

REFLECTIONS ON A RECENT CONFERENCE OF CLASSICAL PHILOSOPHERS

I.

A LETTER TO SAAP MEMBERS

Dear All,

This year's SAAP conference took place on September 15-17. In my email 'RE: May the discussion begin' I informed you about my plan to spend the night of September 15-16 sleeping rough on the stairs in front of 10 Merton Street, for I could not pay for an accommodation at Corpus Christi. In my original plan, I trusted myself to sleep rough just for one night and go home after the Friday afternoon session. To my great relief, the organizer Anna Marmodoro wrote to me that funds were found to pay for my Bed & Breakfast accommodation; this enabled me to attend the Friday evening party and the Saturday session.

On Friday evening, at the party, I told Anna Marmodoro that I should like to present to students and academics at Oxford University two papers: 'Socrates and the Laws of Athens', and 'Plato, Isocrates, and Alcidamas in dispute on Philosophy and Rhetoric'. She promised to look into it.

The Saturday morning paper was on 'Hedonism and the Divided Soul in Plato's Protagoras', presented by Jessica Moss and chaired by Anna Marmodoro. I found two problems with the paper, which I wanted to discuss, one minor and one major. I was given an opportunity to air the minor one. Jessica maintained that Protagoras in the dialogue likens courage to strength. I pointed out that this was not the case.

At 349e-351a Protagoras calls courageous (*andreious*) men daring (*tharraleous*), and admits that daring can be enhanced by learning. Socrates concludes that according to this argument wisdom is courage (350c4). Protagoras resists Socrates' inference: 'But in this way of arguing (*toutôî de tôi tropôi metiôn*) you might think that strength also (*kai tèn ischun oiêtheiês an*) is the same thing as wisdom (*einai sophian*)'. Protagoras' argument relies on the profound difference between the two: 'strength results from a good natural condition and nurture of the body (*ischun de apo phuseôs kai eutrophias tôn sômatôn*, 351a3-4) ... courage results from a good natural condition and nurture of the soul (*andreia de apo phuseôs kai eutrophias tôn psuchôn*)'. By the same token it could be argued that Protagoras likens the soul to the body.

The major problem was with Jessica's hand-out. She opened her references to the text with Socrates' 'So, then, to live pleasantly is good, and unpleasantly, bad?' Since this is an inference, I asked from what it is derived. Instead of looking for the answer in the text, Jessica recapitulated some of the claims that she had made before. I protested: 'The premise from which the inference is derived is quite precise.'

At that point Anna Marmodoro intercepted: 'I must stop you, there are many more people on my list who want to talk.' I pleaded: 'All those who talked before me could discuss their points at length. Is it not fully legitimate to ask about the premise of the inference on which Jessica's argument is based?' It was in vain, and so I left. I went to the Bodleian Library and spent the time I thus had gained with Pindar's 2nd *Olympian Ode*: 'for under the force of noble joys the pain dies and its malignancy is suppressed' (*eslôn gar hupo charmatôn pēma thnaiskei palingkoton damasthen*, l. 19-20).

Will you allow me to make my point?

Socrates draws the inference 'to live pleasantly is good and unpleasantly bad' (351b7-c1) from the theses 'If a man lives pleasantly to the end of his life (*ei hêdeôs bious ton bion teleutêseien*), in that case he has lived his life well (*eu an houtôs bebiôkenai*, 351b6-7)'. This thesis evokes Solon's dictum that we should refrain from attributing happiness to any man during his lifetime, for it is necessary to see the man's end. This thesis caught the imagination of the Greeks. In its light, Herodotus presents his narrative of the rule of Croesus, which dominates the first book of his *Histories*, and forms the basis for the *Histories* in their totality. Solon's dictum encapsulates the tragedy of Agamemnon in Aeschylus (*Agamemnon* 928-9); it introduces the tragedy of Deianeira and Heracles in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (1-3) and in his *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1528-30) it closes the tragedy of Oedipus; it figures prominently in Euripides' *Heraclidae* (863-6), *Andromache* (100-2), and *Troïades* (509-10).

The thesis implies the art of measurement, which the subsequent discussion of hedonism brings to the fore, and with its Solonic connotations it relativizes the very notion of the hedonism of the many, which is inferred from it.

On this basis Socrates discusses the identification of the good with pleasure by 'the people', 'the many' (*tên tôn pollôn doxan*, 353a7-8; *tous pollous*, e2), compelling the imaginary many to accept the authority of those who have knowledge, for only they, with their art of measurement, can direct them so as to choose greater pleasure in any given situation. Socrates again and again asks the imaginary 'many' whether they can point to any other end than pleasure (*ê echete ti allo telos legein*), to which they could look when they view anything as good (*eis ho apoblepontes auta agatha kaleite*, 354b7-c1; cf. 354e, 356a-c), but that they can't (*all ouch hexete*, 354e2). Even Protagoras and the other two sophists, Hippias and Prodicus, in the end find themselves identifying the good with the pleasant.

