

Book Reviews:

Hartle, Ann. *Self-Knowledge in the Age of Theory*.
Lanham, Maryland and London: Rowman & Littlefield
Publishers, Inc., 1997.

The deference shown in Aristotle's writings toward the *endoxa*, the "respectable opinions" of the city, is well known. Aristotle's deeds in no way contradicted his deferential words when he fled his adopted city on charges of atheism, in order, so tradition has it, to save Athens from sinning against philosophy a second time. For although the philosopher will normally suppose the city's views to be truthful, this is not to assume that Athens, or any other human community, always knows its truths fully for what they are. The difficulty made manifest by the Peripatetic's flight is that philosophic interrogation of received opinion cannot help but seem suspect to the city's many non-philosophers: do not such inquiries betray the philosopher's hidden ambitions to rule, or worse, his disdain for all that the city admires? What such citizens fail to see is that the philosopher is actually so impoverished, so uncertain of his possessions, that he can only come into his own by constant comparison of his estate with the doxic images of that which he himself proves, but only in retrospect and quite apart from his doing, to be the original. The experience of ancient philosophy would seem therefore to show that a degree of civic hostility toward philosophy is the understandable, if also defective, human norm. To pay his respects to respectable opinion, the philosopher must run the risk of appearing disrespectful.

Modernity seems, however, to have arranged matters quite differently. "Public opinion" is nowadays remarkably accommodating to philosophy, or at least, to something that bears more than a passing resemblance to philosophy. In the words of Walker Percy, ours is "the age of theory." As regards most anything worth talking about, ordinary citizens now readily defer to the experts, who generously offer their teachings to all and sundry. When a modern academic perishes, it is never from hemlock; it is from failure to publish; and while some might consider tenure at a third-rate state institution a kind of death, this grim fate invariably includes a benefits package considerably more expansive than that offered by the Prytaneum. To be sure, one might very well doubt whether the public embrace of "theory" constitutes an unqualified advancement in learning over Greek intolerance. Percy himself explores the results of theory's largesse to great comic effect in his *Lost in the Cosmos: the Last Self-Help Book* (New York and London: Washington Square Press, 1984). In *Self-Knowledge in the Age of Theory*, Ann Hartle takes up the same problem in a more serious or academic way. However, hers is not merely, or even primarily, a "negative" or "critical" work. In the spirit of premodern philosophy, she seeks to provide an account of the nature of self-knowledge precisely through a consideration of three failed attempts to do the same. Not theory, but philosophy, is for her the proper path to genuine self-knowledge, and she attempts to dis-

play the distinction between the two through an examination of three theoretical pretenders to philosophy's vacant throne.

Such indirection might seem to be, but is not either *faute de mieux*, or sour grapes. For Hartle as for Socrates, the life of philosophy is strangely dependent upon sub-philosophical knowledge, and its attendant ignorance (xiii), and so culminates in the still stranger conviction that philosophic knowledge is indistinguishable from philosophic ignorance (146). It is surely no fault of hers that her quarrel with modern "theory" does not, in Socratic manner, threaten to roil the waters of public life, and thereby call attention to her activity. Still less is she to be blamed for the unprepossessing character of the theories she treats, which rarely evince the charms of the old endoxa they were meant to replace. It seems that once the people, or the age, has been persuaded to proclaim theory king, it does not much to matter to us what particular theory claims title to rule. To exaggerate only slightly, "theories" are to modern rule what persons once were to constitutional office: King Theory is dead, long live King Theory! Indeed, to put philosophical questions to a ruling theory will doubtless be construed by some as part of the rites of theoretical succession. We moderns are both more attached to theory, and less attached to theories, than were the Athenians to their endoxa.

Strictly speaking, "theory" is the target of only the first of this book's five chapters, which gathers under that heading a variety of contemporary teachings whose common concern may be said to be the nature of human intelligence. No mention need here be made of the complete cast of characters. Let E. O. Wilson and W. V. Quine—both Harvard men, as it happens—stand for the whole company. What unites this disparate body? According to Hartle, it is the conviction that all serious thinking is theorizing, and that all theorizing is the manipulation of a web of univocal meanings (a "theory") abstracted from, and so purified of, the endless ambiguities present in what is deemed, from the theorist's point of view, to be "pre-theoretical experience" (1–13). Hartle shows the "insufficiency" of theory so conceived by invoking the argument by retorsion. Thus, theory fails theoretically so to speak because its very terms make it impossible to maintain the distinction between "appearance" and "reality," despite the fact that the distinction is indispensable to the theorist's claim to be in the know (13–18). Modern theory also undercuts the terms of its practice, insofar as it at once assumes the distinctiveness of human "agency and autonomy" and denies it (18–25). In the end, therefore, theory has little of real interest to say either about the world's self-disclosure to us in speech, or about our self-disclosure in deed to the world.

The second chapter proposes to treat "anti-theory." The figures Hartle selects to represent this "mode of thought" (27) are, not unexpectedly, men like Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. Hartle's concerns are not primarily genealogical, so she here passes up the opportunity to explore telling differences between the life of anti-theory in Europe and in America. In any case, the neologism "anti-theory," like the by now badly shopworn term "post-modern," identifies a position that defines itself by reaction or negation. Because Hartle is not herself reactive she manages to portray the motives of "anti-theory" with some sympathy; the limitations the anti-theorists detect in their opponents are, as she has already demonstrated, real enough.

