

GRAMSCI AND ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY: PRELUDE TO A STUDY

Phillip Sidney Horky (Durham University)

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Abstract:

This chapter investigates the precise ways in which Antonio Gramsci engaged with ancient philosophy. A brief examination of the longest discussion in the *Prison Notebooks* of any ancient philosopher or text, Plato's *Republic* (Q8, §22), raises many questions about Gramsci's approach to ancient philosophy. These questions motivate an investigation into Gramsci's surprisingly minimal discussion of ancient philosophy and philosophers, which is best explained in the light of his theoretical commitments to his distinctive species of historical materialism. Rather than responding to specific critical insights advanced about politics or human nature by ancient philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, Gramsci is shown to appropriate ancient philosophy into a broad-spectrum project of the history of philosophy, which interrogates the specific conditions under which historical epochs and the philosophical ideas that characterise them emerge. Tracking the conditions and characteristic ideas is revealed to be the project of the 'specialist philosopher', who must grasp both general methodological principles and particular historical examples. Gramsci's treatment of ancient philosophy reveals more about his universal theories of history, and his engagement with the ideas of his contemporaries (including Benedetto Croce), than a special concern with ancient philosophy itself.
191 words

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Introduction

In his longest and most sustained engagement with any ancient philosopher in the *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci selects that all-encompassing monolith of Plato, *Republic*, for interrogation. But Gramsci's treatment of Plato's magisterial 10-book magnum opus would appear to raise questions with each proposition it advances:

When it is said that Plato dreamed up a 'republic of philosophers', we must understand the term philosophers, which today would be translated with 'intellectuals', 'historically'. Naturally, Plato meant 'the great intellectuals' who, however, were the type of intellectual of his own time, besides affording importance to the specific content of the intellectuality – which could be concretely said to be of

‘religiosity,’ i.e. the intellectuals of the government were those particular intellectuals closer to religion, i.e. whose activity had a religious character, conceived according to general meaning at that time, and according to the specific meaning of Plato. Hence, it is a ‘social’ activity in a certain sense, an activity of elevation and education (and intellectual direction – and therefore with the function of hegemony) of the polis. Hence, it could perhaps be argued that the ‘utopia’ of Plato is a precursor to medieval feudalism, whereby its function which is peculiar to the Church and to the ecclesiastics, an intellectual category of that phase of social-historical development. Plato’s disregard for the ‘artists’ is to be understood therefore as a disregard for ‘individualistic’ spiritual activities which are directed to the ‘particular’, and therefore to the ‘areligious’ and ‘asocial’.

(Q8, §22)¹

This is an obscure and difficult passage which should be front and centre for any analysis of Gramsci’s take on ancient philosophy; and yet it has tended to receive minimal treatment in the major studies on Gramsci and antiquity.² Perhaps this is due to the difficulty of interpreting the passage, of unpacking the complex dialectic Gramsci pursues here. Some aspects are clear: Gramsci seeks to discuss Plato’s *Republic* ‘historically’, by translating its philosophers into ‘intellectuals’.³ What exactly is that supposed to mean? Plato’s ‘intellectuals’ have their signature activity directed towards ‘religiosity’, but what exactly is meant by ‘religiosity’? Does this have something to do with what Gramsci means by ‘intellectuals’? Gramsci calls the activity of the philosopher-intellectuals ‘social’, which implies that it plays a role in ‘hegemony’; what is ‘hegemony’, and how did we get there from the ‘religiosity’ of the philosopher-intellectuals? And

¹ All translations are my own, but they are informed where possible by Hoare and Smith’s seminal English translation (1971), and in the selections found in Forgas, 2000. Citations are from the authoritative edition of Gerratana (1975).

² Fonzo (2019, pp. 19) connects the passage to observations made by Cornelio Di Marzo on Plato’s *Republic* concerning the status of the artist in Plato’s work and makes general points about Plato’s theory of the statesman. The passage is not mentioned in two important articles on Gramsci and ancient intellectuals by Benedetto Fontana (2000 and 2005), about which I will have something to say below.

