

Ancient testimony to secret doctrines

In: The Philosophical Review, LXII - 1953

p. 79 - 92

6025 p. 79
BOAS, G.
1953

D 25
381

Boas G.

Esot.

Φ 9-7538. BOAS (G.). **Ancient testimony to secret doctrines.** (Témoignages anciens relatifs aux doctrines secrètes). *Philos. Rev., U. S. A.* (1953), **62**, n° 1, 79-92. --- Selon une tradition extrêmement répandue, Pythagore, Platon et Aristote auraient enseigné à leurs élèves des doctrines « ésotériques » absentes de leurs publications écrites. Un examen attentif des textes invoqués en ce sens prouve qu'il n'en était rien : il existait, certes, dans la Grèce de l'époque classique, des cultes de mystères, des oracles, etc., mais cet « enseignement » ne jouait aucun rôle dans les systèmes des grands philosophes : il n'y a aucune raison de croire que Platon, Aristote ou même le légendaire Pythagore aient professé certaines théories « secrètes », qu'ils pensaient nécessaire de cacher au public. L'idée que la philosophie contient des « arcanes », qui ne peuvent être exprimés sous une forme rationnelle, n'apparaîtra, dans la pensée grecque, qu'avec les néo-pythagoriciens, les néoplatoniciens et les Pères de l'Eglise.

VV4945

D 381 Boas G.
25

Philos.
Esoteric

53 BOAS G., *Ancient testimony to secret doctrines* [chez les Pythagoriciens] ;
cf. Philosophie.

BOAS G., *Ancient testimony to secret doctrines* : PhR LXII 1953 79-82. | Les témoignages anciens ne permettent pas de dire qu'Aristote, Platon et les Pythagoriciens avaient une doctrine secrète.

Philosophical Review New York
VV4945



Philosophical Review

Ancient Testimony to Secret Doctrines

Author(s): George Boas

Source: *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (Jan., 1953), pp. 79-92

Published by: Duke University Press on behalf of Philosophical Review

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2182723>

Accessed: 18/01/2010 11:58

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=duke>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Duke University Press and *Philosophical Review* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Philosophical Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

DISCUSSION

ANCIENT TESTIMONY TO SECRET DOCTRINES

IN VIEW of an apparently increasing interest and belief in the legend that the ancient philosophers had secret doctrines which they did not publish, it seems appropriate to list and analyze exactly what the Ancients said concerning this matter. We shall confine ourselves to Aristotle, Plato, and the Pythagoreans, except where it may prove illuminating to discuss secret doctrines in others. We shall arrange our passages as far as possible in chronological order, in the hope that the historical development of the legend may emerge. Our first set of relevant passages is from the works of Aristotle himself.¹

I. In the Aristotelian corpus there are eight references to exoteric doctrines, or works, or discussions, or arguments (*logoi*). The word *esoteric* does not occur in Aristotle or anywhere else, according to the revised Liddell and Scott, until Galen. The Aristotelian passages run as follows.

(a) *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1102 a, 26:

"Some things are said [about the soul] adequately enough even ἐν τοῖς ἐξωτερικοῖς λόγοις and we must use these; e.g., that one element in the soul is irrational and one has a rational principle" [Tr. Ross].

(b) *Ibid.*, 1140 a, 1:

"... making and acting are different. πιστεύομεν δὲ περὶ αὐτῶν καὶ νοῖς ἐξωτερικοῖς λόγοις."

(c) *Metaphysics*, 1076 a, 28:

"After this we must separately consider the ideas themselves in a general way, and only so far as systematic treatment demands; for most of what we have to say has been repeatedly stated καὶ ὑπὸ τῶν ἐξωτερικῶν λόγων" [Tr. Ross and Smith].

¹For historians who believe that the ancients had secret doctrines, see F. Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, I, 130, 268. Even H. A. Wolfson, whose reputation as a scholar is beyond reproach, says in his *Philo*, I, 25, "In general, it may be said that the practice of keeping certain doctrines secret was common among all schools of Greek philosophy." This is based upon a passage from Clement of Alexandria which will be discussed below.