Alas, we tend to become parodies of what we hate, and as we see from her succinct summary of anti-theory, Rorty and Foucault succumb to the same sort of problem as do the lovers of theory: anti-theorists fail the test of self-reference. As in the preceding chapter, then, Hartle examines what her interlocutors mean by meaning (29–34) in order to establish their inability to speak meaningfully of human speaking (34–42) and human doing (42–50).

The third chapter of *Self-Knowledge in the Age of Theory* takes up what most of us would surely take to be a more congenial stance, which Hartle identifies by the name of "narrative." The abstruse talk of a Quine or a Rorty is surely an acquired taste, but who can resist the charm of a good story? Of course, there is no such thing as a narrative tout court; there are only narratives. And here we confront an obvious difficulty. Aboriginal mythologizing, *The Book of the Dead*, the *Illiad*, Herodotus's *Histories*, Plato's *Phaedo*, the Book of Job, the Gospel of St. Mark, Augustine's *Confessions*, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the *Inferno*, *The History of Troilus and Cressida*, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, and television talk-show interviews all involve "narrative" in some sense; but that which these various "narratives" narrate serves more to distinguish them than some common means of expression serves to unite them. Out of decency, perhaps, Hartle does not refer to learned discussion of this "form of self-understanding" (51) as "narrative-theory" (but compare 73); nevertheless, we still clearly have to do with yet another theoretical mode.

By way of ordering our thoughts about narrative as such, Hartle offers the precision of three distinct "forms" of narrative: the "defining myth or story . . . of a community," "literature," and "self-narrative" (54–55). In all instances "narratives" draw close to the old *endoxa*, preserving human particularity from the predations of "theory" and "anti-theory," while still allowing some space for the detachment of rational reflection, at least in principle, or on occasion. Alisdair MacIntyre is, accordingly, the greatest prominence considered in the chapter. Hartle advances a judicious appraisal of attempts made by him, and others, to move beyond the limits imposed by modern rationalism upon human self-understanding. She argues quite convincingly that even or especially apart from its content the narrative form does seem to offer distinct advantages in accounting for the place of appearances of human life, and the place of human initiative within the world; but as she also demonstrates, the strengths of narrative are also its weaknesses. Narrative rescues something of human particularity from theory's aloofness and anti-theory's willfulness, but it, too fails to do justice to the desire to know oneself as this particular human being (75–83). In the concluding two chapters of *Self-Knowledge in an Age of Theory*, Hartle offers a more direct account of philosophy as a response to the discovery of human "interiority," by which she means the particular way in which the human being is realized as a particular instance of a particular kind. In the fourth chapter she advances the bold claim that "ancient philosophy" does not confront interiority in all its radicalness (107; cf. 86–88, 90–91): despite the best efforts of Aristotle, for example, to accord a distinctive place in his philosophy to human distinctiveness, he seems unable to do perfect justice to the strange incongruities obtaining between the individual human part and the natural whole. Accordingly, Hartle turns to Augustine, and to his greatest modern student, Pascal in order to extract a provisional description of the "self" that is the

theme of her book, although in an equally bold claim, she asserts that Montaigne is the single most accomplished exegete of human interiority known to us, a claim she promises to make good on at some later date (xv-xvi, 83, 146, 179). This leads, in the final chapter, to some helpful hints as to the nature of philosophy's overcoming of the insufficiencies of theory, anti-theory, and narrative.

By necessity, this summary description of the book's trajectory overlooks the many valuable observations that inform it along the way, for example its retrieval of "rhetoric" from the reductionism of "power politics" (40-50). I conclude these remarks with a general comment, however.

It is not self-evident why the specific "theories" Hartle evaluates in this thoroughly engaging book, for all their influence over the age, have come to assume such authority over modern self-understanding. Of course, to the extent that self-knowledge is never something given, but always to be earned (and that in full awareness that it can never be earned completely), any theory will prove to have its allure. Still, it is, again, rather striking that two of the three theoretical stances she ponders fall considerably short of the human appeal of the *endoxa* they helped to displace; as for the third, it is oddly unaware of the resistance of the *endoxa* it hopes to recover to the necessity of "theory" in an older sense of that word. I am not suggesting that Hartle is to be blamed for the homeliness of her theoretical opponents. To the contrary, she is much to be commended for her dialectical ability not only to see for herself but also to show others that these would-be emperors are, if not naked, than more scantily clad than their conduct would suggest. And yet as she herself concludes, philosophical self-knowledge "is no more, and no less, than the knowledge of ignorance" (146), which suggests that in an age of theory, self-knowledge demands extensive reconsideration of the properly *philosophical* knowledge that first gave rise to modernity's theoretical ignorance. In view of her own claim that philosophical self-knowledge "is sought in the conversation of friends, a conversation not to be distinguished from the philosophical engagement with the history of philosophy" (143), we are surely entitled to conclude that *Self-Knowledge in the Age of Theory*, notwithstanding its many virtues, means in fact merely to be a protreptic to a more intensive confrontation with its theme. I, for one, shall await her promised study of Montaigne with some eagerness.

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