

TEXTUAL DEFERENCE

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IT is one of those unexamined commonplaces of the history of philosophy that the *commentary* enjoyed a central role in the literature of philosophy in both the classical and medieval periods. Something similar holds, too, of Confucian, Syriac, Byzantine, Jewish, Arabic, Indian, Japanese and Korean philosophy, as also of the philosophy of the Renaissance, so that many thousands of commentaries have been written by philosophers on Chinese, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, Latin and Sanskrit texts. Thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx and Heidegger have likewise called forth a substantial commentary literature on German-language writings, and the same applies too, though to a lesser extent, in relation to Descartes and the philosophy of the French. Anglo-Saxophone philosophy, on the other hand, seems to enjoy in this respect an exceptional position. For where English-language philosophers have utilized the commentary form in systematic ways, this seems in every case to have reflected a concern with one or other of the more textually oriented traditions mentioned above (and especially with the Greek and German). Works of English philosophy since Locke seem for their part to have given rise to no significant commentary literature whatsoever.¹ Thus it is significant that where Kemp Smith wrote a *Commentary on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (1918), treating this text as a unitary and coherent whole, his *Philosophy of David Hume* (1941) takes the form rather of a "Critical Study" of the "Origins and Central Doctrines" of Hume's philosophy.

Why, then, should what has elsewhere proved so vital a plant in the literature of philosophy have to this degree failed to take root among philosophers working in the Anglo-Saxon mainstream? Providing an answer to this question will help us first of all to construct a new sort of tunnel through the history of philosophy. More

importantly for present purposes, however, it will throw light upon the current geographical polarization of the discipline of philosophy in a way which will raise issues of wider, contemporary relevance.

I. WHAT IS A COMMENTARY?

An adequate answer to the question as to the nature of the commentary is almost impossible, given the immense breadth and diversity of the commentary literature itself and given also the still partial and inadequate nature of its scholarly treatment.² What follows must therefore necessarily consist in little more than half-supported generalizations.

Commentaries, glosses, scholia, exegeses, postils, *adnotationes*, *animadversiones*, *explicationes*, *enarrationes*, *expositiones* may be said to lie on a continuum between original text (or translation) on the one hand and purely interpretative works (works of secondary literature as nowadays standardly conceived) on the other. The focal instances of the genre—for example the "long" Aristotle-commentaries of Averroes—deal with their respective object-texts line-for-line or paragraph-for-paragraph, and they are distinguished from purely interpretative works by the fact that their central axes are built out of actual segments of the text itself.

Where a commentary is of its nature oriented around the text of some given object work, a work of secondary literature is standardly oriented around ideas and arguments, the latter conceived at what may be some distance from their specific original formulations. The commentary may, certainly, deal with the arguments of its object text. But it will follow an order of exposition that is determined not, in the first place, by the content of these arguments, but rather by the order of the text itself, and it will strive to do justice to this text as

a unitary object to be taken as a whole. A work of secondary literature, in contrast, will treat its object atomistically, as a source to be mined at will. Naturally there are critical and polemical writings of various sorts which fall between these two extremes. Indeed it has to be stressed that we are dealing, here, with a complex multi-dimensional spectrum of cases, in relation to which our present efforts at taxonomy are provisional only, but perhaps not, for that reason, worthless.

II. TYPES OF COMMENTARY

A commentary arises most commonly out of the seminar, i.e. out of some student's study, under the teacher's direction, of an important text, and a remark to this effect is standard fare in those textbooks of the history of philosophy which treat of the genres of philosophical literature. Such commentaries are made for private, scholarly purposes, and indeed it may be assumed that all students of philosophy are responsible for more or less fragmentary writings of this sort. Here, however, we are concerned primarily not with private but with public (or published) commentaries,³ though we do of course recognize that the distinction in question here made itself felt only slowly, so that the background of school philosophy will not be incidental to our story.

The public commentary is, we might say, a device which enables the transmission of the textual force or content of an object text from one age or culture or group to another. Thus for example the commentary may be an attempt to make something perspicuous and accessible out of, or to reveal the underlying system hidden behind here, material that is otherwise dispersed and inaccessible, material that exists, perhaps, only in the form of superficially unconnected parts or fragments. Where the object-text is itself the master text of a religion or race, the commentary may be said to aid in the understanding and fixing of a wider cultural legacy, essentially by surmounting difficulties of interpretation such as are created, for example, by the antiquity and importance (holy or venerable character) of its object. In some instances the commentary may be turned against an object of this sort. Thus scholarly commentaries on Confucian writings were commissioned by the Chinese authorities in the period of the Cultural Revolution

as a means of discrediting the Confucian ideas still exerting a hold on the population at large.

