

# Interpretation

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Matthew Linck, *Wakefulness and World: An Invitation to Philosophy*.  
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In *Wakefulness and World: An Invitation to Philosophy*, Matthew Linck provides chapter-length engagements of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel. Each chapter could serve well as a stand-alone introduction to the philosopher whose work it engages, but the chapters also build on one another to tell the counterintuitive story that the intelligibility of the world, while seemingly obvious at first glance, is not so obvious at first thought, and perhaps not even on second thought. And yet, while the book's thesis poses serious questions about the supposed obviousness of the world's intelligibility, Linck does not take the reader on an obscurantist's journey. Questions arise because reasoning leads to them logically, and reasoning answers these questions as reason is able, understanding that these answers may lead to the posing of further questions. In this way the book reads like a detective story, with the protagonist moving from one clue to the next, because while each clue does not contain the fullness of truth that is sought—and so the pursuit must continue—nonetheless each clue has sufficient significance to point one toward the ultimate sought-after end, an understanding of the intelligibility of the world. Indeed, this book could be used as a treatment for misology, as the inquiry modeled in this book is that of one who wants to know truth, and who also knows how to pursue it, because one is a lover of wisdom.

Reading *Wakefulness and World* gives one the experience of taking an independent study with a master teacher. Focusing for a moment on its form, this book is “about” how to read primary sources and how to philosophize. The first chapter starts *in media res*, with the author acting as a guide bringing the reader quickly up to speed, briefly summarizing a bit of Socrates's and

Glaucon's discussion at the midpoint of Plato's *Republic* (1). Immediately following this opening summary, Linck's authorial voice switches seamlessly to that of a fellow companion on a shared intellectual journey: "Let's listen in to their next bit of conversation" (1). For the rest of the chapter, Linck succeeds in moving back and forth between the two modes fairly seamlessly. (He does something similar in the subsequent chapters on Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel, *mutatis mutandis*, as the other philosophers did not write in dialogue form.) The overall effect is teacherly in the best sense, where the reader has the sensation of thinking along with the author as he is simultaneously being guided.

Turning attention to the book's content—assuming (mistakenly but conveniently) for the moment it can be cleanly separated from the book's form—Linck explains high-level concepts and arguments from all the thinkers he engages in a clear, conversational style, relatively free of jargon, while avoiding oversimplification and maintaining a high degree of precision and rigor. In Linck's own concluding summarizing terms: chapter 1 engaging Plato, "Wakefulness," is about "the apprehension of intelligible forms" and "the waking to eidetic sight"; chapter 2 engaging Aristotle, "World," is about "the delineation of the determinate world" and "the deepening of worldly intelligibility in the quest for principles"; chapter 3 engaging Kant, "Sum," is about "the experience of counting" and the unfolding of mathematical thought into the grounds of conscious experience"; and chapter 4 engaging Hegel, "Thought/Being," is about "common sense" and "the overcoming of common sense" (173).

In addition to its other virtues, chapter 1 serves as a kind of corrective or apologetic against reductionist and anti-Platonist strains typical in much of philosophy today. A number of common errors in reading and interpretation plague not only the generally educated reader of Plato, but also, tragically, many trained philosophers and philosophy professors who presumably should know better. One error is to attribute to Plato everything that the character Socrates says in Plato's dialogues. This error is so ubiquitous as to have a name: "the mouthpiece fallacy." Another error is for a reader to engage Plato not directly, but through a secondhand invention—like one of the so-called Platonic theories ("Plato's theory of ideas," "Plato's theory of recollection," etc.)—and then form the impression that one "knows what Plato thinks." Such impressions often make a reader incapable of fruitfully reading a Platonic dialogue (if one ever gets around to doing so). Never mind the fact that most of these so-called Platonic theories are actually Neoplatonic

theories being used anachronistically<sup>1</sup> (though at some level understandably) to reduce the complex cluster of philosophical activity, arguments, and claims present in any given Platonic dialogue down to a ready-at-hand “theory.”

