Contemporary Encounters with Ancient Metaphysics

Greenstine, Abraham

Published by Edinburgh University Press

Greenstine, Abraham.
Contemporary Encounters with Ancient Metaphysics.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/65988.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/65988

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2306713
PART IV

POSTSCRIPT
From metaphysics to ethics: what kind of transition is signaled by this title? Certainly it is not a matter of progressing from an axiomatic foundation to its corollaries, or shifting attention from one discrete domain to another. Just as this volume has not explored unidirectional “influences” (Latin influo, “flow into”) from ancients to moderns, but rather cultivated their ongoing interactions, similarly we do not want to think metaphysics as a reservoir from which ethics are “derived” (Latin deriuo, “channel away”). Contemporary continental philosophies, like most Greek and Roman philosophies, tend to develop as complex Gestalten: metaphysical, ethical, and many other practico-theoretical facets co-emerge out of inchoate impulses, guided by various reflective practices. This could be illustrated from many preceding chapters. For example, to return to the middle of this book, and the beginning of Greek philosophy, Bartlett shows how the Parmenidean constellation of thinking, being, and not-being is reinvigorated in Badiou’s “event.” Badiou’s evental politics and erotics are not additions to this foundation, but other facets of the same emerging Gestalt. Similarly, on the daring but erudite reconstruction of Peter Kingsley, Parmenides’ ontology, like his poetic imagery, belongs to an entire program of initiatory rebirth.’ Thinking metaphysics and ethics together acknowledges the organic composition of so-called “first philosophy” with self-cultivation and self-conversion.

Rather than revisiting moments from the preceding chapters, in this postscript I would like to illustrate this point with a contemporary philosopher who has so far remained in this book’s footnotes: Bernard Stiegler. Stiegler is best known for his philosophy of technics, which seeks to overturn “metaphysics,” that is transcendent and originary regimes of being and truth, on at least two
fronts: first (1) he posits a “default of origin,” which all organismic systems endlessly supplement, thus transforming themselves toward a completion they never achieve; second (2) he emphasizes the ways in which human systems distribute themselves – their drives, desires, cognition, and so on – across technical objects. The upshot of (1) is that humans and the reality we disclose are always becoming, never fixed in being; the upshot of (2) is not only to entrench and complicate (1), since human self-supplementing is distributed across both social and technical organs, but also to implode most existing metaphysical schemes, since they exclude technology. For Stiegler, this overcoming of “metaphysics” has deep ethico-political motivations: unless we can effectively critique how our psychosocial, economic, and ecological reality comes to be, we will be unable to solve geopolitical problems or make our lives worth living.  

Stiegler frames his anti-metaphysical technics with an extremely uncharitable reading of Plato’s Phaedrus and Protagoras, which builds on Derrida’s well-known chapter, “Plato’s Pharmacy.” But despite his belief that ancient philosophers neglected technology and his hostility to “metaphysics,” Stiegler draws opportunistically on Greek and Roman philosophemes that we would usually classify as metaphysical – in other words, doctrines or images that concern being, change, causation, time, and so on. In the process he not only enriches his own theorizing, but also allows us to invest ancient texts with new significance. Here I will briefly visit just two examples.

HERACLITUS

I begin with a typically elliptical fragment of Heraclitus, which Stiegler creatively decompresses. “Human minds,” Stiegler writes,

are never satisfied in the state of domestication [. . .] On the contrary, they always need to create fantasies that escape from that control, and lie hidden in the shadowy place of mysteries at the heart of those crypts to which, as Heraclitus says, physis (‘being’ for the mystagogue Heidegger) loves (philein) to withdraw (kruptestai), where there is light, or fire, or at least warmth – the very crypt before which Heraclitus wants to place his Laws.  

Here Stiegler’s principal reference is obviously fragment DK B123: φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ. Mainstream anglophone scholars translate “nature loves to hide” or “the real constitution is accustomed to hide itself.” For them, φύσις is the referent for what Heraclitus calls “the shared λόγος” or simply “the λόγος.” Thus the fragment alludes to the subject’s difficulty in perceiving, cognizing, and expressing (λόγος) the paradoxical harmonies of objects-out-there (φύσις). By contrast, Pierre Hadot translates the fragment as “what unveils is also what veils,” or “what is born wants to die.” Here we are on rather different philosophical terrain. The “mere metaphor” of what nature “loves” to do, its regularities, has become a deep mystery about impersonal organic
drives, which blur the subject-object dichotomy. Stiegler hints at a similar reading, beginning with his gloss of φύσις as “‘being’ for the mystagogue Heidegger.” For Heidegger, Heraclitean φύσις designates the transcendental clearing in which beings are disclosed by and for humans. As he translates the fragment, “Being [emerging appearance] intrinsically inclines toward self-concealment.” In other words, disclosure always forecloses other configurations of reality. Beyond the finite dwelling of Dasein lie “mysteries,” as Stiegler signals by speaking of “the shadowy place of mysteries” and calling Heidegger a “mystagogue.”

