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Raymond Geuss

Hannah, Paul, Rosa, Julian, and the Sphinx

I AM VERY SORRY that some readers of the *Cambridge Literary Review* did not like my short poems on Hannah Arendt and Paul Ricoeur. Immediate reactions must be respected. Why, however, one might wonder, did I pick on just those two? To explain that I will have to embark on a long, and partly autobiographical, digression. Three or four years ago I was sent by a Press a manuscript entitled ‘The Book of Dead Philosophers’ to review. The author of this manuscript was the distinguished philosopher Simon Critchley. I read the text with great interest tinged by slight disappointment, and perhaps a trace of envy: I had occasionally thought of writing a book like this myself, and Critchley’s excellent book pre-empted the possibility of my ever doing so. No manuscript, though, is ever perfect, and although Critchley had made an impressively catholic choice of philosophers to treat, I also noticed that he omitted a few who in my view deserved to be treated. There is nothing especially surprising in that; it would be extraordinary for anyone to have an overview of *all* philosophers—perhaps ‘all philosophers’ is not even a well-defined term—and, of course, every philosopher will have his or her own favourite topics, periods, and themes, and in a book like the one envisaged it will not be inappropriate to allow these to guide the choice of figures to be treated, at least to some extent. My own favourites included Rosa Luxemburg, Ghandi, Frantz Fanon, Julian the Apostate, and the Sphinx, none of whom made an appearance in Critchley’s manuscript and, in a spirit of constructive criticism I suggested he discuss them and their deaths. I was particularly keen on the Sphinx, who has some claim to being considered the first philosopher, or rather as being the initiating part of the first philosophical couple. After all, as Hegel pointed out, it is a mistake to think of the history of philosophy as an activity performed by a succession of *individual* men or as the result of such activity; it is inherently a collective human social enterprise. The model for philosophy is not Thales noticing that the waters of the Nile rise at the same time every

year, and wondering why that is the case—that is perhaps (one of) the origin(s) of science. Philosophy, on the other hand, arises paradigmatically when Sokrates encounters Euthyphron on the way to indict his father for murder and asks him what is up, and, most importantly, when Euthyphron responds and enters into conversation with Sokrates. It consists in a joint attempt to thrash out some agreed-on conclusion in discussion, whether the attempt succeeds or fails. In any case it takes (at least) two to philosophise. Friedrich Schlegel gets the emphasis wrong in praising the importance of what he calls ‘Symphilosophie’ only to the extent to which the use of this term suggests that the social dimension is a mere desideratum, as if there could be such a thing—albeit a slightly deficient thing—as philosophy which was not a collective activity.

Nietzsche is not keen on the idea that philosophy is a social enterprise, but he has a line in criticism of all forms of analysis of any continuing practice by reference to its purported unique ‘origin’. He is especially scathing about attribution of the origin of enduring institutions to heroic founders: Christianity founded by Jesus, democracy founded by Kleisthenes, philosophy founded by Thales or Sokrates. There was never a single origin for anything that has had extended historical significance. This ‘genealogical’ mode of arguing, in which purportedly unitary ‘origins’ are shown in reality to be contingent conjunctions of diverse and varied antecedents, is now commonplace; it is a development of a strand in Nietzsche’s thought which one might call ‘positivist’. Nietzsche, after all, himself emphasises that ‘genealogy’ as he practises it is a ‘grey science’ with affinities to the driest kind of archival research. There was, however, early in Nietzsche’s life another strand which only gradually, but then increasingly became sidelined. Richard Wagner had wanted to replace conceptual or analytic, and also historical, thinking with what he called ‘mythic’ thought. Given that Wagner understood himself essentially as a dramatist, he was particularly keen on removing the historical element from the theatre. Shakespeare’s history plays, Wagner thought, are the worst kind of literature; drama must deal not with real contingent historical figures like Henry V, but with ‘mythic’ figures like Oidipous, Siegfried, or King Lear. It was one

of the great glories of Attic tragedy that it did not in general deal with history. *The Persians* (about the Persian Wars that were part of virtually contemporary history at the time at which the play was written) was apparently to be considered an exception. 'Myth' formulated not what had happened to occur, but rather inherent structures of meaningfulness. Henry V in fact happened to win at Agincourt, but the attraction between Tristan and Isolde had nothing accidental or contingent about it, and this was an important feature of the story of Tristan and Isolde even if, or rather despite the fact that, one could not really say in precisely what way the connection was more than merely contingent.

