

Раздел VI

ЛИТЕРАТУРНЫЕ ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЯ

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IS THE *VIA NEGATIVE* A KIND OF SKEPTICISM?

Calypso: Hail, Odysseus, do you remember me?

Odysseus: Of course I remember you Calypso. Thank you for your years of hospitality on your island of Ogygia, even though I left you for my island home, Ithaka and for my wife, Penelope. What are you doing here in the Elysian Fields?

Calypso: Since Great Pan is dead, nymphs like myself no longer have a place on earth, and so some of us have come to the Elysian Fields to see again the heroes, like you, who dwell here. I hear that you have taken up philosophy here in the Fields.

Odysseus: Yes. I find that talking over old battles with my comrades at Troy grows boring. But philosophy is a sort of never-ending quest, and, since I can no longer explore the world, I explore new ideas.

Calypso: I have taken up philosophy also, Odysseus; a very respectable occupation for a retired nymph. What school of philosophy do you most agree with?

Odysseus: Well, you know that I was a great liar and trickster, when I was alive. So I am probably closest to the school of Skeptics, since I don't want to fall victim to credulity and be taken in by any philosophy.

Calypso: You remember that I offered you my love, and immortality when you were alive, Odysseus. So when I took up philosophy I was attracted to a philosophy that emphasizes both love and immortality. I am a follower of Plato.

Odysseus: Do you follow the doctrines of Plato himself, or are you what some philosophers call a «neo-Platonist»?

Calypso: What is the difference between Platonism and neo-Platonism?

Odysseus: Insofar as I can see, the neo-Platonists, instead of talking about the form of the Good, as Plato did, talk about a God who is One,

who is good and true and beautiful: sometimes they call him simply «the one» or sometimes they speak of him as «the God».

Calypso: That would certainly describe my position: I don't want some abstract idea at the base of my system; I want someone who is both loveable and embodies Love.

Odysseus: Then you are not very far from the new religion Christianity, which says that their one God is Love.

Calypso: Oh, yes, I find a lot of things the Christians say are very much like what we Platonists say, or neo-Platonists, if you insist.

Odysseus: The person who taught me about philosophy in the Elysian Fields, Socrates the Athenian, was very interested in the Christian religion. In fact, he has been so involved with it that some people call him «Saint Socrates», which is a way Christians have of honoring people who live up to their ideals.

Calypso: Aside from the idea of the one God, how would you characterize the ones you call neo-Platonists?

Odysseus: They see a hierarchy of worlds: each one depending on the one before. The material world is the lowest world, and depends on the world of ideas, which again depends on the one God. Where Platonists talk about forms or idea, the neo-Platonists tend to see these forms or ideas as actually ideas in the mind of God: just as one of my clever schemes, the Trojan Horse was first in my mind, then became reality.

Calypso: Yes, that sounds very much like something I could agree with.

Odysseus: I don't want to cause problems for you. But I can see a very profound problem in that way of regarding reality.

Calypso: Tell me what it is, Odysseus, and I will try to understand.

Odysseus: Well so far as I can see, you neo-Platonists say that the material world depends on the world of ideas and the world of ideas depends on God.

Calypso: Yes, that sounds right.

Odysseus: And would you say that knowledge of the world really depends on knowledge of the world of ideas, and knowledge of the world of ideas depends on God?

Calypso: Yes: Plato himself would say that: he pointed out that we had never had an experience of perfectly equal things, but we apply this idea of perfect equality to material things, because we have a pre-existing idea of it.

Odysseus: But now, here comes the problem. You neo-Platonists say that you have no real knowledge of God: that He is so simple and undifferentiated that no predicates in our language properly apply to him.

Calypso: Oh yes, we certainly say that. One philosopher who has gone

beyond the Elysian Fields is especially eloquent on that. Some say that he was one of the first disciples of a man named Paul when he spoke in Athens, others say that he came many centuries after, and only pretended to be that disciple. But he brought many ideas of what you call neo-Platonism into Christian thought.