That Socrates himself does not identify the good with the pleasant is indicated by his deferring the discussion of the art of measurement 'to later' (*eis authis skepsometha*, 357b5-6). (This 'later' becomes later indeed; in *Politicus* 283d Plato reveals that the art of measurement is *basilikê technê*, the art of the king.) Having compelled the many to admit that their only end is pleasure, Socrates ascertains that 'knowledge always conquers (*kratein*) pleasure (*hêdonês*, 357c3)'. ('Conquers' is Christopher Taylor's rendering of *kratein*,

Jowett translates: 'must have the advantage over'. But *kratein* is a stronger term. It means 'to rule', 'to hold sway', 'to prevail'.) Socrates could never say 'knowledge always conquers the good'. Compare Socrates' rejection of Critias' suggestion that *sôphrosunê* would rule and preside over the knowledge of the good in the *Charmides* (*archousa tês peri to agathon epistêmês*, 174e1-2).

Motivated by Jessica's paper and the subsequent discussion, I have decided to write a paper in which I shall present Plato's outline of hedonism in the *Protagoras* in the light of the *Seventh Letter*. For in it Plato intimates that he persisted in his desire to do politics in Athens until his first departure to Syracuse, that is until he realised that 'there will be no cessation of evils for the sons of men, till either those who are pursuing a right and true philosophy receive sovereign power in the States, or those in the power in the states become true philosophers' (326a7-b4, tr. J. Harward). He thus abandoned his political ambitions only when he conceived of his ideal state (cf. *Republic* 473d-e, 592a). I thus intend to view the *Protagoras* within the framework of Plato's desire to find a place within the framework of the Athenian politics.

May I ask your help? In view of Protagoras' final self-identification with hedonism I find it significant that at the onset of his discussion with Socrates he explains his preference by what he finds to be most pleasurable. (Socrates tells him that Hippocrates, a young man of a great and wealthy family, wants to become eminent in public life, and thinks that that would most likely to happen if he were to become a pupil of his: 'consider whether you ought to talk to us about this in private, or in the presence of the company' (316c3-4). Protagoras replies: 'it is most pleasurable to me (*polu moi hêdiston estin*, 317c4), if you wish, to talk about these things in the presence of all who are here.' Translations that I have at my disposal fail to register this point. Christopher Taylor translates: 'So I much prefer, if you please ...', Jowett translates 'I should much prefer ...'

Have you come across any translation or any secondary literature in which this point is highlighted?

II.

A LETTER TO THE VICE-CHANCELLOR

Professor Andrew Hamilton
The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford
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October 19, 2001

Dear Vice-Chancellor,

In June I protested in front of Balliol against the on-going degradation of classics and classical philosophy. In the Attachment I am sending you a letter addressed to Members of the Southern Association for Ancient Philosophy. The letter is related to the SAAP recent conference held at Oxford University and it presents the degradation in concrete terms.

What is wrong with classical studies? Twenty years ago I wrote in the *Oxford Magazine*: 'The present generation of classicists and classical philosophers has been drilled from a tender age to translate Greek into English and English into Greek, Latin into English and English into Latin. Understanding Greek, without translating it first in one's head, needs a completely different approach ... Let me emphasize that I have great respect for the expert knowledge in Greek and Latin studies which British classicists and classical philosophers possess. The mastery of grammar and extensive vocabulary which could be acquired by the old methods was indispensable for the good edition of the texts, the good commentaries, the good translations, and the reliable dictionaries which we possess. But precisely because all this has now been achieved, the only proper way to capitalize on it is to cultivate new approaches for which a direct understanding of the texts is a prerequisite.' (J. T. 'The Right to Question', *OM* No. 65, Nought Week, Hilary Term 1991)

Since then I have witnessed an accelerating decline in the subject. The SAAP meetings are supposed to bring together once a year – alternately at Oxford and Cambridge Universities – some of the best classical philosophers from Britain and from many other countries. Until last year, it was good practice to send abstracts of forthcoming papers to participants well in advance of the annual conferences. Last year's conference took place at Cambridge University, Plato's *Euthydemus* and *Timaeus* figured prominently in the programme. Having received the abstracts, I recorded my reading of these two dialogues in the original, put my reading online, and informed SAAP Members. The recordings prepared me well for discussion of the papers at the conference, and I hoped that this would inspire the participants with a desire to acquire the ability to understand the originals directly in Greek, without translating, which such recording presupposes and further enhances. Regrettably, the reaction appears to have been the opposite of what I expected. This year I received no abstracts, only a Programme. The paper announced in the Programme as 'The orthos logos in Plato's *Laws*' was in fact on 'Hedonism and the Divided Soul in Plato's *Protagoras*'. The attached letter to SAAP Members reflects on the discussion that followed the *Protagoras* paper. If the present generation of established classical philosophers finds it onerous to face a confrontation with the text of Plato's *Protagoras*, is it not deplorable?