³ Note that Gramsci does not consider the contents of Plato’s *Republic* to refer to the views of Socrates, its authoritative interlocutor.

what, if anything, do feudalism and the middle ages have to do with Plato's *Republic*? Does Gramsci have a didactic aim, e.g. to elucidate Plato's *Republic* for our own understanding (he does refer to Plato's 'specific meaning' of 'religious character', as contrasted with the 'general meaning at that time')? Or is the treatment chiefly appropriative, situating Plato's *Republic*, like so many other works of important philosophers, in a historical dialectic that responds to the social-historical context of its production? Or is it something in between? And finally, is it necessary to draw on Plato's *Republic* particularly in order to advance such claims as Gramsci asserts?

These questions confront any scholar who wishes to determine, with any gram of confidence, Gramsci's relationship not just to Plato, but more generally to philosophy in the ancient world. If anyone were to pursue this goal, she would find herself faced with a strikingly *small* number of citations, references, or oblique allusions in his surviving works.⁴ To give one such example, consider this passage, which cites Plato alongside Aristotle – the only such occurrence, to my knowledge, in Gramsci's surviving works from *the Prison Notebooks*:

It is worth noting, however, that if the Pope and the leading hierarchy of the Church consider themselves more linked to Christ and to the apostles than they are to senators Agnelli and Benni, the same does not hold for Gentile and Croce, for example: Croce, in particular, feels himself strongly linked to Aristotle and Plato, but

⁴ In Gramsci's own works, mentions of the most important ancient philosophers for Gramsci's education, Plato and Aristotle, occur in these passages: **Plato** (Q3, §75, quoting Lando; Q3, §135, quoting Missiroli; Q8, §22, a somewhat extended dialectic with Plato's *Republic*, discussed below; Q11, §26, on Platonic ideas and laws; Q12, §1.2, on Croce, discussed above; Q17, §18, quoting Jodl; Q25, §7, quoting Doni); **Aristotle** (Q1, §148, on Loria; Q4, §49, on Croce and Aristotle; Q5, §23, quoting Hu Shi's history of Chinese philosophy; Q7, §1, quoting Missiroli; Q8, §186, on 'popular wisdom' as being Aristotelian; Q10, §28.1, on the place of 'Aristotelian-Thomistic' philosophy in the Church; Q10, §41, quoting Missiroli; Q10, §46, on Greco-Christian realism and Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy; Q10, §48.1, on the authority of the Bible and Aristotle in the 16th and 17th centuries; Q11 §14, on 'popular wisdom' as being Aristotelian; Q11 §20, on the marriage of Catholicism and Aristotle; Q11, §22, on the expulsion of biblical and Aristotelian authority in the scientific revolution; Q12, §1.2, discussed above; Q13, §37, associating Thomistic with Aristotelian philosophy; Q14, §15, associating Aristotelians with Catholics and Thomists; Q28, §14, quoting Aristotle's *Politics* VII.11, 1330b19-20, to criticise Loria). Only the very last reference mentioned shows conclusively that Gramsci had access to any original text of Aristotle or Plato, but, as Gerratana notes (vol. IV, p. 2536), Gramsci probably found it in E. Ruta's *Politica e ideologia*, vol. 2 (Milan, 1929). As Fonzo notes (2019: 120), **Socrates** is only referred to once (Q1484), as is **Zeno** of Citium (Q1455). It is difficult to know whether Gramsci had access to any ancient philosophical texts beyond Plato's *Republic*, and that in translation (see n. 9).

he does not conceal, on the other hand, being linked to senators Agnelli and Benni, and it is precisely here that one can discern the most significant character of Croce's philosophy.

(Q12, §1.2)

It would appear that Plato and Aristotle are chiefly being brought in here to elucidate a comparison being drawn between the Pope and the high ministers of the Catholic Church, on the one hand, and Croce, on the other.⁵ Beyond their obvious importance to Croce's philosophy, it is not clear what special significance Plato and Aristotle, or any other ancient philosophers, held for Gramsci or the construction of his own philosophical views.⁶ And yet, if anyone were to examine two major articles devoted to investigating Gramsci's debt to ancient philosophy by the celebrated Gramscist and political theorist Benedetto Fontana, she would read that a plethora of key terms in Gramsci's thought – including the principle of hegemony, the concept of the intellectual, the notion of the democratic philosopher, the correlative of the ethical and the educational, the dichotomy between state and civil society, and the crucial mechanism of consent – *all* have (at some level) their origins in the ancient world, and in ancient conceptual paradigms.⁷ Hence, the historian of ancient philosophy, who would also be a student of Antonio Gramsci, finds herself in an intellectual quandary: how could Gramsci have been so deeply influenced by ancient philosophy, as Fontana would have us believe, and to have written so little about it?

