

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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ern parts” through a new freedom of conscience grounded in the theory of representative authority as derived from his reinterpretation of Judaism and Christianity. Reflection upon this issue could also lead one to question Johnston’s assumption that Hobbes’s admiration of Thucydides for writing as “a wise man should . . . write (through in words understood by all men), that wise men only should be able to recommend him” does not influence the subsequent transmission of his own political teaching(71). However this may be, the present work is of great value for causing us to seek out that larger political aim served both by Hobbes’s political argument and by his treatment of biblical theology; its failure may be to underestimate the contribution of the latter to the former.

## NOTES

1. See, especially, David Gauthier, *The Logic of Leviathan*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). Johnston praises this work (80, n.28) while recognizing that Hobbes does not seem to regard this innovation as do Gauthier and he.(82–83).

2. Clifford Orwin has remarked that to “authorize the sovereign is above all to appoint him to bear our person to God and to take the rap” for doing so which is to “confer upon subjects a novel freedom . . . to act singlemindedly in their worldly interests ” (*Political Theory* 3,no.1,p.38). Harvey Mansfield Jr. says that “Hobbes invented modern representative government as an attack on Christianity” yet may have borrowed the very idea of it from Christianity. (*American Political Science Review* 65, no.1,p.109).

***Death and the Disinterested Spectator: An Inquiry into the Nature of Philosophy.*** By Ann Hartle. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986.) 263 pp.:cloth,\$49.50; Paper,\$16.95).

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Ann Hartle’s second book is in more than one way linked to her earlier book on Rousseau. Here as there, Augustine’s life of prayer is the foil that sets off the proud life of the philosopher. Here as there, death is given center stage. Here as there, the texts chosen to study how a philosophic life differs from a religious life—Plato’s *Phaedo* and Descartes’ *Discourse* in the new book, Rousseau’s *Confessions* in the old—are, as philosophic works go, out of the ordinary. The majority of books classified as philosophical by librarians are argumentative. The books through which Hartle conducts her inquiry into the nature of philosophy are, or at least seem to be, biographical and even autobiographical.

In *The Modern Self in Rousseau’s Confessions* Hartle tried to show that what Rousseau offers in the *Confessions* is not a chronicle of his life but rather “a

philosophical work of art." In somewhat the same spirit, she urges in *Death and the Disinterested Spectator* that the *Phaedo*, the dialogue from which we thought we learned how fearlessly Socrates met death, and the *Discourse*, the autobiographical narrative that seemed to fill us in on Descartes' intellectual history, are "poetry" rather than "history": "The *Phaedo* is a myth . . . the *Discourse* . . . a fable" (p. 6).

One remarkable consequence of this emphasis on the artfulness of the books left to posterity by their provident philosophic authors is that only Augustine's book—*Heilsgeschichte*—retains the status of history.

The present review will not do the job of studying and appraising Hartle's two books together, though I believe a just appreciation of her thought would require it. It will not even be minimally adequate to the new book by itself, whose high ambition is apparent from its title and whose patience with sometimes excruciating literary subtlety and complexity is quite overwhelming. Hartle's eye for detail and ability to raise questions about all manner of literary and argumentative *qualia* are astonishing. I shall merely try to explain and comment on the four chapter headings. These are: Chapter I, Socrates: Penelope and the Bee; Chapter II, Augustine: The Look of Pity; Chapter III, Descartes: Occupation and Preoccupation; Chapter IV, Conclusion: Death and the Disinterested Spectator.

*Socrates: Penelope and the Bee.* Penelope's name comes up at *Phaedo* 84a. Bees made their entry at 82b and are reintroduced at 91c, when Socrates says that he doesn't want to go off like a bee leaving his stinger in his friends. Hartle treats the two comparisons, both of which are cautionary, as sayings that want to be seen *through* and looked *at*, as though they cross out something that was to be steted as well.

