

Bagpipe music

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Abstract Ancient philosophy is in a bad way. Like all other academic disciplines, it is crushed by the embrace of bureaucracy. Like other parts of philosophy, it is infected by faddishness. And in addition it suffers cruelly from the decline in classical philology. There is no cure for this disease.

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“Won’t you write a manifesto,” the editor asked, “on the future of ancient philosophy?” “And why not make it,” he added, “highly speculative and ambitious?” Well, manifestos are for young optimists, and I am an antique pessimist. What’s more, I’ve never had enough imagination to speculate, and my remaining ambitions look to the garden rather than to the academy. So here instead is a little bagpipe music.

Before the familiar drone begins, three warning notes should be sounded.

First, I can only talk about what is quaintly called “ancient philosophy,” i.e., about Act One of the history of philosophy. I don’t know to what extent my remarks hold good in other parts of the wood.

Secondly, for the last decade I’ve been working in French-speaking Europe. I don’t know, except at second-hand or by inference, what things are like in America or Australia or Antarctica.

Thirdly, I shall say nothing about one half—and in most cases by far the more important half—of any

ancient philosopher’s activities; for I shall say nothing at all about teaching.

Oh, there’s a fourth warning note: I am becoming—or so my wife tells me—increasingly crabbed and crotchety and contrary and cantankerous and curmudgeonly. *O les beaux jours. Où sont les neiges d’antan?* In the past, even the future was brighter. Fings ain’t what they used to be—they never were. Paul Ziff once said that if you couldn’t see any aesthetic merit in an object, then—whatever the object might be—that was your fault. He toured the garbages of Florida to test his theory, and claimed that it passed the test. I could never quite believe him; but it must at any rate be true that aesthetic merit depends at least as much on the observer as on the observed. So too intellectual merit.

Q: Where is ancient philosophy going now?—*A:* Downhill, and to the dogs. *Q:* Where will it go in the future?—*A:* Further downhill, and right past the dogs. *Q:* What can be done?—*A:* Not much. *Q:* What will be done?—*A:* Nothing.

Facilis descensus Averno. But in addition to the natural propensity of things to descend, there are three principal reasons for the decline in ancient philosophy. The chief and the most obvious of them is this: You can’t do anything at all in ancient philosophy unless you know a bit of Greek and Latin, and you can’t do anything worthwhile in ancient philosophy unless you are a semi-decent classical scholar. But classical scholarship is a dying art: there aren’t as many scholars as there used to be, and their grasp of the ancient languages and the ancient world weakens and trembles. What’s more, fewer and fewer of them care to take up the philosophy of Greece and Rome.

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This state of affairs is exacerbated by a device known as the TLG. Load it into your laptop, and you have instant access to virtually the whole of Greek literature. You cut and paste snippets from authors whose very names mean nothing to you. You affirm—and you're right—that a particular word used here by Plato occurs 43 times elsewhere in Greek literature. And you can write an article—or a book—stuffed with prodigious learning. (There are similar things available for Latin.)

The TLG is a lovely little resource (I think that's the word), and I use her all the time. But she's strumpet-tongued: she flatters and she deceives. "What an enormous knowledge you have, my young cock—why not let me make a real scholar of you?" And the young cock crows on his dung-hill: he can cite anything and construe nothing.

"Come, Terence, this is sorry guff ... Exactly a century ago Ingram Bywater wrote this: 'I see the handwriting on the wall everywhere—even in Germany, and am not hopeful as to the future of the old humanities.' How wrong he was. And as for today, see what the editors say in the latest fascicule of the *Classical Review*: 'for the first time since 2000, the number of items in an issue has topped 200; as usual, the multitude and range testify to the vitality of the discipline.' You see mildew and aphids everywhere; and all the while the roses are blooming in the rose-garden."

Bywater was indeed wrong. (What convinced him that the end was nigh was the fact that the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge no longer required students of physics and chemistry to have a firm grounding in Greek.) But today—today things are different. The editors of the *Review* are whistling in the dark. True, unnumbered slabs of matter are unloaded at the bookshop doors; true, the slabs come in an unprecedentedly broad range of colours. But numbers are no proof of vitality; and the new colours are those of narratology, and metatextuality, and gender studies, and God knows what else.

"Come come, Terence, you're over-egging it. I'll allow that 90% of the books and articles published in ancient philosophy are worthless. But wasn't it always so? I'll allow that there is little which is epoch-making or path-breaking. But epochs aren't made every year nor paths broken once a month. Regard things with a judicious eye: doesn't every year see one or even two thoroughly decent new books, and two or even four thoroughly decent new articles? And were things ever really much better than that?"

Yes, they were. As far as philologically informed work on ancient philosophy is concerned, things were better fifty years ago.

Now for the second of the three reasons. Ancient philosophy is part of the history of philosophy; and although the history of philosophy—despite what many historians like to say—is no more a part of philosophy than the history of mathematics is a part of mathematics, nonetheless you can't do anything much in the history of a subject without having some sort of acquaintance with the subject itself. So if an ancient philosopher does not thereby philosophize, he must at least know his way about in philosophy—he must, so to speak, be a philosopher without doing philosophy. That being so, the general state of philosophy will influence the state of ancient philosophy. And the general state of philosophy is at present pretty dire.

Publishers' catalogues tell a story of decline. It's true, of course, that philosophy listings get more numerous every year. But there are among them fewer new contributions to philosophy. First, a great deal of what fills the catalogues consists of handbooks and course-books and companions and the like. They are wholly admirable items, but they are not philosophy. Secondly, there is the line of volumes—what, will it stretch on to the crack of doom?—on business ethics and medical ethics and legal ethics ...; in other words, on subjects which (as A. C. Lloyd liked to put it) are matters not for philosophers but for priests and commissars. Finally, there are the cuckoos in the nest; for all the catalogues, even from the most reputable publishing houses, have large and thrusting sections with curious labels like "Feminist thought" and "Continental philosophy." Any rude shepherd will put you right on the names of such things—and they don't include the word "philosophy." ("Really, that's going too far—after all, have you ever read a word of **** or of *****?"—"Why certainly not: it would only prejudice my mind against them.")

All this rubs off on the history of philosophy. When serious philosophers take Heidegger seriously, then historians of philosophy will. And so we are served up with things which make a rational man's each several hair to stand on end like quills upon the fretful thingummyjig. Not that that's the worst of it. After all, a book which advertises itself as being about Lyotard and Lucretius, or Democritus and Derridaism, or feminism and Favorinus, is honest and open and easily avoided. What's insidious is the seepage. Once upon a time I myself made a reference to Kierkegaard—a plagiarized reference, to be sure; but at the time it seemed rather chic. Fortunately, I saw the suppurations in time and took the antidote. Others don't. Slowly the poison the whole blood-stream fills.

Spare a glance for *la belle France*. Philosophy here is a wonderful thing. On the one hand, more of it is written,