Filosofins Historia

Antiken och Medeltiden

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How should the history of philosophy be written? There are of course many ways. A faithful one would be to treat the thinkers of the past on their own conditions, put them into context, and to try as faithfully as possible present their views, without undue emphasis on how they relate to the perspectives of today. This clearly would be the approach taken by a historian of ideas. The approach of Wedberg is different though. His interest in the thinkers of the past is how they relate to the progress of philosophy, to what extent they are correct or not, according to the perspective of today, which in the case of Wedberg is that of an analytic philosopher. This does not encourage a history of piety, on the contrary, what interest the author is not exactly what they said and wrote, but the sense that made, or ought to have made. Thus Wedberg engages the past into a dialogue with the present. Instead of quoting he prefers the paraphrase, instead of letting the philosopher himself set the agenda, Wedberg supplies him with a schemata to which his thought has to comply. Not unlike giving the philosophers of the past examinations, which non-surprisingly they mostly fail to excel in. Thus Wedberg reveals ambiguities in their key concepts (something he tries to remedy by giving alternate definitions and consequently allow correspondingly different interpretations of the arguments in which they appear), contradictions in their reasonings (here he no doubt is inspired by the method of his old teacher Phalén as he also acknowledges) and gaps in their approaches. This is of course grossly anachronistic and that is of course its point. In spite of its obvious flaws, such an approach has less obvious advantages, especially when it comes to giving an overview of a large field. Instead of merely providing a catalogue of names and succinct briefings, it gives to the enterprise a unifying theme and a focus. And although he never can do a single philosopher justice (which he often acknowledges) he at least puts the spot-light on some specific aspects of their thinking. In effect there is no such thing as passive learning and understanding, learning and understanding follows by asking questions and compare the expected responses with the actual. So the reader is exposed to a cross-examination of the philosophers of the past by Wedberg. Never mind that Wedberg in comparison is light-weight compared to those he puts on trial, anyone is entitled to ask questions. So by explaining what it is all about, at least from his own perspective, he provides a text-book of elementary philosophy, and by relating the thoughts of one to those of other philosophers, who thus are made to appear over and over again, (the repetition of which incidentally is a useful pedagogical device), he gives to those thoughts in addition to their intrinsic complexity a historical anchoring, i.e. being part of a social and evolving context, not unlike the fibers in a piece of rope that make up cohegency by being wrapped around each other. The philosophers of the past do not come across as giants larger than life with glorious accomplishments, but as flawed humans who nevertheless are able to make

valiant attempts. This has an inspiring effect on the reader as if wanting to join the fray. Philosophy not being a fixed subject of truths, but an untiring effort to achieve them, in which everyone with the right kind of temperament is in principle able to join.

In this his first volume he treats the Greek and the Medieval Scholastics. The Greek are as usual put on the stage as the initiators. In the beginning light was not separated from darkness, on the contrary religion, scientific speculations and philosophy were strands in a primitive but yet pregnant thought that were impossible to separate. To what extent were the pre-socratics philosophers and not scientists? A natural answer would be that lacking scientific methods they had to resort to speculation, and the philosophical aspect to their thinking was simply the audacity they displayed in their attempts and their exploration how far could be done with just pure thinking. Anaximandros explained that an earth put in empty infinite space would be suspended, because after all in what direction could it fall, all directions being equivalent? The atomic approach to matter is a profound approach, which has had a decisive influence on scientific tradition, and in fact it is hard to think of modern scientific method without it. Basically it is the faith in finite reduction, thus the feasibility of analysis, of disassembling an entity into its irreducible constituents, and then start a reassembly.

The poetic tradition of philosophical thinking is represented by Heraclites and Parmenedis. One stating that everything is in flux, the other that there is no change, no difference, as difference would mean the existence of nothing, and nothing cannot exist. Radically opposed as the two may appear, still they are also remarkably similar[1]. Popper used to chide Einstein that his theory of general relativity, really was a Parmenedian entity, unchanging and timeless, as time had been incorporated into it. In connection with Parmenedis one should not forget Zenon, the fascination of whose paradoxes still endures among philosophers to the puzzlement (and exasperation) of the mathematicians. Parmenedis teaches that change is impossible. What do we mean by something changes, is that not a contradiction in terms? What is changed is no longer itself, and thus there is no longer anything that has changed. Zenon transformed those rather vague arguments to something far more exact. Mathematics has clarified the issues (at least to the mathematicians), and maybe the vacuity of other empty thinking, seduced by the self-referential nature of language, can be similarly treated.

Clearly Parmenedis was an obvious forerunner of Plato (as was in a less obvious way Heraclites), and Plato is of course inescapable in any philosophical review[2]. Wedberg does not spend much time on him, skipping almost entirely the so to speak poetic aspects of Plato, and instead concentrating on the logical structure of Platos views. He emphasizes that Platos theory of forms provided the embryo of set-theory, relaying that Cantor supposedly was inspired by him. He also puts stress on the fact that to Plato Mathematics was very important as a subject of abstract and reliable thinking. But are the mathematical truths so foundational, after all they are built on unproven assertions? Plato supposedly dreamed of a dialectic method, which would rectify this. To Wedberg (or at least for

[1] Mathematician are used to transforming something changing to something constant, by the addition of a time variable.

