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Reinhold Urmetzer

On Seduction (2)

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Preface

Many years ago in a library I came across a volume of Cicero, the “Letters to Atticus.”¹ I thumbed through the book, seeking nothing in particular, and was curious about certain passages that did not in any way represent the preconceptions of that dreadfully boring Latin I had held since my time in school. I discovered there a very human, very lively, and interesting contemporary—of the forename Marcus Tullius—who conversed passionately, in great detail and from a comprehensive education with his best friend about matters of daily politics, of their view of the world, and of private affairs.

Now here was no rigid and exalted-for-all-time marble bust looking down on me from its pedestal, but rather a human being like you and me.

Starting from Cicero’s works I felt my way slowly forward, towards further Roman literature, first the lyricists Catullus and Juvenal, then to Horace and the literary circle around Maecenas and Augustus. I discovered in the Roman works affinities between the conditions of society of former times and those of the present, not to say anything of the forms of society, of “decadences,” of which one so colorfully complains, even nowadays and especially in the United States.

1 The volume in question is Cicero, „Atticus-Briefe,“ in German and Latin from Helmut Kasten (Heimeran-Verlag München 1980). A suitable and freely available English translation is from Evelyn Shuckburgh, “Letters to Atticus,” published in 1923.

In any case, Roman antiquity was for quite some time no longer as alien as I had believed—quite the opposite. Imperialism, striving for power, oppression and exploitation of the poor, multiculturalism, disorientation and “anything goes,” luxury, decadence—I understood, now all of a sudden, the ardently pursued discourse in the United States over the “good life” in Classical times and the present.

Now I systematically combed through the entire corpus of Roman literature, to name but a few works. From the Letters of Cicero, of Plutarch or Pliny on contemporary poetry, or on the novel (Petronius), or the writing of history (Tacitus), I finally arrived, whether I wanted to or not, at the philosophical schools, which played—both as a way of life and an instance of morality—an exceedingly important and largely underestimated role in the contemporary lives of the Roman and Greeks. Even our present is largely determined by those past debates—just as much as from Christian, Jewish, or Islamic faith.

The present volume is thus essentially concerned with classical thought, which has occupied my interests up to the immediate present.

Conversely I am just as much concerned with the philosophies of the present. “Postmodern” is applied again and again as an expression and term of art—and not only in the USA—to describe a change, changing times, even a change of era. Under the influence of post-

modernism, a worldwide relativization and critique of western thought, communication, morals and life-goals, even meaning in life, has established itself.

Whereas on the other hand even the term “postmodern” has been understood, in Great Britain and Germany especially, rather and mostly negatively, and has faced rejection. In its stead Jürgen Habermas speaks of the “enlightenment over the Enlightenment,”² others of a “revision of modernism,” etc. etc.

In fact, the present confusions and disorientations in thought are associated with those French philosophers who were the prophets of this development and dissolution-phenomenon. Their disruptive maneuver—affecting the socialist and capitalist economic systems (and their underlying views of the world)—as well as their general and all-encompassing relativizations (anything goes), who in their argumentation stood in direct proximity to the Classical Skeptics, thus also come to us draped in a fascinatingly æsthetic (or even theatrical) event and performance costume, such as with Derrida. Lastly, once again, an æstheticization of thinking and speaking, for which our French neighbors have always admitted a great weakness. I need only mention such names as Voltaire, de Sade, Rousseau, Camus, Sartre, Baudrillard ...

2 The German term for the Enlightenment, “Aufklärung,” may also be translated as “clearing up,” with the sense of addressing remaining issues. The German rendering, “Aufklärung über die Aufklärung” thus contains a felicitous double-meaning difficult to reproduce in translation.

Not least of all, the Linguistic Turn in the Anglo-American analytical schools, which has proven to be an exceedingly influential research and theoretical avenue in the aftermath of Ludwig Wittgenstein, had dug its own grave. Analytical philosophy, also called the “philosophy of science,” might well be, in the domain of a theory of knowledge, a plausible “value-neutral” and effective philosophy of the natural sciences and of information theory. Thus, a philosophy of calculating and measuring, of digitalization and computer languages and robots (among others). Whereby we humans may perhaps already have become not unlike robots, if this thinking is already seen as the only true and self-evident possibility. And we are even already prepared to abandon entirely terms such as “humanism,” “humanity,” or the responsibility of human beings towards nature, all in the name of the newly-christened “trans-humanism.”

And yet analytical philosophy remains influential, as a theory and practice tangential to broad social and political domains such as advertising, manipulation, control technologies not only of machines, but even of whole societies—though it is so neither in university circles nor in politics. Furthermore, we have so immunized ourselves against every criticism outside of personal language-games (discourse), even outside of the prevailing economic dogmatism, that in my opinion even for such a would-be influencer, as the German philosophers of the Frankfurt School affected to be—in that they attempted to penetrate this lion’s den alongside Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas, and Apel—it is

no longer possible, is not even worthwhile.

Yet where do we now stand, at the end of humanistic thinking, perhaps even at the end of Aristotelian logic and argumentation? The neologism “Trumpification” in word and thought. Where only Nietzsche’s will to power, the “creative” economic structuring, if not outright plundering, has survived in the domain of philosophy? Where at every turn, and loudly, the dominance of artificial intelligence (AI) is bespoken, which leaves philosophizing behind as superfluous? When this is even seen as a necessary step in evolution towards the overcoming and abolition of traditional conceptions of human beings? Perhaps even of humankind as a free and self-determining animal?

Whither this path of Western thought, towards what new future?

The Classic period produced, in its heterogeneous ideological schools multiple wholly different propositions on the necessity of philosophic thinking and a generalizable school for living, which remain worthy of consideration, if we have not yet wholly forgotten (or suppressed or abolished) thought in terms of general philosophy.

Without truth, there are no lies. Thus there must also metalinguistically exist a timeless conception of truth, justice, and of beauty. And the idea of humanity, of humanness, and help, will just as necessarily continue to exist, if we wish not to become slaves of the new

“trans-humans,” that is, once more beholden to supernatural powers.

Lübeck, 4th of July, 2018