As I will argue, in order to pursue a response to this question, one would need to examine carefully how Gramsci approaches the problem of historical dialectic with previous philosophical figures: that would include not only Plato and Aristotle, already mentioned, but also, and more importantly (to my mind), the figures through whom it would appear these

⁵ Frosini (2003, pp. 185-6) sees this passage as elucidating the relationship between 'intellettuali organici e intellettuali tradizionali'.

⁶ Note that, in a major analysis of Gramsci's own philosophy (Frosini 2003, a monograph of 198 pages), Plato and Aristotle only appear on three pages.

⁷ Especially in two articles: 2000 and 2005.

ancient thinkers were translated to Gramsci, chiefly Benedetto Croce.⁸ A few hypotheses regarding the scattered references to the ancients, which are often programmatic or feature simply in quotations of other figures, could be advanced here: either Gramsci did not know ancient philosophical texts at any level of detail, or, while he was in prison, he only had access to them via intermediaries or through mere personal recollection.⁹ Or – and this is the alternative argument I wish to advance – Gramsci’s scanty treatment of ancient philosophy and ancient philosophers is best seen as a reflection of his own philosophical-historical commitments. The situation as it presents itself in Gramsci’s surviving works demands that we approach the surviving material with an attentiveness to his own ideas about historiographical method and the place of the history of thought, conceived both universally and particularly, in his philosophical-political system. Hence, I will approach the aforementioned quandary in this way: first, I will seek to situate the role of the history of philosophy, generally understood, in Gramsci’s peculiar declension of historical materialism, and the correlative relationship between historical materialism and philosophy itself; and secondly, I will attempt to analyse the particular significance of ancient philosophy and philosophers to his universal approach to historical materialism. My goal will be to approach Gramsci’s relationship to ancient philosophy not, as Fontana would have it, as a series of parallel reflections that, when brought into proximity, suggest possibilities for Gramsci’s inheritance of ancient thought; instead, I aim to show that Gramsci’s reports about ancient philosophy reflect a more general or universal approach to historical dialectic, in which ancient philosophy does not play a special role.¹⁰

⁸ One could add Hegel, Marx, and Engels to this list, although it is not typical of Gramsci to cite these figures in relation to the ancients. On Croce, Gramsci, and the relations between ‘absolute’ history and philosophy, see Thomas 2009, pp. 278-94.

⁹ See the list of references to ancient philosophers collated at n. 4. Fonzo (2019, p. 121) notes that among the books from the library of Gramsci at the Fondazione, a German translation of Plato’s *Republic* is to be found.

¹⁰ Hence, with the exceptions of the passages quoted, I will not aim to produce a systematic analysis of all passages referring to Plato, Aristotle, or other ancient philosophers, since that project would be to focus too much on the *particular* cases that the ancient philosophers present to Gramsci.

Gramsci on Philosophy and History

In order to first advance upon Gramsci's approach to the history of philosophy, it is necessary first to grasp Gramsci's unique formulation of the relationship between philosophy and history. He does this in a series of reflections entitled 'Introduction to the Study of Philosophy: Principles and Preliminaries':

What should be understood as philosophy, or as philosophy in a single historical epoch, and of what is the importance and the significance of the philosophy of the philosophers in each of these historical epochs. Accepting B. Croce's definition of religion as a conception of the world which has become a norm of life (since the term norm of life is understood here not in a bookish sense but as being applied in practical life), it follows that the majority of mankind are philosophers because they engage in practical activity, and in their practical activity (in the guidelines of their conduct) there is implicitly contained a conception of the world, a philosophy. The history of philosophy as it is generally understood, that is as the history of philosophies of philosophers, is the history of attempts and ideological initiatives undertaken by a specific class of people to change, correct or perfect the conceptions of the world that exist in any particular epoch and thus to change the relative norms of conduct that go with them; in other words, to change practical activity as a whole.