A work of commentary is normally the responsibility of an author distinct from the author of the original text. But there are also self-commentaries, for example the *Convivio* of Dante. The Bible, too, contains elements of self-commentary (see e.g. Neh. 8:8), as also does Homer,⁴ and Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. Self-commentary survives not least in our present footnotes, which are direct descendants of the marginal glosses ("scholia") of the tradition.

Occasionally a work of commentary may itself be of such importance that it gives rise to a second-order commentary literature of its own (for example in the case of Boethius' commentary to the *Isagoge* of Porphyrius, or of the glossings of the *Gloss* which dominated Bible-exegesis throughout the later Middle Ages). Commentaries may in addition relate not only to entire works but also to single sentences.⁵ Or indeed they may relate to individual words: the first dictionaries took the form of collections of glosses to difficult words in Homer. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* can be seen in this light as having been built up out of chains of self-commentaries (glosses on glosses), in which the commentary-structure has been deliberately left exposed.

Commentaries are of course made not only to philosophical works but also to works of religion and theology, to poetical and scientific works and to the various codes of secular and canon law. Indeed one signal advantage of the approach to be advanced below, is that it will reveal natural interconnections between areas of human activity too often treated in isolation. Above all it will help to remind us of the truism that the disciplines of law, theology, philosophy and medicine were initially much more closely connected than is the case today. Thus it is no accident that Averroes ("the Commentator") was at one and the same time physician, "philosopher of Islam" and High Court Judge. Elements of the scholastic method in theology and philosophy may indeed have been derived from models taken over from the Islamic legal tradition. The latter was marked especially by the fact that, because Islam lacked councils or synods, it had to depend on a principle of consensus in order to define its legal and doctrinal orthodoxy, in a process which worked retroactively: Each generation cast its glance backward to the genera-

tions that preceded it to see whether or not a certain doctrine had gained acceptance through consensus; and this was decided by the absence of a dissenting voice among the doctors of the law regarding that doctrine.⁶

Legal commentaries are themselves a means of fixing the correct ("orthodox") interpretation of the sentences of a legal code, sentences which must of necessity be formulated by means of general terms whose concrete application to specific cases is not capable of being fixed *a priori* by the legislator. The job of the glossator or commentator is, therefore, that of trying to establish the "dominant opinion" among the authorities—originally the "*communis opinio doctorum*"—as to the correct interpretation of paragraphs of the code that have been exposed as problematic.⁷

And there are of course also philological commentaries, a genre that originated with the Alexandrians at a time when there is, as Geffcken puts it, a "veritable commentary-atmosphere abroad."⁸ In the Renaissance, too, there was cultivated the practice of philological commentary. This was first of all for purely linguistic reasons. The goal was to make once more manifest the classical linguistic norms of Greek or of "Golden Latin" by exhibiting the original classical texts in the purest possible form. But the humanists wanted the new sort of precision in the fixing of the text to serve also practical goals. They wanted to reconstitute not only the language but also the "wisdom" of the ancients, in all its breadth. Thus it was especially in the Renaissance that there arose a systematic commentary literature around scientific texts, and we have the example of the Renaissance "iatrophilologists," who sought to further medical science by writing philological commentaries on the medical and botanical writings of the ancients.⁹

III. WHY DO COMMENTARIES ARISE?

Commentaries grow up around a given work, crudely and trivially speaking, because it has become necessary to make this work more easily accessible. This is normally for a plurality of reasons, not all of them strictly philosophical. Commentaries will arise first of all because of the density or impenetrability of a given work. But they will arise also because a text is too remote, or too short, or too aphoristic, or too fragmentarily preserved for immediate under-

standing. Thus the texts of English-language philosophy have been spared the hand of philological commentary not least because they are normally available as a matter of course in complete and uncorrupted forms. And commentaries have been made to Wittgenstein's writings (almost all of which were of course written in German) not because Wittgenstein employs in his philosophy a difficult language, but because it is necessary to create the context and interconnections, and thereby to offer a coherent reading, of the thoughts expressed.

In a commentary, as we saw, the words of the text are typically presented ostensively; they are transmitted to the reader in a way that is designed to bring him closer to this text itself. And this means that commentaries as such will arise where the very words of a text enjoy their own intrinsic importance (as divinely inspired, for example, or as constituents of an age-old esoteric ritual or legal ordinance). We might refer to this as the hagiographic dimension of the commentary literature, recognizing thereby that there are different sorts of veneration or respect for an author which are able to justify—in felicitous circumstances—the expenditure of exceptional effort in grappling with the difficulties of his text.

