

Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization

in Plato and Homer

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Allow me to begin with a paradox: Plato is supremely relevant, and Plato is entirely irrelevant. To describe what I take to be his continuing potential for world-historical relevance, a quote from Nietzsche's *The Wanderer and his Shadow* (86): "If all goes well," he writes, "the time will come when one will take up the memorabilia of Socrates rather than the Bible as a guide to morals and reason." Nietzsche's criticisms notwithstanding, I'd argue that one can read Plato with the same purpose and consequence as Xenophon. Now, it would seem things have not gone as well as Nietzsche hoped they might. Throughout the intervening century, the writings of the ancients have been taken up and made relevant by authors right, left, and center-liberal, and somehow modernity has remained thoroughly modern. Such pleasantly edifying interpretive exercises show that the ancients remain essentially irrelevant to us. Why so? Concerning Plato, the glib Nietzschean answer would be that his writings are part of the problem ♦ perhaps the problem itself ♦ and not part of the solution. I prefer Nietzsche's own ambivalent glimpses of Plato outside the interpretive traditions that have misrepresented him. In *The Antichrist* (8, 9), Nietzsche describes his own project as digging up "the most widespread, really *subterranean*, form of falsehood found on earth" ♦ "the theologians' instinct" ♦ evident not only in the usual places but also in "our whole philosophy;" and he says the best tool for the job is philology. However, Nietzsche was often not as radical in his digging as Nietzscheans claim. For all his efforts to overturn the Biblical texts and expose their influences in modern philosophy, Nietzsche didn't entirely succeed in uprooting the theologians' instinct in classical philology itself, the instinct that satisfies itself in claiming, for example, that Christianity is Platonism for the people (*Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface). Following him at his best, though, I'd argue that Plato remains irrelevant for us, even if we consider ourselves philologists, because we continue to take up and read the dialogues Biblically.

There are a great many varieties of reading Biblically and none of them is appropriate for reading works written in a society without a Bible. To clarify my meaning somewhat: Gadamer

begins *Truth and Method* by distinguishing his sense of hermeneutics from theological and legal hermeneutics (xi). The Bible and the law are given, fixed things -- absolutes; and interpretations of the Bible and the law are thus practical activities of the clergyman and judge in which what is given is not and cannot be called into question. The dialogues are neither the Bible nor the law and ought not to be read as if they were. But what would it mean to read them hermeneutically in Gadamer's sense? The project of a universal hermeneutics, founded on the ontological claim that language and being are identical, is itself a radically Protestant project. Instead of only one Bible, every book is a Bible; each text is a law unto itself; each interpreter is as well -- and yet, in the end, the universality of the *logos*, the Word, subsumes everything into itself. Well then, if the hermeneutic method doesn't quite suit the dialogues, perhaps deconstruction? Is there anything to be gained for an understanding of Plato in the move from a modern Christian to a modern Jewish interpretive tradition other than a different set of strategies for dealing with the inflexibility of an absolute, foundational text, the application of which has been extended by the assumption that all texts are intrinsically absolute? If Derrida's readings of Plato's dialogues set the standard, then no. What else? Perhaps all it takes is finding an old-fashioned, no-nonsense Classics department in which to read Plato without such theoretical presuppositions? Not if we're to trust David Grene, who writes in his memoir ♦ *Of Farming and Classics* ♦ that he was one of the last products of a 19th century philological training at Trinity College (Dublin), the main feature of which was the "relentless Talmudism of [his] teachers" (75). The study of the letter is evidently subcontracted from the study of the Word. Everyday academic freedom, then? Well, despite the conceit, the institutions, practices and habits of mind of the modern academy are not derived from Plato's Academy, but rather from medieval Cathedral schools. Plato didn't lecture or dispute the sentences, as we schoolmen do; nor are there footnotes in the dialogues.

None of this is to deny the commonsense notion that a proper fusion of horizons when reading the dialogues is possible for anyone at any time. My comments arise from my curiosity about the reliability with which partial insights into the meaning of this or that dialogue so attained fail to build up and spark a deeper awareness of the nature of philosophy for Plato, but rather always become subordinated to one or another incommensurable understanding ♦ if no longer directly and explicitly to a religious tradition, then indirectly to the implicit assumptions of what we take to be most profoundly true or even most immediately relevant, all of which

would be alien to the Greeks. Of course, our attempts at a fusion of horizons with Plato's dialogues must fail from our side ♦ they cannot fail from Plato's side ♦ but the degree and consistency of our failures requires its own explanation.