(d) *Physics*, 217 b, 31:

"The best plan will be to begin by working out the difficulties connected with [Time], making use of *καὶ διὰ τῶν ἐξωτερικῶν λόγων*" [Tr. Hardie and Gaye].

(e) *Politics*, 1278 b, 31:

"There is no difficulty in distinguishing the various kinds of authority; they have been often defined already *ἐν τοῖς ἐξωτερικοῖς λόγοις*" [Tr. Jowett].

(f) *Ibid.*, 1323 a, 22:

"Assuming that enough has been already said *καὶ . . . ἐν τοῖς ἐξωτερικοῖς λόγοις* concerning the best life . . ." [Tr. Jowett].

(g) *Eudemian Ethics*, 1217 b, 20:

"But if we speak briefly about [logical matters], we may say first that it is to speak abstractly and idly to assert that there is an idea whether of good or of anything whatsoever—this has been considered both *ἐν τοῖς ἐξωτερικοῖς λόγοις* and in our philosophic discussion" [Tr. Solomon].

(h) *Ibid.*, 1218 b, 32:

"All goods are either outside or inside the soul . . . ; this distinction we make *καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἐξωτερικοῖς λόγοις*" [Tr. *idem*].²

It is obvious that none of these passages from Aristotle's own works tells us the meaning of the word which we transliterate *exoteric*. They give us no indication that the exoteric doctrines, or theories, or works, or discussions, were public as opposed to private, or that they were contrasted with something secret or enigmatic.

II. We have two second-century works which quote a letter from Alexander the Great to Aristotle, of which one gives the philosopher's reply. One of these is Plutarch's life of Alexander, the other Aulus Gellius.

(a) Plutarch, *Vit. Alex.*, vii, 3:

"Alexander appears not only to have studied the ethical and political doctrines [*λόγων*], but also the secret [*ἀπορρήτων*] and deeper [*βαρυτέρων*], which men call by the special terms of *acroamatic* and *epoptic* and do not recount to many."

Nothing is said here about the exoteric doctrines, and the distinction which Plutarch seems to have in mind is that between what Aristotle called the practical and the theoretical sciences. But at the same time he indicates that the theoretical sciences were secret.

²The same list of passages from the authentic works can also be found in Ross's commentary on the *Metaphysics*, II, 409.

The passage immediately precedes one in which Alexander's letter is quoted. The letter runs,

"You have erred in publishing your akroatic doctrines. For how might I excell others, if all those things in which I was educated were to be made common? But I should prefer to gain distinction in my experience of the best rather than through power."

Plutarch does not quote Aristotle's supposed reply to this note but gives it in paraphrase, adding that the treatise on physics has no utility for either teaching or learning the science, but was written rather as a model for those who had already been trained in it. Just what this means concretely is difficult to clarify. But certainly the secrecy of the physical—theoretical—sciences is not accentuated. It is rather their difficulty which seems to be the burden of the passage. The difficulty of interpretation is compounded by a variant reading introduced by Xylander, who reads *metaphysics* for *physics*. And since metaphysics is usually thought of as deeper and possibly more secret than physics, Xylander may have been right in spite of the MSS.³ In any case it is Plutarch and not the author of the spurious letter who is responsible for the notion of secrecy.⁴

(b) Aulus Gellius, *Noct. Att.*, XX, v:

Aulus Gellius, a younger contemporary of Plutarch, gives a much more extensive account of the matter.

"Of the writings and theories [*artium*] which he handed down to his disciples, Aristotle the philosopher, teacher of King Alexander, is said to have had two sorts. Some were those which he called *exoteric* [Greek in text], the others were lectures [*akroatic*]. Those were called exoteric which developed rhetorical practice and skill and a knowledge of civil affairs. The *akroatic* were those in which a more abstract and subtle philosophy was discussed, pertaining to theories of nature and dialectical disputations. To this study, which, as I have said, was *akroatic*, he gave over his mornings in the Lyceum, nor did he allow anyone to participate in it who chose, but selected those whose ability, whose rudimentary knowledge, and whose zeal and industry in learning he had first examined. But those exoteric lectures [*auditiones*] and practice in speaking he carried on in the same place in the afternoon, and these he gave freely to the young without selection, and he spoke of it as his evening walk [*δελινδὸν περίπατον*, Greek in text], but the other as his morning [*ἑωθινόν*], for in both cases he spoke

³I am relying on Ziegler's critical apparatus for this information.

