

TOPIC 1

ON THE PROBLEM OF FIRST PHILOSOPHY

1. A question is imposing itself

They say that in our time we have a philosophy that cannot be supported, because the fields of science have delimited themselves radically from field of philosophy. If we search for an answer to one of our question, it is more likely to receive an accurate one from a certain science field, therefore eliminating the necessity of thinking in a philosophical manner. As Heidegger stated in the "What is metaphysics?" held in front of all of the professors of the Freiburg University (so mostly in front of scientific minds), the domains of science are completely separated from each other. Philosophy has always been the basis of human thought but given the present situation it is of no interest for us nowadays, and as Aristotle thought (in the first book of "Metaphysic") philosophy is the basis of the sciences but it isn't more important than any science. Of course, this affirmation causes trouble in some ways. Firstly, from a historical point of view, in Aristotle's time, the word "science" (and the Greek word "episteme") meant something else. Comparing it to Heidegger's quote, back then the fields of science were interconnected, and a proof to this is the whole body of work from Aristotle, because one man who "managed" to be a philosopher also managed to put the basis of sciences. The other problem raised is that we cannot be sure in what way philosophy can stand today as the basis of science. It has even been stated by Bertrand Russell that philosophy is the middle stage in human thought, between the mystical character of theology and the scientific imperative of science. These two problems are subsumed to the problem of adapting philosophy to the technocratic times that we live in and making it viable for the man living the end of postmodernism.

If philosophy is not viable for the "recent man", we say that it has lost its primate. "Loosing its primate" means that we find ourselves in a situation in which we cannot have a prime philosophy, a "philosophia prote" as it appears in Aristotle's text that coined it. By loosing it's primate, philosophy betrays it's true character and it's freedom which is always in a relation to the viability of the answers proposed by it and (also very important) the questions put by it. To give an example, Karl Jaspers stated that Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are the two big exceptions in philosophy and one who tries to philosophize in the style that they did is going to fail. This, of course means that they belong to their time and the only thing left to do is to interpret and extract the best out of them. Every time we come across them they are followed by historical facts and we cannot "look" at them just like we cannot see a comet without its burning tail. But are these two philosophers the only ones that are (if we may say) "stuck" in their time? If we assume that they are the only ones we betray what we have stated earlier that today philosophy cannot find itself a primate, because if the other philosophers are not "stuck" in their time, it means that any one of them has a present availability. Of course, we mustn't make the mistake of acting like we're contemporary to all of the philosophers and as Gadamer says we must be an "active historical conscience". This means not treating the comets' tail like a limit that must be transcended in order to understand a philosophers' thought, but actually accepting the limit and using it to make the horizons "fuse". So if the philosophers are mostly stuck in their place in history and hermeneutics is the only way to find a primate for philosophy, we're going to look back at each one of the "philosophia prote" and

decide if it is suitable for these times. We're not going to regard the "linguistic turn" as a prime philosophy because it makes philosophy depend on science in some manner and we're trying to delimitate ourselves from science and meanwhile give a basic problem for human thought in our times. Wittgenstein states, in a very existentialist style, that treating a question is like treating an illness and so we're going to look back at what from what illnesses did the philosophers "suffer". Treating first philosophies as "maladies" may seem nihilistic but the word appears right since all the great philosophers were driven into searching for answers and questions by something that comes from their intimate being. The "question" is sacred to philosophy and not surprisingly one is imposing itself before we start: "What is the illness of our time?"

Also, before we start we have to clearly state the method we're going to use. Each time we put a concept into question we're going to use arguments from other philosophers that maybe thought after the philosopher in cause. This is for three reasons: because we're trying to "fuse horizons" from our point of view, from our time and culture, without pretending to be contemporary to every philosopher; because each important philosopher that came after a certain one influenced it's time and therefore, in some ways, our time (to give an example, after Aristotle we cannot speak of "water" being the essence/substance of Being, and so on); because we cannot claim the power to destruct these important philosophical systems in a (somehow, because of the given circumstances) "simple" analysis.

