II. BOOK REVIEWS

Donald Phillip Verene, *The Philosophic Spirit: Its Meaning and Presence*. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2023, 146 pp. €29.90. ISBN: 9783838217819

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Donald Phillip Verene's latest book is a contribution to the meaning of philosophy, a contribution that is highly valuable, extremely timely and useful. Not only because the prevailing spirit of our time requires a kind of a philosophical resistance, but also because it requires the specific kind of philosophical resistance that Verene is offering. This gets clearly articulated throughout the book but particularly towards the end when Verene proposes that we follow the method of Giambattista Vico to read philosophy, finding four authors who will "serve as master *topoi* from which to think our own thoughts."[1] What this method is gets hidden in the Aristotelian understanding of *topoi*, which could be roughly translated as "examples," and provided the means used by the humanist philosophers of the Italian Renaissance (of whom Vico is the intellectual descendant) to oppose the metaphysical and essentialist approach of scholastic philosophy, prioritizing the teaching of rhetoric over metaphysics and dialectics.[2] This humanist tradition has great value in an era characterized by postmodern continental critical posthumanism or a technocratic posthumanism declaring the advent of cyborgs and Artificial Intelligence, and this alarming situation gives the book special urgency.

The book is divided into four parts: the first three comprising a discussion of four authors and the last one focusing on eight modern au-

[1] Donald Phillip Verene, *The Philosophic Spirit: Its Meaning and Presence* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag 2023), 135.

[2] See Panagiotis Kondylis, *The Modern-era Critique of Metaphysics* [in Greek] (Heraklion & Athens: PEK, 2012), especially 107–32.

thors. The number of authors is a direct reference to Vico. The overarching framework of Verene's exposition is stated in the introduction in the famous Delphic injunction to "know thyself." As Verene notes, this guiding principle of philosophy gets articulated within two separate philosophical tendencies: "speculative philosophy and skeptical philosophy retain self-knowledge at the center of their thought. The memory of the Delphic precept becomes the hallmark of the philosophic spirit."[3] Now that we have a clear understanding of what Verene takes as the philosophic spirit, we can turn to the different eras that he examines.

The first section is entitled "Beginnings" and concentrates on the figures of Hesiod, Thales of Miletus, Pythagoras and the Agrigentian philosopher-poet Empedocles. Hesiod is best known as the poet of the *Theogony* and the didactic *Works and Days*. As a poet, he is credited with invoking the Muses, the protectors of the arts and providers of divine inspiration, daughters of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. It is memory that is of philosophical interest to Verene[4] who notes that "Without memory there is no possibility of self-knowledge because there is no self without memory and without memory there is no knowledge."[5] Thales is invoked not only as the first of the pre-Socratics, but also as the possible author of the "know thyself" principle, because his life points to the fact that the philosophic spirit pertains to this world but also beyond it. Pythagoras was the first to coin the word "philosopher," taken to mean the lover of wisdom, and with this property he distinguishes between philosophers and those who exercise power, giving much-needed freedom of expression to the former. Empedocles, known for his descent into the Etna volcano and his subsequent apotheosis, provides us with the idea of cycles of creation and destruction and serves as another paradigm of the place of the philosopher between the earthly and the divine worlds, as a lover of wisdom.

In the section on the ancients, Verene begins with Socrates and his elenctic method. Socrates, according to Verene, redefines the meaning of philosopher, as not just a spectator of the world but an actor in it, while also providing a method to reach knowledge of ourselves via dialectics, in the sense of speaking with others, in which we come to understand our

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[3] Verene, *The Philosophic Spirit*, 24.
[4] See Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegel's Recollection* (New York: SUNY, 1985).
[5] Verene, *The Philosophic Spirit*, 30.

limitations and ignorance. Plato is the second ancient on whom Verene focuses, specifically his discussion on the quarrel between the philosophers and the poets, expelling the latter from his ideal city in the *Republic*. The poets are the servants of mimesis, but they cannot determine what is worthy of imitation. Verene notes that the quarrel involves two kinds of seeing, one being the bodily vision of the poets and the other the vision of the mind that contemplates the ideal forms, which alone determine what is worthy of imitation. The philosopher introduces questioning, and thus skepticism, into thought and strives to surpass it. Verene concludes: "the ancient quarrel now is resolved. It bequeaths to us who come after it the dialectic between the image and the idea, between the metaphor as supplying the beginning points of thought and the question as supplying the continuance of thought."[6]

When he turns to Aristotle, Verene concentrates on his ethical philosophy, which he correctly describes as not a science but an art, before turning to his description of the contemplative life, full of the philosophic spirit and alone capable of providing real happiness. He concludes this section with a discussion of Lucretius's poem *De rerum Natura*. The Epicurean tenet upheld in the poem and stressed by Verene is that "All is mortal, including the human soul. Knowing this fact about ourselves, we can accept our own mortality, because we cannot alter it. It is the constant condition of life. Once we accept this condition, we may seek to enjoy our existence as humans as much as we can, while we can." How different is this Epicurean materialism from the unbounded and thus counterfeit scientific version of our age!