⁴Cf. the spurious letter introducing the *Rhet. ad Alex.*, 1421 a, 26.

while walking. His books too, commentaries on all these things, he divided into two parts, so that some are said to be exoteric and some akroatic.

"When King Alexander knew that the books of the akroatic sort had been openly published, in spite of the fact that at that time he was holding nearly all of Asia by force of arms and was driving even King Darius back in victorious battles, yet in the midst of such great affairs he sent letters to Aristotle saying that he had done wrong to publish those books which were the akroatic studies, in which he himself had been educated. 'For how otherwise,' he said, 'could we surpass others, if these things which we have received from you should become public property? For I prefer to excel in learning rather than in goods and money.'

"Aristotle wrote back this sentence, 'The akroatic books, whose publication you deplore and which are thus no longer hidden as secrets [*arcana*], you should know are neither published nor unpublished, since they will be intelligible [*cognobiles*] only to those who have heard us.' "

There follows in Greek the text of both letters. Alexander's reads precisely as it does in Plutarch. Aristotle's reply runs as follows.

"You have written me about the akroatic doctrines, thinking that I ought to keep them secret. Know that they are both published and unpublished. For they are intelligible [*ξυνητοί*] only to those who have heard us."

It is worth pointing out that Aulus Gellius adds himself a word on his translation of *ξυνητοί*. *Hoc ego verbum: ξυνητοί γάρ εἰσιν quaerens uno itidem verbo dicere, aliud non repperi, quam quod est scriptum a M. Catone in sexta origine: Itaque ego, inquit, cognobiliorem cognitionem esse arbitror.* It would therefore appear that the author of the letter thought that Aristotle's text was sufficiently difficult to require oral exegesis.

Certain comments should now be made on this classical testimony to Aristotle's secret doctrines.

1. The distinction between the two sorts of subject matter corresponds to the writings in the Corpus which we actually have, not to a body of secret or unpublished documents and a body of published documents.

2. In spite of the apparent distinction between written and unwritten books, both types of subject matter are reported as given in the form of oral discussions, one in the morning and one in the after-

noon. Here too there is no ground for believing that the lectures were secret and the written books public.

3. The only distinction between the auditors as first stated is that between those who have already had the prerequisites for studying physics and dialectics and those who had not. The difference is thus not that between secret and nonsecret but that between advanced and elementary, difficult and easy.

4. Even in the spurious letter from Alexander, nothing is said of the secrecy of the akroatic doctrines. Alexander simply wishes them kept unpublished so that he will know something which others do not know.

5. The following phrase in Aristotle's supposed reply looks as if it has been cribbed from the seventh Platonic letter [341 B].

Ps-Aristotle: ἴσθι οὖν αὐτοὺς καὶ ἐκδεδομένους καὶ μὴ ἐκδεδομένους.

Ps-Plato: Τοσόνδε γε μὴν περὶ πάντων ἔχω φράζειν τῶν γεγραφότων καὶ γραψόντων, κτλ.

III. The earliest reference to the distinction in non-Aristotelian writings which I have been able to discover, appears in Cicero. In the *De finibus*, V, iv, 9-12, we find the following passage:

"9. One part [of the Peripatetic doctrines] deals with nature, another with discourse, a third with living. Nature is so investigated by them that no part of it, whether in heaven, on earth, or in the sea, if I may speak poetically, is skipped over. In fact, when they spoke of the beginning of things, and of the world as a whole, in order to draw conclusions not merely by probable arguments but also necessary conclusions from mathematical reasoning, they brought forth a very great sum of evidence from the things investigated by them for the knowledge of the hidden [*rerum occultarum*] . . .

"12. Since there are two sorts of books about the highest good, one written in popular style, which they used to call *exoteric* [Greek in text], the other more polished [or "accurate"—*limatius*] which they left in the form of commentaries, they do not always seem to be saying the same thing. Yet on the whole there is no diversity among those whom I have named nor dissension among them."

