

Lorenzo Peña

Review of:

Lloyd P. Gerzon (ed.)

*Graceful Reason: Essays in Ancient and
Medieval Philosophy*

Presented to Joseph Owens

Philosophia

XIX/1

(Bar Ilan University, (Israel)

may 1989)

pp. 73-79

ISSN 0048-3893.

GRACEFUL REASON: ESSAYS IN ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY PRESENTED TO JOSEPH OWENS, Edited by Lloyd P. Gerson. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1983. pp. 447. Paperback.

This is an excellent Festschrift. The contributors' scholarship is thorough and well-attested. The editor's work has been painstaking and conscientious — a complete bibliography of works by and on Father Owens is appended; the indexes are helpful. The volume is well-edited and printed — except for a number of misprints, mainly to be found in the papers in Italian. The drawbacks from which the book suffers pertain rather to the kind of publication it is: too many subjects by too many authors, often with insufficient space to develop their themes. Let me focus on a few of the papers without detracting from the value of the others.

Walter Leszl's paper «L'argomento contro i molti in DK 29B1 e il procedimento di Zenone» sets forth a detailed analysis of one of Zeno's arguments against the many. Leszl discusses and rebuts Solmsen's, Frankel's and Barnes's views to the effect that Zeno was not serious in his argument against plurality. To the reviewer's mind, Leszl is quite right there and, in fact, those views are but a token of an unfortunately widespread tendency to either misapply the exegetic principle of charity, or else look upon any philosophical tenet emerging as hardly retrievable by application of that principle as a joke of aorta which in the end is nothing else but another way of failing to take fundamental disagreements in philosophy seriously. Common as those abuses are in other fields of the philosophical history of philosophy, they reach their peak in ancient philosophy, with very few people being prepared to acknowledge that Heraclitus accepted true contradictions or that Plato meant what he said in the *Parmenides* and *Sophist* dialogues.

Leszl makes it clear that Zeno not only grasped but also used the techniques of *reductio ad absurdum* argument. His concluding remark though (pp. 26-27) is that Zeno's own argument tells not just against the many but also against the *Parmenidean One*, since the latter is conceived of as having largeness — while Zeno's argument shows that whatever has largeness is made up of many things, some infinitely large and some lacking any largeness at all, which is absurd. Leszl refutes Furley's solution to the effect that Zeno's adding 'πάχος' in his argument shows that what is ruled out is not every and any largeness but such largeness alone as includes physical density. According to Leszl, instead, Zeno implicitly dissented from both *Parmenides* and *Melissos*.

Leszl is not wholly convincing on this issue. Furley seems to me to be right: having mere μέγεθος may fail to entail being divided into parts, while having πάχος (mass, bulk, thickness: see LSI for references) may not: Zeno's argument can be read as a proof that whatever largeness the One may have, it is indivisible. (But cannot one who believes in the many argue that each of them has that kind of largeness? In fact many atomists have suggested or even contended that such is the case. Zeno might reply that if the move is legitimate when you set at the purported atoms, why not at the very start, i.e., concerning the whole composed out of those atoms?)

G. Verbeke's «The Meaning of Potency in Aristotle» (pp. 55-73) is a bold attempt at making sense of Aristotle's (pseudo)modal notion of potency. I find, however, that Verbeke's reading is generally unsuccessful. His is one of those interpretations which miss out Aristotle's irreducible ways of being, viz. act and potency — which cannot be analyzed into, or explained away in terms of, modal notions, but rather the other way round. What seems to me most wrong is Verbeke's claim that the «potency of a being is not unlimited, it is confined within the boundaries of a particular area» (p. 56). What is thus being denied is Aristotle's own conception

of pure potency — and, as a consequence, his view of prime matter. Verbeke's entire paper is but a series of variations on that (to my mind) misconstruction. Thus (p. 57): «The concept of potency seems to be closely connected with that limited scope of possibilities which are present in a particular being... If the evolution were from mere non-being to actualization, it would be hard to explain why a process of becoming is possible in some cases and not in others». Verbeke tries not merely to conserve Aristotle's doctrine but also to buttress it («So we may conclude that potency is present almost everywhere» are his final words).

As an exegetical essay, the paper is flawed because of its failing to envisage the alternative interpretation that the Stagirite meant what he said when he spoke of prime matter and pure potency; such an interpretation may be backed up by many considerations, e.g., that if the structure of act and potency is going to explain anything, it must be taken to its ultimate applications: as coming to know calls for having been able to acquire such a state, which is a near potency, likewise coming to be a substance capable of learning calls for a previous potency of such a coming to be, which potency is nothing else but pure potency, i. e. prime matter — a potency not within the boundaries of any particular entity at all, but precisely a potency for anything whatsoever, which in itself (actually) is neither a what nor a how much nor a how, and so boundless. Verbeke fails to quote and discuss such texts as at least *prima facie* support this construction. He also refrains from going into a philosophical examination of the difficulties surrounding Aristotle's «basic significance [of 'potency'] which is found everywhere where potency is involved: it is a principle of change in something else or in the same being insofar as it is other (*Metaph.* ix, 1, 104a9-11)» (p. 57, n. 8). That such statements are puzzling doesn't even deserve mention, according to Verbeke. This is another reason why I think that his essay also does not successfully defend Aristotle's view of potency: any such defence ought to take into account the difficulties involved and then try to dispel them, which Verbeke does not.