Linck commits none of these fallacies. On the contrary, he models how one *should* engage Plato’s dialogues without reductionism and yet with brevity and clarity. He manages to penetrate quickly to the heart of pivotal themes, claims, and arguments from Plato’s dialogues, and he does so without warping or inaccurately glossing the original material. With tact, and perhaps even invisibly to the neophyte, he even manages to call to task philosophers who think that argumentatively establishing or denying the existence of the forms is the most appropriate initial, persistent, and final response to Glaucon’s<sup>2</sup> first mentioning them. Linck is sympathetic to the reasonableness of such a response, saying “the presumption that there *are* forms to begin with” is something that “we would want to question” (3). But that is a fish to fry for another time. Linck makes clear that the conversation between Socrates and Glaucon, at this point, is really about something else, namely, what to do or conclude in the light of forms being a given. They are a starting point, not a bone of contention. The philosopher is someone who sees forms, and delights in the seeing (2). This is the *definition* of a philosopher (4). Linck summarizes the point as follows: “Understood in this way, philosophy is not premised on proving that there are forms. Philosophy begins with seeing the forms” (4).

Chapter 2, focusing on Aristotle, is just as careful, edifying, and delightful as the chapter on Plato. Linck walks through select passages from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and *Physics* to describe what the world is and what things are in the world by focusing on “nature,” without relying on—and thus, without having to spend time clarifying the meaning of—most of the other typical Aristotelian jargon of substance, accident, actuality, potentiality, and so forth. Part of his method in explaining Aristotle’s account of nature is juxtaposing it with a “fable” Descartes describes in his *Le monde* (51–52). In the Cartesian fable, nature is construed to be “both the moving matter and the laws which such motions obey”; but because of this, “if the world is an aggregate

<sup>1</sup> An anachronistic interpretation is not necessarily an unhelpful one, or even an inaccurate one. Nor is it necessarily the case that Plotinus is mistaken in any given claim he may make, as far as it goes. Nevertheless, neither is it necessarily the case that Plato means all and only what Plotinus says he learned from Plato, nor that Plato is doing all and only what Plotinus thinks Plato is doing in writing his dialogues.

<sup>2</sup> Linck takes care to note that it is not Socrates, but rather “Glaucon” who “is the first person to utter the word [‘form,’ *eidōs*] in the *Republic* and he uses it in this sense [as ‘indicating a class or kind of thing’]” (2).

of colliding bodies, there can be no conception of a principle of rest” (52). On the other hand, in Aristotle’s account, “nature is not understood here [192b21–23] as the totality of moving things (and their laws). Rather, nature here is distinct from the things that move and rest. Nature is what is responsible for their motion and rest” (53). Motion and rest are defined in terms of becoming and fully being, respectively. “The motions that begin in the acorn and the egg come to rest in the active lives of an oak tree and a sparrow” (55). When the oak tree grows or the sparrow flies, what Descartes calls instances of motion, Aristotle instead calls aspects of the activity of being an oak tree or sparrow, because “to be a sparrow means to act—to live—in certain ways. Such activity—activity as the being of a certain (kind of) thing—must be distinguished from motion” (54).

Once more Linck is to be lauded for avoiding ham-fisted and misleading characterizations of a thinker and his work. He does not portray Aristotle as a hard-nosed empiricist protesting the rationalist idealism of his teacher Plato (a common cliché which does disservice to both Aristotle and Plato). When concluding his discussion of being and nature, after recapitulating the differences between artifacts and living beings (88), Linck points out that forms have appeared once again in the course of our inquiry, that “the turn to forms is a second beginning for the philosopher,” and that “this second beginning is the first beginning played in a different key” (89). Because Linck does not advert to facile reflections on similarities or differences between the philosophers he is engaging, he succeeds in writing chapters that can be read as stand-alone treatments that also build on one another when read together.