Here again there is no evidence of secrecy of doctrine, though there is evidence that the subject matter of physics and metaphysics was considered *hidden*, which may, and no doubt does, mean no more than what we mean when we speak of passing from the known to the

unknown. As for the exoteric writings, they are distinguished simply by their style, some being simpler than others. But the more difficult writings are not said to be secret, and in fact Cicero appears to believe that there is no discrepancy in doctrine between the easier and the more difficult fields. It should furthermore not be overlooked that Cicero here makes the distinction between the exoteric and the non-exoteric within the field of ethics, that is, *de summo bono*. He does not say that the nonexoteric writings dealt with the arcana of metaphysics, were enigmatic, mysterious, or anything of the sort.⁵

IV. An examination of the Aristotelian commentators gives equally negative results.

(a) Themistius, on *Physics*, 217 b, 31:

Here the discussion concerns time, and all that Themistius notes is that "it would be well first to raise questions about [Aristotle's] own doctrines and *τῶν ἐξωθεν λόγων*, first if [time] exists, then what it is, in order."

This would seem to indicate that in Themistius' opinion the exoterica, if they are to be identified with the *ἐξωθεν λόγοι*, are other people's views in contrast with Aristotle's. This would amount to nothing more than saying that he is to take up the problem of time both in Aristotle and in other people. There is no hint of secrecy or nonsecrecy.⁶

(b) Simplicius, on the same:

Simplicius first points out that we must examine the nature of time both in Aristotle's works and in the exoteric doctrines. He then continues, "The exoteric are the common and generally admitted opinions, neither apodeictic nor acroamatic. And after such an examination [Aristotle] says we ought to next examine what the nature of time is." This clearly follows Aristotle's famous practice of citing his predecessors in the opening chapters of his works.

(c) Philoponus, on the same:

"[Aristotle] uses the term exoteric doctrines to distinguish between acroamatic and apodeictic consequences of his opinions and those arising from probability. And it is said in the *Categories*⁷ that

⁵Grote in his *Aristotle*, p. 64, refers also to the *Letter to Atticus*, IV, 6, where the exoteric writings are those which have proems or introductory prefaces.

⁶But see Themistius' *Oration*, XXVI (319 D), which appears to contradict this.

⁷This is not in our editions of the *Categories*. There is a somewhat related phrase in the *Posterior Analytics*, 76 b, 23 ff. *Οὐ γὰρ πρὸς τὸν ἐξω λόγον ἀπόδειξις, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ, ἐπεὶ οὐδὲ συλλογισμός. Ἀεὶ γὰρ ἔστιν ἐνστηῆσαι πρὸς τὸν ἐξω λόγον, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸν ἔσω λόγον οὐκ αἰεὶ*. The reference, however,

DISCUSSION

the exoteric doctrines are those which are not apodeictic nor addressed to the genuine [students] of the akroatic doctrines, but arise from probability and are addressed to the many."

Philoponus here distinguishes, as do his predecessors, between the results of logical deduction and those of experience, between the certain and the merely probable, between what one knows from what Aristotle would call the order of Nature and what one knows from the world of chance or observation. It may be well to point out that this fits in with what Aristotle says about the degree of certainty of the practical and theoretical sciences, the former being only probable, the latter capable of being certain. If what I say has any importance, then it will be observed that the comments of Aulus Gellius quoted above have some pertinence, for he too identifies the exoteric doctrines with those about practical matters, the others with those about physical and metaphysical.

(d) Eustratius, on *Eth. Nich.*, 1102 a, 26:

Eustratius here distinguishes between general lectures and answers to special questions. The akroatic were the lectures, heard by all, the other discourses were called exoteric because they were composed for special needs, *διότι τούτων ἕκαστον πρὸς τινα ζήτησαντα γέγραπται ἕξω τῆς κοινῆς ἀκροάσεως*.⁸

It will be observed that in the four commentators cited here, with the possible exception of Themistius in his oration, there is not a hint of secrecy of any doctrines whatsoever. And yet they cover in time some seven centuries, during which Aristotelian scholarship could easily have been contaminated with vulgar errors and superstitions.⁹ The question now arises of whence this interpretation of Aristotle came.