The context of the Penelope comparison is Socrates' address to Cebes, which starts, roughly, in the middle of 77a. Seemingly ministering to the fear of self-dispersion at death (77e), though in truth asking a *ti esti* (what is it?) question about the soul, Socrates proposes that they consider what the characteristics are of things that do and things that do not disintegrate. He answers that things that stay self-same are likely to be simple and thus not subject to disintegration, whereas things that alter belong to the class of composites liable to extinction. To the former class belong, for instance, the equal itself (perhaps one should sometimes translate as "the just plain equal") and the fine itself. To the latter belong men and horses and cloaks and any other things which, while sometimes called by the same name as the various *itselfs*, bear a whole lot of other names besides; hence are composites. Now the complex things just conjured up—that is, men, horses, cloaks—are of course complex in a variety of ways. Men, the subject of our immediate interest, are (for instance) compounds of soul and body. Their bodily part can be seen (like their cloak?) and heard (like the voice of the lyre?). But what of their soul? It is invisible, inaudible,

intangible. The soul is as imperceptible as the *itselfs* are. Since, then, the soul and the immutable *auta* (peculiarly well represented by the equal *itself*, upon which all the mathematical sciences depend) are similar in this one respect, why not suppose souls to bear the further likeness to the *itselfs* of being indissoluble?

The argument just sketched is followed by a fervent description of the philosopher's soul as intent on "gathering itself into itself" (80e), withdrawing from bodily community, and "as much as possible" giving itself to "concentration." Thus the conversation with Cebes goes over the same ground as the earlier address to Simmias (starting at 64c). It confirms that inasmuch as being dead is a state of detachment of soul from body, and living philosophically is the effort at such detachment, it would be irrational for the philosopher not to welcome death as consummation. A philosopher who desires, or tries, to avert the final "break" after a life devoted to untying soul from body would be recompounded with body many times, thereby turning his own cathartic enterprise into something as pointless as Penelope's work of weaving and unweaving her father-in-law's funeral shroud.

I feel far less secure than Hartle in identifying one thing in a Platonic dialogue as edifying *mythos* and another as *logos* (perhaps also edifying). Moreover, I suspect that "Penelope's *anenuon ergon*" (idle labor) is a stock comparison. I am therefore disposed to construe the suggestion that the picture of a philosopher wedded to life in the body is absurd (in the technical sense of the word as well as the colloquial) "straight." It is not at all clear to me that Indian stories of metempsychosis and the *scala naturae* that goes with them are inserted solely for the benefit of nonphilosophic types (note the Buddhist raft image at 85d and compare Odysseus's raft). Being so foolishly innocent as to believe that the authors of serious literature, while no doubt teaching, and even addressing different audiences diversely, are nonetheless also studying something for themselves, trying to get it clear, working it through by writing it out (as do mathematicians), I tend to think about and by means of Platonic images, stories, and arguments toward what I guess to be the subject under investigation. This leads me to pay less attention to *who* said something than does Hartle. Once spoken, words and thoughts are "out there" for me, in the mini-cosmos of the dialogue. As a consequence, Socrates' simile of Penelope's weaving and unweaving joins up with 73d on the one hand and with Cebes' question at 87bff on the other.

Stephanus 73d belongs to the dialogue's section on recollection (which anticipates Hume's "association by contiguity vs. by resemblance"). A cloak figures there, as a term in the following analogy—cloak:cloak's user or owner::lyre:lyre's user or owner::body:soul. Stephanus 87b belongs to the passage after the disquisition on misology: Cebes asks whether the relation of soul to body mightn't be like that of a weaver to the last cloak he wove and wore.

With the best will in the world I cannot manage to become persuaded of the

dramatic individuality of Cebes and Simmias. But their two images of weaver and lyre seem to me to be tapped from the same well of *deep likenesses* from which Socrates' pun on *autos* (self) (the dialogue's opening word) also springs. The life in those images (and they are all images of life) is too palpable for me not to feel pressed to use them to think with. Are not Goethe—who sings of “weaving life's living cloth” (*und weben des Lebens lebendigen Kleids*)—as well as the modern biologist—who investigates how cells weave organs and how organs reweave themselves in the injured living being—using Cebes' image? Or, again, don't our own most simple and most sophisticated notions of structure, organization, system derive from Simmias' image of soul as the body's harmony? It is hard for me not to attribute to Plato, the maker of the drama, a similarly naive interest in the character and source of the life of living things. Feeling entitled to put the three men's metaphors for life together, I also take metempsychosis and the longing for deliverance from the wheel of rebirth naively, as expressing revulsion at life.