It is understandable in this light why commentaries should have been so often produced in relation to works that are possessed of some national or religious significance, works that are seen as contributing to the founding or to the cultural integrity or exclusivity or to the moral training of a given society and which may have come to enjoy official recognition as such. Consider for example the way in which Magna Carta has been appealed to over and over again by the English in time of national crisis "as a fundamental law too sacred to be altered—as a talisman containing some magic spell, capable of averting national calamity."¹⁰ It is more than anything else the fact that works of philosophy have enjoyed to some degree the role of master texts in certain cultures that accounts for the fact that the discipline of philosophy itself is taken seriously in those cultures, both by its practitioners and also by a wider public. (It goes without saying that philosophy is not taken seriously, in this sense, in the Anglo-Saxon world.)

The master texts are often distinguished further by special mnemotechnical powers, reflecting the fact that they arose at a pre-literate stage

of social evolution, when the only available verbal technology for the preservation and fixation of ideas and values in transmission was that of the rhythmic word.¹¹ For these and other reasons the given texts may give rise both to special difficulties of interpretation and also to a special linguistic fascination. Indeed, their powers in this respect may extend far into the future, as is seen, for example, in the way in which ancient Greek and Latin texts are still able to exert a hold upon us even today.

The established master texts are distinguished also by their breadth or universality. This is most clearly seen in the case of Homer ("from whom all men have learned since the beginning"), who was responsible for establishing that common Greek language which allowed the whole Greek people for the first time to feel its unity, in spite of all differences of race and class. Homer served as a veritable national encyclopedia, the source of instruction not only in a range of administrative and other skills but also in ethics. The practices of law and politics in Greek society relied to such an extent on the training which Homer supplied, that his work acquired an institutional status and its dissemination and explication was granted state support.¹²

The Bible, too, is possessed of a universality of this sort: it constitutes, as it were, a divine encyclopedia that is written in cipher (so that St. Jerome, for example, could claim in the prologue to his commentary on the Book of Isaiah that this latter work comprised the whole of physics, ethics and logic¹³). And similarly Confucius, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, and indeed the *Corpus iuris civilis* played a central role in providing master texts for their respective cultures, each with pretensions to universality, and each giving rise to a veritable forest of commentaries on the part of successive generations of scholars. So intimate was the connection between master text and commentary that the poet Gower, when setting out to produce, in his *Confessio Amantis*, "a bok for Engelondes sake," was careful to supply the work with its own (anonymous) scholarly apparatus of glosses and summaries and with a long preface designed to resemble the prologue to a Scriptural commentary.¹⁴

What is important for our purposes, now, is that philosophers, too, have sought repeatedly in the course of history to usurp in their writings

the role of the Homeric encyclopedia. It is this—albeit via much intermediation—which accounts for the desire still alive especially in Germany to extend one's philosophizing across the entire available breadth of philosophy in the way that this was done for example by Aristotle or Kant or Hegel.¹⁵ And it accounts also for the desire on the part of certain contemporary philosophers to imitate in their own writings aspects of the style and hermetic character of the older master texts—to produce, in other words, works which will have the power to call forth a commentary literature of their own. (This desire, too, is absent from the world of Anglo-Saxon philosophy.)

A prime text may enjoy further not merely a cultural but also an evidential status, so that commentaries may arise in reflection of the fact that certain texts come to be awarded a role in the evaluation and accreditation of philosophical or scientific theses. The medieval term *auctor* signified someone who deserved not merely to be read but also to be respected and believed; his writings possessed *auctoritas* in this sense; they were compiled out of profound sayings worthy of imitation. Scholars did not in these circumstances attempt to compete with their *auctores*. They sought rather to understand and to interpret and to reproduce for themselves the authority of their texts.

The frequent incidence of acknowledged or unacknowledged quotations from other writings in medieval works is an external sign of the role of tradition and *auctoritas* in the science of the day, something which reflects in turn the fact that currently favored empirical methods for scientific evaluation were not, as yet, available, or not sufficiently entrenched.¹⁶ Still at this stage—and even for example in the work of Surez, who was the first to write a work of metaphysics that is not a commentary on Aristotle—the opinion of the individual scientist acquires validity only to the extent that it can be shown to be supported by the prevailing opinion among the *auctores*. Thus the scientist's job is to assemble a representative selection of experts or authorities in a way that will establish the compatibility with tradition of the view he favours.

Even leaving aside the case of Marxist philosophy, where the agreement of an author with the very word of Marx or Engels or Lenin was once deemed to count as evidence for the correctness of what he had to say, the rule of coherence with

general scientific opinion has not lost its hold entirely as a method of validation. No longer, however, is this rule taken to imply that the scientist must cast what he has to say in the form of interpretations of theses already formulated by earlier masters; and no longer is it the case that the reputation of a scientist is a function of the number and breadth of the *auctores* he himself is in a position to cite.