The second supposed author of secret doctrines is Plato, second not to be sure in chronological order, but in importance in the development of the legend. For if there are eight authentic passages in Aristotle which might indicate that he had two sorts of doctrine, there are none in Plato.

In Aristotle's *Physics*, 209 b, 15, occurs a passage which is the *locus classicus* of the legend that Plato too had secret doctrines.

is probably to the commentary of Philoponus on the *Categories* (ed. Busse), pp. 4, 10 ff.

⁸Ed. Heylbut, p. 111, line 27. Cf. what he says on 1139 b, 35.

⁹See even the *Schol. in Luciani Vit. Auct.*, 26, where the esoteric doctrines are simply the dialectic, the exoteric the rhetorical. The scholia to Lucian are probably not earlier than the seventh century.

There Aristotle says, "This is why Plato in the *Timaeus* says that matter and space are the same; for the 'participant' and space are identical. It is true, indeed, that the account he gives there of the 'participant' is different from what he says in his so-called 'unwritten teaching' " [Tr. Hardie and Gaye]. The so-called unwritten teaching [ἐν τοῖς λεγομένοις ἀγράφοις δόγμασιν] has been interpreted both as lectures, in the plural, as distinguished from the dialogues, and also as secret doctrines. That Plato gave lectures has been pretty well disposed of by Cherniss in his *Riddle of the Middle Academy*, but the legend is hard to kill. The supposed evidence that he also had secret doctrines follows.

(a) *Theaetetus*, 152 C:

Here Socrates and Theaetetus are discussing a certain belief of Protagoras, interpreted by Socrates to mean that appearance and sensation are identical and that the latter is *episteme*. Socrates then asks, "By the Graces, was this Protagoras then all-wise and did he say this to us as a riddle for the mob, but to the learned did he tell the truth in secret?"

This is merely a criticism of Protagoras and not an avowal on Plato's part that he himself had secret doctrines nor even that he believed Protagoras to have had secret doctrines nor that philosophers in general had secret doctrines.

(b) *Ibid.*, 155 E:

Here Socrates says to the young philosopher, "Would you not be grateful to me if I were to examine thoroughly with you the hidden truth of the thoughts of a man, or rather of famous men?" Naturally Theaetetus would be delighted, and Socrates begins to launch himself upon a solemn invitation to learning. He is discussing the hidden truth of Protagoras, which he, of course, drags out of hiding, and it turns out to be the doctrine that all is motion. But the doctrine of universal motion is the major theme of Protagoreanism, hidden only as a concealed premise is hidden, not secret or occult. And even if it were, it is surely not evidence that Plato had secret doctrines.

(c) *Republic*, 378 A:

Here Plato says that if it is necessary to speak of certain shameful myths, such as the story of Kronos, it should be done in private and not before the young.

But this is obviously simply the belief that the young should not listen to obscene stories.

DISCUSSION

(d) *Phaedo*. 62 B:

Socrates and Cebes are talking. The former says, "There is now something said in the ἀπορήτοις about this, to the effect that we men are in a sort of prison and that we ought not to free ourselves from it nor to escape by stealth. And this seems to me a great matter and not easy to understand."¹⁰

Whether Plato is referring to the Eleusinian mysteries or to certain Orphic rites and dogmas, he is certainly not having Socrates quote his most famous pupil's secret doctrines. In fact, Socrates is pictured as not thinking too highly of the doctrine in question.¹¹ And it might be suggested that if it were really a secret of the mysteries, Plato would hardly have been likely to mention it in one of his dialogues which everyone admits was published.

(e) *Epistle* VII, 341 C-E:

Ast in his *Platons Leben und Schriften* (p. 521) indicates that there is a possible intimation of secrecy in the distinction between the Many and the Few in the seventh letter. The author, having maintained that he himself never has preached anything concerning "these things" and that he never will, goes on to point out the impossibility of reducing them to words. If it were possible, however, to expound them either in writing or in speech, he himself would be the best person to do so. He would have been only too happy to expound them, had it been possible, for the benefit of the Many, but only the Few would have understood what he was driving at. He then proceeds to state that some day he plans to expound the very things which he has just said were incomprehensible in discursive speech. Nor does he wait long for the day to arrive, for the famous "philosophical digression" begins immediately.