So Stiegler appropriates Heraclitean φύσις as a principle of beings’ emerging appearance, unveiling, or birth, while redeploying the infinitive κρύπτεσθαι to allude to beings’ correlative disappearance, veiling, and death: a mystery. This reading is obviously metaphysical, but what does it mean?

It is precisely by adding ethical and political nuances that Stiegler sheds light on this question. First, in a manner appropriate to Heraclitus’ polysemous Greek, Stiegler elaborates κρύπτεσθαι into two French forms: he speaks of “those crypts to which, as Heraclitus says, physis loves to withdraw.” While “to withdraw” (se retirer) is an uncontroversial translation for the present middle/passive infinitive κρύπτεσθαι, “crypts” (cryptes) is not philologically motivated. By supplementing “to retire” with “crypts,” underground chambers of burial and worship, Stiegler hints that the mystery of concealing and dying requires cultivation. One of the key messages of Taking Care of Youth and the Generations is that intergenerational care (parenting, education, and the institutions and technology that support them) sustains the “organs” and “circuits” of desire and belief. Desire and belief involve selecting from the manifold of experience in order to configure a past and aspirations for the future. They are the sublimated and socialized products of each person’s or community’s impetus toward supplementing their originary lack. Since Stiegler often names this care philia, from φιλία, the verb φιλεῖ (“loves”) in φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ reads as an allusion to the inseparability of worlding from interpersonal caring. Love, friendship, worship, and cultivation: taken together with the technologies across which they are distributed, these are the psychosocial “organs” that support shared cognitive and affective orientations, through which beings emerge from φύσις.

But this psychosocial sharing must not exclude the mystery of Being. When Stiegler says that Heraclitus “wants to place his laws” before this crypt, he presumably has in mind the report that Heraclitus deposited his book in the temple of Artemis at Ephesus. Artemis is a goddess of borders and transitions, which often involve the explosion and reconstitution of regimes of meaning. Like her brother Apollo, sometimes considered the patron deity of philosophy, she has both civilizing and enigmatic, terrifying aspects. Her temple is thus a thought-provoking symbol for the “infinite” or “incalculable” spaces of concealment required by the unveiling of φύσις. Stiegler writes that “human minds [. . .] are never satisfied in the state of domestication [. . .] On the contrary, they always need to create fantasies that escape from that control.” In other words, because of our originary default and complex distribution of energies.
across technologies, human psyches and societies cannot stand still; we must continuously evolve toward our individuation-to-come. We can only do this if we refrain from freezing and mortifying our hopes and beliefs. That is why it is not only nature that loves to hide, but human fantasy that “lies hidden” in the crypt, “where there is light, or fire, or at least warmth.” “Escaping” (échapper à) and “lying hidden” (gésir) are additional Stieglerian supplements for the meaning potential in κρύπτεσθαι. It is not only shared psychosocial organs that must be nourished, but also the infinite beyond in which these organs “grow” (φύσις < φύω, “grow”). The sharing of norms must be complemented by critical management of this un-domesticable facet of human individuation. In this way Heraclitean fire will continue to provide its world-disclosing “light” and life-supporting “warmth,” sustaining the world and the people and societies in it.

ARISTOTLE

We can further illuminate the interplay of metaphysics and ethics in Stiegler’s philosophy by turning to his appropriation of Aristotelian theology. Though Aristotle’s works are intact and prosaic, unlike Heraclitus’ ambiguous fragments, his esoteric style and theoretical complexity make his god as puzzling as Heraclitus’ nature. On Stephen Menn’s reading, which cogently situates Aristotle in the context of his predecessors, the key features of Aristotle’s deity are absolute goodness and continuously active thinking. This would be clear enough, but it becomes challenging when we add that, in order to be absolutely good and continuous, god’s thinking must not have any independent content: god must be self-sufficient “thinking of thinking [νόησις νοήσεως].” Furthermore, Aristotle wants this “thinking of thinking” to be the principle of all activity in the universe, and to hold this position by virtue of its lovability: in some sense, everything must be oriented toward love of god. Finally, he notoriously concludes his Nicomachean Ethics with the assertion that the best life for humans lies in godlike thinking, even though such contemplation is only intermittently possible. This is hard to understand, not only because it threatens to render superfluous the previous nine books on moral virtues, but also because god’s thinking is neither readily intelligible nor, to many modern readers, particularly attractive. What form of thinking is this? How does it organize the universe? How and why does that universe love it? Why should humans emulate it?

A good entry point into Stiegler’s creative solution to this puzzle is his warning about “the destruction . . . of theos, of that which according to Aristotle animates each soul, as absolute singularity.” Let us focus on the claim that Aristotle’s god is an “absolute singularity.” What does this mean?