And this brings me to Voegelin. It's been more than a decade since I scandalized the Voegelin Society by arguing that, although I knew of no one closer to Plato than Voegelin, their similarity is not most evident in his studies of the dialogues themselves.¹ [1] I went so far as to claim that there's a fundamental ambiguity in Voegelin's treatment of Plato: the Plato of his textual exegeses is inconsistent with the Plato of his philosophy and history of consciousness. I know of no more Platonic account of the human condition and the task of the philosopher than the first pages of *Israel and Revelation*, in which the quaternarian structure of the primordial community of being is discussed. And I know of no one who has explored the mystery of human participation in the order of being more Platonically than Voegelin. However, his readings of Plato's dialogues are not as Platonic as his own late meditative writings. They're too Biblical. They could use a bit more of Nietzsche's spirit. I've also argued that the most radical and most Platonic aspect of Voegelin's philosophy is his understanding of the equivalences of experience and symbolization, and that the full significance of this understanding became obscured through its association with the distinction between compactness and differentiation ♦ a distinction that's inadequate for the purposes of most textual exegesis, when it's not trivial or irrelevant, because it tends to distort equivalent experiences in a Biblically historiogenetic way. Voegelin's studies of the dialogues predate his earliest and best analyses of equivalences. No matter whether the full significance of these analyses is insufficiently recognized in his later works, it's certainly the case that Voegelin didn't reconsider the orientation and details of his exegeses of Plato's texts in light of his important discovery.² [2]

1 [1] "The Uses of Plato in Voegelin's Philosophy," Eric Voegelin Society, American Political Science Association (1996), San Francisco.

2 [2] "The Significance of Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias* in Eric Voegelin's Philosophy," published in the proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Work of Eric Voegelin (1997), University of Manchester.

The question of the relevance of Plato is the question of how to read Plato. The hermeneutic encounter is the only site of relevance. As much as anyone, Voegelin allowed himself to be called into question by the dialogues, and the unexpected consequence of the encounter was, for me, the core of his philosophy, his understanding of equivalences. In my recent work, I've attempted to develop Voegelin's account by applying it to the dialogues in a way that Voegelin did not: I've studied the significance of Plato's use of source-texts in composing the dialogues. The project is intrinsically more speculative than classical philology could ever allow; but it's nevertheless also based on a source-critical analysis of the similarities of texts that was unnecessary for Voegelin's presentation of the recurrent surfacing of equivalences from a common depth of psyche. In my work, I assume that equivalences in Homer and Plato are evident because Plato used Homeric texts that he understood to be experientially equivalent in his composition of the dialogues, and that these intentional symbolic equivalences are relatively easy to spot in the dialogues if one does not restrict one's reading to the narrowness of a philological hunt for explicit references. More generally: there's a wealth of equivalent symbolizations of equivalent experiences in Greek literature before Plato; I assume that Plato's awareness and understanding of the phenomenon is broadly comparable to Voegelin's; I'm certain that Plato wrote the dialogues to reflect his understanding of this tradition; and I am also certain that the several versions of what I have been calling "reading the dialogues Biblically" are blind to it. The field of study is wide and rich and, despite the familiarity of the texts, relatively unexplored. The only obstacles preventing discovery of its treasures are the self-imposed limitations that can be overcome by following Nietzsche's simple rule: Do not read with the theologians' instinct. To have some sense of the depth and character of the literary culture into which Plato was born, one need only consider the great many ways Homeric stories were presented in the theatre. For example, what must Euripides have assumed about his audience in using an episode from the *Odyssey* for his *Cyclops* and having the satyr-play complete the tetralogy that includes his *Hecuba*, the plot of which is based on the same Homeric episode but makes no reference to it? Another example: wouldn't Plato have assumed readers of the *Republic* to be intimately familiar with Aristophanes' *Birds* and *Thesmophoriazusae*, comedies he would have seen as a teenager? How is it possible to read the *Republic* without laughing at the similarities? A reminder: in *Beyond Good and Evil* (28), Nietzsche writes that he is able to explore Plato's secrets by keeping in mind that "under the

pillow on [Plato's] death-bed people found no Bible, nothing Egyptian, Pythagorean or Platonic, but something by Aristophanes."