2. The substance

When philosophy has a primate it means that something primates in its field, that the "prote" is ruled by one concept. At the dawn of philosophy, as we know, the philosophers questioned themselves on what persists although everything seems to be perishable. Thus the first prime philosophy is generally accepted to be "ontology". We're going to take one of the most important philosophers, and that is Aristotle, who engaged in finding and knowing the "ousia". Now, the term "ousia" was translated in two different ways and that's because of the Latin filter: it is either called "substance", or "essence". Heidegger argues that it actually means being (Sein) and all these, of course, cause trouble and that's why keeping the original term is not just out of "snobbism" (if we may put it like that) but out of the need to access the core of Aristotle's thought.

Trying to gain knowledge of the "ousia" implies some problems and this practice was contested by Descartes. Descartes states that we cannot know the substance (latin translation) without it's predicates, because every substance shows itself with a number of characteristics. Therefore "ousia" remains unknown without it's characteristics and this leads to a problem: in the relation between ousia (what is) and parousia (what appears), if "ousia" shows itself only by characteristics and never in its pure form, then "ousia" throws itself into forgetting by giving priority to what appears, to parousia. This is why Hume and Kant consider "substance" as merely a category of the intellect responsible with a type of understanding the world and don't give "ousia" the necessary credit. Also, Heidegger introduces his lecture "Time and Being" (so the Heidegger after the Kehre) by saying that we perceive what surrounds us but never in the world we can find Being. Extrapolating, if Heidegger considers "ousia" as "Being" (in the simple sense of the word "to be") when interpreting Aristotle, then "ousia" is never to be found and thus we cannot have a true and rational knowledge of it. As Nietzsche thinks we must say goodbye and release

ourselves from the task of trying desperately to know the “substance” which he considers to be one of the great diseases (not illnesses as we argued!) of philosophy. The illness of Aristotle regarding knowing the “ousia” is therefore not justified and cannot stand as a contemporary primate for philosophy, after postmodernism, or the “great process of losing sense” as Baudrillard calls it.

3. The “causae”

At the beginning of the Dark Ages, after Christianity caught on, Thomas d’Aquino considered theology as the first philosophy. In his “Summa theologiae” he tries from a metaphysical position to go (in a very Aristotelian way) from cause to cause until he reaches the first cause which is obviously “incausatum”. Therefore, the “causae” is the concept that primes in theology as first philosophy. Every time we speak of “cause” we correlate it with “effect”. Now, the problem raised by this is that in modern times we cannot know which one of these two is more important. That is because if the “cause” explains, the “effect” demonstrates. Also, Hume explained that we say 1 is followed by 2 simply because we’re used to. Applying this to the relation between “cause” which is “one” and “two” which is the “effect” of “one” maybe by multiplying, then “cause” and “effect” lose their specific order. The task of searching for the “incausatum” is not justified since He created the man, and therefore man is an “effect” of His act of creation. His act of creation being the cause, we imply that the “incausatum” has this relation of cause and effect in His actions, in His way of being.

After reading Hume, Kant says that his thinking took a spin-off exactly because he didn’t agree with what Hume thinks of the relation stated above. But this denial of Kant doesn’t either justify Thomas, because Kant considers “cause” and “effect” as depending on the intellect. Plus, “cause” and “effect” speaks of something temporal, but (1) the temporal is not a characteristic of the “incausatum”, and (2) Kant considers time as an a priori form of perception. Rationality is a tool given to us by the Divine Spirit, says Thomas, but he also says that in order to understand the - for example - Orders of Angels (how he did) your intellect must be illuminated by the Divine Spirit. The malady, the illness of Thomas who spent years writing his “Summa” and going from one cause to another is not justified to reign in today’s philosophy and cannot sustain a primate in philosophy.