Hartle's way of reading differs in that she much more strenuously demarcates dramatic individuality. Convinced that Simmias and Cebes are yokels in philosophy, she takes little interest in their “mere metaphors.” Socrates is the one to go to for instruction. And Socrates, as we all know, tends to “irony.” Accordingly Hartle gives oblique readings primacy. *Prattein anenuton ergon* (engaging in idle labor) refers, for example, to Socrates' weaving and unweaving of arguments for the soul's immortality. He weaves them in the daylight; he unweaves them on the sly. Just as Penelope's true purpose is not to get Laertes' funeral cloak completed, but rather, to avoid a decisive confrontation with the suitors, so Socrates is “feigning.” He weaves the various arguments for the soul's invulnerability, permanence, divinity to still the fear of death. He unweaves them, that is, hints at the arguments' lack of cogency (e.g., pp. 57, 73) because he loves truth more than he loves himself or his friends.

For Hartle, the Penelope image also stands for the need, while living the life of a philosopher, continually to reinstate the “loosening” of soul from body (“theoretical virtue”) and the ruling of body by soul (“practical virtue”). The work is never done, and is in that sense “futile,” because what was so strenuously unwoven reweaves itself.

Finally, the Penelope image is used to let ring out some version of Husserl's passionately embraced conception of “philosophy as infinite task”: “The philosopher's ‘immortality’ is his entrapment in an endless task” (p. 200). Although there is no “final solution,” that should not make us hate arguing. Hartle deems the section on misology, which falls at the center of the dialogue, its “crucial section” (p. 52). “It is here that the brief exchange between Socrates and Phaedo occurs,” which according to her concludes with a “pact” between them (p. 53), as a result of which Phaedo becomes something more (or less) than a chronicler of Socrates' last day. Phaedo, if I understand Hartle correctly, will tell Echecrates “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” (as it really was) not as the eyewitness.

ness but as the soul-witness, who would protect what was most “*eigentlich*” (authentic) about Socrates, would testify. Most authentically Socratic is not Stoic impassivity but love of discourse or argument. The extremity of evil is not death but hatred of logos (89d, but compare 83c).

Whether [particular] . . . arguments are true or false, the life of argument is good. It is at least a holding action against the irrational. By remaining unchanged, by holding fast to the life of argument, Socrates brings about a change in those present. In Phaedo’s words, he ‘cures’ them. . . . This, it seems to me, is the real meaning of Socrates’s last words [about owing a cock to Asclepius] (p. 59).

“Socrates’s cure is accomplished,” according to Hartle, “by means of the distinction between truth and certitude” (p. 59).

As for the simile of the bee (pp. 14, 55, 72, 78, 81, 211), the stinger that Socrates says he may have left in his friends, and which they need perhaps remove, is some possible untruth. On p. 54, Hartle identifies it as actual deception: Socrates, to avoid seeming pitiable, used Phaedo’s love and loyalty to have him frame an account that would make it appear that philosophy is “useful” for removing the fear of death (*cf.* p. 215). Not so. Philosophy cannot console human beings for their not being divine. Philosophy lacks pity, because the divinity to which its practitioners strive to assimilate themselves is stark, merciless, beautiful *nous theoretikos*.

*Augustine: The Look of Pity.* The God of Augustine does console. At least, one may hope He will. He who created human beings and their world from nought and who maintains them in being does not despise us for being human, all too human:

The Christian belief in the immortality of the soul is not based on the overcoming of the human as such. The resurrection of the body means human immortality, not the immortality of the ‘purified’ disembodied mind (p. 121).