Even supposing that Plato was the author of this curious bit of paradox, it is obvious that he says that he has never expounded the doctrines under discussion in any manner—either spoken or written. Hence on this basis one should conclude that the "unwritten doctrines" were not even delivered as lectures. And if they are what is contained in the philosophical digression, then they are not secret. Thus not even the seventh letter, if it is Plato's, gives us any reason

¹⁰The ἀπορήτα apparently were a matter of interest to the later Platonists, for Eusebius, *Praep. evang.*, XIII, 4, cites a book of Numenius, Περὶ τῶν παρὰ Πλάτωνος ἀπορήτων. Unhappily the fragment throws no light on our problem. See F. Thedinga, *De Numenio Philosopho Platónico* (Bonn [1875]), frag. 41, p. 66.

¹¹See Stallbaum's notes on this passage in his edition of the *Phaedo*.

to believe that Plato had any secret doctrines, and we are no better off than we were in the case of Aristotle.¹²

Pythagoras is, of course, the most celebrated author of secret doctrines, but since we have no works of his whatsoever, we cannot cite texts supposedly from his hands which might be used as evidence one way or the other. The most famous reference to his supposed secret methods of instruction occurs in Cicero's *De natura deorum*, I, 5, 10, where his disciples are said to refer to him as an unquestioned authority on metaphysical matters. This passage appears to be the oldest source of the celebrated *Ipse dixit*. But the fact that the Pythagoreans utilized the principle of authority as justification of their doctrines does not in itself prove that the doctrines were secret; on the contrary, Cicero seems to say that they had certain well-known doctrines which they justified in this way. So Catholics are not believing in secret doctrines if they use as their authority the words of the Pope speaking *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals. Moreover, in Aristotle, who speaks of Pythagorean doctrines frequently, there is no hint that besides the theories which he is discussing there exist others of which he knows little or nothing. The *Ipse dixit*, however, has a great history. It began, in surviving letters, with Cicero, went into Quintilian, Diogenes Laertius, appeared again in Clement of Alexandria, and from then on passed into the realm of the great commonplaces of historical legend.¹³

Diogenes Laertius, however, was the really great purveyor of the legend of secret doctrines. "Plato," he says (III, 63), "has employed a variety of terms in order to make his system less intelligible to the ignorant" [Tr. Hicks]. Epicurus (X, 5) "extolled Idomeneus, Herodotus, and Timocrates, who had published his esoteric [κρυφία] doctrines and flattered them for that very reason" [Tr. *idem*]. Why anyone should take pleasure in the publication of his secrets is unexplained, as is the paradox of the secrets' being published. As for Pythagoras, "Down to the time of Philolaus it was not possible to acquire knowledge of any Pythagorean doctrine, and Philolaus alone brought out three celebrated books, which Plato sent 100 minas to

¹²Oddly enough Proclus in *Tim.* 23 C (see H. Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, I, 46, 27) maintains that the tradition of Plato is not so enigmatic as that of Pherekydes. And Proclus does not shun enigmas and allegories.

¹³For references to the texts, see A. Delatte, *La vie de Pythagore*, p. 142, n. 9 and p. 252, where Delatte seems to maintain that the *Ipse dixit* was *le précepte du secret philosophique*. I fail to see that it means anything of the sort as quoted by Cicero, but Diogenes Laertius, whom Delatte is studying, does use it in that way. For further and very illuminating comments on the development of this legend, see E. Frank, *Plato und die sogenannten Pythagoreer*, p. 72. Cf. T. Heath, *History of Greek Mathematics*, p. 160.

DISCUSSION

purchase. . . . And the rest of the Pythagoreans used to say that not all his doctrines were for all men to hear" (VIII, 15, tr. *idem*).¹⁴ With such a passion for a belief in secret doctrines, it is at least a grave question whether the witness is unprejudiced.

