

A Response to the papers by J-M. Narbonne (Laval), P. Hoffmann (CNRS and the EPHE, Paris), and M. Haltemann, (Notre Dame), delivered to

“Neoplatonism and Continental Philosophy”

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During one of his early visits to Harvard, Étienne Gilson reported: “As for the history of philosophy, they don’t see any use for it. Perry is quite upset. He thinks that too much studying of the systems of others prevents young people from finding one of their own.” [Gilson in L.K. Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, The Étienne Gilson Series 6, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 150]. For the purposes of our discussion we may characterise “Continental,” as opposed to Anglo-American, philosophy by its self-conscious unification of philosophy, on the one hand, and the study and judgment about its history, on the other. All sorts of qualifications are, however, required. Less and less is this a contrast between geographical locations. Certainly there are now European, especially German universities, where philosophy is mostly done in the analytical tradition which originated in the English world. Equally, there are universities in the USA where philosophy is primarily “Continental.” So, though the traditions have escaped their geographical boundaries, we may say that Anglo-American philosophy is historically located, but that this location is more likely to be external to its own reflection than for Continental philosophy.

The Anglo-American tradition of philosophy is, of necessity, both historically located and gives itself this location, but it does so by its selection from out of the past of what it regards as genuine philosophy and, consequently, is able to provide it with norms and examples. It is situated not so much at the end of a history but in relation to a past in which it finds fragments of arguments it recognises as philosophical. As a result both of this external relation of philosophy to the past understood as history, and also of what in the past it regards as providing it with norms and examples, outside of Catholic academies it is often difficult to find the study of Neoplatonism and mediaeval philosophy in the Anglo-American world.

Things are far worse in Britain than in America and at Oxbridge than outside these centers. While things have improved a little for médiéval philosophy at Oxbridge, my arrival at Oxford in 1978 to write a thesis on Aquinas was preceded by the abolition of the single position in medieval philosophy upon the retirement of the sole occupant of the readership! With Neoplatonism there

things are worse. H.-D. Saffrey, recognises E.R. Dodds, who was Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, as “the pioneer of Proclean studies in the 20th century.” [Proclus, *Théologie platonicienne*, 6 vol., texte établi et traduit par H.-D. Saffrey et L.G. Westerink, (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1997), vi, vii-viii.] Saffrey praises him together with his French contemporary André Festugière. But except for a single junior lecturer in the Divinity Faculty at Cambridge there is no one teaching Neoplatonic texts at Oxford or Cambridge at present, and most importantly for our discussion here today, I cannot think of a single philosopher in England whose positions show any influence of Dodd’s studies or of the flowering of Neoplatonic studies in our time. As M. Hoffmann’s communication indicates, across the Channel, Émile Bréhier and Festugière have many heirs, and we may add that these are found among medievalists as well as among the students of late antiquity. Further, in the work of philosophers like Jacques Derrida (and we may add Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry, as other examples) the positive influence of these studies is manifest, as Mr Haltemann’s communication gives us proof.

To note both the more self-conscious connection of philosophy and its history in the Continental tradition is not by any means to solve the problems of how philosophy and historical study are and can be related, or, indeed, of how contemporary philosophy can include any positive relation to Neoplatonism. The insoluble *aporiae* and ruinous dilemmas in Gilson himself are warnings to us and the three papers to which I have the honour to respond bring these dilemmas again to our attention.

To put it very roughly: Gilson’s philological and historical accomplishments tempted him to confuse judgments of fact and philosophical creations, so that both were fatally weakened. His clarity about the religious context of médiéval philosophy produced insoluble dilemmas for drawing it into contemporary philosophy, which he understood as if it were still Modern. And, as for so many, identifying his own and Heidegger’s quest for Being was to become lost in the Black Forest. Philippe Hoffmann’s paper requires us to ask frank questions about the real relations of philosophy and history and about religion and philosophy. The result, I suggest, is that both the aim for historical understanding and actual **mis**understanding are necessary for philosophy. Here the Neoplatonists both provide a model and show how compelling is the necessity. Jean-Marc Narbonne’s paper illustrates particularly in the case of Heidegger’s relations to Neoplatonism how the misunderstanding of history which belongs to philosophy works and how it belongs to its creativity. Matthew Haltemann’s contribution forces us to consider whether Derrida’s is the right model for the relations of philosophy and its history, one which stands at

the other side both of Heidegger and of a thoughtful acceptance of what it means for Neoplatonism to belong to the history of philosophy.