For Stiegler, there are basically two types of singularities. First are the infinite and incalculable objects projected by interpersonal caring and its technologies, which give that caring and technology their orientation. Examples include art, justice, virtue, beauty, the triangle, the bee, or the French language. The infinite object of justice, for instance, (ideally) gives orientation to education,
legislation, legal proceedings, and their techno-material apparatuses. In Stiegler’s terminology, such objects do not “exist,” but “consist”: “justice certainly does not exist on earth, and will never exist. Who, however, would dare to suggest that this idea does not consist, and does not merit being maintained, and even cultivated in young souls [. . .]?” Here we see the second domain of Stieglerian “singularities.” Parental and educational “cultivation” of “young souls” not only “maintains” the consistence of justice, it also singularizes those souls. In other words, infinite objective singularities like Justice facilitate the infinite (inter) subjective process of self-singularization. They provide an organizing space for people’s and groups’ self-projection toward their futures. This is why Stiegler says that god, as a singularity, “animates each soul”: if objective singularities admitted interpretive closure, this space would close up, threatening our sense of being alive. At the same time, the “existence” of worldly things would fade into mere “subsistence”: there would be an “interruption of making-world – of the psychic and collective individuation that a world is.” In other words, if the psychosocial and technical organs of worlding sickened, things would lose their haecceity, their existence: in Heraclitean terms, φύσις would be entombed in the mortifying concealment of its own crypt.

Why does Stiegler call god an absolute singularity? Because it is the very plane on which objective singularities consist, and toward which subjective singularities are oriented. On this basis, we can formulate Stiegler’s implicit solutions to the conundrums with which we began. What form of thinking is god? How does it organize the universe? For Stiegler, god is the principle of those singularities which are the condition of the possibility of the thinking that makes both individuals and the world exist. In other words, god’s consistence gathers and guarantees the consistence of justice, the bee, the French language, and so on. And those consistences permit the existence (emergence into being) of acts of justice, individual bees in all their specific and conspecific variations, and French grammar, vocabulary, and its dialects. How and why does the universe love god? Because, as the gathering of singularities, god is the object of the ceaseless self-supplementing projection of all individuals, groups, and technical apparatuses. (In this regard, god’s place in atheistic culture is taken by the Freudo-Lacanian Thing.) In other words, god represents a remedy for our originary lack, inasmuch as the process of remediation makes us and our world exist.

Why, finally, should humans emulate god? On the one hand, it is perhaps not even intelligible for humans to emulate god as horizon of singularities. But if, following Aristotle, we choose to represent this horizon as the continuous actualization of singularities, then we can follow Stiegler in speaking of the need to “elevate” our psychosocial and technical organs toward this actualization: we must sublimate our individual and collective neediness, since otherwise we either succumb to repressive norms, whose singularities have died, or act out addictively or destructively. Unlike many readings of Aristotle, this by no means implies abandoning moral virtues for theoretical contemplation. The challenge to “elevate” ourselves toward god comes up in every psychosocial and techno-material domain.
CONCLUSION

It will be evident that Stiegler does not aspire to rigorous scholarly readings; rather, he creatively supplements and redeploy texts with a view to his own ends. For him, texts are elements of interpersonal distributed systems, whose vitality lies in ongoing individuation. In this postscript I have focused on illuminating how ancient metaphysical ideas help him to express ethico-political problems. At the same time, and in a similar spirit of supplementation, I have oriented my commentary on Stiegler toward classic interpretive challenges at the interface between metaphysics and ethics in Heraclitus and Aristotle.

Could ancient metaphysics, in turn, nourish further developments in Stieglerian ethics and politics? Stiegler identifies the apparatuses of hyperindustrial consumerism and mobile digital media as the greatest modern challenges to the existence of individuals and their worlds. The solution is to “elevate” these systems toward the horizon of singularities, which Stiegler constantly presents in cultic, mystagogic, and spiritual terms. At the same time, he insists that the god of traditional religions is dead. Could the “soft,” pantheistic polytheisms of ancient philosophy help us to develop the spiritual organs we need – especially those of us insufficienitly “inspired” by the Pauline spirituality of Gianni Vattimo, Julia Kristeva, or John Caputo? Ancient metaphysics, with its polymorphous relations to “the gods,” undoubtedly has much still to offer to contemporary continental ethics.

NOTES

1. Peter Kingsley, In the Dark Places of Wisdom and Reality.
2. Stiegler repeats and varies these core positions across his publications. He explicitly engages with the field of “distributed cognition” in “Relational Ecology and the Digital Pharmakon.” See also the bibliography for the main texts under discussion. Further, I made use of the collection of resources at arsindustrialis.org/les-pages-de-bernard-stiegler.
6. For example, at DK B1, 2, 50, 80, 89, 113–14.
9. Brackets in original ([Introduction [87]]).


15. *Youth* p. 38.

16. Stephen Menn, “Aristotle and Plato on God as Nous and as the Good.”


23. *Decadence* p. 105; see also *Worth Living* pp. 64–5.


28. *Decadence* p. 137; *Epimetheus* p. 235; *Youth* pp. 81–2.


### BIBLIOGRAPHY


