
I. BOOK REVIEWS

**Thora Ilin Bayer & Donald Phillip Verene,
Studies in Historical Philosophy, no. 4,
Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, *Philosophical Ideas: A
Historical Study*, 2021, 122 pp., € 24.90,
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Abstract

“The life of ideas is their interpretation”¹ is a brilliant quote to start this review of the book *Philosophical Ideas: A Historical Study* by Thora Ilin Bayer and Donald Phillip Verene. The core statement that the authors make in the preface is that all philosophical ideas would benefit from the process of reexamination. Ideas are the medium of wisdom and we, as philosophical readers, have to find the ideas that are great and timeless. The book embarks on a quest to reexamine the most renowned philosophical ideas, from Plato’s poetics and Hegel’s dialectics, to less-known ideas such as Vico’s conception of science and Cassirer’s conception of the symbol. This review will proceed with a concise summary of each major part of the text, followed by a short critical view.

The introduction sets the stage for the upcoming chapters by giving readers operational definitions of the scope, scale, and purpose of philosophy. The authors tell the story of Pythagoras, arguably the first to call himself a “philosopher” when he was speaking with Leon, the tyrant of Phlius.² The state of being a philosopher has always been interwoven with ignorance. We seek wisdom but it is merely an ideal of the moral human, an ideal that is the starting point of philosophy. But to seek wis-

¹ Thora Ilin Bayer & Donald Phillip Verene, *Philosophical Ideas: A Historical Study* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2021), 7.

² *Ibid*, 12.

dom we require memory. Otherwise, learning would not only be impossible but meaningful speech would also be seriously obstructed. The best way to train our memory is to arrange the mental images that we are trying to preserve in an orderly manner. The authors also make the claim, using the story of Boethius and Aristotle's *Protrepticus*, that true philosophers achieve an internal peaceful state of mind (*ataraxia*). When a philosopher pursues the process of philosophizing to its limit, a sense of self-sufficiency and removal of fear is gained. The authors present these fundamental ideas by drawing on examples from ancient philosophy and adopting a narrative style, which makes this part of the book enjoyable to read and intriguing.

The first part of this book reexamines Platonic poetics. Bearing in mind that human beings make up the state, and that self-knowledge is the ultimate goal of the subjects within a state, the authors claim that, perhaps, the *Republic* might not first and foremost be a book of political philosophy, but instead an attempt to articulate the Socratic pursuit of self-knowledge. Verene and Bayer then revisit the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry. They explain it using Hegelian dialectics, arguing that the core of the quarrel lies in what they have in common: both try to describe objects using different methodologies. Poetry presents in language what the body sees and perceives, while philosophy tries to go beyond the senses to grasp the metaphysical aspect of the object, which is always out of reach. Thus, language is necessary for both. The central point that the authors make in this part of the book is that poetry has to be superseded by philosophy in order to go beyond its images. The quarrel is in this way resolved by the dialectic that occurs between the two. After all, no real dialectic could exist between two equal sides; one of them has to be superior.

The second part of this book is concerned with the ideas behind Hegel's dialectics. Hegel was a system builder; he believed that philosophical truth needs a system, not mere propositions, and to build that system Hegel utilized the dialectical method. What the authors here claim is that a paradox is inherent in our own essence as human beings. We not only animals or rational agents, but rather both, and this doubleness constitutes the core of our self-knowledge. We have to confront skepticism and transform it because it is unable to grasp and accept that this paradox is a necessary step to reach the final form of wisdom. The authors also point to ideas found in Hegel's *Science of Logic*, in which

being and nothingness are in dialectical opposition. As with poetry and philosophy, one side dominates the other and in this case it is being. Verene and Bayer remind us that philosophy preserves the memory of the past and through the process of recollection human culture is able to progress. They describe philosophy's normative role and why it is important in order to reach self-determination, a necessary condition for human freedom.

The next part of this book reexamines Vico's ideas on science, beginning with his method. The authors present the argument that Vico's method is genetic, that it seeks out "what is first, in the sense of the origin from which all else comes."³ The core of philosophical thought is metaphysics and the human mind is our instrument to examine the divine mind. From this, the authors then discuss Vico's notions about nations. All nations go through common stages: the age of the gods, the age of heroes, and the age of human beings. History, however, is cyclical and at no moment is this cyclic nature overcome. Just like individuals, nations have life cycles: from birth, through growth and maturity, to their decline. Nations all have different laws that govern their societies, but what they all share in common is their existence in this cyclical history. Verene and Bayer also make valuable remarks about the axioms that Vico presents in his work *La Scienza Nuova* (*The New Science*). His genetic method, arguably misunderstood by the academic tradition, could serve as guidance on how to order the civil world of human society.

The final part of this book surveys Cassirer's philosophy and its theory of knowledge. Verene and Bayer provide a good account of the symbol and its dual nature, as both spiritual and sensible, occupying a position between universal meaning (as grasped by thought) and particular sensory signs (where meaning impinges). This part also explains why Cassirer believed that the task of philosophy was to comprehend the symbolic character of knowledge itself. The authors provide a brief account of why myth and philosophy allow us to grasp the whole of things through the principle of tonality, which is the unifying principle, a principle of inner form. Cassirer's philosophy was highly influenced by the works of Kant, Goethe, and Hegel. To showcase this, the authors dive into the concept of *Basisphaenomenone*, the idea that the I (as a subject)

³ Ibid, 64.

exist in an external world. They also give a fresh account of self-knowledge, not merely as introspection, but rather as connected to the notion of work, attributing the formation of culture directly to it.

The conclusion of the book covers the notion of contemplation, as discussed by various philosophers, starting with Aristotle, who links the concept of contemplation, the act of grasping the nature of something, to the concept of happiness. The authors provide a good account of how contemplation is necessary for correct reasoning, which is itself necessary for correct action. This makes contemplation the basis of virtuous behavior, which is the basis of happiness itself. The authors then move on to a discussion of Cicero's art of oratory. Cicero believed that eloquent speech had its core in eloquent thoughts; if your thinking is good, good speech will follow. It is precisely our speech, the words that we use, that is the medium of the act of contemplation. Verene and Bayer reveal the bond between thought and language in Cicero's texts and claim that our ability to speak properly leads to proper actions. They make the point that contemplation exists parallel to the ordinary occupation of the thinker and is not only directed at metaphysics, but also to more pragmatic fields like history and politics. Finally, the authors dive into *The Republic of Letters* to reveal other means of contemplation that were used to enlighten the general public.

Overall, *Philosophical Ideas: A Historical Study* provides a unique perspective and interpretation of the central ideas found in Plato, Hegel, Vico, and Cassirer. It also discusses the problem of knowledge that each philosopher faced, and dealt with, in a different way, through poetics, dialectics, science, and the symbol, respectively. The one minor drawback of this book is that the reader must have at least partial knowledge of the works discussed in order to truly understand what Verene and Bayer are trying to present. However, since the book is targeted towards an academic audience this is not much of a concern. What is truly important is that ideas have no true and objective meaning and it is healthy for the development of philosophy to read and contemplate different interpretations. Or, as Verene and Bayer beautifully put it: "It is to philosophy and its ideas that we can turn to keep this sense of things ever before us."⁴

⁴ Ibid, 110.