Philippe Hoffmann reflects for us on the “necessary link between philosophy and philology” and intends “to show to what extent philology and history, far from thwarting the project of a philosophical reading of philosophical texts, allows us to refine it and to understand the texts within the existential perspective ... [of] their ancient authors and addressees.” He directs our attention to how, because their own philosophy was exegetical, the Neoplatonists were both philologists and historians. In illustrating the necessity of historical reconstruction on our part, so that we can understand something of the difference between Neoplatonic philosophy and our own, M. Hoffmann draws our attention to the religious character and context of this philosophy (a character connected with its exegetical nature) and how “they constructed philosophically a religious concept of faith.” In his rich apparatus he points us to an article by his teacher and the predecessor in his Chair, Pierre Hadot, a article which has much influenced his own work, “Philosophie exégèse et contresens” [originally published in 1968, reprinted in his *Études de philosophie ancienne, L’ane d’or* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres: 1998), 3-11.] I want to draw on this article and on a review article by Hadot published in 1959 entitled “Heidegger et Plotin” [in *Critique* 539-556] in responding to M. Hoffmann.

Hadot’s analysis of the *contresens* involved in Neoplatonic philosophy as exegesis is full of ironies and paradoxes. For example, philosophy is exegesis because the truth has been given in philosophical and poetic texts which have a sacred character, texts which are preserved and interpreted in a tradition whose own divine teachers give more or less authoritative access to the always true but obscurely profound meaning of these texts. Discovering this meaning gives impetus both to philology (so that the significance of the words is recovered) and to history (so that the tradition, its the steps forward and its missteps, enable the opening of this deep fullness) However, the same conviction about the truth of these past revelations requires that the texts be misinterpreted.

In his annex “On the Concord of philosophies in late Neoplatonism,” while summarizing Hadot’s essay, M. Hoffmann lists the falsifying moves whose purpose was to manifest the truth and concord of the authorities, these moves all those acquainted with either médiéval scholasticism or the interpretation of the Bible will recognise. They are systematization, accommodation of difference, discovery of what the texts must “really” mean in opposition to their obvious sense. These falsifications occur because the purposes of the interpreters are different from those of the authors and also because what they hold to be indubitably true is also, in fact, different. But the paradoxes and the surprises do

not end there. Hadot points out that, with such a mentality, what is new and creative in Neoplatonic philosophy as exegesis must come from that misunderstanding of the texts which is required in order to adapt them to its own necessities. One of these is the need for concord. Bringing opposed doctrines into concord produces such wonderfully fruitful notions as that of the motionless motion, enabling the concordance of Plato and Aristotle precisely where they are most at odds. Aquinas misinterpreted the text of Aristotle's *De Anima* through this notion, communicated to him from Simplicius via the Arabs, then used it in order to ascribe life to God in his *Summa Theologiae*.

The differences between the Neoplatonists and their authorities required the creative misinterpretation of texts from the past held to be true precisely in order to manifest their truth. In "Heidegger et Plotin" when interpreting Heidegger's thought as a kind of new neo-Platonism, Hadot points out that in deepening the understanding of any past author we always misrepresent his meaning. Hadot writes: "This phenomenon, constant in the history of philosophy, comes out of the evolution of philosophical understanding: it is impossible to remain faithful to a tradition without taking up the formulas of the creator of the tradition, but it is equally impossible to employ these formulas without giving them a sense which the ancient philosopher would not even be able to suspect. One believes then sincerely that the new sense corresponds to the profound intention of this philosopher" (542). Complete historical retrieval is always impossible, but when we sincerely believe that we are recovering the authentic meaning, the approximate character of the result is creative. Thus our situation is not very different from that of the Neoplatonists.

