Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's "Categories"*

First half of the sixth century CE

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Commentary

Teaching and Experience in Ancient Greece:

Notes on Orality and Pedagogy in Plato and His Neoplatonic Interpreters

Ever since I became able to read ancient texts in Greek, Latin, or Arabic, I have unconsciously adopted the habit of reading them out loud whenever possible. I don't think I ever deliberately set out to do this because of theoretical considerations: it just seemed to be the natural thing to do. Not until my long-suffering wife began to refer to this practice of mine as "praying"—as when a guest would ask "what's that noise coming from downstairs?" and my wife would answer "Oh, that's just Mike praying"—did it dawn on me that my practice was, and still is, a bit weird. In modern Western culture, reading is almost always a solitary and silent occupation, and it would certainly never occur to me to read an English-language text out loud if I was alone. Why, then, do I naturally and unreflectively tend to do so when reading Plato in Ancient Greek, for instance? In what follows I will try to make my motivations clearer, both to myself and to my listeners.

The answer must be that at a pre-reflective level, I make at least two assumptions. In the case of Plato, for instance, I assume that his dialogues were intended to be read out loud, if not perhaps even performed as kinds of dramas. There are good historical reasons for believing this assumption to be true, as we shall see. Second, I assume that if I did *not* read them out loud, I would be missing something. What are my grounds for believing that?

I have always supposed that reading ancient Greek texts in general, and Plato in particular, in translation, no matter how good the translation may be, is just not the

same things as reading the Plato in the original language. By sticking to translations, one *misses* something, one fails to grasp certain aspects of the meaning of the text. What might that something be, that something I was missing when I read Plato, for instance, only in translation, but began to gradually perceive as my knowledge of these ancient languages gradually improved? Well, for one thing, the more Greek one learns, the more one becomes aware of the multiple resonances, connotations, and levels of meaning Plato's choice of words contains. This is part of what makes him such an inexhaustible writer: one can read any one of his dialogues again and again for a lifetime and still discover new levels of meaning every time.

Apart from these lost nuances, however, the element of meaning that is always necessarily "lost in translation" must have something to do with the cadences and rhythms of the ancient language in which a given text was written. The Greeks were well aware of the proximity of language to music, so much so that they wrote long, complex treatises on meter and rhythm in the spoken and written word: not only in poetry, but also in prose. They were firmly convinced that, like the different kinds of music, so the various rhythmical and metrical schemes of speech had a direct influence on the cognitive and moral faculties of the audience (cf. *Republic* Book 3). Plato knew that certain linguistic phenomena, carefully chosen words and well-turned phrases, could have a pedagogical effect on the listener that could not be explained by rational factors alone. Whereas modern scholars of ancient philosophy tend to focus on the rational validity (or frequently, the lack of such validity) of the arguments Socrates uses in his discussions, Plato himself knew there was more to philosophical dialogue and teaching than rationally valid reasoning. In the Charmides, for instance, Plato has Socrates promise to cure the handsome young eponymous character's headache using what he calls an "incantation" (Greek *epōdē)* (Charmides 156e–157b):

δεῖν οὖν ἐκεῖνο καὶ πρῶτον καὶ μάλιστα θεραπεύειν, εἰ μέλλει καὶ τὰ τῆς κεφαλῆς καὶ τὰ τοῦ ἄλλου σώματος καλῶς ἔχειν. θεραπεύεσθαι δὲ τὴν ψυχὴν ἔφη, ὦ μακάριε, ἐπῳδαῖς τισιν, τὰς δ' ἐπῳδὰς ταύτας τοὺς λόγους εἶναι τοὺς καλούς· ἐκ δὲ τῶν τοιούτων λόγων ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς σωφροσύνην ἐγγίγνεσθαι, ἧς ἐγγενομένης καὶ παρούσης ῥᾴδιον ἤδη εἶναι τὴν ὑγίειαν καὶ τῇ κεφαλῇ καὶ τῷ ἄλλῳ σώματι πορίζειν.