The next section is devoted to four Christian thinkers. The first is the late antique philosopher Boethius, who tried to combine Christian faith with reason, an effort depicted in the choice of verse and prose he includes in his work *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Although Boethius is traditionally credited as the first of the scholastic theologians, Verene argues, showing his reliance on skeptical and speculative philosophy, that Boethius's spirit is one of Christian humanism. The speculative strand is further highlighted by the presentation of St. Anselm and his famous ontological proof of the existence of God. Verene states that the gist of the argument is that "in both logical and rhetorical terms, [it]

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[6] Ibid., 55.

shows what it means, in metaphysics, to have thought think itself. God's existence is pure thought…The rational is the real."[7] This last phrase sounds familiarly Hegelian, and it is Hegel whom Verene summons to conclude that, with Anselm's proof, we approach the true infinite. The section then seeks the balance in two skeptical figures, Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno. Cusanus is an important Renaissance humanist, who invigorated Socratic ignorance as "learned ignorance." Verene quotes Cusanus as advancing the idea of a limit to human knowledge: "We can never possess what anything is in its own being, what it is in and of itself (quiddity)."[8] With Bruno, we are reminded that sometimes the philosophic spirit needs to depart from the multitude but also confront what it erroneously takes to be common sense.

The last section, entitled "Moderns" is also the longest in the book, treating eight figures instead of four. The first chapter is concerned with Descartes and his philosophical Archimedean point, that of the self of the "ego cogito." Verene treats the Cartesian subject as a version of the "know thyself" principle and notes that "Socrates brings philosophy down from the heavens and into cities and homes. Descartes brings philosophy out of its role in medieval thought as the agent of theology and provides philosophy with its own place to stand."[9] As theology moves into the background, the importance of politics and the state come forward and it is to the latter that Verene moves next, examining the figure of Thomas Hobbes and his *Leviathan*. In Hobbes's conception, the state is a modern Leviathan and the individual subject needs a guide to live in the modern state. As Verene says, Hobbes shows that inequality can never be overcome in human societies and that politics differs from ethics.

One famous topic of Verene's scholarship – making him a worldwide authority on the subject – is Giambattista Vico. Vico is concerned with providing a science of human affairs and "realized that the *idea of law* that is at the basis of the new science of nature is also at the basis of a new science of the world of nations derived from the *ius gentium*, the law common to all peoples, described in the Roman *Digest of Justinian* (1.1.4)."[10] The history of nations is characterized by cycles of rise and

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[7] Ibid., 75.
[8] Ibid., 78.
[9] Ibid., 88.
[10] Ibid., 96.

fall and is directed by divine providence. Vico's genius appears when he says that, because we are the makers of civil society and its history, we can have knowledge of it as a sort of self-knowledge. Next, Verene turns to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the solution he gave to the question of human progress in the Age of Enlightenment. Rousseau makes a distinction between true and false philosophy, with Verene commenting that "False philosophy is that which proceeds to explain and to justify critically the success of the sciences and arts, showing how much we have gained from them. True philosophy is an activity of the soul's discourse with itself in the attempt to discover what is to be human. Rousseau's philosophy is neo-Socratic."[11]

With the next pair of authors, Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Verene argues that we are in the midst of the modern version of speculative philosophy. Verene walks us concisely and successfully through Kant's efforts to systematically combine reason with experience, focusing on the way that schematism connects intuitions and concepts in the faculty of imagination. Furthermore, he quotes a passage from Kant that emphasizes the notion of the limits that surround our understanding, which is taken to be like "an island, enclosed by nature itself within unalterable limits,"[12] and is surrounded by an ocean of illusions. The danger of speculative thought is the transgression of these natural limits. This constant risk of movement inherent in speculative thinking is captured by Hegel's dialectics and specifically the "speculative sentence." The internal movement between subject and predicate in the speculative sentence always results in a sublation, an "*aufhebung*," which rests upon the recollection of the previous forms of the subject. It forms a gallery of past, present and future images of the self, which is simultaneously a gallery of ironies. Verene says "The irony is that we cannot stabilize consciousness to form a whole. It keeps separating itself into various stages, one stage leading to another. The self looks at itself one way, and then it finds yet another way to look at itself."[13]

Verene's most recent modern pair is that of Ernst Cassirer and Alfred North Whitehead. Cassirer is best known for his philosophy of symbolic forms and the importance he attributes to the symbol. Accord-

[11] Ibid., 104.
[12] Ibid., 111.
[13] Ibid., 117.

ing to him, man is an *animal symbolicum* and not a rational animal. Philosophy does not create its own symbols – as myth, religion, art, history, science do – but rather "grasps the previous modalities as that which they are, as characteristic symbolic forms."[14] Because of this characteristic, the duty of the philosophic spirit is to provide harmony between the competing symbolic forms within a human culture. Whitehead is widely known as the collaborator of Bertrand Russell and for saying that all of European philosophy is simply a series of footnotes to Plato. Through a brief but thorough exposition of Whitehead's concepts of process, prehension and eternal objects, that latter quote is substantiated.

Verene's use of past philosophers, along with his drifting back and forth between skeptical and speculative philosophy, provides a concise and brilliant exposition of the philosophic spirit. The philosophic spirit is presented by Verene as a much-needed new humanism that needs to be articulated by philosophy, a humanism that reintroduces the idea of limit because it is only ever within limits that we can try to achieve the self-knowledge that is pursued by philosophy. For this reason, the book not only surveys the philosophical topoi of the past, but itself serves as an example of a new philosophy of limit-seeking humanism.

[14] Ibid., 122.