A week after returning from the SAAP conference I read an article by Rebecca Cann, the head of classics at the West London Free School, entitled 'Ancient languages aren't the preserve of the private sector' (*TES Magazine*, Sept. 23, 2011), in which she writes:

'There are many comprehensives in which Latin, classical Greek, ancient history and classical civilisation are taught by passionate and committed teachers ... the literature, politics,

history and culture of the Greeks and Romans are endlessly fascinating ... all young people should be able to access these subjects.'

Can Rebecca Cann promise her students that they become as good in the subject as SAAP Members who attended this year's conference? And even if they do, what prospect is it? Is it worth striving for?

Will the prospective students of Greek and Latin be ever told by their teachers that it is possible to understand the Greek and the Latin originals directly, without translating them in one's head into English? Will they ever learn that if they acquire this ability they will be able to enjoy the giants of Greek literature and philosophy as fully as only the reading of their works in the original makes possible? On my website www.juliustomin.org they could find a number of Plato's dialogues and his Seventh Letter, a pamphlet of Isocrates and Alcidamas, and two epistles of St. Paul read aloud in Greek, which demonstrate that this can be done. But although these texts have been on my website for more than a year, I find not a single classicists' website linked to my website. How can this be explained? The problem is that one can benefit from listening to Greek originals only if one had acquired the prerequisite capacity of understanding Greek directly in Greek, but the way the Greek and Latin had been taught does not facilitate the acquisition of that ability. Does this mean that classical studies are incapable of reforming? Is there no hope?

In order to acquire the prerequisite ability to understand Greek directly in Greek, students must themselves read Greek texts aloud, record their readings, listen to their own recordings, and watch for their mistakes. Such work requires proper stimulation. Would you consider announcing an annual prize for the best reading of one of Plato's dialogues, say the *Apology*? If the prize properly reflected the amount of effort that such a task would involve, and if it had the full support of Oxford University, it might bring about the required change in the approach to Greek texts.

Allow me an explanation concerning the recordings on my website, to which I have not added anything new for more than a year, which might put in doubt my assertion that these recordings are profoundly enriching my own life. The following recordings are on my computer and not yet online: Plato's *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Ion*, *Menexenus*, *Symposium*, and *Theaetetus*; Xenophon's *Convivium*, Aristophanes' *Knights* and *Clouds*; Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Alpha, Alpha elatton, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, and Zeta. At present I am recording Plato's *Republic*.

Let me bring to your attention 'Plato's *Phaedrus* in Prague and in Oxford' on my website, especially the 3rd chapter 'Plato, Isocrates, and Alcidamas in dispute on philosophy and rhetoric'. The currently dominant late dating of the *Phaedrus* stands and falls with the dating of the *Phaedrus* after Isocrates' *Against the Sophists* and Alcidamas' *On Sophists*. In this chapter I have shown that the dating of Isocrates' and Alcidamas' essays prior to the *Phaedrus* resulted in the distortion of these texts, and of the corresponding distortion of the

Phaedrus, the originality of which is thus compromised. The correction of these distortions makes the dating of the *Phaedrus* prior to Isocrates' *Against the Sophists* and Alcidamas' *On Sophists* imperative, which means that Plato must be rethought. I began to tackle this task in *The Lost Plato*, which you can find on my website, but it should be a task in which all those who study, interpret, and teach Plato ought to be involved.

The Lost Plato developed over the years, and each further dialogue which I have attempted to set and interpret in the chronological sequence of dialogues as it was slowly emerging in front of my eyes sheds new light on the preceding dialogues. The whole text therefore calls for a revision. The best way to do so would be on the basis of presenting the fourteen chapters written so far to students and academics. I propose to do so at Oxford University. Since the task of rethinking Plato requires close attention to Plato's texts in the original, this undertaking could lead to a revolution in the approach to Greek texts, which I have been advocating for more than thirty years.

But would it be worth the trouble? What might be the gain for those who would participate in this project? Let me refer to the recent words of Michael Gove, the education secretary: 'It is literally the case that learning languages makes you smarter. The neural networks in the brain strengthen as a result of language learning.' – Ancient Greek can confer this physiological advantage to the learner, but furthermore can enrich the human mind in a very special way, for it gave birth to Homer and Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, Aristophanes, Herodotus and Thucydides, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, and each of these giants enriched it in their turn.

I hope you will tell me what you think of my proposals and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

With best wishes,

Julius Tomin