Along with Diogenes Laertius must be placed Clement of Alexandria. In the *Stromata* (V, ix, 58 ff.), after several chapters on allegory and symbolism, required by the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture as developed from Philo, Clement says, "It was not only the Pythagoreans and Plato, then, who concealed many things; but the Epicureans too say that they have things that may not be uttered, and do not allow all to peruse those writings."¹⁵ The Stoics also say that by the first Zeno things were written which they do not readily allow disciples to read, without first giving proof whether or not they are genuine philosophers. And the disciples of Aristotle say that some of their treatises are esoteric, and others are common and exoteric. Further, those who instituted the mysteries, being philosophers, buried their doctrines in myths, so as not to be obvious to all" [Tr. Roberts and Donaldson]. This, he maintains, is the reason for the myths of Plato. The Pythagoreans, he continues, had two sorts of pupils, the "hearers" (*ἀκουσματικοί*) and the disciples (*μαθηματικοί*), by which they signified that "something was spoken to the multitude and something concealed from them." In this way he justifies the Christian use of allegory and mystery, a use which was necessitated not only by the need for a rational interpretation of many of the stories in the two Testaments but also by the doctrine that the New Testament was prefigured in the Old.

It is interesting to observe that the distinction between the various orders of pupils is found also in Aulus Gellius (I, ix) with additional classes. Discussing the pedagogic methods of Pythagoras, he says, At first he gave a *physiognomonic* examination to the youths who came to him to study, a word which means to inquire into the conduct and nature of men by deducing them from the character of their countenances and expression, as well as from the quality and appearance of their whole body. Then he who had been examined by him and found suitable was ordered to be received into the school at once and to keep silent for a certain time, not all for the same amount of time but

¹⁴Cf. D. L., VIII, 42, where the daughter of Pythagoras refused to sell her father's writings, for he had "solemnly charged her never to give them to anyone outside of his house" [Tr. *idem*].

¹⁵It seems strange to us who know Epicurus largely through Lucretius and the account given of his doctrines in Diogenes Laertius to find him also an author of arcana. But Dr. Edelstein has called my attention to a comment by A. J. Festugière in his *Epicure et ses dieux*, p. 57, n. 1, which points out the mystical language to be found in some of the Epicurean fragments. It may well be that such passages were known to Clement and that they suggested the inclusion of Epicurus in his list.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW

some for one period, others for another, according to the estimated ability of their aptitude. He, however, who kept silent heard what was said by others, nor did he have the right to ask questions if he did not understand, nor to comment on what he had heard. But no one kept silent less than two years. These were called during the period of silence and listening *akoustikoi*. Then when they had learned the most difficult of all things, to keep silent and listen, and had begun to be skilled in silence, the Greek for which is *echemuthia*, then they were given the power to speak and to ask and to write what they had heard and to express what they themselves thought. At that time they were said to be *mathematikoi*, from those arts which now they had begun to learn and study, since geometry, gnomonics, music, and likewise other deeper studies were called *mathemata* by the ancient Greeks. The people, however, call mathematicians those whom they ought to call by the national name, *Chaldeans*. From then on, adorned with those scientific studies, they proceeded to the investigations of cosmic events and the principles of nature and were finally called *physikoi*.

This passage shows that the pupils of the Pythagoreans in the opinion of Aulus Gellius were divided into orders or grades according to their proficiency, but does not show that there was anything mysterious or secret about what they learned. So most colleges in the United States speak of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, without implying that sophomores are wise fools in some occult sense, that juniors are especially young or seniors especially old, or that the juniors are less initiated into the arcana of scholarship than their elders. Degrees of proficiency have habitually been given names, and even if Aulus Gellius is right, his testimony is not to degrees of secrecy but to degrees of difficulty.

We have now reached the third century of our own era and by this time the distinction between esoteric and exoteric doctrines was widely held. This is the period when not only the Platonic myths, but also the popular myths, were interpreted allegorically in the Philonic manner. It was not long before Porphyry was to interpret the wanderings of Odysseus as the symbol of a philosophic theory and when the later Neo-Platonists were to go even further along the path of fancy. This is the period of Neo-Pythagoreanism at its wildest, when the Christian Fathers were to make a more or less viable mixture of Biblical and philosophic doctrine in which mysticism, logic, number theory, Platonism, music, were all jumbled together to form in the fifth century the beginnings of a new metaphysics. As the Fathers sought, following Philo, a rational interpretation of the Bible, so the pagans sought, or seem now to have been seeking, a religious interpretation of the sciences. Hence allegory veiling mysteries became accepted as the standard mode of discourse. To read this procedure back into the minds of Plato and Aristotle is quite un-

DISCUSSION

warranted. The method was needed by the Christians and by the Neo-Platonists. But it was not needed by the Ancients themselves.

