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Death and the Disinterested Spectator
An Inquiry Into the Nature of Philosophy

Ann Hartle

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For Bob

Le soleil ni la mort ne se peuvent regarder fixement.
La Rochefoucauld

*And pray to God to have mercy upon us
And I pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain
Because I do not hope to turn again
Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again
May the judgment not be too heavy upon us
T.S.Eliot, Ash Wednesday*

Preface

Each semester for several years I taught a course entitled "Philosophy of Man" at St. Francis College. Its purpose was to examine the question about the nature of man, i.e., the question about the manner of human being. Among the works we studied were Plato's *Phaedo*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and Descartes's *Discourse on Method* because these works discuss such issues as the relation between soul and body and the immortality of the soul.

My reading of these works led me to see that the question about the nature of man cannot be separated from the question about the nature of philosophy, that activity which claims to be the highest, that way of life which claims to be best for a man. I also began to see *internal* connections among the *Phaedo*, *The Confessions*, and the *Discourse*. By this I do not mean anything that depends on somehow proving that Augustine read the *Phaedo* and that Descartes read *The Confessions*.

It is often claimed that Augustine is a kind of Platonist and that Descartes is indebted to Augustine for his first principle, the *cogito*. This claim is based on a perception of the kinds of internal connections which link the *Phaedo*, *The Confessions*, and the *Discourse*. My own interpretation of these works shows that they are indeed to be understood in relation to each other but not because they are in fundamental agreement or because they constitute a sequence of "development" or dependence within the history of philosophy. Rather, as Socrates defines himself in contradistinction to the natural philosophers and Sophists, so Augustine understands himself, not as a Platonist, but as having rejected a version at least of the Platonic notion of philosophy, that is, the claim that it is a *divine* activity. Augustine's encounter with the Platonic books teaches him "the difference between presumption and confession." Descartes's

project in the *Discourse* is radically and self-consciously different from Augustine's confessing. Descartes's grounding of certitude in the *je pense, donc je suis* is, from Augustine's point of view, the greatest presumption. But the project of the mastery of nature which follows from this first principle could not have occurred without the Christian notion of the divine. Descartes's occupation belongs to man as man but presupposes the Augustinian understanding of God as compassionate actor.

The first three chapters of this book are presentations of my interpretation of the *Phaedo*, *The Confessions*, and the *Discourse* respectively. On this level, they are relatively autonomous chapters. At a second level, the internal connections among the three works are displayed and, at decisive points, articulated. The fourth chapter is an attempt to deal more directly with the question concerning the nature of philosophy, presupposing the interpretations presented in the first three chapters and linking these three chapters more explicitly.

It might be asked whether other philosophical works would have also served as a kind of background for my own reflections on the nature of philosophy and perhaps have led me to different conclusions. For example, the discussion of the philosophical life in the *Symposium* presents the philosopher, not as beginning from or striving for the stance of the disinterested spectator, but rather as being driven by the *erotic* pursuit of wisdom. I chose to begin from the *Phaedo* and to follow out its presentation of the philosophical life because it is there that the claim that philosophy is a preparation for death is made and displayed most explicitly. But, given this beginning, would not Boethius's *On the Consolation of Philosophy* be the most appropriate way into the medieval perspective on this claim? There, the question I am concerned with is discussed explicitly. It seems to me that the specifically *Christian* response to philosophy's claim is not made in Boethius's work at least in the way it is in Augustine's account of his torment in the face of death in *The Confessions*. And Descartes's response to philosophy's claim presupposes Augustine's uncertainty in the very attempt to overcome that uncertainty. Finally, in Descartes's *Discourse* the modern search for certitude shows itself as grounded in the desire for power against death. This search for certitude has been reduced, in our own century, to the desire for clarity and distinctness and precision which is the limit of the analytic movement. My reflections on the nature of philosophy are intended to pose again the Socratic claim that philosophy, by its very nature, is a preparation for death.