Odysseus: Well, whether he was an original disciple of this man Paul or came later, he represents a certain Christian kind of neo-Platonism. So anyone who shares his views is, I think, open to the objection, which I am about to make.

Calypso: So tell me: what is this skeptical objection?

Odysseus: You'd agree that if this one God did not exist then the world of ideas would not exist and if the world of ideas did not exist, the material world would not exist.

Calypso: Yes, of course.

Odysseus: But in the same way that the material worlds depends on the world of ideas, and the world of ideas depends on the one God, then knowledge of the material world depends on knowledge of the world of ideas, and knowledge of the world of ideas depends on God.

Calypso: That seems right.

Odysseus: But now, since you agree that we cannot have any real knowledge of God, then we cannot have any real knowledge of the world of ideas, and so we cannot have any real knowledge of the material world. So your doctrine leads to a form of skepticism: since we do not have the knowledge on which all other knowledge depends on, we cannot have any knowledge at all.

Calypso: Ah, but Odysseus you have to distinguish two kinds of knowledge, knowledge derived from reasoning and knowledge derived from contemplation. We don't have knowledge derived from reasoning about the one God, but we do have contemplative knowledge of God.

Odysseus: Tell me more about this distinction.

Calypso: Knowledge derived from reason uses predicates and proceeds from premises to conclusions: it doesn't possess its object but strives toward it. Knowledge derived from contemplation is very different: it has to be given to us by God. It does not use predicates, and when it is about God this knowledge cannot be put into words or defined.

Odysseus: My skeptical tendency makes me wonder whether knowledge that cannot be put into words or defined really is knowledge.

Calypso: And yet Odysseus how many of the greatest things you have experienced cannot be put into words or defined: are any words adequate to a great love, a great sorrow, or the longing for something beyond that drives you to seek something beyond anything you have experienced?

Odysseus: But those are experiences that we have in this life.

Calypso: But that does not mean that they come from the things we can sense in this life: perhaps such experiences are indicators of something beyond what we can sense.

Odysseus: Not everyone has such experiences.

Calypso: Perhaps not, but do you respect those who don't? You have known love in your life, Odysseus. Don't you pity and despise people like Thersites who you beat for his insolence at Troy, who would claim that love is only a delusion?

Odysseus: Certainly a great love is an experience that one cannot deny once you have had it.

Calypso: That is characteristic of knowledge derived from contemplation, Odysseus: you may not be able to describe it, or convince someone who has not had it that it is not a delusion: but you are very sure that your knowledge is real.

Odysseus: But what I learned from Socrates about philosophy is that it consists of using our reason to reflect on experience, and come to a conclusion that is reasonable.

Calypso: Yes, but what experience? Only the kind of experience that comes to us by way of our five senses? And how can we be sure that we can trust our reasoning powers? Isn't it an immediate knowledge that they can be trusted an example of knowledge derived by contemplation?

Odysseus: Certainly the reliability of reason is not something that our senses can tell us. But I rather like the philosophy taught by Aristotle of Stagira. That taking our sense experience together with certain first principles of logic we can build up a reasonable picture of the world. If one isn't to be a skeptic, that seems to be the best philosophy.

Calypso: There is a lot of truth in Aristotle's philosophy, and we who follow Plato can learn from it. But if you admit direct knowledge of logical first principles, why not admit other knowledge by the same process, which I would maintain is knowledge by contemplation. Knowledge of the world of ideas and knowledge of God, for instance.

Odysseus: But isn't knowledge by contemplation supposed to be without predicates, and not definable or describable?

Calypso: Only if it is knowledge of God by contemplation and that is because God is infinite, and goes beyond all of our categories. Knowledge of the world of ideas can use predicates and be described, since in the world of ideas there is diversity. Degrees of being are also degrees of unity: in each subsequent sphere of being there is greater multiplicity, until we come to the material world, which is pure diversity. Some of the philosophers from the lands above the Black Sea have described this very well.

Odysseus: So not all knowledge derived from contemplation has the characteristics of being without predicates, and not definable.