(Q10, §17)

This programmatic passage, which owes something both to Croce and something to Marx/Engels, presents the problem of philosophy as a problem of history.¹¹ To begin, Gramsci focuses our attention on the problem of defining philosophy, a *universal* or *general* concern, in particular *historical* terms. That is to say, the problem of philosophy as a whole is a problem of

¹¹ On Croce's influence over Gramsci in conceiving of philosophy as history and vice versa, see especially Finocchiaro 2009, 18ff.

individual instantiations of philosophy throughout history, arranged continuously across various and variegated epochs. For each epoch there exists a single philosophy, best suited to that epoch as a fitting conception of the world; this philosophy is fundamentally *practical*, in the sense that it represents the *application* of the 'norm of life' that obtains during that epoch.¹² Thus, each epoch's philosophy reflects the activity of the majority of people who live in it, and not simply the philosophy of those leading *individuals* on whose life and thought a standard biographical approach to the history of philosophy would focus. Or, as Gramsci goes onto argue:

From our perspective, studying the history and the logic of the various philosophies of the philosophers is insufficient. At least as a methodological guideline, attention should be drawn to the other parts of the history of philosophy, i.e. to the conceptions of the world of the great masses, to those of the more restricted leading (or intellectual) groups, and lastly to the relationships between these various cultural complexes and the philosophy of the philosophers. The philosophy of an epoch is *not* the philosophy of this or that philosopher, of one or another group of intellectuals, of one or another large portion of the popular masses. It is a *combination* of all these elements, culminating in a particular trend, in which the culmination becomes the norm of collective action, i.e. becomes 'history' both concrete and complete (integral).

The philosophy of a single historical epoch is therefore nothing other than the history of that same epoch, nothing other than the mass of variations that the leading group has succeeded in imposing on the reality that came before. History and philosophy are indivisible in this sense: they form a 'bloc'. But the philosophical elements proper can be 'differentiated', in all their various levels: as philosophy of the philosophers, as conceptions of the leading groups (philosophical

¹² The status of 'religion' as such, formulated here in Croce's terms, is not especially to the point here. On 'religion' and its role in Gramsci's philosophy, see especially Frosini, 2010.

culture), and as religions of the great masses. And it can be seen how, at every single level, we are dealing with different forms of ideological 'combination'.

(Q10, §17)

This section of helps to explain why Gramsci established the various terms mentioned above. To begin, the study of philosophy as it is generally practiced, i.e. the study of the history of individual philosophers and of philosophical logic (what Gramsci calls the 'philosophy of philosophers'), is rendered insufficient because it fails to convey a complete philosophy.

Gramsci is not here clear about the history of individual philosophers or their logic – they would appear to play some role in pursuit of complete philosophy, but it is not clear on the basis of this passage alone what specific function they have. A complete philosophy would take into account not only these elements, but also their actualization of their concepts in the real world: not only the conceptions of the so-called 'leading' or 'intellectual groups', but also the 'religions of the great masses', understood as woven together through cultural complexes which, when combined, culminate in a distinctive idiomatic trend that becomes the 'norm of action' and characterizes the historical epoch.¹³ Thus conceptualized, 'history' and philosophy cannot be separated out, and Gramsci advocates what Croce would refer to as 'absolute historicism', although the versions of Croce and Gramsci are not exactly the same.¹⁴ For Gramsci, the philosophical elements that make up 'history' can be disambiguated according to *ideological* levels, each of which features its distinctive set of combinations that constitute it: (a) the 'philosophy of the philosophers', which would appear to be constituted of the history of exemplary individual philosophers and their actions, and of logic; (b) 'philosophical culture', or

¹³ Frosini (2010, pp. 264-5) discusses the unity of theory and praxis in the context of Gramsci's notion of 'religion'.

