

The Case of the Athenian Stranger: Philosophy and World Citizenship

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Philosophy began where it did, no doubt, because of a couple of national characteristics of the Greeks: they were curious, and they liked to talk. "All the Athenians and the strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing," comments the narrator of the Acts of the Apostles, setting St. Paul up to exploit Greek modesty about knowledge of the Gods in favor of his own immodest conviction. And not only did the Athenians like to talk about new things and new ideas, they turned talk itself into a social form. Some of the highest manifestations of this form, in which it is raised to the level of art, are to be found in the dialogues of Plato, where "the argument" appears as a constructed object to be passed from speaker to speaker, each treating it with respect, according to rule, and required to contribute something to it.

When American students learn philosophy in this tradition, they step automatically across their own national boundaries into another society and another epoch. This is not always made clear, since we often tend to assume our right to beliefs and habits that have their roots elsewhere without too much curiosity about those roots, like the preacher who is alleged to have said, "If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it's good enough for me." Comfortably ensconced in the "Judaean-Christian tradition" (a label whose omission of any reference to the Greeks says something about the continuing opposition between belief and reason), we give little thought to "international" questions involving the subsequent histories of Jerusalem or Rome or even Wittenberg. I will come back to this. But to stay with the Greeks for a moment: remembering that Athens was the first home of philosophy, it may strike us as significant that the chief interlocutor in Plato's last major dialogue, the *Laws*, should be an Athenian stranger. The action of the dialogue takes place in Crete, it is true, so

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it might just be that the Athenian is a foreigner there. But we must give Plato credit for the multiple significances of his text, and the conjunction of the two terms is suggestive in a deeper way than that. One defensible reading of it, I think, is as meaning that the philosopher must be a stranger, even in Athens.

The reason for this is clear enough: truth and rightness—to the clear understanding (if not to the practice) of which philosophy is committed before everything else, even if it turns out to be finally unreachable—cannot be exclusively or specifically Athenian virtues, nor can they belong to any particular culture or outlook. It must be possible to ask, even of Athenian beliefs, whether they are true, and even of Athenian policies whether they are right. This is a form of what has been called the open-question argument. And note that it will particularly be Athenian beliefs and policies that the Athenian philosopher will challenge; the Athenian who criticized only Sparta would be suspect, not because it might not be the case that Athenian institutions were genuinely better than Spartan ones, but because philosophical criticism, like charity, begins at home, and in an imperfect world there is always work to be done there.

This doesn't exempt Sparta from Athenian criticism, although it should be said that such criticism could only be brought to bear by Athenians thoroughly familiar with Spartan institutions *from a Spartan point of view*. But the right strategy for Athenian philosophers who want to improve matters in Sparta might rather be to give encouragement and support to *Spartan* philosophers, who, although they may in fact be suppressed by the Spartan authorities, will have a better chance of being heard in Sparta in the long run. And meanwhile the Athenian who is too self-congratulatory about Athens, especially to the Athenian authorities, will strike us as self-serving, as Rousseau does, for example, when he says "Heureux, toutes les fois que je médite sur les Gouvernements, de trouver toujours dans mes recherches de nouvelles raisons d'aimer celui de mon pays!" [happy, every time that I meditate on governments, to find always in my researches new reasons to love that of my country!]¹

All this talk about Athens and Sparta (not to mention Geneva) could of course easily be translated into contemporary terms, referring to the United States and the Soviet Union, and the lesson of our example must already be clear enough. American philosophers ought, it seems to me, be critically attentive to American beliefs and policies. It is far more important, in the first instance, to teach the methods of such critical attention than to show the superiority of democracy to communism or of capitalism to Marxism. Not, again, because that exempts the Soviet Union from American criticism, but if that criticism is to become part of the curriculum, it will have to be on the basis of close reading of Marxist and Soviet writings. And, similarly, the way to help benighted Russians (or Frenchmen or whomever—I have dealt elsewhere with the notorious problem of the split between Anglo-Saxon and "continental"

philosophy, but it is still with us)² to become better philosophical critics is to make friends with Russian (French, etc.) philosophers and discuss philosophy with them, not just to tell one another how benighted they are. Just meeting a live philosopher from another part of the world and another tradition can do wonders for students' international awareness, even if it does reinforce their sense of privilege at the freedom and rigor of the philosophical argumentation they are used to (even, indeed, if it only awakens this sense).

