorum London 1981 pp. 124-137 and A. H. Armstrong “The Divine Enhancement of Earthly Beauties. The Hellenic and Platonic Tradition”, in *Eranos* 53-1984, pp. 49-81.

33 On the significance of the image of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* see A. H. Armstrong “Dualism, Platonic, Gnostic and Christian” in *Plotinus Amid Gnostics and Christians*, ed. David T. Runia (Free University Press, Amsterdam 1984) pp. 33-34. This sentence is to some extent an attempt at a Platonic consideration of a moderate version of the Christian view of history put forward by David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, in a broadcast lecture this year.

under God her work may do something to help all God’s creatures by bringing the course of events in that limited extent of space and time in which it can have effect closer to the eternal kingdom.

An apparently more precise form of the future-dominated accusation that history could have no meaning for the Hellenes is to say that this is so because it is for them cyclic, not linear, circling like a dance, not marching to a goal. A moment’s thought will show that thinking of history as cyclic does not deprive it of meaning when historical experience is present-dominated. But the charge is worth a little closer examination. To begin with, we should enquire how well based it is on what we know about Hellenic thought. The assumption, at least implicit, which appears, very frequently, to be made by people who say this is that the strict doctrine of Eternal Recurrence was generally held in antiquity; that is, the doctrine that history repeats itself in an infinite series of Great Years and that the repetition is exact in every detail, or only admits of the smallest and least important variations. But in fact this is not the case. Aristotle’s pupil, Eudemus of Rhodes reports that Eternal Recurrence was believed in by Pythagoreans.³⁴ It seems reasonably certain that it was held by the Old Stoics and the conservative Stoics of the period after Posidonius.³⁵ In its Stoic form, of course, it required belief in the *Ekpurosis* or Conflagration, the periodic re-absorption of all things into himself by the Divine Fire which is followed by the *Apokatastasis*, the restoration of the universe. It is therefore not at all likely that those Middle Stoics who denied the Conflagration,

34 Eudemus ap. Simplicius Phys. 732, 30 (DK 58. B34). “If one were to believe the Pythagoreans, that events recur in an arithmetical cycle, and that I shall be talking to you (muthologēsō) again sitting as you are, with this pointer in my hand, and that everything will be just as it is now, then it is plausible to suppose that the time too will be the same time as now.” (tr. J. E. Raven) This is generally accepted as reliable. But it seems to me to have an element of caricature: and in any case we cannot be sure how far back from the fourth century the doctrine goes, or how many Pythagoreans held it: it may possibly have been derived to some extent from Empedocles.

35 Nemesius *De nat. hom.* 38 p. 277 (SVFII625).

Boethus of Sidon, Diogenes of Babylon, and, most important of all, Panaetius,³⁶ and those who followed them, could have held it.

Outside these restricted circles, in so far as Hellenic thought about history was "cyclic" or "periodic", it was so in a much more natural and flexible way. The natural Hellenic experience of time is better described as rhythmic rather than cyclic. It moves in the alternating rhythms of day and night, of birth and death, and circles like the seasons as it goes on its way. This is a very natural kind of experience indeed, based on the alternation of light and dark which is the basis and origin of time-experience for all living things, and conforming to our deepest personal experiences of the course of events. On the foundation of this kind of experience Plato (*Timaeus* 22 C-D: *Laws* III 677) and Aristotle (*Metaphysics* XII 8.1074b) came to think of human history as periodic, each period terminating in a catastrophe which destroyed the greater part of the human race, leaving only a few survivors who had to start to build civilisation over again from the beginning. These catastrophes do not destroy the universe, which is everlasting. They are not all of the same kind, though fire and flood are predominant: and they were not necessarily thought of as occurring at absolutely fixed intervals of time. Nor is there any suggestion that each period is an exact repetition of previous periods. This kind of loose and open periodicity, based on natural rhythms, leaves plenty of room for change and variety in the course of events, for unique happenings and unique personal contributions to human destiny of lasting historical significance. One day is never exactly like another day, or one spring like another spring, and though the alternating rhythm of birth and death brings children to replace their parents, they are by no means exactly like them and do not do the same things. It is this kind of periodic recurrence, not the rigid Stoic doctrine, which the historian Polybius uses in his account of the cycle of constitutions (VI 5-9). Plotinus is willing to take the idea of world periods