*Descartes: Occupation and Preoccupation.* Hartle, like a fair number of other commentators on intellectual history, has grave doubts about the “legitimacy of the modern age.” These doubts are succinctly expressed by the three main words of her chapter heading. Descartes, in Part III of the *Discourse*, when describing the rules of his “interim morality,” speaks of the philosophic life (the life given over to the “cultivation” of one’s reason) as an “occupation.” In context this is the *mot juste* because it expresses the “transvaluation” of philosophy into a useful profession. Henceforth philosophy is a *metier*, an expertise that has “techniques” and uses technical language. And it is to be “useful.” Quoting the passage toward the end of Part I of the *Discourse*, where Descartes writes “I always had an extreme desire to learn to distinguish the true from the false in order to see clearly in my actions and to walk with assurance

in this life," Hartle italicizes the phrase "in order to" and comments: "The goal is certitude in action; the ability to distinguish the true from the false is not for its own sake [as it was in premodern philosophy]. . . ." Contemplative knowledge is no longer distinguished from know-how, and know-how practical (political wisdom) is on the way toward becoming know-how technological. While this type of reading of the *Discourse* (which Hartle backs up by minute and meticulous analysis of the text) is familiar, her claim that there runs through the *Discourse* a kind of "preoccupation" with death is, I believe, somewhat of a novelty (see pp. 146ff). She does not, she writes, "mean to suggest that he [Descartes] is pathologically obsessed by the fear of death," but rather "that he understands the activity of philosophy in its relation to mortality" (p. 147). One thesis of her book is, if I understand her correctly, that philosophy is always a totalizing life-choice in the face of death. This is what she seemed to argue in her book about Rousseau. In *Death and the Disinterested Spectator* even the Socratic renunciation of totality is, I believe, exhibited in some such Heideggerian frame.

Supposing for the moment that Hartle's reading of the *Discourse* is just and that "modernity" has Cartesian "roots" (cf. the "tree of knowledge" in Descartes' "Letter to the Translator of the Principles"), what is wrong with Descartes' "project" and its execution since? The question is clearly ridiculously too large, since answering it would require, among other things, that one take stock of what is wrong politically, economically, socially, intellectually in today's world, and discriminate which ills are the result of Descartes' program. Hartle's book does not openly ask the question, though I do believe her book points in some such direction. Shrink the question: What's wrong with Descartes' program? Hartle's answer seems to me to be strikingly like that of Eva Brann, Karl Lowith, and others. It is the purist's answer: Descartes's program is neither fish nor fowl, neither pagan nor Christian. It is, to use Brann's coinage, a "perversion" of Christianity. She writes:

Pride is at the very heart of the philosopher's attempt to escape death [by assimilating himself to Mind Divine]. Hope is possible only on account of God's compassion. . . . [The] change in the notion of the divine, the change from disinterested spectator to compassionate actor [is] what makes possible (but not inevitable) the modern project undertaken in Descartes' *Discourse*. Descartes attempts to begin from nothing, to rebegin philosophy as a purely human activity and as an imitation of the divine compassion. . . . Descartes rejects both the Socratic notion of philosophy as an endless task [Husserl and Penelope conflated] and the Augustinian dependence on a compassionate God. The certitude of his self-assertion is the beginning of the task of reversing the effects of original sin (p. 135; cf. pp. 202ff, 207).

In a small essay entitled "A Note on Eva Brann's 'Roots of Modernity'" (*St. John's Review*, Winter 1985), I tried to record some of my reasons for questioning this line of thought. Briefly, it seemed to me that the founders of mod-

ernity were not obliged to agree with Hartle that “hope is possible *only* on account of God’s compassion.” Where does Hartle stand when she so pronounces? Another way of putting my objection would be to urge that the founders of modernity may well have held that “reversing the effects of original sin” and “reversing the effects of the *doctrine* of original sin” are two different things. Long before them, Julian of Eclanus wrote to Augustine:

You ask me why I would not consent to the idea that there is a sin that is part of human nature. I answer: It is improbable, it is untrue, it is unjust and impious. It makes it seem as if the devil were the maker of men. It violates and destroys the freedom of the will . . . by saying that men are so incapable of virtue that in the very wombs of their mothers they are filled with bygone sins (In Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p.387).

Julian, it seems, held that God would be malicious if a natural human disposition could not, by natural discipline, be turned toward good. Augustine’s doctrine of original sin outraged Julian’s religious sensibilities.