Of course not all commentaries reflect either hagiography or slavish adherence to tradition. Especially with the rediscovery of Aristotle in the 11th century there arises a new sort of scientific and critical mentality, so that Aquinas can affirm (in his commentary on Aristotle's *De caelo et mundo*) that "the study of philosophy does not have the goal of knowing what men have thought but of knowing what is the truth of things." Some commentators thereafter treat established texts merely as decorative vehicles for the transmission of their own ideas. Some commentaries, on the other hand, are written precisely in order to demonstrate the importance of a work hitherto dismissed on all sides as unimportant. Each of these forms is, however, capable of arising and surviving only against the background of a commentary tradition of a hagiographical or exegetical sort. Moreover, even the writing of hagiographic commentaries is not of necessity incompatible with the expounding of new and critical ideas. Already in Jewish and Eastern Christian commentary much criticism is allowed, though only if the code is superficially adhered to. Thus for example one may never say an authority is wrong or inconsistent, but rather for example that he is "metaphorical" or "difficult to understand." In this way there may be effected an infiltration of new ideas, though these must never be announced as such.

Something similar holds, too, of medieval Indian philosophy, where the practice of writing commentaries had arisen in reflection of the seeming incomprehensibility of the religious texts that had served as the starting point of philosophical reflection. The resulting commentaries serve thereafter as the expression of a strongly systematized conformism that is however sometimes only superficial. As in much of scholastic philosophy, so in India, too, there prevails the custom "that no individual can claim to have seen the truth for the first time and, therefore, that an individual can only explicate, state, and defend in a new form

a truth that had been seen, stated, and defended by countless others before him."¹⁷ The novice philosopher, accordingly, must first affiliate himself to one or other of the established systems. To be admitted as a master he must then write a commentary on the stras of this system, or a sub-commentary on one of the existing commentaries, and so on. And while a person may at any stage introduce a new point of view, "at no stage can he claim originality for himself. Not even an author of the sūtras could do that, for he was only systematizing the thoughts and insights of countless predecessors."¹⁸

IV. SIX CONDITIONS

We can, in light of the above, list the following conditions for the appearance of commentaries around a given text in a given culture:

- i. The text must enjoy a certain density or inaccessibility or seeming incompleteness or foreignness, so that it is not readily understandable to all.
- ii. The language of the text must serve in this culture as the object of a special intrinsic fascination.
- iii. The exact words of the author must be of importance as such (it must for some reason be seen as worthwhile to grapple with the difficulties posed by these very words).
- iv. The text must enjoy a certain cultural or national or religious significance in its own right. (This is sometimes at one remove, where a minor text inherits significance from its author, or is granted retrospectively a special historical significance, for example because its language is no longer known, or is known only partially.)
- v. The text is possessed of a certain universal or encyclopedic character.
- vi. Tradition or authority are treated in the given culture as a principal court of appeal in the evaluation of scientific or other sorts of assertions.

These conditions are dispositional only: that is, they are intended to serve as a guide as to when and where we might expect a (public) commentary literature to arise. The six conditions are in addition not independent. On the contrary, it is our contention that they map interconnecting aspects of a single underlying structure. This is seen for

example in the fact that, where the texts most characteristic of post-Lockean English-language philosophy satisfy none of the listed conditions, the most important texts of mainstream German philosophy satisfy them all.¹⁹ In relation to other cultures, too, the six conditions can be seen to be closely linked. Consider the results of applying them to the case of, say, the Talmud, the Koran, or the American Constitution.

V. ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMENTARY CULTURE

It was the duty of the rhapsodes in Ancient Greece not only to recite but also to explain Homer. The first commentaries were in this sense quite literally inextricable from the text which served as their object. Indeed the roots of the commentary tradition reach far back into the time of oral culture, when philosophy (science) is perforce not a body of fixed doctrine which can be treated as it were impersonally and from without, but rather, again, a serious business of mnemotechnics, designed to bring about the training of the minds who will serve as the carriers of the doctrine into the future. The new-fangled chicanery of "writing" must initially appear from this perspective to be of secondary importance, if not as positively dangerous. Thus as the possibly spurious 7th Letter of Plato has it: "no serious man will ever think of writing about serious realities for the general public." And "when anyone sees anywhere the written work of anyone, whether that of a lawgiver in his laws or whatever it may be in some other form, the subject treated cannot have been his most serious concern" (344 c).