I do not wish to deny that there are many philosophical tasks—in logic, metaphysics, the philosophy of science, even ethics and social philosophy—that are quite independent of this sort of international awareness. I speak of one responsibility among others, though it is one that I believe every philosophy department should assume. But if part of the philosopher's job is to bring critical attention to bear on the beliefs and policies of his or her own society, then he or she must be prepared to take a standpoint outside that society, to be, in other words, a stranger in it. And a responsible carrying out of the job will imply the availability of one or both of the following: a thorough knowledge of the beliefs and policies of other societies, actual or ideal, and/or a set of standards independent of and as it were higher or more authoritative than the standards of any particular society. The first desideratum will encourage comparative studies, an exposure to views and systems other than those the scholar (or, as I might as well say from now on, the student) has grown up with. The case is similar to the case for foreign languages: nobody who knows only one language can see that language from the outside, as it were, or can appreciate how thought is a prisoner to it, how its apparently most straightforward expressions are loaded with metaphors; just learning how to order dinner in French won't do much to relieve the parochialism of the monolingual, but it is a step in the right direction nevertheless—in the direction, that is, of a realization that there is a whole set of alternative schemes of expression. This realization induces modesty about the scope of one's own conceptual grasp of things, the exactitude of available meanings in the mother tongue. There is philosophical parochialism, too, which needs to be overcome by a similar exposure to alternatives (although it is to be noted that learning a second language does not necessarily mean that one stops speaking the first one).

It might be argued that the sort of exposure that is at issue here is not a matter for philosophy, that it is taken care of by courses in history and Western civilization and international relations, not to mention foreign and comparative literatures. All that is splendid, but it does not relieve philosophy of its special task. Other societies don't just exist but are and have been articulate about their own philosophical principles—and indeed the United States itself has been more explicit than most, as witness the writings of the eighteenth-century founders. So students might read, for material preparatory to reflection on their

own society, not only Locke, Montesquieu, and the other precursors (along with Jefferson and the *Federalist* papers), but also More, Campanella, Swift, Butler, Morris, and Orwell among others, and not only Marx but also Lenin—and even, as far as that goes, Hitler himself and other racists and totalitarians who have used the forms if not the standards of rational argument. It is in other words reasonable for students of political and moral philosophy to know how other societies have behaved and misbehaved, how they have been governed well or badly, and how they or their leaders have rationalized or justified such government and behavior, as a comparative and empirical basis for their own analyses.

These analyses need to be pursued beyond the comparative stage, for having varied *objects* of criticism does not necessarily clarify the *principles* of criticism. This is where the second desideratum comes into play: finding a perspective independent of any society or culture (or for that matter language) from which to analyze and criticize social and cultural forms. This, it will be said, is just a special aspect of the task of philosophy in general, which is to do the same for all forms of thought, not just social and cultural but logical, epistemological, metaphysical, and the rest. And there is nothing wrong with that remark if it is taken seriously. For it has become commonplace to allege that we are all captives of the language and the conceptual structure we speak and employ in our everyday dealings, so that success in this general task would mean liberation from that captivity, and hence again a kind of alienation from the linguistic and conceptual habits of our own society or nation. Of course the idea that a conscious understanding of ourselves involves alienation is by now classical, at any rate in its Hegelian form—and Hegel is certainly one of the philosophers students ought to read in their search for analytic tools for the understanding of their own society, along with Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and other political philosophers (up to and including Rawls and Nozick), less tied than some of the apologists, polemicists, and Utopians to the virtues and defects of particular systems.