¹⁴ Thomas (2009, pp. 267-73) outlines their relative approaches to absolute historicism and describes Gramsci's central objection to Croce: 'Gramsci is here criticising Croce for the same failing that Croce had argued fundamentally disabled both Hegel's and Marx's thought: the determination of the finite by the infinitude that precedes and stands over it. Croce's frenetic flight from (Hegelian) metaphysics had been merely an exercise in rhetorical prodigality; unbeknownst to him...he had always already affirmed a fundamentally metaphysical structure of thought, even and especially when he thought to negate it.' For the relations between Gramsci and Marx on the topic of the philosophy of praxis, also see Vacca (2016, pp. 362-5).

the conceptions of the so-called 'leading' or 'intellectual groups'; and (c) the 'religions of the masses'.

History of Philosophy as a Philosophy of Praxis

Gramsci's approach to philosophy, then, assumes that philosophy, considered as the sum total of philosophical systems advanced by these three social groups in any particular epoch, is always ideologically embedded.¹⁵ In this way, Gramsci's approach to the 'philosophy of praxis' reveals a significant inheritance from Marx and especially Engels.¹⁶ For Gramsci, the history of philosophy is a history of ideological statement, in the most active and applied sense of that term: as he says later on, the history of philosophy, properly conceived, is not simply a series of 'individual expressions' whose historical content is 'often minimal and drowned in a complex of abstractions whose origins are purely rational and abstract.'¹⁷ Why approach the history of philosophy in such a way? According to Gramsci, this approach avoids the two dangers that are present to standard histories of philosophy: solipsism, which is the natural conclusion of transcendentalist philosophies such as those of Hegel¹⁸; and deterministic/mechanistic conceptions, which, in Gramsci's estimation, characterize all philosophy prior to classical German philosophy – perhaps including Greek philosophy (although he is not explicit about this).¹⁹ The philosophy of Hegel is valuable insofar as it reflects what Gramsci calls 'creative' philosophy, or the philosophy that is rooted in the active 'will' of the philosopher, rather than in the philosopher's capacity to be merely 'receptive' to what the world presents mechanically – or, to put it another way, classical German philosophers demonstrate their 'creativity' by exercising their individual wills upon the masses, rather than being mere hermeneuts or investigators of the world around them. But while classical German philosophy was able to

¹⁵ Also see Q11, §62.

¹⁶ Cf. Thomas, 2009, pp. 18-22.

¹⁷ Q7, §45.

¹⁸ Inter alia, see Q11, §44. Cf. Morton, 2005.

¹⁹ Q11, §12.

impress itself upon the many, and hence to present an individual society's 'expression', it was not, in Gramsci's estimation, sufficiently historical, in the special sense of reflecting the 'practical efficacy' that should typify its reaction to this expression. Or, as Gramsci says in a note entitled 'When is it Possible to Say that a Philosophy has an Historical Importance?':

It is possible to say that the historical value of a philosophy can be 'calculated' from the 'practical' efficacy it has acquired for itself ('practical' is to be understood in a broad sense). If it is true that every philosophy is the expression of a society, it should motivate a reaction in that society and produce certain effects, both positive and negative. The extent to which precisely it motivates a reaction is the measure of its historical importance, of its not being individual 'elucubration' but 'historical fact'.

(Q7, §45)

Hence, we see that the value of individual philosophies, understood as expressions of a society at a particular moment in time and place, is to be judged based on the effects it has on that society: a philosophy which fails to motivate a reaction in that society is simply the expression of an individual's 'elucubration' – merely metaphysical musings scribbled down in the personal diary, the consequence of late-night insomnia.

It is by appeal to the 'historical value' of a philosophy that Gramsci advances not only a philosophy of praxis – the kind of applied philosophy that both reflects classical German 'creativity' and provokes visible reactions in society²⁰ – but also a new conceptualization of the philosopher himself. For Gramsci's 'technical' philosopher is, as we will see, the ultimate *historian of thought*: he is someone who will understand, and be able to account for, how specific ideologies function as 'organic' superstructures in certain regimes, placed in certain locations and historical epochs. Gramsci's 'technical' philosopher is able to think with greater

²⁰ I take no position on whether by 'philosophy of praxis' Gramsci was referring specifically to Marxist philosophy (in any certain declension) or not; the identification of this relationship is effectively immaterial to my argument anyway.