Early in his life Nietzsche was close to Wagner's view, and in *The Birth of Tragedy* strove to overcome conceptual and historical forms of thinking and to replace them with a form of mythology. *Birth of Tragedy*, a treatise without footnotes, is organised not around a proper history or a conceptual or analytic treatment of tragedy, but narrates a myth based on the figures of 'Apollo' and 'Dionysus'. 'Apollo' and 'Dionysus' are intended to be *neither* 'real' historical individuals, like Henry V or the god 'Jahweh' (if he existed), *nor* mere names for what are actually abstract conceptual structures, such as the "drive to encompass more and more material" (*Stofftrieb*) and the "drive to impose unity" (*Formtrieb*) which Schiller asserts to be the basic principles of aesthetics. They are *more* like Siegfried and King Lear than either like Henry V or like abstract principles or concepts. A 'mythic' treatment is a treatment in which a figure with some distinctive individual characteristics is involved in a narrative encounter with *other* such figures. 'Lear' is to some extent 'defined', if one wishes to think about it in that way, through the encounter he has with his daughters, because this has a kind of necessity. A myth is a *recurrent* narrative pattern. It need not, in fact cannot, be *strictly* invariant—one of the clearest characteristics of ancient myth is precisely that the narratives which constitute them have no *single canonical form* (in all details). A good myth can be multiply reconfigured to express any one of a number of variant forms of human necessity. Each author can write *his own* Oidipous within some limits of narrative coherence, stylistic appropriateness and teleology. What these limits are is not antecedently given. So, although there may

be no single historical origin of philosophy, and no ahistorical 'meta-physical need' to which philosophy responds, there might be a mythic account of the origin of philosophy, an account which sums up in a concentrated narrative some of the salient characteristics of a practice as it has established itself.

In this spirit I suggest that the 'origin' of philosophy lies in the encounter of Oidipous and the Sphinx. This makes it clear that there is no *single* originator of philosophy because philosophy is inherently an interaction of a certain kind between two animate entities who can speak and act. I specifically say 'animate entities', not 'human beings', because the Sphinx is not human in the usual sense, but on most accounts half woman, half lioness. Furthermore, the interaction is an odd mixture of the utterly frivolous and the deadly serious, of the accidental and the necessary. The Sphinx asks a question which is also a joke (a riddle), but also kills anyone who can't answer it. What could be more contingent than a meeting on a road in the countryside? Yet the meeting seems to generate from within itself its own form of internal necessity. We usually think of 'games' as something one can choose to play or not, but this game is not really voluntary: no one asks Oidipous whether he wishes to try to solve the riddle the Sphinx proposes. When Oidipous does give an answer, she kills herself. She has made the question (and its answer) a matter of life or death for Oidipous, and then also for herself. Was her own death in the envisaged circumstance a part of the 'rules of the game' from the start, or did she merely *make* it the final logical conclusion by her self-destruction? Why did she start the game in the first place? Could it have been that she did not know the answer to her question herself until Oidipous tells her? Did she perhaps just make up a question which, she thought, had no answer, in order to be able to kill travellers? When Oidipous actually does know the answer, or at any rate invents an 'answer' which she cannot dismiss as an answer once it has been given, she draws what she sees is the conclusion. Her death has an appropriately weird archaic consistency. By doing so she founds philosophy. Finally, the person who answers the riddle in fact *instantiates* the answer. The riddle is: "What walks on four legs in the

morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?” and the answer is “a human being” (as an infant, an adult, and an old-person-leaning-on-a-stick). Oidipous does not just *give* the answer; he *is* an instance of the answer. When he gives the right answer, this is nothing but the correct account of what he is. It is perhaps also relevant that the Sphinx is in some sense not a being who exhibits ‘natural’ unity. She is, we might say, a biological ‘creole’, a bifurcated being who presents herself as a unity. Is this why she is so murderously hostile to the people of Thebes and asks such off-beat questions? Her question appropriately is about something that seems, from the description she gives of it, to be even more deeply creole than she is: *three* in one. Philosophy exists in the state of tension and motion between the moment of the original encounter—the moment when Oidipous can be seen coming up the road, or rather the moment when the nameless first traveller appears, for, after all, Oidipous was not the first to have an erotically tinged encounter with the Golden Strangler-Girl of Thebes—and the final, sad, but ‘logical’, denouement. When either of the two parties concerned knows the answer, the encounter, and philosophy, is over. As Nietzsche’s Zarathustra says about the dead tightrope walker, the Sphinx perished in the course of discharging a profession which she knew to be dangerous; there is nothing contemptible about that. Did Oidipous know his ‘profession’ of knower was equally dangerous? Would Oidipous have been so keen to discover the cause of the plague in Thebes and his own origins, if he had not encountered her?