In fact Verbeke is a (too) convinced Aristotelian, who takes for granted what should rather be argued for: that the notion of potency is free from major difficulties and that it usefully applies to our common experience. AntiAristotelian philosophers allege that the notion is unenlightening and definitely contradictory since, when potency is actualized, it is so «not as such but as something else» — which statement brinks on overt contradiction, which it avoids only by availing itself of the reduplicative «as», which may be regarded as a disreputable device, since it enables one to hide the logical consequences of what one is claiming and, thus, to salvage any theory whatsoever. But, if we are to countenance true contradictions, the entire purpose of the Aristotelian dichotomies (act/potency, form/matter) is lost, since they aimed at nothing else but avoiding such contradictions as seemed to be entailed by other philosophical views — in particular, a number of Platonic claims. Even when Verbeke quotes some of the thorniest Aristotelian contentions — (e.g., p. 59, n. 17 on 1042a 25-9 and 1044b 27), that matter is not even an individual being in act and that it is unknowable — he fails to discuss, and even perhaps to realize, the difficulties such claims are subject to; nor does he show awareness of another difficulty, this one concerning form or act «as such»: act (actuality) gives (matter, potency) what nevertheless it lacks, i. e., what it attains solely by actualizing or informing matter; thus, form «as such» cannot be actual; and then how can it actualize? How can it be knowable «as such», while it only exists when it is actualizing matter and when, accordingly, it does not exist as such but as something else, too? Finally, how can substances be «composed of matter and form» (p.64, referring to 1042a 35-31) when neither matter nor form are ever actual entities, at least 'as such'?

Most of all, Verbeke's clinging to his idea that any potency takes place within (some) boundaries — those of the entity whose concrete and particular potency it is — fails to make

allowance for Aristotle's purpose of accounting for things «evolv[ing] beyond the boundaries of their present situation» — as he himself puts it, on p.60. Verbeke says that potency «is a positive orientation towards certain kinds of evolution, whereas others are excluded» (p. 67), an orientation «stem[ming] from the nature of things» (ibid.), which ruling out is incompatible with Aristotle's point, viz. that any such nature is something that the thing has in act, which having must have been preceded by the thing's (or more exactly, the matter's) being able to acquire it, i. e., by pure potency. (So, when Verbeke himself quotes Aristotle [on p. 58: he refers to *Phys.* 191a8-13] as claiming that prime matter «is merely potential, without any formal determination», I feel sure he's short of realizing how damaging that claim is for his own construction, which implicitly rules out any but accidental potency alone, i. e., such potency as an actual substance is actually endowed with.) Thus, Verbeke manages to make Aristotle's ontology sound commonsensical at the price of waiving its depth and scope.

Other insufficiencies I find in Verbeke's essay are: its failing to mention recent discussion on those and related topics by R.M. Dancy, J. Hintikka, S. Waterlow, M.J. White, Sorabji, Lindsay Judson, Ronald Polansky, Kirwan, Robin Smith, H. R. King, W. Charlton, A.R. Lacey, F. Solmsen, H. M. Robinson and others; its even failing to take into account the (old) Scholastic discussions about them; last and not least, its charitable construction of Megarians, viz. that «[w]hat they probably assert is that nobody could ever prove the potency to be there when it is not being actualized» (p.61, n.24) and that «Megarians [don't] totally deny the existence of potency» (p. 62), a gratuitous interpretation to my mind, ensuant on the above criticized method in the history of philosophy.

H.B. Veatch's essay (pp. 75-100) is concerned with tracing all errors in contemporary metaphysics to «the transcendental turn», which Veatch looks upon as the view according to which «the business of the philosopher ... is not at all to know reality as it is, so much as it is to project various all-embracing categorial schemes ... through which reality can come to be ordered and structured for purposes of our better human manipulation and control of it» (p. 77-78). That, as Veatch contends (p.80, n.9), analytical philosophy (as a whole) partakes of such a «turn» seems to me quite wrong.