Someday, I must write about Plato's use of Aristophanes, but there's a great deal left to be done on Plato and Homer. I've already written on the use of the *Odyssey* in the composition of the *Symposium*,³ [3] the *Phaedrus*, and the *Timaeus* and *Critias*, based on preliminary insights into its use for the *Republic*,⁴ [4] but I've been avoiding returning to the *Republic* for years. If it isn't to end up under my pillow, I can't procrastinate much longer. The numbers aren't good, though. Glaucon says that the "proper measure" of studying the *Republic* is "a whole life" (450b); studying the *Odyssey* alongside it is two lives, maybe three; with luck, I have a third of one left. And today, I have only a few minutes left. Where to begin? As good a place as any is Book 2 of the *Republic*, after the lengthy speeches by Glaucon and Adeimantus.

Plato's brothers ask Socrates to defend justice in itself. Instead of giving a straightforward answer, he replies rather oddly, asking them to consider the difference between reading big letters and little letters, relating the former to a city and the latter to a soul (368d). Now, traditional hermeneutics teaches us that the size of the letters should make no difference to the meaning of a text. So Socrates is suggesting that a single text be read twice for two senses, one political and the other philosophic. Which text? we might wonder. From what follows, it's evidently the *Odyssey*, the epic in which Odysseus sees many cities and learns of many minds (1.3). Note that Socrates' reading plan is not a differentiation of compact Homeric symbols. The *Odyssey's* account is no more compact than the *Republic's*; and in any case, Socrates' initial attempt to keep the political distinct from the philosophic fails.

Socrates' exegesis of the big letters is commonly known as making a city in speech, but he begins by describing several different cities, even giving them different names. The first is the "city of utmost necessity" (369d), comprised of four or five almost autonomous men whose

3 [3] "Ascending with Socrates: Plato's Use of Homeric Imagery in the *Symposium*," *Interpretation* 31/3 (2004), 325-350.

4 [4] *Plato through Homer: Poetry and Philosophy in the Cosmological Dialogues* (University of Missouri Press, 2003).

dealings with one another are limited to the minimal division of labor necessary for self-sufficiency. There follows a digression in which Socrates raises the question of how to understand the relation between different natural or given aptitudes and different arts or jobs ♦ note the immediate failure to stick to politics. Adeimantus expresses his preference for the doctrine: "One man, one art" (370b). Socrates then describes the expansion of the initial city in accord with this doctrine: the four or five become a throng of tradesmen, including (one would assume) butchers for the teeming herds of sheep and cattle; a marketplace is established and a money economy introduced; a harbor becomes necessary for the economic growth ships make possible; work increases for everyone, except for the few in the mercantile classes that develop; others become wage-earners. All in all, a rather ugly place. When Adeimantus, in a liberal mood, finds this city sufficiently just (372a), Socrates describes another one. In fact, he gives two descriptions, and he names it the "true" and "healthy city" (372e). Glaucon objects strongly to both descriptions, the first time because the feasts are "without relishes," and the second ♦ after Socrates provides figs and acorns ♦ because it seem to him "a city of sows" (372c, d). Commentators in a liberal mood assume that Socrates' account of the true city describes the suburban leisure activities of those who work in the ugly city during the day. Not so. It's a different place ♦ an idyllic agrarian community that disregards the strict division of labor; minimal work, no politics, lots of wine and singing; and a strict vegetarian diet that's not to Glaucon's taste. To appease Glaucon, Socrates describes a "luxurious" and "feverish city" (372e). He returns to the ugly city and makes it bigger again, adding cakes, prostitutes, rhapsodes ♦ even swine to be fattened and slaughtered. The ugly, mercantile city had already "overstep[ped] the boundary of the necessary" (373d). The feverish city makes this explicit. It initiates wars of conquest; and, to be consistent with Adeimantus's doctrine, it acquires a class of expert warriors, euphemistically named guardians. Socrates spots a problem, however. Given the unlimited spiritedness of the guardians ♦ another slip into a discussion of the soul ♦ "a good guardian is impossible," he says (375cd). Such guardians will not be guard dogs, they will be wolves; and "appetite, a universal wolf ♦ [will] last eat up himself," to quote Shakespeare's Odysseus (*Troilus and Cressida*, 1.3.109-124). Socrates claims to be "at a loss" for a solution and says that they've abandoned the initial "image" of the discussion (375d).