Linck’s treatment of Kant in chapter 3 is a slight departure from his usual mode of explanation, only insofar as he utilizes (and thus must spend time explaining) Kantian jargon, but Linck is aware of this anomaly, stating later in the introduction to his glossary that Kant is an “outlier...who makes extensive use of philosophical terms inherited from his predecessors” (177). Otherwise the method and approach is the same: engaging a passage from a primary text, considering it carefully, reasoning about it methodically but in a conversational style. This chapter begins with a quotation from Kant about the simple act of counting on one’s fingers (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B15–16), and the bulk of the chapter is taken up with explaining how the possibility of such a simple action relies on *intuition* and *concepts*, and involves necessity (91–92). This chapter, along with the next on Hegel, contains dense argumentation that may strike the more casual reader as discursions that are sometimes harder to follow, but Linck is aware of this, and attempts to assuage

this difficulty with frequent section breaks, with reviews and reminders of covered ground, and, in chapter 4, with narrative reversions—or attempted reversions—to “common sense.” At one point he writes: “Maybe, though, the problem is with us. Maybe we shouldn’t be asking these questions. Maybe the questions themselves create the illusion of a problem about giving a true explanation of knowing” (144). Such comments encourage the reader to persist in places where many readers are probably posing those very questions to themselves. Again, Linck’s teacherly manner is apparent, and appreciated.

Before I began reading *Wakefulness and World*, based on the publisher summary I thought the book might be a good text for an introductory philosophy course. After reading the prefatory pages, that expectation shifted into a higher gear; I thought it might be a good book for sharing with people who want to know what philosophy is, or to demonstrate to friends what it is that philosophers do. Once I had finished the book, I had become convinced that this is a book for audiences of nearly every level of philosophical training—from beginners to specialists—as well as for those with no training at all. To speak to its pedagogical virtues for a moment, being edified by the book myself I saw that its potential uses go beyond introductory courses. I assigned it as one of the texts for a junior-level metaphysics course last semester, for example, and it served well.

When interviewed and asked why the book was subtitled *An Invitation to Philosophy* rather than *An Introduction to Philosophy*, Linck said, “I wanted to avoid the term ‘introduction’ because usually the books that have that heading lay out the fundamental concepts, the basic areas of inquiry that philosophy delves into, and I wasn’t doing that. I didn’t want to do that. Instead, it’s an invitation to participate in the activity of philosophizing and reading philosophical books.”<sup>3</sup> From my reading and use, and from what I have seen among my students, Linck’s book accomplishes its desired end.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sjc.edu/news/tutors-talk-books-matthew-linck-his-new-book-wakefulness-and-world>.

## GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

*Interpretation* welcomes manuscripts in political philosophy broadly conceived. Submitted articles can be interpretations of treatises of political philosophy as well as literary works, theological works, and writings on jurisprudence that have an important bearing on political philosophy.

All submissions must be in Microsoft Word® and sent, as an email attachment, to [interpretation@baylor.edu](mailto:interpretation@baylor.edu).

Submissions must be under 8,000 words, including notes and bibliographic references, and must be accompanied by an abstract of no more than 150 words. Because *Interpretation* is a double-blind peer-reviewed journal, all author identification and all references that would identify an author's own publications must be removed from the document. A separate title page, with the author's affiliation and contact information (including address, postal code, email address, and phone number) must be included with your MS.

Contributors should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style* (16th edition). *The Chicago Manual of Style* offers publications the choice between sentence-style capitalization in titles of books or articles and headline-style. *Interpretation* uses the headline style. Parenthetical references no longer use "p." or "pp." *Interpretation* has reverted to the traditional form of citation and no longer uses the author/date form. Please double space the entire text. Footnotes, rather than endnotes, are preferred.

Words from languages not rooted in Latin should be transliterated to English. Foreign expressions that have not become part of English should be accompanied by translation into English.

The editors of *Interpretation* are committed to a timely appraisal of all manuscripts, and expect to be able to have a decision on submissions within four to six weeks.