[2] Philosophy is a tree, with many of the outmost branches having nothing to do with each other. So what does a Heidegger and an analytic philosopher in common? Plato!

the purpose of the book) the idea of this method is the most interesting thing in Platos philosophy, as it points towards the efforts of Frege and Russell to base mathematics on logic, as well as the attempts of formalized languages in general. In the same way Socrates interests Wedberg because of his interest in trying to analyze concepts. Both Socrates and Plato can be seen as reaction to the sophist tradition, which many see as the forerunners of post-modernism and relativism. On one hand an infatuation into the formal possibilities of reasoning, on the other hand a total lack of higher purpose and seriousness. Protagoras is still often quoted with his maxim that Man is the Measure of everything, meaning, as Wedberg points out, that morality is a matter of convention, a point of view later to be taken up by Hume.

Aristotle gets more attention (and sympathy) than Plato, partly for his wide empirical interests, and the modifications he thereby felt fit to subject the teachings of his master to. But once again Wedberg is mostly interested in the accomplishments of Aristotle on Logic. In particular his classification of the 256 types of syllogisms which can be combinatorially constructed and his identification of the twenty-four valid types, not through a tedious inspection, but through a process of generation. Wedberg notes that thus long before Euclid Aristotle presented a complete deductive treatment of a formal system (albeit not as complicated as that of geometry). Wedbergs interest in the Stoics is mostly confined to their attempts at formalizing logic. Truth-tables are supposed to be the unlikely invention of Wittgenstein, but of course they did exist in implicit form in Aristotle, and even more explicitly in the Stoics. But neither the latter nor Aristotle seem to have fully appreciated that an implication in which the first term is false is always true.

After the Hellenic period serious philosophy went into decline, and the decline would continue for centuries. Neoplatonism appears as a farcical version of Platonism. Why is that? Maybe because if Platonism is taken too literally, as they were by Plotinus, they become ridiculous. One cannot really separate Platonism from Plato. It is the personality of the philosopher, his irony and his anguish which provides a serving grace. Neoplatonism is concerned with the spiritual giving it an almost palpable existence which no doubt would have abhorred Plato. The interesting thing is the extent such ideas have influenced Christianity. Maybe more than the Old Testament. The Christian notion of God is closer to that of Platonism, especially neoplatonism than the anthropomorphic version provided by the Bible. This leads to the final section of the first volume, the scholastic philosophers of the mediveal ages. Religion and philosophy could not be separated at the time. In fact philosophy was to provide the intellectual credentials of religious thought. This required some juggling. The tradition was long though, Augustine certainly could be seen as the pioneer, combining religious devotion with sharp reasoning. His metaphysical speculations, as to the nature of time, are well-known and appreciated. He was also giving a proof of the existence of truths, later to be repeated by logicians such as Bolzano in the early 19th century, tying in with classical Greek paradoxes of self-referential liars, later to find its ultimate sophistication in the diagonal principle of Cantor and Gdels proof of incompleteness. His 'proof' simply was that if there are no truths, than this statement cannot be true, and thus the existence of truths is being established[3]. If you equate God

[3] Augustines proof was actually a bit different, as he was concerned about eternal truths, but the modifications are straight-forward

with (eternal) Truth, you are seductively close to a proof of God, something which would engage theologians for centuries[4] . The interesting phenomenon is of course the need to anchor faith in reason, something that on theological grounds can be seriously questioned, in fact be seen as a heresy. Still there is a puzzle here of a God. To what extent is a God constrained by necessity, and the most compelling necessity is that provided by logic, to which serious thought is inescapably constrained. The most elegant proof of Gods existence is the Ontological, where God is defined as the perfect being, and clearly existence is an attribute of perfection![5]. Thus by thought alone something far more potent is produced out of the hat. Of course the same kind of reasoning can be applied to the biggest number. Which is patently absurd, but maybe not the biggest number which will be ever thought of by men, this being assumed to be only a finite number. But then of course to this hypothetical number we can add one. The connections to the logical paradoxes of the early 20th century should be obvious. In a sense one can thing of the formal logicians of that period to be the descendants of medieval scholastic thinkers. An idea which no doubt would have abhorred (as well as amused?) Wedberg. But medieval thinking was not only about such abtruse thought. William of Ockham is still famous for his razor, a principle of scientific methodology which although elegant and seductive may be questionable. Ockham is also a proponent of nominalism (to some extent foreshadowed by Aristotle), a notion that has played an important role in early 20th century formalism, and also one which has been suggested as a sounder basis for mathematics. Nominalism is simply that only individuals exist, and that classes of individuals have no independent existence, thus cutting against the very core of set-theory.

The scholastic philosophers connected with classical Greek thought, to which they became increasingly familiar through the Arabic tradition which had preserved them through the early Dark Christian Ages. Thus they developed it as well, not only logic (with its fanciful applications) but also the notion of concept analysis and definitions. As such they belong to the mainstream of Western philosophy, and their reputation has suffered undeservedly, according to Wedberg, due to the contempt they suffered under people like Galilei.

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[4] Augustine was also interested in asserting inescapable empirical truths, such as the existence of the self, thereby anticipating Descartes, as well as having been anticipated by generations of anonymous refelcting individuals.

[5] The proof has of course many variants, one less succinct and hence probably closer to the originals in spirit, can be summarized as follows: Consider the most exalted being that thought is capable of forming. If that being does not exist, one can think of even more exalted thought, namely the one with the same attributes to which existence has been added