I haven’t checked *The Book of Dead Philosophers* since it appeared in print, so I don’t know whether any of my positive suggestions were adopted, but I strongly suspect it would have been difficult for Simon Critchley to accommodate ‘Sphinx-cum-Oidipous’ within the given framework of his book. Perhaps he, perfectly reasonably, thought that the ‘death’ of a mythic being who was for us a mere object of legend was a radically different thing from the real deaths of real human beings. Perhaps there is room for a booklet ‘Fictional deaths of imaginary philosophers’ of ‘Unreal deaths of mythical philosophers’. It is a shame Borges did not embark on something like this.

Having made my various suggestions to Simon Critchley for further inclusions in his book, I turned to the matter of exclusions. One might think that some philosophers could be deleted on various grounds. For instance, that there was really too little reliable information about them and about their death for any entry to be worthwhile, e.g. Chilon, Periander, Xenocrates. Note that this criterion would not exclude the Sphinx. We have more clear information about her, given the entity she is, than we have about Chilon, given the kind of entity he was (if indeed he existed at all). A second possible reason for exclusion might be that the philosopher in question did not have a memorable or enlightening death. Sokrates, Giordano Bruno, Rosa Luxemburg, and Ghandi definitely *did* have memorable and enlightening deaths: all of them executed or assassinated in some sense for acting on their respective philosophical beliefs. Many important philosophers did not have especially significant deaths; it is not, after all, a necessary condition for philosophical significance that one have an interesting life or a memorable death. A third criterion for exclusion would be that the person in question, regardless of their present reputation, was either not a philosopher at all or was an uninteresting or mediocre specimen of the species. Thinking about this particularly in the light of my suggested additions (Luxemburg, Ghandi, the Sphinx, Fanon, Julian, etc.), I originally suggested that Arendt and Ricoeur, who did feature in Critchley's book, be excluded on the grounds that the first was certainly not a philosopher at all, and had not even been a particularly good practitioner of her chosen profession of historically oriented political journalist, and that the second had been utterly unmemorable either for his writing or, as far as I could tell, for his life—I had been his colleague for a couple of years at the University of Chicago in the very late 1970s, and had had some conversations with him, had jointly examined some doctoral dissertations, etc. and so felt that I had some basis for this judgment. I then realised that in fact both of those deaths could, contrary to first appearance, be seen as somehow 'enlightening' in that they were both especially appropriate to the lives the people in question had lived. Arendt died in a kind of traffic accident, an *appropriately* trivial conclusion to a singularly uninspired intellectual life, and I had not noticed the reports of

Ricoeur's demise until several years after the fact, as I had failed to notice his publications.

I have always been a great admirer of the *Greek Anthology*, particularly of Book VII, a collection of purported funerary inscriptions, the best of which attempt the utterly impossible, and thus especially tempting, task of summing up a whole human life in a couple of lines. Cavafy wrote a number of poems on the death of Julian, and Paul Celan's poem on the death of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht ('Du liegst im großen Gelasche') is a non-pareil, which has haunted me ever since I first read it. At this point the two poems about forgettable contemporaries presented themselves to me, as it were, ready-made; the one on Arendt in German (as the vaguely Brechtian syntax indicates) and the one on Ricoeur in Greek (as an instance of the idiom of *λαμβάνω* + participle). When Boris Jardine told me the *Cambridge Literary Review* was planning an issue of 'translation', and asked if I had anything appropriate, I first thought of a short poem about cats I had written in Latin a couple of years ago, to which I eventually appended a German, an English, and a French version. I thought that this could conceivably be the kind of thing Boris wanted. The second was the 'Swabian haiku' which had originally appeared in a (privately printed) volume celebrating the fiftieth birthday of the philosopher Axel Honneth in 1999; the point being to open the question of whether this could at all be construed as a 'translation'. I finally added the two poems on forgettable contemporaries because I thought it would be good to end with a bit of lapidary Greek, even though it is prose.

Author Info

Raymond Geuss's most recent book is *Politics and the Imagination* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

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