Distinguishing doctrine from fact does not presuppose religious conviction. I am not maintaining that Descartes’ coming out on the same side as Julian is due to his sharing Julian’s piety. It is possible, though not necessary, that it was for rhetorical reasons that Descartes cloaked his project (of delivering human beings from teachings that made miracles *necessary* if life was to be endurable) in an argument purporting to show that God cannot be the devil (alias malicious demon). The audience he was addressing and hoped to win over was, after all, Christian.

Indeed, it is Hartle rather than I who seems to hold that Descartes, the manifestly superior man who flatters and goads his audience with suppositions of human equality and who describes his choice of a philosophical life as a choice of metier, could only have done these things as a lapsed Christian. At least, she writes as though the baneful choice of making philosophy “useful” which she exposes by her analysis of the *Discourse* could only have been made by a rebel, not against the Christian church but against the Christian God:

The whole of Descartes’s project, as the search for self-reliance and certitude, begins to appear as the struggle against the effects of original sin: sickness, pain, work, death, and the so-called darkening of the intellect. Descartes . . . is attempting to do what faith believes that only God can do. From this point of view, Descartes’s whole enterprise is . . . based on the most monstrous pride. This view is only confirmed by the fact that he presents his project not as a matter of pride but as an undertaking of the greatest compassion and, indeed, like Redemption, for all mankind (p. 208).

I have several difficulties with the just-cited passage. First, I am unconvinced that the search for certainty, the fascination with rational necessity, is a peculiarly Cartesian item. Parmenides’ goddess, Plato’s Socrates in the *Republic*, Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* all speak of the “unshakeable” (*bebaiotate*

*arche*). I agree with Hartle that Socrates in the *Phaedo* looks like what Peirce called a “fallibilist.” But I would need to hear in far greater argumentative rather than literary detail about what Hartle calls “the distinction between truth and certitude” before I could alter my present conviction that Dewey (mentioned by Hartle in a note on p. 251) is historically in the right in claiming that modern philosophy inherits the search for certainty from ancient thought. Consequently, Descartes’ enterprise of laying (or finding) firm foundations does not, to me, seem dependent on Christianity in that odd Hegelian way in which the rebel is dependent on what he rebels against. Second, while I acknowledge the grave difficulty that, from the standpoint of any kind of orthodox Christianity, knowing non-acknowledgment of the truth of the doctrine of original sin, on the ground that the doctrine is not based on fact, must appear as itself a symptom of original sin (“darkening of the intellect” to the truth that “the truth is not in us”), I do not, in the cited passage, find reasons for judging Descartes and his project from that religious perspective. And I am troubled by the suggestion that “this view,” which is, presumably, the Augustinian one in and by which Descartes stands condemned, is “confirmed” by Descartes’ presenting his project as one of “compassion.” “Compassion.” Hartle explains in a footnote, is her translation of Descartes’ own word *generosité*. I haven’t tracked the word in Paul Robert’s *Dictionary of the French Language*, but doesn’t it refer to the sort of largesse that is supposedly distinctive of people of *gens*, noble men and women (*cf.* the “*gennaios* falsehood” of the *Republic*)? If my understanding of Descartes’ word is just, then Hartle seems to me to be loading the dice by not allowing Descartes the option of a morality of noblesse oblige that bypasses Christianity instead of being its product. Her reply, I imagine, will be to saddle me with questions about how I would square the *Discourse’s* opening paragraph about the equitable distribution of good sense with noblesse. That would be fair. I would thus be led to study Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, since that is the book where the morality of benevolence which Hartle so much mistrusts, in Descartes and in the world today, is subjected to the most thoroughgoing scrutiny and critique. It is, I believe, also the book which first most vividly states the thesis that modern times, our times, are an epoch of “secularized Christianity.”