precision than the lay 'philosopher', the every-man, as a consequence of his training in logic and its history.²¹ Or, as he says in a note entitled 'Introduction to the Study of Philosophy':

Accepting the principle that all men are 'philosophers', i.e., that between the professional or 'technical' philosophers and rest of mankind, the difference is not one of 'quality', but only of 'quantity' (in this case, the term 'quantity' is being used in a special sense, which is not to be confused with arithmetical sum, since what it indicates is greater or lesser degrees of 'homogeneity', 'coherence', 'logicality', etc., i.e., quantity of qualitative elements), it still remains to be seen exactly what the difference consists in. Thus, it will not be exact to call by the name of 'philosophy' every tendency of thought, every general orientation, etc., nor every 'conception of the world and of life.' The philosopher can be called a 'specialized worker' by comparison with the labourer, but this isn't exact either, since in industry, in addition to the labourer and the specialized worker there also exists the engineer, the one who not only knows the trade from the practical angle, but knows it theoretically and historically. The professional or technical philosopher does not only 'think' with greater logical rigour, with greater coherence, with more systematic sense than do other men, but he knows the entire history of thought. In other words, he knows how to account for the development of thought up to himself, and he is in a position to recover the problems from the point at which they are found, after having undergone every previous attempt at a solution, etc. In the field of thought, he has the same function that specialists have in their various scientific fields.

(Q10, §52)

Gramsci's professional or specialized philosopher is like all other men, who are also considered 'philosophers' in a special sense, because he, like they, practices what Gramsci elsewhere refers

²¹ Q11, §44, on 'The Technique of Thinking'. On Gramscian and related notions of 'technical', see Morera, 2014, pp. 58-63.

to as 'spontaneous philosophy'. 'Spontaneous philosophy' implies that each man has the capacity to employ language (conceived of as the totality of notions and concepts determined within a grammatical structure) to individual and collective political action.²² It is a crucial point of Gramsci's philosophy that all men have a certain rational capacity, since the capacity to communicate rationally underlies political action that has been infused with reason. The difference between the lay-philosopher and the specialist philosopher is, as he says, one of 'quantity of qualitative elements', by which Gramsci would appear to mean the degrees to which individual humans show the inclination to understand the world around them and the past according to 'homogeneity', 'coherence', 'logicality', and other fundamental philosophical principles.²³ Gramsci's commitment to a universal anthropomorphic notion of 'philosopher' does not necessarily imply hostility to this professional or specialized philosopher: what Gramsci wants to do away with is our assumption that the history of philosophy is a catalogue of great thinkers thinking interesting, but ultimately politically insignificant, thoughts – that is, the pursuit and illustration of the genius of truth that is only responsive to the class of specialized philosophers, or 'thinkers'.²⁴ The specialized philosopher as conceived of by Gramsci would be someone who not only had the entirety of the history of thought present to his consciousness, but also had the philosophical tools to understand precisely where wholes and parts are to be differentiated, under what circumstances conceptual continuities and discontinuities obtain, and when propositions follow logically, and do not.²⁵ As Gramsci says elsewhere, 'what must next be explained is how it happens that in all periods there co-exist many systems and currents of philosophical thought, how these currents are born, how they are diffused, and why in the process of diffusion they fracture along certain lines and in certain directions.'²⁶ These historical activities are prerequisites for his own applied labour, which

²² Q3, §48; Q11, §25.

²³ On the tensions implicit in this binary between specialist and lay-philosophers, see Wainwright, 2010, pp. 509-10.

²⁴ Q10, §52; Q9, §64; Q11, §44..

²⁵ On the specialist philosopher and his logic in Q10 and Q11, see now Guzzone, 2019.

²⁶ Q11, §12.

involves at least at a preliminary level the identification of problems, the understanding of the many ways in which previous specialist philosophers attempted to solve them, and the way forward, given the conditions of social organization that he faces in his own day. In these ways, the specialist philosopher is shown to be an historian of philosophy, and vice versa.