Furthermore, not everyone ready to be counted among users of transcendental arguments would accept Veatch's characterization: why cannot a «transcendentalist» think that what he is securing is a view of how reality is, even if among the premises upon which he relies are some claims about our thought, or our language? Doubtless Frege and Russell — at least through some period of their respective evolutions — accepted that we can reach a view of reality by means of considerations on language; and, somehow or other, most analytical philosophers have agreed to that — even though most of them grant that, since the method is part guesswork, we never secure (absolute) certainty about how the world is; but surely realism and certainty are different and separated issues. That misconstruction of the analytic enterprise seems to flaw all Veatch has to say about Russell (pp. 89-91), Bergmann (pp. 92ff) and Quine (pp. 96ff). Veatch's crusade against the «roadblock of transcendentalism» (p. 99) leads him to a lot of confusion. Russell did not devote himself to «an analysis of logical propositions» (p. 89), but to a logical analysis of propositions (or, more accurately, sentences) and, through and beyond that, to an ontological analysis of the world. Nor do «all modern logicians» (p. 91) contend «that, insofar as universality attaches to the subject term of any proposition, the proposition has not been fully analyzed; and that further analysis will disclose how any and all of the universal elements or features attaching to subject terms need to be analyzed out and relegated to the predicate-place». No, of course not. Some of those «modern logicians» are realists and contend that reference — in subject-term position if you want — to universals is unavoidable. (Quine

himself is one of those who do not; whether he is right in viewing universals as extensional is outside the present question; Veatch implicitly agrees with Hochberg's assessing of Quine's view, although he fails to refer to the discussion; to the reviewer's mind, both are wrong on that point.) Even though Veatch's allegations against «modern logia» (on pp. 91-93) have some point — (witness Frege's puzzles about «the concept horse», i. e., a serious difficulty concerning the reading of higher order functional calculus sentences in terms of ordinary language, as well as what Veatch calls the «relational character of predication») — he fails to consider extant alternatives: set-theory (and related calculi) for one — which manage to refer to universals without encountering Frege's troubles — and, most of all, combinatory logics, which are free (or, as free as it is possible to be) of both those drawbacks. (Why not consider, for example, Fitch's ontology of states of affairs?) Withal, Veatch also fails to realize that Aristotle's categorial ontology falls afoul of the same or quite similar difficulties — unless, of course, we deem it all right to fall back on the $\pi\rho\acute{o}\varsigma\ \acute{\epsilon}\nu$ equivocation of which Veatch makes so much, an equivocation saddling us with having to accept «an 'it', considered simply as a material possibility to be what 'it' is» which «is only as a potentiality or ability to be something, or to be what it is» (pp. 87-88), an «it» — pure potency or matter — which only «by equivocation» may be said to be at all. One wonders whether whatever is meant — or referred to — by the predicate which has thus been attached to that «it» in the just uttered sentence is actually had (or «been») by the «it» under consideration, and whether that «it» can be said to be of that ilk simpliciter or only by equivocation, and so on and so forth. Moreover, if such a view is tenable, why not formalize it? Even if Veatch regards formalization as pointless, he should be aware that it would, at the very least, render his position far more convincing.

Another essay in the volume which invites many interesting philosophical questions is Cornelio Fabro's «Intorno al fondamento dell'essere» (pp. 229-237), the main intent of which is commenting on some points of the Heideggerian Kehre — and of course trying to join them with Aquinas' irreducibly original view of *esse*, according to Fabro. I find astounding what Fabro says on p. 236: that the scholastic distinction of *essentia* and *existentia* was (conceived of as being) purely of reason *cum fundamento in re!* But of course, even if Fabro is bent on maintaining that Thomists have forgotten or misconstrued Aquinas' own original distinction, such a claim wholly ignores the many well-argued discussions on that issue among the different Schools, with most Scholastics — not just Thomists, but also Scotists and others — recognizing that between essence and existence in finite beings there exists a difference which is not purely of reason. In general, Fabro takes too many things for granted, which lessens the strength of his otherwise suggestive, historical considerations. Fabro's paper could have benefited from a discussion of various ways of construing Aquinas' doctrine of essence and existence — like G. Lindbeck's «Participation and Existence in the Interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas» (*Franciscan Studies*, 1957, pp. 1-22, 107-25). Fabro seems most unfair in his attitude towards «strict Thomists» like Manser, Billot or Garrigou-Lagrange and of course towards traditional Thomism, which is dismissed as being downright opposed to Aquinas' own doctrine (p. 235, n. 16; p. 237 and *passim*.)

Many philosophically interesting questions are also mooted in C.J. de Vogel's paper «Deus Creator Omnium: Plato and Aristotle in Aquinas' Doctrine of God» (pp. 203-227), which shows a rare mastery as well as an acute sensitivity as regards some of the ontological problems. The reviewer agrees with most of what Professor de Vogel has to say on Plato and the Neoplatonics. Although I don't share de Vogel's view on St. Thomas' doctrine of God — as «introducing Plato's metaphysics of transcendent Being into the formal void of Aristotle's Prime

Mover's Mind» — I think here is a challenging, illuminating essay whose arguments are not to be ignored.

Similarly thorough in its scholarship as well as insightful — if sometimes highly controversial — is the concluding essay, N. Wells's paper on Araujo's view of eternal truths. Other outstanding papers deal with themes in Aristotle, Aquinas, Maimonides, Plotinus, Albert the Great, etc. Among the authors are Ralph McInerny, John M. Rist and other distinguished scholars.