Again and again Plato criticizes the Sophists for the exaggerated respect which they demonstrated for the written word. Such an attitude, as Plato conceived matters, "was bound to weaken or even to destroy physical memory, on which the whole oral tradition of the past was based, and in the end would be a threat to true philosophy, which needs the personal intercourse of the dialectician to plant the living word in the soul of the listener."²⁰

True and serious philosophy, from this perspective, can take place only within the compass of a school, and a school is initially defined precisely by the fact that its members accept a common authority (Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle,

Thomas, Scotus), and thereby also a common text as standard work for study. And now it seems clear that commentary as public genre, and especially the commentary public of the philosophers, has vital roots also in this textual orientation of the schools. Indeed, to belong to a school, in the Middle Ages, means precisely to be engaged in the attempt to grasp the meaning of just *these* texts, so that the work of the school becomes intrinsically connected to the making of commentaries. This holds of Thomas or Scotus, too—simply because they were university professors endowed with the task of conveying and explaining successive portions of the relevant master texts in easily memorable form—as appropriate to a time when books (which is to say manuscripts) were still rare and memory still powerful. The schools may be marked further by an opposition between two kinds of writing, the esoteric "inner writings," which will contain the properly important doctrines and formulations, and more popular writings directed to the "outside." While the surviving works of Plato seem to be in the main such popular "outer" writings (reflecting Plato's view that a person is only "playing" when he writes), those of Aristotle are rather internal *logoi* of a school. As Owens puts it in relation to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "In general, the style and technique of the Books have not the character of writings ever intended to be 'published,' in the sense of being directed to an undetermined public."²¹ Rather, they must be interpreted in relation to definite school activity.

For this reason, too, students of philosophy will require the assistance of commentaries as their distance increases from the original masters of their respective schools. With the growth in size of the accredited master literature there come to be required also synoptic compendia of the sort illustrated by the *libri sententiarum* of Isidore of Seville or Peter of Lombardy. These are compilations of quotations from the Church Fathers and other *auctores*, organized systematically rather than according to the Scriptural order that had initially prevailed. Principally, however, they are a teaching device, reflecting the practices current in institutions of learning in the Middle Ages and later.

And similarly, when once Wittgenstein himself is no longer available to explain the meaning and connection of his gnomic sayings, commen-

taries and epitomes begin to be produced on his thought. Leaving aside this very special case, however, the commentary-tradition is not to be found within the world of English-speaking philosophy: philosophers writing in the English language were never marked by the desire to produce texts worthy of commentary, and philosophers working within this tradition are not affected by the idea that its texts might properly serve as the objects of commentary. This is at least in part because this philosophy was initiated by thinkers who wanted to break with what they regarded as out-moded practices of the past. In England, as (initially) on the continent, the "new philosophy" came to be oriented not around schools and school texts, but around ideas, arguments and problems. Thus commentaries were not written upon Hume and Berkeley not least because—as contrasted with the case of, say, the Lombard, or Aquinas (or Shakespeare, or Milton)—their writings were never put to use as texts for schoolboys.

It would be wrong, however, to conceive the revolution which was effected by the contemporaries of Gassendi and Locke—a revolution which can be seen, *anno regni derridanae*, to have enjoyed a lasting philosophical success only in the Anglo-Saxon countries—as consisting simply in the positive transition to something new. As Duhem and others have shown, philosophers had begun much earlier to think in terms of the new, visual and scientific orientation. Both Nicholas of Autrecourt and Telesio had conceived knowledge as flowing exclusively from the senses. But such thinkers continued at the same time to embrace the old reliance (be it hagiographical or critical) on tradition. The essence of the Gassendian-Lockean revolution was, rather, negative: it consisted in the very fact that a philosophical culture was born in which the writing of commentaries had no place.

VI. A NEW MAP OF PHILOSOPHY

It is a simple matter to imagine a map of philosophy wherein the positional value of a philosopher is determined by the number of commentaries written upon his works, connections between one philosopher and his successors being established in turn by the degree to which the latter are responsible for commentaries on the former. The largest node on this map will be occupied

almost certainly by Aristotle, the master of all who know, descended from whom is also the largest number of further nodes. The authors of the Vedas and Upanishads, too, will enjoy prominent positions on the map, as also will Porphyrius, Augustine, Boethius and Thomas. Kant, Hegel, Marx, Wittgenstein and Heidegger are medium-sized points. English and American philosophers, with the possible exception of Locke, do not appear on the map at all.

To make sense of all the available connections the map must include not only philosophers but also poets, grammarians, jurists, theologians, and many others in a way which does justice to the actual historical relations of philosophy and its sister-disciplines. When this is done, then we find that one of the most important positions on the map is occupied by the already mentioned theologian Peter Lombard, whose compilation, the *Libri quattuor sententiarum*, enjoys a quite special place in virtue of the fact that the preparation of a commentary on this work had in 1222 been made compulsory for all candidates reading for the Bachelor of Theology—an edict taking in such luminaries as Aquinas, Bonaventure, Scotus, Ockham, Aureol, Gregory of Rimini and countless others. This was not because of any special literary excellence of the text itself; rather, Lombard's *Sentences*, as a non-controversial compendium of all major problems, served as a definitive source of philosophical-theological five-finger exercises for successive generations of students.