Finally, there is the problem of identifying the purpose of this specialist philosopher's labour: to what end is all of this intellectual activity, underpinned by the specialist philosopher's will and abilities, and supported by his training and education, to be directed? Gramsci elaborates this purpose in another section that falls under his analysis of 'Language, Languages, and Common Sense':

It is possible therefore to say that the historical personality of an individual philosopher is also rendered by the active relationship which exists between him and the cultural environment he would like to modify. The environment reacts back on the philosopher and imposes on him a continual process of self-criticism, in its function as 'teacher'. This is why one of the most important claims that the modern intellectual classes have made in field of politics has been that of the so-called 'freedom of thought and of the expression of thought ('freedom of the press', 'freedom of association')'. For it is only where this political condition exists that the relationship between master and disciple in the general sense referred to above is realized, and that a new type of philosopher is actually realized 'historically', one who could be called a 'democratic philosopher', i.e. a philosopher convinced that his personality is not limited to himself as a physical individual, but is an active social relationship constituted of modification of the cultural environment. When the 'thinker' is contented with his own thought, 'subjectively' free, i.e. abstractly free, he nowadays becomes a joke. The unity of science and life is precisely an active unity, in which alone liberty and thought are realized; it is a master-pupil relationship, one between the philosopher and the cultural environment in which he has to work, and

from which he can draw the necessary problems for formulation and resolution. In other words, it is the relationship between philosophy and history.

(Q10, §44)

It becomes clear from this passage that the specialist philosopher's duty is to continually challenge the very society that produced him and his thought – to realize that it is society that constantly makes the specialist philosopher to 'know himself' – notable here is the *absence* of reference to Socrates, surely in the back of Gramsci's mind²⁷ – and it is from society that he will discover the problems he should direct his intelligence towards in his labour.²⁸ It also becomes clear from this passage that the specialist philosopher will only be in a position to complete these duties in a society that allows for freedom of thought and of expression. A specialist philosopher thus positioned in such a society would thereby become a 'democratic philosopher', one whose personality extends beyond the physical limitations of his body to a broader social consciousness, mediated by his philosophical activity.²⁹

Conclusions, and a Return to Plato

From the abovementioned analysis of some major sections of Gramsci's treatment of the philosopher and his relationship to history, several conclusions can be drawn:

1. All humans are, in some general sense, 'philosophers', because they possess the basic tools of social reaction and the basic instruments for articulation and expression of this reaction (e.g. language, reason, grammar). It is not clear that these 'lay-philosophers', as I refer to them,

²⁷ Gramsci only mentions Socrates once, and unremarkably, at Q6, §172, where he is quoting from Schiavi's anthology.

²⁸ Also see Q11, §12.

²⁹ For the relationship between democracy and philosophy, also see Q10, §41; Q10, §35; Q6, §82; and especially Q7, §38, where Gramsci quotes an 'aphorism' in Latin: 'Omnis enim philosophia, cum ad communem hominum cogitandi facultatem revocet, per se democratica est; ideoque ab optimatibus non iniuria sibi existimatur perniciosa' ('For all philosophy, since it recalls the faculty of thinking, which is common among humans, is per se democratic; and for that reason it is not wrongly considered by elites dangerous to them'). The aphorism originates in Croce's *Cultura e Vita Morale*, 1914, p. 45, which he claims to have found 'in an old German undergraduate dissertation'.

are expected, or even capable, of pursuing the history of philosophy, conceived of as a history of philosophical problems related to society.

2. Some humans are fit to be specialist philosophers. They have higher capacities for the tools of philosophy, e.g. logic, metaphysics, etc., and should be properly trained in order to be able to apply their specialist skills to social problems. These specialist philosophers must not relegate their activities to theoretical philosophy, to mere metaphysics or logic-chopping, lest they become the subjects of comedy.

3. The philosophy practiced by these specialists must be pragmatic and applied, and chiefly constituted of responses to challenges faced by specific communities in specific circumstances. Hence, their philosophy must be relative in the main. Like Croce, who developed a comprehensive theory of 'absolute historicism' through a dialectic with Gramsci, Gramsci imagines the relations to be chiefly historically and politically contingent, and it is one of the responsibilities of specialist philosophers to account for the history of thought as a history of the articulation of social problems. This will help them in their project of discovering solutions to those problems of society that remind him, as a teacher does a student, that he needs to 'know himself' critically.