Typical of the sort of thing of which we are speaking are Galen, maintaining that Aristotle or Theophrastus wrote some things for the Many and others for their "companions;"¹⁶ Hermias saying that "Pythagoras and the proud and silent men united with him, uttered other doctrines, in my mind mysterious, and this great and secret saying, the *Ipse dixit*";¹⁷ Julian the Apostate referring to the Pythagorean secrecy and saying that not everything ought to be told and that "of those things which it is lawful to tell," one ought to refrain from revealing them to the Many;¹⁸ Eunapius writing that "some philosophers hide their esoteric teachings in obscurity, as poets conceal theirs in myths";¹⁹ Sallustius, the Neo-Platonist, pointing out that fables are used in theological matters so that the ignorant may not be induced into contempt for things divine and the wise may be stimulated into inquiry.²⁰ So Suidas refers to Epimenides as one "who wrote many things in the epic manner and in prose mysteries of a sort and a purification and other enigmatic things."²¹ Simplicius, commenting on the *Physics*, says in regard to Parmenides and Xenophanes that they are in contrast with the Ancients who "were accustomed to set forth their thoughts enigmatically."²² And Diogenes Laertius (IX, 6) quotes Timon as saying, "Among these sprang up a screamer, reviling the mob, Heraclitus, who spoke in riddles." And since Heraclitus became a proverbial symbol of the obscure philosopher, one of whose works spoke of the Pythian oracle as neither speaking nor keeping silent, but giving signs (frag. 74), it is quite possible that he, even more than the others cited, was the source of the legend in question. The sharp distinction between the populace and the learned, the Many and the Few, is not novel by any means, but that does not mean that philosophers had secret doctrines. In Plato, for instance, one finds allegorical interpretations of Homer and mention of the inner meaning of various popular myths. But the point is that he gives the interpretation openly and does not merely hint that there is one. The idea that philosophy contains arcana which cannot be expressed in rational discourse is more characteristic of Neo-Pythagoreans, Neo-Platonists, and the Christian Fathers, to all of whom mysteries and intellectual riddles were an integral

¹⁶*De subst. fac. nat.*, IV, 758 K. Cf. Schol. in *Phaedo*, 61 E, citing Philolaos teaching "in enigmas as was the custom of these men" (Diels, *Fragmente*, I, 398, 23).

¹⁷*Irrisio*, in Diels, *Doxographers*, p. 655, 9.

¹⁸*Orations*, VII, 239 A.

¹⁹*Lives*, 456 (Boissonade), tr. W. C. Wright.

²⁰*De diis*, iii and iv.

²¹Diels, *Fragmente*, I, 29, 23.

²²*Ibid.*, I, 221, 5.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW

part of belief. In classical times there existed beyond doubt religious mysteries, mystery cults, oracles, and riddles, but they seem to have formed no part of serious philosophy, for not even the "philosophical digression" in the seventh Platonic letter is duplicated in any of the dialogues. And since we have no reason either to believe in the testimony of these later writers or to read their point of view back into the minds of the Ancients, we have no reason to believe that Plato and Aristotle, or even Pythagoras—if there was such a person—had any doctrines which were secret or which they felt it necessary to conceal from the public. We have seen, I hope, that not even the Peripatetic commentators attributed any secrecy to any of Aristotle's doctrines, and some of them were contemporary with the Neo-Platonists, the Neo-Pythagoreans, and the Christian Fathers. Consequently the whole idea had better be discarded as another legend dating from the time when superstition was taking the place of reason.²³

GEORGE BOAS

The Johns Hopkins University

²³I have not attempted to trace the history of this idea into modern times. Readers interested might consult the classic study of J. Bernays, *Die Dialoge des Aristoteles*, especially pp. 34 ff. And for further information on the source of this legend see Frank, *op cit.*, p. 72.