The map is instructive also in giving us a direct indication of the ways in which philosophical authors were taken up and supported by different secular and religious powers in the course of history. And the map implies also a new view of the geography of contemporary philosophy. For where all philosophers, whether Jewish, Christian, Chinese, Islamic or Indian, were once united (albeit unwittingly) in a common endeavor centered on the striving to interpret (and criticize and extrapolate beyond) some core of master texts, philosophers today are in this respect divided into two opposing camps.

On the one side we have what might be called the philosophical commentary cultures of Germany, France and Italy, where philosophers (leaving aside a small number of fifth columnists from the analytic camp) continue to respect (albeit in different ways) the older textually ori-

ented habits of the tradition. Here philosophers are typically governed by the idea that philosophy must be something earnest and profound, and they are accustomed to the idea that philosophical texts ought properly to employ a complicated and hermetic language.

On the other side (and as it were off the map entirely) we have what are philosophically speaking the non-commentary cultures of contemporary England and her former Colonial Territories, of Scandinavia, Poland and Austria, where philosophy—or at least the philosophical mainstream—lacks this textual orientation and training. Here the writings of philosophers are marked by a kind of easy superficiality of style that might earlier and elsewhere have been dismissed as unphilosophical.

Where, as we have seen, the tradition of schools and masters was in England abandoned for good already at around the time of Locke, this tradition was reinstated in Germany in the 19th century and has been continued without interruption ever since. In France it seems to have been rekindled only in the last decades (reflecting in part a dependence of much contemporary French philosophy on German models), and after a long interregnum of philosophy of a non-textually oriented sort.

The differences here arose for a variety of reasons, some of them religious and political. Thus English (and American) philosophy since Locke has been a markedly democratic affair in the sense that successive generations of philosophers have looked, not in veneration to earlier masters, but to fellow philosophers addressed as equals in a spirit of continued discussion. (English *literature*, on the other hand, where other standards and traditions prevail, has been able to preserve that sort of veneration and respect in face of the text against the background of which the writing of commentaries is able to flourish.)

The commentary orientation of German philosophy, at least, is to no small part a result of the fact that the philosophy of the Germans has been always, in the Middle Ages as also in the modern era, a product of the universities. Not only the orientation around texts was inherited by the German philosophers, but also many of the practices associated therewith, above all as concerns the striving for a universal or encyclopedic philosophy, the formation of schools and of ortho- and heterodoxies. Even Kant gave lec-

tures in the form of commentaries (he never gave a course on his own philosophy), and lectures of this sort (normally unpublished) have been the statutorily imposed form in modern German universities until far into the 19th century.²² German philosophy has been further affected by the legacy of the idea—an idea that was at least inspired by Kant and Hegel, and which is nowadays accepted as a matter of course in most of continental Europe—to the effect that there are, in theoretical philosophy, no truths in themselves to which we can gain access, but only thoughts of people. Thus to do philosophy is not to seek the truth, or to seek arguments and evidence in favour of what one holds to be the truth; rather it is to write the history of what people have thought as this is revealed precisely in the slowly growing stream of canonical texts. Philosophy and history of philosophy become hereby identified. In some circles this has led to historical and philological work of the highest order; in others (and increasingly) it has degenerated into a treatment of texts that is purely literary.

The role of the student of philosophy in a culture such as this is a largely passive one: the beginning philosopher is taught that it is most proper for him to *philosophize through* the master-philosophers of the past, for only thus will he be able fully to immerse himself in the ever-growing stream of canonical texts; the active give-and-take of philosophical exchange takes place thereby not between teacher and student, but at third hand: between text and commentator-lecturer.

Of course contemporary philosophy in the Anglo-Saxon countries, too, is a creature of the universities; it would be wrong, however, to neglect the consequences of the fact that the most important philosophical movements among philosophers writing in English grew up precisely against the resistance of established schools and organs. Serious philosophical training in these countries is, at least ideally, centered not on lectures but on seminars and tutorials which imply an active give-and-take between students and teachers. The activity of philosophizing is therefore learned, in the small, through the practice of discussion and argument. And then it is not texts holistically conceived, but individual ideas, puzzles and arguments which take center stage. On the other hand how-

ever it means also that the student reads little that is deep, or is such as to enjoy an extended shelf-life, so that the breadth of philosophizing in its classical forms, of a sort that was earlier transmitted through close (and obligatory) study of the masters, is normally eluded.

