

Questions Of Hermeneutics And Exegesis

For over twenty years questions of hermeneutics and exegesis in relation to religions, ideologies, and philosophies have interested and concerned me, leading to my conjecture that the use of denotata to express a revelation, a spirituality, an idea, an ideal, or a philosophy, results in not only a dialectic of opposites - for example in the Gospels of Christianity ἁμαρτία (conventionally interpreted in Gospel translations as sin) contrasted with 'righteousness' (and being saved, rewarded by God with everlasting life in Heaven) and φαῦλος (conventionally in interpreted in Gospel translations as evil) contrasted with 'good' - but also in problems of exegesis: as in how Hellenistic Greek is expounded in terms of a modern language such as English. Thus, is the interpretation of 'sin' from the Hellenistic Greek ἁμαρτία imposing a meaning that may not have been germane to the milieu of such an ancient period in all or certain instances? [1]

In the matter of the Gospels of John did the author use ἁμαρτία to express, to expound, something - 'sin' - which might well have been a foreign concept to speakers of the Greek of that time when there was a common belief among many of them in a hierarchy of pagan deities and of propitiation (such as offering gifts or a sacrifice to the gods) for misdeeds or for 'offending' a god or gods or to ask for their help?

Consider the tractates of the Corpus Hermeticum some arguably written around the time or not long after that Gospel, with the Poemandres tractate centred around θεός as in this from v.3:

φημι ἐγώ, Μαθεῖν θέλω τὰ ὄντα καὶ νοῆσαι τὴν τούτων φύσιν καὶ γνῶναι τὸν θεόν·

"I answered that I seek to learn what is real, to apprehend the physis of beings, and to have knowledge of theos." [2]

Is theos here the Jehovah of the Hebrews and the God of Christianity? Or is it better to understand theos in a non-anthropomorphic way as Being, the source of beings, mortal and otherwise? If the interpretation is 'God' then this tractate, and many of the others, arguable express early Christian weltanschauungen with an implicit dialectic of opposites, unlike the neutral, non-anthropomorphic Being which can metaphysically be understood as 'the divine', the numinous. [3]

Such a dialectic, as I have previously endeavoured to explain, [4] invariably leads to conflict both internal, within some individuals, and external between individuals and entities, such as religious or political groups or factions who or which claim to have the correct or a better interpretation or understanding of their beliefs or ideology. Hence extremism [5] and the suffering that such extremism causes.

My personal experiences, over some four decades, and my subsequent reflexion on that experience, have led me to conclude that, rather than denotata, the personal experiencing of the numinous through empathy and pathei-mathos is of fundamental importance in understanding both our physis (φύσις) - and thus our relation to Being and to beings - and Being, the numinous, itself. [6]

To illustrate the dialectic of denotata and the subsequent suffering caused there is the National Socialism of Germany between 1933 and 1945. This was a way of life centred around denotata such as kampf, nation, and ethnic identity, with individuals judged by, and expected to judge others by, the primary criterion of ethnicity, with particular ethnicities assigned a certain value (high or low), and each individual judged by how well they adhered to the duty they were expected to do in respect of their nation (their land) and the ethnicity they were said to belong to or believed they belonged to. In addition, kampf between individuals, ethnicities, and nations was considered healthy and necessary, with such struggle revealing the worth of individuals and thus those considered fit to lead and assume positions of authority.

This German National Socialist way of life was therefore a collective, supra-personal, one with the empathy and pathei-mathos of individuals, and the personal judgement and compassion derived from them, ignored or suppressed in favour of obedience to the 'will of the collective' (the folk, the nation) embodied by Der Führer and through the führerprinzip and with disobedience not only disapproved of but liable to be punished. This dialectic of opposites - of certain types of individuals or ways of behaviour being better than others and with The Third Reich having a particular destiny achievable through kampf - naturally led to the impersonal harshness of the Nürnberger Gesetze, as well as to the invasion of Poland and thence to the Second World War with the attendant deaths and suffering of millions of human beings. German National Socialism was thus from its beginnings to its ending in 1945 an extremism whose principles, causes, and characteristics promoted and incited harsh, uncompassionate, actions.

In contrast, the personal empathy and pathei-mathos of individuals provides a natural balance devoid of denotata, expressed or implied, and can only promote individual actions consistent with compassion. It cannot be extrapolated from the individual experiencing to form anything supra-personal expressed by a denotatum or by some denotata such as an -ism or an -ology be such religious, ideological, or political or otherwise, since in doing so its individual physis, its natural nameless balance, is replaced sooner or later by a dialectic of opposites.

In practical terms this implies the mortal individual could, at best, be a fallible example or inspiration for some others, since to claim or to be perceived by others as other than fallible and mortal, and other than a possible and personal inspiration, is ὑβρις (hubris) and a contradiction of the nameless balance that for centuries we have, according to my

understanding, erroneously denoted by appellations such as θεός, ὁ θεός, and God with the inevitable dialectic of exegesis and conflict and of suffering.