Finally, in speaking about "my own" reflections on the nature of philosophy, I do not claim anything like "novelty." I cannot separate what

is precisely my own from what has its beginning in my thinking about the *Phaedo*, *The Confessions*, the *Discourse*, as well as the other works on which I rely in my fourth chapter. In this sense, I hope that this book will show that the study of the history of philosophy is not simply reducible to the study of intellectual history. It seems to me that anyone who today wishes seriously to raise the most fundamental philosophical questions must inevitably be drawn back into the history of philosophy. At best, we raise again the oldest questions.

I am grateful to friends and colleagues who have helped me in bringing this work to an end. Much of what I have written here concerning comedy and tragedy goes back to conversations with my husband, Robert. From beginning to end he has encouraged, read, criticized, and even typed. Donald Phillip Verene read the first version of the manuscript, and his suggestions are reflected here in several important ways. Gerald Galgan, friend and former colleague, was unsparing with his time, insightful in his criticisms, and invariably encouraging. I am grateful to William F. Edwards for his comments on the first version of the chapter on Descartes and to James Gouinlock for his suggestions concerning the chapter on Descartes and the concluding chapter. Donald Livingston, Gilbert Meilaender, and Carl G. Vaught raised questions about my project which helped me to be clearer and to express myself more clearly about it. I am very grateful for their help. Rose Bode and Patricia Redford typed the original version of the manuscript, and I thank them for their skill and patience.

I am indebted to the National Endowment for the Humanities, to the Earhart Foundation, and the Institute for Educational Affairs for their generous support.

Note on the Texts

I have used Burnet's edition of the *Phaedo* and have consulted the Loeb and Grube translations. The Latin text for Augustine's *Confessions* is the Loeb edition. I have relied almost exclusively on Warner's translation of *The Confessions* and I have followed Warner's practice of italicizing Augustine's quotations from Scripture. References to Descartes are to the sixth volume of the Adam and Tannery edition of the *OEuvres de Descartes* (spelling modernized) and to the first volume of the English edition by Haldane and Ross. The translations, however, are principally mine. A reference such as

(AT 3; HR 82), for example, means (page 3 of Volume 6 of Adam and Tannery; page 82 of Volume I of Haldane and Ross).

Introduction

After Philosophy has dismissed the Muses of poetry and has reminded Boethius of her presence at the death of Socrates, she makes this speech:

He who has calmly reconciled his life to fate, and set proud death beneath his feet, can look fortune in the face, unbending both to good and bad: his countenance unconquered he can show. The rage and threatenings of the sea will not move him though they stir from its depths the upheaving swell: Vesuvius's furnaces may never so often burst forth, and he may send rolling upwards smoke and fire; the lightning, whose wont it is to smite down lofty towers, may flash upon its way, but such men shall they never move. Why then stand they wretched and aghast when fierce tyrants rage in impotence? Fear naught, and hope naught: thus shall you have a weak man's rage disarmed. But whoso fears with trembling, or desires aught from them, he stands not firmly rooted, but dependent: thus has he thrown away his shield; he can be rooted up, and he links for himself the very chain whereby he may be dragged. 1

The consolation of Philosophy is the speech that takes away fear and thus conquers proud death. But Philosophy has Muses of her own. She heals Boethius with her songs. And in charming away fear, she must also chase away hope.

My book began as a study of philosophical "disappointments" and became a questioning of philosophy's claim to console in the face of death. The burden of the text is an interpretation of three works: the *Phaedo*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and Descartes's *Discourse on Method*. What these works have in common, that is, what first led me to link them, is that they are in some sense "autobiographical." Each recounts a "turning point" in the life of the author, a struggle or disappointment with

philosophy that turned the author in a different direction. As I tried to understand the significance of these turning points, two things began to make themselves clear. One cannot write an autobiography without saying or implying something about one's death, that is, without facing one's death. And, then, it began to seem that these three works are not, after all, autobiographies. The *Phaedo* is a myth, *The Confessions* is a prayer, the *Discourse* is a fable. Philosophy has Muses of her own.