This is true in two ways. First because we cannot really ever recover the ancient context completely or achieve complete sympathy. Hadot points out that ancient rhetoric remains lost to us. We might add, relative to M. Hoffmann's communication, that one implication of this is that the *Life of Proclus* he cited is useful for discovering the historical Proclus in about the same way that the Gospels may be used to discover the "historical Jesus." Written from within the School and to assist its mission, this is in fact a eulogy portraying Proclus within the patterns which the Platonic school prescribed for him as that pattern was understood by his immediate successors [see Marc Lebiez, *Éloge d'un philosophe resté païen: Proclus (412-486)*, Ouverture philosophique (Paris/ Montréal: L'Harmattan, 1998)]. Any difference between the pattern and Proclus has been erased and is no longer recoverable. This is really a representation of the ideal "divine" successor of Plato as this figure was understood in the 5th century. Its ideal of the philosopher is not and cannot be ours, and this will become more and more apparent, the more it is filled out. Can we enter into the mentality that

prayed to the Sun three times daily not merely as the visible image and agent of the Good but as a higher spiritual being? If history were to require this sympathy of us, it would make philosophy impossible.

Second, Hadot concludes his essay on *contresens*, with a comment on how, in this postmodern period, there is “a return to an exegetical mode of thought” (10). With the end of the modern “mythe,” as he calls it, of the historical reality or philosophical possibility of an “absolute beginning” in philosophy, “philosophy has become conscious of its historical and linguistic conditioning.” I note two points here. The end of a notion of an autonomous reason which would permit philosophy’s absolute beginning does also open us to the mixture of philosophy and religion which Proclus displays and teaches, even if we find it impossible to sit at the feet of a divine philosopher or to enter his particular religion. This seems to me to suggest something both of what history can give philosophy and also its limits. Further, if postmodern philosophy has lost the autonomy and objectivity of science which would permit its having an absolute beginning, philology and history have not come into possession of what philosophy has lost. We seek no true and original *datum* manifest to an unconditioned *theoria*. M. Hoffmann writes of historical and philological studies as enabling an “approach” to a conversion toward the past. In virtue of their necessary inadequacy, such relative conversions toward what is irrecoverable in itself serve as well as necessitate, the necessary misrepresentation of its history which philosophy requires in order to be creative.

Within this framework which M. Hoffmann has given and suggested, we may place both M. Narbonne’s exposure of how Heidegger misrepresented Neoplatonism and Mr. Haltemann’s treatment of Derrida’s Plotinus.

M. Narbonne shows beyond doubt that Heidegger misinterpreted Neoplatonism. With violent hands he forced it within a history of the confusion of Being with beings, a forgetting of the difference which was given a definitive and fatal form by Plato. By Heidegger’s account, in Plato Being is given in true or universal being, the idea or form, what is present for thought and can really be known, but which exists separately from particulars in the realm of becoming, particulars which both are and are not. In two kinds of beings, universal and particular and in their relations, Being is exhausted. Transcendence, even the transcendence of the Good beyond thought and being, is no more than the transcendence of universal true being in respect to the particular. Whether or not this is an adequate interpretation of Plato, it is without doubt a misrepresentation of Plotinus and his successors for whom the transcendence of the One in respect to *Nous* is of an altogether different kind than of the transcendence of the universal, the truly knowable object of thought, in respect to the sensible particular.

This difference is very evident to us who approach Neoplatonic texts through at least half a century in which this difference is the one most emphasized by Neoplatonic scholarship, as well as in the philosophy and theology which belongs to, receives, motivates and comprehends its results. In consequence, Emmanuel Lévinas commenting on the *Enneads*, can write: "The unity of the One excludes, in effect, all multiplicity, whether it be that which takes shape already in the distinction between thinker and thought or even in the identity of the identical conceived under the guise of self-consciousness where, in the history of philosophy, one will go someday to find it." [Emmanuel Lévinas, "De l'un à l'autre: transcendance et temps," in idem, *Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 141.] Lévinas, as Jacques Derrida also recognised, can write this in virtue of a moment which Derrida describes as "the dawn of a new Platonism, which is the day after the death of Hegelianism." [Jacques Derrida, *La Dissemination* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1972), 122-3]. But this dawn, which overcoming the Hegelian interpretation of the One as the self-conscious *Nous* of Aristotle simplified, is in great part owed to the Heidegger who misrepresented Neoplatonism. How Heidegger helped create this new interpretation despite his own misinterpretation is instructive for our consideration of the relations of philosophy and historical study.