Calypso: No, only when it is knowledge of God.

Odysseus: But now I see another problem with your philosophy, Calypso.

Calypso: What is it?

Odysseus: Philosophers are supposed to argue with each other: in fact, in many ways the essence of philosophy is argument. But how can someone who claims that she has knowledge derived from contemplation argue with someone who lacks this knowledge?

Calypso: Yes, in some ways it would be like arguing about love with a man like Thersites, or arguing about color with a blind man. But most men are not as blind to higher realities as Thersites. What a Platonist philosopher can do is to appeal to experiences that almost all men have, for example the experience of love, and show how these are indicators of a higher reality. And for those who lack or refuse to admit such experiences, you can use dialectic, like your friend Socrates, to reveal that other solutions to the problem that philosophy raises are not satisfactory.

Odysseus: I thought that by «dialectic» Socrates only meant rational argument, usually to show that a proposed definition or solution to a philosophical problem led to contradiction.

Calypso: I think even Socrates meant more than that by «dialectic», and I am sure that Plato did. Some solutions or definitions contradict themselves, but often solutions or definitions contradict our deepest experiences. For example, some modern skeptics try to deny the idea of consciousness, but we are more certain that we are conscious than we can be of any philosophical argument to the contrary.

Odysseus: So for you knowledge by contemplation is the same as what you think Plato meant by knowledge by dialectic?

Calypso: Not the same but related to it. Knowledge by contemplation goes all the way from knowledge by mystical experiences, which only a few people ever experience, to knowledge of things like love, which almost everyone experiences or can experience. One of the things which the philosophy derived from Plato is good at showing how the relation of archetype and image help us to understand all kinds of things: mystical union with God is the archetype, but the human experience of falling in love is the image of that archetype.

Odysseus: So, by contemplating the images we get some idea of the archetypes.

Calypso: Yes, that is one way to go: Aristotle says that Plato would often ask whether in a given philosophical discussion a major question was whether we are on our way to the first principles, or on our way from them. But real understanding of the images comes from knowing the archetypes.

Only the mystic really knows the nature of love, even in more ordinary cases of love.

Odysseus: Then is the way to become a philosopher to become a mystic?

Calypso: That is the best way, but we can start from the images and go to the archetypes. Don't you remember how Socrates would teach his disciples that philosophy is the best preparation for death? Now you are dead. Odysseus, you should be preparing our soul for the next step in the afterlife.

Odysseus: So, Calypso, you are still offering me immortality, although a different kind that mere unending life, which you offered me when we met during our lives on earth.

Calypso: Perhaps I am, Odysseus. And this time you cannot say that you have to get home to Ithaka.

Odysseus: You may be right, Calypso, and this time I may take your offer. But since we can no longer die, we have plenty of time to discuss everything thoroughly and come to the best decision. Tell me about your philosophy and I will tell you more about mine. We have all eternity.

NEO-PLATONISM AND EVIL

Odysseus: Hail Calypso! I've been thinking about our last conversation on neo-Platonism, and I'm rather inclined to see if I can follow you in your views about God and the world of ideas. However, I see a difficulty in following you on the neo-Platonic path.

Calypso: Yes, as always your ingenious brain comes up with difficulties. But so long as the difficulties are part of the search for truth, I have no objection to considering them with you. It is only if your difficulties are an attempt to dominate me and win a victory over me that they would be a bad thing. However, raising difficulties is not a bad thing if it is part of the search for truth rather than an attempt to «win» a victory in an argument.

Odysseus: Yes, Socrates impressed in me that philosophy is about the search for truth, not about winning arguments. Perhaps those of us who have passed beyond the Elysian Fields to the next stage of the afterlife, like Plato himself, don't need argument but can *see* the truth. But for us still in these Fields (which some call «Limbo»), we have to use our intellects on the search for truth, raising objections and trying to answer them.

Calypso: Merely raising difficulties without caring for the truth would be an evil thing, but I do not think that that is what you are trying to do, Odysseus. But even if it were, I could bring good out of that evil by using