4. The noetic

We’ve talked a lot about Kant and Hume giving arguments from their works, and now we’re going to briefly discuss the problem of the noetic. After Descartes wrote “Meditations of First Philosophy” it came the era of philosophy as the theory of knowledge. Even if Kant is the “king” in classical theory of knowledge, he was preceded by Descartes, Locke, and basically by the philosophers “devoted” to rationalism or empiricism who fought over the problem of the true source of knowledge. After that, Kant came and settled the conflicts by saying that neither reason nor experience are solely a true source of knowledge. This is why we will use him and his philosophy when talking about this type of first philosophy. The prime philosophy being the theory of knowledge, the philosophers analyzed the Ego that “cogitates”. Therefore it is the reign of the noetic, and everything revolved around the Ego that perceives the world, in a type of “open solipsism”. We can call it like this because the Ego, preponderantly in Kant’s philosophy returns to itself to see its limits

of knowing and after this it agglutinates things like “time”, “substance” and basically the whole reality.

Firstly, an objection comes from Husserl criticizing Descartes’ “*cogito ergo sum*” by saying that it is illogical and useless to say “I think”. To give an example, to say “I think” means that your intellect is an empty room and Husserl argues that all of our actions (like the one to “think”) are intentional: you think something, you feel something, you are always like a reflector, not like an empty room looking at itself. But this may not be a strong argument to why the theory of knowledge cannot be adapted to our times. The real problem of the Ego that thinks itself is that if every time we are “intentional”, then the Ego turning to itself implies a problem. When we “think” something, we are the subject that *thinks* and what is being processed by our thinking is the “object” of our thinking. For the Ego to turn to itself and think itself he must make an object of itself. But if he’s thinking the thinking mechanism, then he’d have to put itself on a position outside itself, and not to control itself. If he’s outside himself and cannot control what he’s thinking (also because of the a priori structures), if he inevitably puts things in categories, then when he is trying to think itself he is basically missing. We are saying that he is missing because he gets lost trying to think his own structure, and what results from the thinking process cannot be trusted since he cannot control it. In the XX century this is considered a paradox, and it has been demonstrated (also using the Turner machine) that a formal system is always incomplete because it cannot demonstrate itself. Therefore the Ego agglutinates and transforms for example “time” and “space” into his structures, denying them as real in a very solipsistic manner. It is clear now the “illness” of Kant who tried to think the thinker while the Ego that cogitates is basically missing cannot be put into practice in our times and thus we are left with no other possibilities but one (or so we know by now).

5. The possibility of a new First Philosophy

Philosophy, as we stated earlier, needs to define its field so it can still exist nowadays. But defining its field doesn’t mean finding problems but rather letting problems *appear* to us, if we may put it in Husserlian terms. We’re just going to expose a possibility created by some contemporary philosophers, rather than trying to search for one (given the circumstances). One possibility lies in contemporary phenomenology. After the “death of metaphysics” and postmodernism, in some philosophers works a new problem was raised: the problem of donation (in French), or “givenness” – how it is translated officially in English. The primate of philosophy can be ruled by the problem of donation because it comes from the tradition of post-heideggerian phenomenology that states that Being is always something that it (is) given (or “*es gibt*”, to be more precise). If we’re talking about phenomenology then we’re talking about the analysis of the phenomenal that is permanently *given to us*. There are a few directions concerning the problem of donation, and I’m going to briefly expose two of them:

- a. Jean Luc-Marion’s philosophy talks about givenness by analyzing the relation between intention and intuition, and saying that there is a permanent donation of phenomena. Some of the phenomena (“*phainomenon*” means “to appear” in Greek) might be so strong that they simply overwhelm the Ego with their absolute characteristics, like the case of religious revelations.

- b. On the other side there is Jacques Derrida who thinks that the phenomenal donation is always present, but we never get the full phenomena, the true one – for example the “eidos” of a phenomena. We only deal with phantoms of phenomena, Derrida claims in very postmodern view, and that nothing is given to us in its true form, not even Language or Time. For example, Time is not given to us in the form of Eternity, we get bits of it that we measure.

To end it, we must conclude and recap a little bit by saying that philosophy, for its true nature to be fulfilled, needs to have a primate. On the other side, we cannot deny the historical “hole” that we’re in, and after the great loss of sense we need to reconquer philosophy (even metaphysics) on new grounds, even if it means getting a few generation of philosophers “ill”.