*Conclusion: Death and the Disinterested Spectator.* Wonder is the last chapter’s major theme because, according to a famous passage in the *Theaetetus* and another in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, wonder is the source of philosophy. Surely, not only of philosophy? If wonder is a stepping back, an acknowledging that breaks loose from “everyday immersion in action, in the web of means and ends” (p. 8), then the stance that is today so glibly called “aesthetic” meets the description. While Hartle, quoting Husserl in a footnote, acknowledges that nonphilosophers, too, “wonder” or are “curious,” she pays amazingly little attention to these other folk (Galileo watching the incense lamp swing, Miranda

exclaiming “How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, that has such people in it,” Monet painting his haystacks, any and all of us some of the time, for the reasons mentioned in the opening paragraph of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*). She so little explains what it is about philosophers’ wonder and contemplation that give it the palm (although stargazing and painting haystacks are no different from philosophy in being “useful” only extrinsically) that I feel genuinely unclear about what philosophy *is* according to her.

Much of the textual analysis and argument in Hartle’s *Inquiry into the Nature of Philosophy* steers toward fighting the idea that philosophy is or ought to be useful. It ought not “change” the world (as Marx, who is clearly enemy number one though his name is never mentioned, thought it should) because it is powerless to make the world better. Moreover, to expect philosophy to be publicly consequential is not only to endanger the public realm but also to ruin what philosophy is—the inherently pleasurable activity of noticing and thinking that has no purpose beyond itself. I may well have missed something, but it looks to me as though the trinitarian hierarchy of making, doing, thinking of the *Republic*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Diogenes Laertius’s “Life of Pythagoras” is simply taken over, with no attention paid to the possible need for finer discriminations. The case for the philosopher’s life given over to thinking being an essentially self-serving life is repeatedly stated in terms of the thesis that “philosophy claims to overcome death” (see especially p. 71) and assumes a “more than human stance” (p. 8 and throughout). But *what* it is that the philosopher *thinks about* and the *manner* of his thinking and precisely why such thinking is best described as straining toward divinity—these things are not explained.

We are given one clue: Tragedy and the stance of the tragic protagonist when he gains knowledge of his former ignorance (*anagnorisis*) are somehow held to come closest to philosophy (e.g., pp. 194–95). This suggests that for Hartle it is not wonder but terror that is the beginning of philosophy. Indeed, she does so write:

Philosophy begins as an escape from death and thus presupposes mortality. Then it returns to its conditions and becomes a meditation on death. Socrates’s discourse about death on the day of his death is both a diversion from death, a passing the time while waiting to die, and an unblinking steady looking at death (p. 219).

The fear of death allows the question of the soul’s nature to come out of obscurity (p. 71).

From these passages it is evident, to answer my own question about the philosopher’s subject matter, that one of the things he thinks about is the human soul, self, mind and whether these are one and the same or different. But what about all the other things that people on philosophy departments’ reading lists talk about, for instance space, time, matter, the principle of noncontradiction, the

nature of mathematical knowledge, the logical relations between norms and facts? Are these in or out? And on what principles? I could certainly imagine an argument according to which all such questions depend on or are included in the question about the nature of the soul. Perhaps such an argument is implicit in Hartle's book. I wish it were explicitly developed.

But even when I confine myself to the express topic of Hartle's book I must ask why do questions about the soul's nature presuppose fear, fear of death? Isn't life at least as much the "horizon" of death as death is the horizon of life?

The free human being thinks of nothing so little as of death and his wisdom is not a meditation on death but on life (Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, Proposition 67).

It was because I thought that the *Phaedo* is of the same persuasion as the passage from Spinoza's *Ethics* just cited that I included some of my own reactions to its imagery earlier in this review. Perhaps Hartle would reply that what she is describing is how one becomes "free" in the relevant sense. Then my question becomes, why through terror, why not through love? Another way of putting this is, I suppose, why does sublimity (in Kant's or Burke's sense) outrank beauty?

I very much hope that the generally dissenting tone of this review does not obscure the fact that I found *Death and the Disinterested Spectator* very much worth reading. It is beautifully written and full of fine aperçus. Conceivably, if the hints on pp. 196ff were further developed—hints about proceeding from wonder to inquiry via acknowledging and delineating discrepancies in feeling, thought, and attitude—much of our disagreement would fall away. As it stands, it looks to me as though Hartle's book tries to do the impossible—conflate Plato and Aristotle with both Husserl and Heidegger.