In relation to hubris,

σὺ δ' ἄκουε δίκης, μηδ' ὕβριν ὄφελλε:
ὑβρις γάρ τε κακὴ δειλῶ βροτῶ: οὐδὲ μὲν ἐσθλὸς
ῥηιδίως φερέμεν δύναται, βαρύθει δέ θ' ὑπ' αὐτῆς
ἐγκύρσας ἄτησιν: ὁδὸς δ' ἐτέρηφι παρελθεῖν
κρείσσων ἐς τὰ δίκαια: Δίκη δ' ὑπὲρ ὕβριος ἴσχει
ἐς τέλος ἐξελοῦσα: παθῶν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνω

Hesiod, Ἔργα καὶ Ἡμέραι, vv 213-218

You should listen to [the goddess] Fairness and not oblige Hubris
Since Hubris harms unfortunate mortals while even the more fortunate
Are not equal to carrying that heavy a burden, meeting as they do with Mischief.
The best path to take is the opposite one: that of honour
For, in the end, Fairness is above Hubris
Which is something the young come to learn from adversity. [7]

ἐξ ὧν δὲ ἡ γένεσις ἐστὶ τοῖς οὖσι, καὶ τὴν φθορὰν εἰς ταῦτα γίνεσθαι κατὰ τὸ χρεῶν· διδόναι γὰρ αὐτὰ
δίκην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοισ τῆς ἀδικίας κατὰ τὴν τοῦ χρόνου τάξιν. Anaximander [8]

Where beings have their origin there also they cease to exist: offering payment to balance, one to another,
their unbalance for such is the arrangement of what is passing. [9]

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[1] I expounded on the matter of the word sin in *Interpretation and The Question of Sin* which forms part of my 2013 essay *Exegesis and Translation, Some Personal Reflexions*. <https://davidmyatt.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/exegesis-and-translation-partsone-two.pdf>

[2] My translation, from *Corpus Hermeticum: Eight Tractates*, <https://davidmyatt.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/eight-tractates-v2-print.pdf>

[3] From *Mythoi To Empathy: A New Appreciation Of The Numinous*, appendix II of *The Numinous Way Of Pathei-Mathos*, <https://davidmyatt.files.wordpress.com/2022/10/numinous-way-pathei-mathos-v7.pdf>

[4] In Part Seven, *The Abstraction of Change as Opposites and Dialectic*, of *The Numinous Way Of Pathei-Mathos*, <https://davidmyatt.files.wordpress.com/2022/10/numinous-way-pathei-mathos-v7.pdf>; and in the essay *Numinosity, Denotata, Empathy, And The Hermetic Tradition*, <https://davidmyatt.files.wordpress.com/2022/03/dwm-denotata-empathy-v1b.pdf>

[5] In *Understanding and Rejecting Extremism* I defined extremism and an extremist thus:

"By extreme I mean to be harsh, so that my understanding of an extremist is a person who tends toward harshness, or who is harsh, or who supports/incites harshness, in pursuit of some objective, usually of a political or a religious nature. Here, harsh is: rough, severe, a tendency to be unfeeling, unempathic.

Hence extremism is considered to be: (1) the result of such harshness, and (2) the principles, the causes, the characteristics, that promote, incite, or describe the harsh action of extremists. In addition, a fanatic is considered to be someone with a surfeit of zeal or whose enthusiasm for some objective, or for some cause, is intemperate.

In the philosophical terms of my weltanschauung, an extremist is someone who commits the error of hubris." <https://davidmyatt.files.wordpress.com/2022/10/david-myatt-rejecting-extremism.pdf>

[6] My conclusions are outlined in two works: *The Numinous Way Of Pathei-Mathos*, <https://davidmyatt.files.wordpress.com/2022/10/numinous-way-pathei-mathos-v7.pdf>, and *Understanding and Rejecting Extremism*, <https://davidmyatt.files.wordpress.com/2022/10/david-myatt-rejecting-extremism.pdf>

[7] Notes on my translation:

a. δίκη. The goddess of Fairness/Justice/Judgement, and – importantly – of Tradition (Ancestral Custom). In Ἔργα καὶ Ἡμέραι, as in Θεογονία (Theogony), Hesiod is recounting and explaining part of that tradition, one important aspect of which tradition is understanding the relation between the gods and mortals. Given both the antiquity of the text and the context, 'Fairness' – as the name of the goddess – is, in my view, more appropriate than the now common

appellation 'Justice', considering the modern (oft times impersonal) connotations of the word 'justice'.

b. Μischief. The sense of ἄτησιν here is not of 'delusion' nor of 'calamities', per se, but rather of encountering that which or those whom (such as the goddess of mischief, Ἄτη) can bring mischief or misfortune into the 'fortunate life' of a 'fortunate mortal', and which encounters are, according to classical tradition, considered as having been instigated by the gods. Hence, of course, why Sophocles [Antigone, 1337-8] wrote ὡς πεπρωμένης οὐκ ἔστι θνητοῖς συμφορᾶς ἀπαλλαγὴ (mortals cannot be delivered from the misfortunes of their fate).

c. δίκαιος. Honour expresses the sense that is meant: of being fair; capable of doing the decent thing; of dutifully observing ancestral customs. A reasonable alternative for 'honour' would thus be 'decency', both preferable to words such as 'just' and 'justice' which are not only too impersonal but have too many inappropriate modern connotations.

d. νήπιος. Literal - 'young', 'uncultured' (i.e. un-schooled, un-educated in the ways of ancestral custom) - rather than metaphorical ('foolish', ignorant).

[8] Diels-Kranz, 12A9, B1

[9] In respect of χρόνος, it is not here a modern abstract measurable 'time' but 'the passing' of living or events as evident in the Agamemnon:

ποίου χρόνου δὲ καὶ πεπόρθηται πόλις 278

Then - how long has it been since the citadel was ravaged?

τίς δὲ πλὴν θεῶν ἅπαντ' ἀπήμων τὸν δι' αἰῶνος χρόνον 554-5

Who - except for the gods - passes their entire life without any injury at all?

In respect of ἀδικία, here it simply implies unbalance in contrast to the balance that is δίκη. The translation 'disorder' - like 'order' for δίκη - is too redolent of some modern or ancient morality designed to manifest 'order' in contrast to its dialectical opposite 'disorder'.

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