There is something that Hegel did not do, but that Plato did, which puts this set of considerations potentially at least on the level of what might be called internationalism or world citizenship rather than on the level of abstract theory. Hegel tied his system to the historical emergence of Spirit, which manifested itself in individual nation-states; for the individual *person* there was no higher duty than allegiance to his or her own state, no question of an international or transnational attachment. Despairing of the emergence of any actual state, Plato could not consider even Athens (or perhaps, after the death of Socrates, especially not Athens) as the collective embodiment of reason, and he concluded that the only thing for the individual to do was to become a citizen of an ideal state—ideal in the strong sense, in that it could exist only as an idea,

perhaps never as a reality. There is a striking passage in Book IX of the *Republic* in which Glaucon suddenly catches on to this. Socrates has pointed out that the right thing for the "man of understanding" is to acquire goods and power only on condition that they do not "unsettle the constitution set up in his soul," on which Glaucon observes:

Then, if that is his chief concern, he will have no wish to take part in politics.

Indeed he will, in the politics of his own commonwealth, though not perhaps in those of his country, unless some miraculous chance should come about.

I understand, said Glaucon: you mean this commonwealth we have been founding in the realm of discourse; for I think it nowhere exists on earth.

No, I replied; but perhaps there is a pattern set up in the heavens for one who desires to see it and, seeing it, to found one in himself. But whether it exists anywhere or ever will exist is no matter; for this is the only commonwealth in whose politics he can ever take part.³

I want to conclude by asking whether there is any sense in which Plato's recommendation is reasonable for contemporary students of philosophy, and if so whether it might correspond to a valid "international" component of philosophical instruction.

In recent philosophical and political discourse, the term "international" evokes powerfully the several Internationals to whose deliberations Marx contributed in the nineteenth century. For him the proletariat was the genuinely international class, since the very idea of a national state involved the dominance of a property-owning bourgeoisie that required power to protect its interest. The "international" therefore was *against* anything national (which explains among other things why international interests have often been construed as anti-American). We would be more inclined to think that international interests should be able to transcend and criticize without destroying the national communities and characters that severally exist in the world. And for this something like Plato's strategy is still appropriate.

The *Republic* obviously made possible a conception of the rational life for human beings to which individuals could subscribe and which they could strive to realize, independent of any other individual characteristics. In this respect, Stoicism, whose chief exponents were an emperor and a slave, was a true if partial heir of Platonism. A possible consequence of this conception was, equally obviously, a new community of citizens of the "commonwealth in the realm of discourse," who would recognize one another precisely *through* discourse and who might as it were constitute a rational leaven diffused through the agglomeration of states, each impelled and governed by more or less irrational considerations, that made up the known world. It was something of a tragedy for the West that this conception had no secular realization in antiquity but was

taken up by St. Augustine in the service of Christianity and turned by him into the City of God, whose principles of citizenship and whose potential for transnational realization (although not international, since nations were automatically to come under other-worldly judgment) were just those expressed and foreshadowed by Plato.

We ought not, however, allow the appropriation of good ideas by vested interests to discourage us from trying to realize them correctly. What would it mean, now, for individuals to live according to a revised version of the *Republic*, taking into account what has been learned about psychology, economics, etc., in the intervening 2500 years? What sort of transnational community might this make possible? Not a church, certainly; and not a United Nations at the government level, since we are talking about individuals and not governments. The individuals in question—and this is where the teaching of philosophy comes in, since its function on the Platonic model is precisely to produce them—would have to think not only of education and national government and poetry and the rights of women but also of world resources and class conflicts and terrorism and the risk of nuclear annihilation. They would need to confront the question of history—which could hardly exist for the *first* full civilization—and of the nature of civilization itself, now that it has spread from the cities, in which it originated, into the remotest corners of the globe. They would need to realize that their countries, as Plato uses the term, really co-exist in a real world which they jointly exhaust, so that there can be no question of colonization (the conceptual context of much Greek speculation about ideal states) nor even of retreat behind secure borders out of reach of the economic or ecological influence of other countries. They would further need to understand that the histories of particular countries, within the context of the extension of the works if not always the spirit of civilization, have been determined to an unpredictable degree by ideological commitments and conflicts, the roots of which lie largely in prejudice and unreason—a judgment to be brought where necessary against one's own fellows, ancestors, and traditions, but which can only be brought in the light of an actual acquaintance with the histories in question.