The Quest for Being to which Heidegger would awaken us by showing the difference of Being from beings requires that the language of negation be given a positive import. Being is not, is not defined as the object for thought, and is unspeakable within the structures of objectifying speech. It does not stand alongside beings even as their cause so as to become one among them. Heidegger's quest became or expressed the quest of many for whom metaphysics had become the objectifying rationality which expressed or caused our blindness. In fact Heidegger's quest awakened philosophers and theologians to the character of the Neoplatonic One. After this recognition they became free also to see that in virtue of his misinterpretation of Neoplatonism and its tradition even within Western metaphysics Heidegger's account of the fatal history of Occidental forgetting of Being was mortally defective. In consequence, we witness in M. Narbonne's paper historical studies which use the very understanding of the transcendence of the One which was significantly enabled by Heidegger's Quest for Being in order to undermine his philosophy. Philosophy which requires an account of its history as essential to its own construction is also creatively overcome by the historical undermining of the very universal judgments which made it philosophy and history simultaneously. In Jacques Derrida Mr Haltemann has presented us with a deconstruction which has no narrative of its own and is situated between metaphysics and Heidegger's

critique. Its playing field is the place where history and philosophy meet but where neither has an objective or absolute beginning. In terms of the analysis we are using, philosophical activity as Derrida practices it could appear as a variety of Hadot's postmodern exegesis where philosophy is conscious of its historical and linguistic conditions and is and must be endlessly fecund because of the creativity of its *contresens*. For Hadot, in distinction from the ancient Neoplatonists, such *pensée exégétique* now concerns itself with "human works in their totality and is conscious of its extents and limits." (10) This could also appear as a way of understanding the Derridean portrayal of reality as text.

Mr Haltemann is not wrong then to find a useful comparison of Derrida and Plotinus. Such comparisons have been made for a long time. One of the first is in Pierre Aubenque's very important article "Plotin et le dépassement de l'ontologie grecque classique," [*Le Néoplatonisme (Royaumont 9-13 juin 1969)*, Colloques internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche scientifique, Sciences humaines (Paris: CNRS, 1971), 101-108] published in 1971. Aubenque refers to *De la grammatologie* which had just appeared in 1967 and notes that Derrida's deconstruction as "dépassement de la métaphysique" "finds its exact prefiguration in Neoplatonism." (108) Derrida's method of placing negations and affirmations together, so that negation is as positive as affirmation, is, as M. Narbonne notes, also the place where Heidegger parallels Neoplatonic thinkers. Jean Trouillard who is a 20th century reincarnation of these thinkers looks to the "absence which all presence implies" and "to the positivity and efficacy of absence" ["Pluralité spirituelle et unité normative selon Blondel," *Archives de philosophie*, Janvier-Mars, 1961, 21-28 at 27]. Trouillard clearly and rightly regards such a view of negation as Neoplatonic. So Mr Haltemann is correct to find in Derrida what Derrida also admits: an important degree of similarity between the methods and even some of the content of Derridean deconstruction, on the one hand, and of Plotinian reflection, on the other. However, we must equally be on our guard against any confusion.

The dialogue between Jean-Luc Marion and Derrida about negative theology brings out strongly the difference between Derrida's negation and that of a negative theology of Neoplatonic inspiration. [See Jacques Derrida. "How to avoid speaking: Denials," in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, eds. S. Budick and W. Iser (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), trans. from "Comment ne pas parler: Dénégations," in *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*, (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987), 535-595.] The latter is for Derrida only a delayed arrival at the point where the Good gives itself to union with the soul willing to abandon itself to erotic contemplation and to the

coincide of opposites in the absolutely simple. In my view, despite differences in language, of the ways of balancing the positive and negative, of the relations of inner and outer in the ascent, and of *eros* and *nous* in the union, this is a right understanding of the *telos* of negative theology. This understanding will apply generally to the pagan Neoplatonists and to their Christian followers from Gregory of Nyssa through Augustine, the Pseudo-Denys, Bonaventure, Aquinas and to their heirs in the late Middle Ages and modernity. Derrida rejects all of this as coming in the end to presence. It falls to M. Marion to defend Christian negative theology while denying that his own position is Neoplatonic. In my view Marion's denial is an excellent example of contemporary fruitful *contresens* functioning to make philosophy creative precisely in the misunderstanding of its own history. On that subversive thought inspired by M. Hoffmann's and M. Hadot's reflections on philosophy as exegesis, I close.

Wayne J. Hankey
Department of Classics
Dalhousie University and the University of King's College
Halifax, Canada
B2H 3J5