4. The history of philosophy requires the specialist philosopher to assemble, in any given society at a particular historical moment, the ideological characters of the philosophy of the philosophers, the conceptions of the leading groups (philosophical culture), and the religions of the great masses. This assembly requires the skills of metaphysics and logic, in order to properly differentiate between the various levels.

5. The specialist philosopher can only perform his proper labour in a society which provides freedom of thought and freedom of expression. A specialist philosopher properly situated will eventually become a new kind of philosopher, the 'democratic philosopher', whose philosophy will be a philosophy of praxis. This philosophy of praxis will be manifested in politics, through the philosopher's political action.

This study has only been able to tap into a few aspects of Antonio Gramsci's conception of philosophy and its relationship to history. There isn't space here to discuss how Gramsci realizes the aforementioned commitments in the practice of doing the history of philosophy dialectically, especially in relation to his 'nearer' contemporaries Croce, Hegel, Marx, Vico, and other more minor figures (like Missiroli, Lando, and Loria); similarly, much remains to be said about how the specialist philosopher's labour constitutes a philosophy of praxis. After all, this is a contribution to a volume on Gramsci and antiquity. But in the light of our conclusions, we can now return to the enigmatic passage cited above, where Gramsci devotes more space to any ancient philosopher than anywhere else in the *Prison Notebooks*. We might now say that Gramsci seeks to evaluate Plato's 'republic of philosophers' in a specially 'historical' way, i.e. according to the procedures of historical materialism. So understood, Plato's philosophers are 'great intellectuals' whose intellectual activity is directed towards 'religiosity', by which Gramsci would appear to mean that it concerned itself with Croce's notion of 'religion' as a 'conception of the world which has become a norm of life' – Gramsci is referring to the educational programme of Plato's *Republic* as a programme of social change.³⁰ Insofar as Plato's philosopher act 'religiously', in the special 'intellectual' sense, their actions are not only 'social' (by raising up citizens and educating them), but they are also directed towards the hegemony that informs the polis of Callipolis. Gramsci then connects this particular understanding of the 'republic of philosophers' to the social-historical development of the Church in the middle ages, a 'utopianism' that rejects the needs of the individual (including the individual 'artist') in favour of the social good. From the perspective of a 21st-century historian of ancient philosophy, Gramsci's reading of Plato's *Republic* itself is not especially enlightening – there are all sorts of reasons to doubt that Plato's *Republic* has any firm historical relationship to medieval feudalism, and it is not particularly insightful, or even unique to Gramsci's distinctive communist thinking, to note that Plato's *Republic* features an educational programme for the State that could be

³⁰ At Q11, §26, Gramsci complains of Michels' sociological theory that it ends up 'a baroque form of Platonic idealism', in which the laws of sociology 'have a strange resemblance to Plato's pure ideas that are the essence of real earthly facts' (trans. Thomas, 2009, p. 331).

considered 'hegemonic'.³¹ Indeed, it would appear that Gramsci is not really thinking about the text of Plato's *Republic* at all; he would instead appear to be operating at quite some distance from the German translation of the *Republic* that he may have had in his possession, or engaging with someone else's ideas about Plato's political regime entirely, and perhaps reflecting upon ideas that circulated in his youth and/or education. However we might infer the intimacy of Gramsci with Plato, it emerges from this study that his engagement with Plato is not, as Fontana would have it, particularly sensitive to the nuances of ancient philosophy – or even to ancient history (conceived of as historical materialism). It would appear that there is more 'absolute' than 'history' in this example – which should not be a surprise, given Gramsci's ideas about philosophy and its relationship to history.

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³¹ A most interesting comparison obtains when we look at Karl Popper's summary of his scathing analysis of Plato's political and educational theory (1966, p. 137): 'Plato's political programme was much more institutional than personalist; he hoped to arrest political change by the institutional control of succession in leadership. The control was to be educational, based upon an authoritarian view of learning – upon the authority of the learned expert, and the 'man of proven probity'.

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