³⁶ Philo, *De Aeternitate Mundi* 76.

seriously (V 7 [18]) and the later Neoplatonists explicitly accept them (Proclus *Elements of Theology* props. 198-200). But, though they may have taken the idea immediately from the Stoics, their periods are Platonic rather than Stoic. They are, of course, periods in the endless history of an everlasting universe. No Platonist could accept the idea of the periodic destruction and restoration of all things. And there can be considerable variety in what happens in the periods, especially to human souls. Every soul which has a place in the material universe must descend into it at least once in every world-period. But most of them have to descend more than once, and their other descents depend on their free conduct of their lives in the body (Proclus *In Timaeum* III 275-279 Diehl). The noblest and best of human souls may even descend more often than they are obliged to, moved by love (*erōs*) to help those less perfect than themselves who are in need (Proclus *In Alcibiadem* 32, p. 14 Westerink).

There can, then, be considerable freedom and variety in Platonic world-periods, and individual lives and acts can have a great deal of significance: though this is not the main reason why time and history are full of meaning for Platonists: they are so first and foremost because they image present eternity. But it would be doing a grave injustice to the Stoics to suppose that their faith in Eternal Recurrence compelled them to experience history as without significance and pointless. To begin with, if in each Great Year the course of events repeats itself exactly in every detail, then from any point of view which is concerned with significance there is only one unique course of events, just as there is only one Jupiter Symphony, however often it is played. So every thing, every person, and every event can be seen as making its own unique contribution to the one history which circles endlessly.³⁷

³⁷ It can be objected here from the Christian point of view that the contributions of persons are not free contributions. Apart from the difficulties and inconsistencies into which the Stoics got themselves in trying to combine their strong belief as ethical philosophers in moral responsibility with the strict determinism which their physical theology required, this is an objection to Stoic determinism

What can be more satisfyingly significant than to take one's part in a great dance or play in a symphony? The point and meaning of such activities does not lie in their leading to anything or contributing to anything outside themselves and is not diminished by the number of times the performance is repeated. And the meaning becomes immeasurably deeper when, as in Stoic doctrine, God is the dance and all the dancers. The cyclic deployment of the universe is his perfect self-expression: he is altogether in his work and loves it. Further, we should remember that for the Stoics, as for most believers in Eternal Recurrence, we are now at a low point on the cosmic cycle: things are worse than they were, and are going to get considerably worse before the end. (This belief is of course perfectly compatible with a linear view of history and has very frequently been held by Christians. St. Cyprian expresses it as forcibly as any pagan philosopher or orator. (Cyprian *To Demetrian* 3: C.S.E.L.III.1.352-3.) The lines

Hora novissima, tempora pessima sunt, vigilemus.
Ecce minaciter imminet arbiter ille supremus.³⁸

sum up a great deal of patristic and mediaeval writing and preaching about the present and future.) So the Conflagration was for the Stoics the great cleansing, when God burns away the accumulated evils of the old age of the world, and the *Apokatastasis* was the spring of the universe, the return to the golden beginning of things. It would not last, of course, but who outside the shallower sort of fairy-tales can believe in "They lived happily ever after"? Absolute beginning, life without shadow of death, belongs to eternity, not to time and history: and in Stoic thought there is no eternity. If we consider all this, we can understand how

rather than to their cyclic view of history. It would certainly be very difficult to hold the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence without being a determinist, but determinism is perfectly compatible with a linear, Biblical view of history, as Christians and Muslims have shown.

³⁸ The first lines of the poem of Bernardus Morlanensis on the Last Things (c. 1130-1140), to be found in most anthologies of mediaeval Latin verse.

for the Stoics human life and history could be full of significance, and why their belief in Eternal Recurrence filled them, as it has filled others who believe in it, not with boredom and depression but with intense joy.