When Philosophy consoles in the face of death, she is defending the philosophical life. She reminds Boethius of what he has been and of what he is: "Do you remember that you are a man? . . . Can you say what is a man?" When Boethius answers that man is an animal, reasoning and mortal, Philosophy knows the cause of his sickness: "You have forgotten what you are. . . . You are overwhelmed by this forgetfulness of yourself." 2 Boethius's "forgetfulness" is a version of the sickness to which the philosopher is most susceptible from within, and of the attack to which philosophy is most often subjected from without. This is the suspicion that philosophy is "mere words."

The *Phaedo*, *The Confessions*, and the *Discourse* are defenses of the activity, indeed of the worth of the lives, of the authors. The defenses are, in one sense, the same in each: the kind of life presented is a life that leads to immortality. But in the *Phaedo* and the *Discourse* this defense must be seen in its poetic context. The "immortality" that is promised is an imitation of an activity done in *this* life. In *The Confessions*, death is presented as having been truly overcome. The defenses that are given in the *Phaedo* and the *Discourse* are accomplished by means of a deliberate lack of precision concerning the distinction between theoretical and moral excellence. But in the *Phaedo* this is a blurring of the distinction which preserves both terms. In the *Discourse*, the distinction ultimately collapses: Descartes attempts the radical reorientation of philosophy as such toward the practical.

In this respect, Augustine is much closer to the ancient than to the modern position: the life of contemplation, the activity of "useless" prayer (especially the prayer of praise) is actually displayed in *The Confessions*. Yet, Descartes's radical reorientation of philosophy could not have taken place without the change in the notion of the divine that is manifested in *The Confessions*. Descartes's reorientation presupposes the Augustinian notion of the divine as actor, as compassionate actor, in contrast to the classical philosophical notion of the divine as disinterested spectator.

This classical notion is inseparable from the view that philosophy is a

divine activity that is done by human beings. Nowhere is the philosophical tension between divine and human so strikingly displayed as in Socrates, especially in the *Phaedo*. Here, philosophy is defined as the separation of soul and body, as the practice of death. This definition appears to dominate the entire discussion. But another definition is also presented and then seems to be forgotten: Philosophy is the greatest music. The philosopher "sings charms" everyday to charm away the fear of death. Descartes's fable too exerts its power through its "charm." The soothing message of the *Discourse* is that pain, misery, ignorance and even death can be overcome.

The possibility of this Cartesian overcoming of death depends upon the securing of an unshakeable point, an Archimedean point, from which the world can be moved. Yet the position of analytic philosophy today is one of embarrassment at its own powerlessness. At most it is the observer of the power of science. And the only causes of wonder are the man-made things, especially those which imitate the human. Descartes's "defense" of philosophy really brings about its destruction: it is left with nothing worthwhile of its own. In the *Discourse*, Descartes completely identifies himself with the accusation that philosophy is "mere words." By identifying the good and important with the useful, Descartes reduces philosophy to the position of a pleasant diversion.

Thus, modern philosophy can only end in what Husserl has called "the despair of one who has the misfortune to be in love with philosophy." 3 And his despair finally takes the form of the withering of philosophy to a kind of precise powerlessness such as we find articulated by Gilbert Ryle:

I conclude, then, that there is, after all, a sense in which we can properly inquire and even say "what it really means to say so and so." For we can ask what is the real form of the fact recorded when this is concealed or disguised and not duly exhibited by the expression in question. And we can often succeed in stating this fact in a new form of words which does exhibit what the other failed to exhibit. And I am for the present inclined to believe that this is what philosophical analysis is, *and that this is the sole and whole function of philosophy*. But I do not want to argue this point now.

But, as confession is good for the soul, I must admit that I do not very much relish the conclusions toward which these conclusions point. I would rather allot to philosophy a sublimer task than the detection of the sources in linguistic idioms of recurrent misconstructions and absurd theories. But that it is at least this I cannot feel any serious doubt.4 [Emphasis added.]

To claim that "transmutation of syntax" is the sole and whole func-

tion of philosophy is not simply modesty. It is ultimately the acceptance of the view that philosophy is "mere words." And if this is so, then philosophy is indeed defenseless because trivial.

The defense of philosophy presented in the *Phaedo* is precisely a defense against the accusation that philosophy is "idle talk." Philosophy is indeed a "sublimar task" than the transmutation of syntax. But it is also an "endless task." The *Phaedo* invites us to distinguish between "endless" and "futile." To make this distinction is to do something which must be distinguished from the detection of a source in a linguistic idiom of a recurrent misconception or absurd theory.