The most prominent Anglo-Saxon philosophies in the present century have indeed freed themselves, step by step, from residual literary, historical and philological associations of their discipline in favour of an alliance with formal logic. Hence the seeming paradox that the philosophy of linguistic analysis has normally not dared to allow itself any special (for example aesthetic) fascination with language itself.²³ Dominant, instead, have been variants of the idea, mined out of Plato via Frege, of a realm of propositions conceived as a repository of fixed, objective meanings, each capable of being unproblematically captured in the framework of a precisely governed syntax. It is clear why this idea, even in its more sophisticated later variant forms, should have proved uncondusive to the expenditure of great effort in the reading and understanding of difficult texts. And it is clear also why it should have implied a rejection of that sort of historicist philosophy which trades in privileged languages, peoples, or epochs, such as we find in the writings of Hegel or Gentile or Heidegger.

Of course not all analytic philosophers have adopted the Fregean idea. Thus there are the more or less pragmatically oriented views of language favoured by Wittgenstein or by the speech act theorists. There is the view embraced by Quine or Winch which sees sentences as acquiring meaning only within the context of some "conceptual scheme." None of these conceptions even comes close, however, to a view which might sanction a rekindling of that orientation around master texts treated as authoritative which was once characteristic of all major philosophical cultures.

VII. EPILOGUE: ON THE SOURCES OF PHILOSOPHICAL KNOWLEDGE

What are the sources of philosophical knowledge and what are the methods of verification of

philosophical statements? To affirm that such statements are known *a priori* is to do little more than give a name to a problem, comparable to talk of the Muses breathing life into the poet. The very terminology of "sources of knowledge" is indeed a figurative extension, almost certainly first used by the Alexandrian court poet Callimachus, of a word having as its literal meaning: fountain of a stream or a river. "And not of every water do the Melissae carry to Deo, but of the trickling stream that springs from a holy fountain, pure and undefiled, the very crown of waters."²⁴

To drink from the source from which another poet has drunk already, this means, as tradition has it, to imitate the poet in one's work.²⁵ And in this matter it is vital that one should "draw from the original pure source, not from its polluted derivatives." For "the Muses, who once taught Hesiod and now answer Callimachus' questions, always utter the truth."²⁶

It seems clear, now, that some individuals do indeed have a peculiar facility or talent in the practice of philosophy, and that it was this fact which was albeit implicitly recognized in the division respected by earlier philosophical cultures between "*auctores*" and mere "*actores*." Certain individuals have that sort of tacit knowledge which is conducive to what, for want of a more adequate expression, we might call philosophical vision (perhaps also to the expression of philosophical vision, or indeed to the gathering or filtering of such vision from prior sources). And as Oakshott points out, tacit or practical knowledge "can neither be taught nor learned, but only imparted and acquired. It exists only in practice."²⁷ Hence also all earlier philosophical cultures recognized that, just as apprentice-painters need to learn the tacit skills of their art by copying the paintings of the masters, so students of philosophy need to *imitate* the activity and style of thinking of the philosophical masters—and this by commenting on their works. Not least for this reason, then, is it important to turn to the very words of an author, to the original text. For as William Whetely (*fl.* 1309-16) points out, commenting on the *De disciplina scolarium* of pseudo-Boethius, it is the "statements of 'authentic' men that are the more diligently and firmly inscribed in the mind of the hearer."²⁸

NOTES

1. While Leibniz' *Nouveaux Essais* is most properly to be classified as a critical review, it must be admitted that Locke's writings have elicited genuine commentaries in other circles, as e.g., in: Henry Lee, *Anti-Scepticism: or Notes Upon Each Chapter of Mr. Locke's Essay Concerning Humane Understanding. With an Explication of all the Particulars of which he Treats*, and in the same order (1702), or more recently in: John Yolton, *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding. A Selective Commentary on the "Essay"* (1970). After Locke, however, philosophers writing in English seem to have generated almost no commentary at all. Mill's *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* is not a counter-instance, since Mill sets out in this work to deal with Hamilton's philosophy and not with some one single writing. Broad's *Examination of McTaggart's Philosophy* (1933/38), on the other hand, is a genuine commentary, and the same can be said also of *The Student's Handbook, Synoptical and Explanatory, of Mr. J. S. Mill's System of Logic* by the Rev. A. H. Killick (London, 1870). Leaving aside these examples, however, and leaving aside also the rather special case of commentaries prepared as parts of critical editions, the reader will find it difficult to come up with further examples to add to this list.