Most of this goes well beyond anything that Plato could have had in mind and argues against the detachment—though not the alienation—that he recommends for the man of understanding. There is, however, no inconsistency here. For the continued existence of philosophy in Plato's sense now depends on at least a standoff, if not a permanent accommodation or agreement, between countries having different ideological histories and traditions, which can no longer be treated calmly as possible enemies in war after the manner of Book V of the *Republic*. Since it seems unlikely that the ideal of that Book, of "rulers ... sufficiently inspired with a genuine desire for wisdom," will ever be generally realized, it will be up to the philosophers of each country to join with others—for

the profession has no corner on wisdom—to try to rectify the deficiency. (I have suggested elsewhere how I think they should go about it.⁴) Here, however, we are concerned with the international rather than the national aspect of the problem, and the obvious recommendation to emerge from the foregoing is that philosophers (and their students) should come quite deliberately to think of themselves as members of a community—not to say citizens of another Republic—whose principles of membership transcend national and ideological considerations, consisting rather in a commitment to wisdom in social and political practice or, in other words, to philosophy itself in its practical (and not only in its contemplative) mode.

An obvious objection, among those that will immediately spring to mind, is that this looks like a call for a dogmatic conception of what philosophy is, for a metaphilosophical closure that would have totalitarian implications and would tend to put philosophy at the service of the most powerful ideology. However, it seems to me possible for philosophers from different traditions to agree, not on the content of metaphysical (let alone ideological) doctrines, but on the necessity of criteria for the judgment of such doctrines and on the need for philosophical openness.⁵ Many years of involvement with international activities in the profession have convinced me that even in Sparta (if I may summarize many particulars under a return to this metaphor) there are today numbers of philosophers whose language and methods and whose conception of rigor in argument are not so far removed from our own and whose interest in the sane behavior of their governments may be more urgent and sometimes more effective, in spite of repression, than the corresponding interest on our part. (We don't, collectively, take this very seriously, and that is a professional defect.) These are people it would be worth meeting and talking to, not just at an occasional international congress, or when they happen to come on official missions, but by repeated private (but perhaps collective and organized) visits and by regular correspondence, and not just to find out how things are done elsewhere but to inquire how they might be done together. To do this might require actually learning their languages, but that would be all to the good. (We might at least begin by putting substance into the language requirements for the Ph.D., perhaps by adding to the graduate curriculum reading courses using journals from other countries.)

In a way it is too bad that everyone doesn't still speak Latin. In a way I am recommending a return, not to a universal language but to a universal mode of discourse, to philosophy itself, as a possible basis for the kind of internationalism that, in an earlier and simpler age, the conduct of intellectual affairs in Latin used to represent. The stakes are higher now. It would be worth an effort on the part of the profession (and its association) to realize its international potential, even if that means a more deliberate adoption of the stranger's role.

The Latinate scholar may not always have felt at ease in the vernacular, but the compensation was access to the whole world of scholarship. Similarly for the philosopher: potentially at least, to be a stranger in Athens is to be at home in the universe.

Notes

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 3, Paris: NRF/Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1964, p. 351.

² Sartre, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, pp. 5–6.

³ Plato, *The Republic*, tr. Francis Macdonald Cornford, London: Oxford UP, 1941, pp. 319–20.

⁴ "Reform and Revolution," in Virginia Held and Charles Parsons, ed., *Philosophy and Political Action*, New York: Oxford UP, 1970, pp. 72–104.

⁵ See my "Address to the Closing Plenary Session," *Acts of the 17th World Congress of Philosophy*, Varna, Bulgaria, 1973, pp. 847–50.