Most commentators, concerned to demonstrate the consistency of Plato's argument, see no problems in these passages. However, if we turn to Plato's source-text and read it as "big letters," for its political significance alone, we'll discover the consistency with which Plato rewrites the *Odyssey's* account of the first places Odysseus visits on his wanderings, problems and all. A quick sketch of the correspondences will have to suffice. The "city of utmost necessity" is based on the *Odyssey's* description of the Cyclopes: there are few of them, each living as autonomously and self-sufficiently as possible; they do not cultivate the soil; they have no political counsels, laws, society or culture; and they have no ships. The vivid tale of the encounter with Polyphemos, read both in big and small letters, is used frequently in the *Republic*, but not at this point. The *Republic's* description of the expanded, mercantile city is based on the Laistrygonians, the people who are giants and cannibals, like the Cyclopes, but who work day and night with great industry. They have a walled city, a political regime, and a harbor; they cooperate effectively in battle; and they're cultured enough to cook their meat. In the *Republic*, the descriptions of the initial city and its expanded form are separated by the discussion in which Adeimantus prefers to understand the different functions or skills in an economic division of labor as natural differences. In the *Odyssey*, the encounters with the two cannibal societies are separated by a charming story: Ithaca is within sight, but the homecoming is delayed for a decade or so when one of Odysseus's companions stupidly opens the bag of winds they'd been given by the Aiolians and they're blown off course. So much for Adeimantus's preference for "one man, one art." It's a disaster for the discussion of justice, and Socrates knows it. Now, what about Socrates' idyllic agrarian society, the "true" and "healthy city"? It's as different from the ugly cities that precede it as Circe's island is different from the Cyclopes and the Laistrygonians. Socrates describes it twice, and both times Glaucon objects. In the *Odyssey*, there are two separate approaches to Circe's household, and in both episodes Eurylochos, perhaps the most troublesome of Odysseus's companions, is full of doubts and suspicions. You'll recall he's afraid of being turned into a pig. The second time he objects, Odysseus considers taking a sword and cutting off his head; however, Eurylochos is a relative, and he's persuaded against it (10.428-448). The literary form in which Plato casts Glaucon's objection to the "city of sows" is obviously something of a joke at his brother's expense. Glaucon prefers a feverish city in which war-loving guardians are necessary to get him his relishes. How unjust would such a city be? In the *Odyssey*, Circe's magic transforms Odysseus's men into swine, but it also tames wolves and

lions. The wolves and lions that guard her household greet Odysseus's men as friends ♦ they do not attack and eat them. And no swine are eaten either; instead, when Odysseus establishes a new order in her household, Circe transforms the swine into men again. In Glaucon's city, the guardians are dogs gone wild: they would attack and devour enemy and friend alike. They're such universal wolves that a great deal of effort is expended in teaching them to be able to distinguish friend from enemy properly. And yet, what good is all their education? Learning to harm only one's enemies would not make a guardian just. Socrates had refuted that definition of justice earlier in the evening's discussion. For Socrates, justice is ♦ at the least ♦ helping your friends and harming no one (335e). Circe's wolves and lions are just guardians; the guardians of Glaucon's city are not.

When Plato has Socrates say he's "at a loss" for a solution to the problem of the good guardian, he has him turn to philosophy. That's the question with which I began, the question that always returns: what is philosophy for Plato? and what is its relevance? Is philosophy something like a magic of the pretty extreme? and is politics necessarily something like cannibalism? Answers to these questions require us to read the *Republic* in small letters as well as big letters. The *Odyssey* too. And why not Aristophanes while we're at it? What better guides to morals and reason?