My intention, then, is to pose once more the question of the nature of philosophy, especially insofar as that nature is revealed in the claim that the philosophical life is a preparation for death. That is, I want to ask whether philosophy has any real power. In what way and to what extent is the activity of philosophy an overcoming of death?

The claim that philosophy overcomes death and leads to immortality is inseparable from the claim that philosophy begins in wonder. Wonder entails a stepping outside of the everyday immersion in action, in the web of means and ends which has to do with preservation. In this respect, wonder is the assumption of a more-than-human stance. It is the posture of the disinterested spectator. But, at the same time, in the very act of escaping the demands imposed by mortality, philosophy presupposes that mortality. Thus, the proper task of philosophy is to be a meditation on death. It is in this task that its power is revealed.

Here we begin to see the vulnerable position in which philosophy is placed by the very questioning of its power. Insofar as philosophy begins in wonder, insofar as it seeks simply to know, it is necessarily useless. It is not a means to an end, but is itself an end. To require a defense of it is to require that it show what it has accomplished for us, that is, that it demonstrate its usefulness as a means to some end other than itself.

My attempt to deal with these questions (against the background of the *Phaedo*, *The Confessions*, and the *Discourse*) leads to two related conclusions. Philosophy does not herself console. In order to defend herself, she needs the arts of rhetoric and poetry. Indeed, she must "sing charms every day." The *Phaedo* is a myth; the *Discourse* is a fable. This inability to console

of herself is the ultimate powerlessness of philosophy. Death is not overcome, the immortality of the gods is not achieved.

The prayer of Augustine is indeed a consolation which even claims to have its consoling power not from myth but from the Truth itself. But the very need for this consolation shows that Augustine's position in the face

of death is one of hope. And hope is neither courage nor certitude.

In the distinctions among courage and hope and certitude the true power of philosophy can be made manifest. Philosophy is not an escape from death but it is a preparation for death. Socrates, on the day of his death, appears to be the disinterested spectator of his own death. But this god-like separation of soul and body is, at the same time, a courageous ruling of the body. Socratic meditation on death is not the search for certitude about the immortality of the soul. It is not the search for knowledge either as the end of the detached observer or as the means of the moral agent in the face of death. It is the search for wisdom and, therefore, at the same time, a preparation for death. Precisely if, and only if, philosophy does not seek to be useful, to be a means to some other end, it has its proper effect. Socrates's death is a display of the real power of philosophy as the search for wisdom.

Chapter I

Socrates: Penelope and the Bee

The *Phaedo* as Apology

The *Phaedo* is another apology and is meant to be compared with the *Apology of Socrates*. In one sense, the two dialogues mirror each other as opposites, yet they are ultimately concerned with the same questions. Together and in contrast with each other they reveal Socrates's understanding of the nature of philosophy. And what forces itself on us at once is that, whatever the nature of philosophy as practiced by Socrates may be, it is always vulnerable, always under attack, and always in need of defense. 1

That the *Phaedo* is intended by Plato to be taken as another apology is clear from the early part of the dialogue where Simmias and Cebes accuse Socrates of being too eager to die. Socrates takes what they say as an "accusation" against which he must defend himself as if he were in a court of law (63b). The conversation here is playful in contrast to the serious, if ironic, speech of the *Apology*. Although some of those present on the day of Socrates's death were also present at the trial, the audiences are, on the whole, very different. This contrast between friendly and hostile audiences suggests one possible way of putting the accusations against which Socrates must defend himself: in the *Apology* he is defending himself for being with others, for sharing himself with everyone indiscriminately, and in the *Phaedo* he must defend himself for being apart from his friends, for separating himself from others.

Another way of expressing the accusations against Socrates is in the explicit manner of the *Apology* itself. There Socrates replies to two groups of accusers: the old, that is, public opinion over the years, and the new, that is, Meletus, Anytus and Lycon who have brought the formal indictment against him. Public opinion, built up over the years, holds that