
METAPHYSIC AND DIALECTIC

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AND
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ANCIENT AND MODERN



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PART ONE

The Ancients

Dialectic is a hard term to define with precision. This is because dialectic is really a process of thought communing with itself. There is both a circularity and a linearity to its self-development. Most simply and
5 influentially we need only look to Plato to understand its epic quality and to Hegel to see its perennial attraction.

In Plato dialectic is associated with a certain open-endedness—a kind of literary ambiguity which combats
10 the apparent precision and relativity of the sophists by rendering every possible position suspect. Then in the hands of Plato's later followers a primarily sceptical orientation emerges which eventually asserts itself in the scepticism of Pyrrho. This ancient scepticism
15 remains the model for all time in terms of its complete rendering of any empirical stability unstable.

There is, however, in the Platonic dialectic another less accessible dimension which is understood only by Aristotle and later Neoplatonism in so far as it is a species of Neoplatonism. This is the dimension that
5 understands the Parmenidean dialectic of Plato as being a sustained effort to comprehend rather than to simply negate Heraclitean metaphysics. Aristotle understood this effort as being the key to understanding the esoteric teaching of Plato concerning the One and the Dyad.
10 Neoplatonism develops this side by understanding, primarily in the acute mind of Proclus, that the genuine teaching of the Parmenidean dialogue is that it produces a positive rather than a negative result.

THE ANCIENT PROBLEMATIC

15 It is no easy task to penetrate into the mysteries of ancient metaphysics. To do so one must begin by giving up both a modern and a Christian cosmology. In addition one must be able to appreciate the ancient tradition that takes for granted that Aristotle actually did understand Plato; that
20 Plato did, in fact, have an esoteric as well as an exoteric teaching; that Pythagoras and Parmenides and Heraclitus are the ultimate sources of Plato's metaphysical education; that Socrates is the other source of his education; and, finally, that it is in Plato not Aristotle that for pre-Christian
25 philosophy is to be found the ultimate solution to ancient scepticism. The full access to those who would

follow this tradition is twofold. The first pathway is via Aristotle's unrelenting dissatisfaction with Plato's solutions to the problematica of Greek religion. The second is via the equally unrelenting criticism of
5 Aristotle by the Neoplatonic masters. This double pathway has yet to be fully traversed because either the desire to unlock these ancient mysteries has been blocked by modern assumptions, scientific or Christian; or has been sidetracked by failing to understand what
10 were regarded by ancient philosophers as the most crucial questions and texts.

To give up scientific assumptions means to give up empiricism, to give up asymmetrical non-anthropomorphic cosmology and to accept an hierarchical order of
15 beings in which the natural is the most insignificant. To give up Christian assumptions means to give up the idea of personal salvation, of providential history, and most crucially the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. Now for moderns or post-moderns (bearing in mind that
20 Aristotle, indeed any theorist of the new, regards himself as a kind of "post-modern") this giving-up is well nigh impossible because it assumes a knowledge of what must be given-up. The most common barrier is sheer ignorance; the less common the certainty that
25 thought is not transcendental enough to overcome historical temporality.

ANCIENT QUESTIONS AND TEXTS

Ancient questions are rooted in a self-evident belief that getting out of this world is the only intellectually valid option for the educated man. There is no Christian
5 consolation and no *grace-ful* exit. Existential reality is cold and transcendental. The face of fate is inscrutable and help is not to be found outside of the self. Such a world is the crucible of philosophy and philosophy is nothing less than metaphysics as speculative theology. There is
10 no divide between philosophy and theology. Such divide is a later development impossible without Christianity. The texts are the ones moderns find most esoteric, because most inaccessible to their assumptions and interests. The best access is to begin with the Neoplatonic
15 curriculum and then to transpose it by formulating an Aristotelian critique of it. Late Neo-platonism, which Plotinian devotees think mainly to be a derogation from the poetic enlightenment of their master, would have its scholarship begin with Aristotle as the philosophic
20 major domo of this world and the higher levels above ending with Nous as an ultimate intermediary craftsman (the Platonic demiurge) between heaven and earth mythically understood. True to Aristotle one would begin with the teachings about dialectic (Aristotelian
25 logic or syllogistics) and nature (Aristotelian physics) and progress to speculative theology (Aristotle's *Metaphysics*), which we have on the authority of

Porphyry was the one Aristotelian treatise Plotinus never had out of mind or thought as he wove his garlands for Plato. Once Aristotle was mastered, Plato was begun and, oddly to a modern, the works most
5 eagerly studied in the contemporary twilight of classical studies at our best universities, where at least a smattering of ancient lore is regarded as positive as long as the doses are small enough to bear inoculation, were not by Plato's true devotees in the twilight of classical
10 antiquity regarded so highly. The student in Athens under his Platonic (née "Neo") master would imbibe the mysteries of Plato as follows: *Alcibiades I*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Philebus* – then he would be ready to grapple
15 with Plato's true masterworks – *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*. *Philebus*, *Timaeus* and *Parmenides* would be read in the light of the esoteric Platonic teachings assumed in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Thus the final educational programme of late Athenian Neoplatonism was to
20 understand the exoterica of Plato's most speculative dialogues – *Philebus*, *Timaeus* and *Parmenides* – in the light of Aristotle's polemics against Plato's esoteric and exoteric doctrines as found in Books A, M and N of the *Metaphysics* (which by and large are not understand-
25 able to the exoteric interpretations of modern scholarship) esoterically.