2. See e.g., Buck and Herding, Geffcken, de Lubac, Sandkühler, Lohfink, and also Minnis (to which I am especially indebted). All of these are historical studies, limited to commentaries of particular sorts and periods. A more general work is Hobbes (ed.), whose contents are, however, little more than abstracts of informal talks.

3. Thus we here leave aside also those cases where students' notes are published as it were *per accidens*, which is to say not because of their own intrinsic importance but in reflection of the independently established eminence of their respective authors (this for example in the case of Galileo's early notebooks on Aristotle's *Physics*, or of Lenin's "Notes on Hegel's Logic," or of Wittgenstein "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*").

4. Cf. Pfeiffer, p. 3.

5. The term "homily" was used as a designation for commentaries of this sort, as for example on the part of Epictetus. Thus when Christian preachers take sentences from the Bible as the basis of their sermons, they are here following an older tradition.

6. Makdisi, p. 649.

7. See Zimmermann, esp. pp. 31ff., on the origins of the doctrine of *communis opinio* in canon law, and of the role of legal science and legal practice and precedent in the constitution of the *herrschende Meinung*.

Legal commentaries, too, have a much less significant role to play in the English-speaking world, though this of course hangs together with the fact that the corresponding object-works are to a large extent absent also. William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* are not, despite their title, commentaries in the strict sense here at issue, and nor is Bentham's *A Comment on the Commentaries*, which is more properly a critique of Blackstone's work. On the other hand however much judge-made law in the Anglo-Saxon countries arises through a process of commenting on the decisions and judgments of previous courts.

8. Geffcken, p. 408. Lohfink, pp. 2f.

9. Cf. Dilg. Makdisi points out (p. 659) that already in the 13th century the scholastic method of the Islamic jurisconsults had been put to use in the medical field, as for example in the work of Najm ad-Dîn b. al-Lubûdi.

10. William Sharp McKechnie, *Magna Carta: A Commentary on the Great Charter of King John*, 2nd ed., (Glasgow, 1941), p. 121.

11. As Havelock points out, "This is the historical genesis, the *fons et origo*, the moving cause of that phenomenon we still call 'poetry'." (p. 43)

12. Havelock, p. 29. Pfeiffer, p. 5.

13. *Patrologia latina*, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: 1844-64), xxiv, 18B-19B.

14. Minnis, pp. 177ff.

15. There are philosophers in the Anglo-Saxon world who have pretensions to a universality of this sort; thus Whitehead, in our own century, and also Jonathan Edwards—and then it is significant that isolated commentaries have indeed been prepared on their works. On Whitehead see Donald W. Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality* (1971); and on Edwards see Jeremiah Day, *An Examination of President Edward's Inquiry on the Freedom of Will* (1841), Henry Philip Tappan, *A Review of Edwards' "Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will"* (1838), and Albert Taylor Bledsoe, *An Examination of President Edwards' Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will* (1845), all of which however approximate more closely to critical reviews than to commentaries in the strict sense here conceived.

Rawls, too, has a status approximating to that of a universal philosopher in certain circles, and thus it is interesting that Robert Paul Wolff (author, incidentally, of commentaries on Kant and on Marx), should have penned a work entitled *Understanding Rawls: A Reconstruction and Critique of a Theory of Justice* (1977), which bears many of the marks of commentary as here understood.

16. Cf. Specht.

17. Mohanty, p. 181.

18. Mohanty, p. 181.

19. This holds even of the writings of Kant, which may perhaps be held to constitute an exception in relation to condition ii. Certainly these writings display none of that sort of etymological wordplay that is characteristic of the writings of Hegel or Heidegger. And they are possessed of no poetic quality. I would argue, nonetheless, that the very words of Kant have exerted and continue to exert, both among philosophers and even among a wider public in Germany, a fascination of a sort that is unthinkable in relation to any Anglo-Saxon philosophical author.

20. Pfeiffer, pp. 31f. In Indian philosophy, too, the job of the philosopher does not consist in studying, as it were from the outside, a wisdom that is somehow fixed; rather, the philosopher is called upon to *imitate*, in his thinking and philosophizing, the thinking and philosophizing of earlier masters. Cf. Deutsch.

21. Owens, p. 75. See also Jaeger, pp. 136 f.

22. In German faculties of law, teaching forms centered on the legal commentary enjoy an unchallenged position even today (and it is worth remarking that in other respects, too, the opposition between commentary and non-commentary cultures in philosophy bears comparison to the opposition between codified and common law cultures in the field of law).

23. J. L. Austin is perhaps the single important counter-instance to this claim.

24. "Hymn to Apollo," 110-12.

25. Kambylis, p. 122.

26. Pfeiffer, pp. 125f.

27. 1962, p. 11. Recall the passage from Plato's Letter VII above.

28. Cf. Minnis, p. 9.

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