If the head and the rest of the body are to be well, you must begin by treating [*therapeuein*] the soul … and the cure of the soul … must be carried out by the use of certain incantations [*epōdais*], and these incantations are beautiful *logoi*, and by means of such *logoi* moderation [*sōphrosunē*] comes to be within the soul, and once moderation has made its way in [to the soul] and is present, then health is easily imparted, not only to the head, but to the rest of the body.

(Trans. Chase)

Socrates thus promises to cure young Charmides' physical ailment by treating his soul, by means of a kind of incantation (*epōdē*) that is nothing other than his own *logoi*. Whatever the nature and *modus operandi* of an incantation may be, it is clearly more akin to magic than to rational argumentation. As for the *logoi* in which those incantations consist, the wide variety of possible meanings of the Greek word *logos*—ranging from "word" or "utterance" or "reason" to "argument" or even "philosophical treatise"—makes it hard to pin down exactly what is meant here. In the present context, it probably means the "discourses" or "speech acts" used by Socrates in his typical activity of engaging in conversation with everyone he met, subjecting his interlocutors to questions designed to induce philosophical reflection and self-examination, and eventually, according to the interpretation of Plato and his Neoplatonic successors, to guide those interlocutors to begin the rational and spiritual ascent from the sensible world to the intelligible world of Forms or Ideas.

For Plato then, speech (*logos*) as used in the context of a philosophical dialogue, as practiced by Socrates and as dramatized by Plato, can have an effect on its listeners that is greater than the mere conviction generated by persuasive rational arguments. Plato does not tell us precisely how this works, but has recourse to images, similes, and metaphors to illustrate his point: Socrates' *logoi* are similar, in the effects they have on their listeners, to the sting of a manta ray or a horsefly, or to quasi-magical incantations. Like the erotic madness that Plato describes in the *Phaedrus*, however, or the ecstatic spiritual ascent, powered by Eros, that is described in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*, such *logoi* can have an effect on the listener that shakes her to her very foundations and can lead, not just to rational assent to a proposition or the conclusion of an argument, but to a transformation of the interlocutor's way of life, and hence of her entire mode of being.

Thus, according to Plato, when an Ancient Greek listened to Socrates and participated in a discussion or dialogue with him, the *logoi* which the interlocutors exchanged in such a dialogue affected them in a way that included, but at the same time transcended, purely rational and cognitive human faculties. However Plato thought this worked, it must necessarily have involved, on the one hand, the rationally formulable, propositional *content* of the *logoi* uttered by a teacher like Socrates. On the other hand, however, and indissociably, that effect must have involved the *form* of those *logoi* as well: the sound of the speech acts when pronounced, their rhythm, and the cadences of their pronunciation. It follows that the transformative effect of the exchange of philosophical *logoi* in an Ancient Greek philosophical school cannot be exactly and adequately reproduced by merely translating their propositional content into another natural language, or into the formulae of modern symbolic logic. Such translations are, at best, the mere scaffolding or lifeless skeleton of the living organism which Plato considered the *logos* to be.

What held true of the interpersonal exchange of living *logoi* in Ancient Greece may also hold, to some extent, for those of us who read those ancient texts today. The French scholar Pierre Hadot has stressed that when we seek to understand ancient

philosophical texts in general, and those of Plato in particular, we often fail to take account of the fact that in Antiquity, what we refer to as a book was something quite different from the books we read today. Not only were books in Antiquity meant to be read aloud, but they were primarily intended to remind the reader of what she already had learned from direct oral instruction. This had important consequences for the structure and form of ancient writings: the rhythm and sonority of the text were intended to produce specific psychagogic effects on the readers. For Hadot, an ancient book "has no meaning in itself, but only within the living praxis from which it emanates or for which it is intended."[1] In other words, one cannot, as is often done in contemporary teaching of ancient philosophy, merely take a few sentences out of a variety of Platonic dialogues, analyze their logical validity, and then claim in any but the most superficial sense that one has "studied Plato."

At least since the time of the Sophists and Socrates, Hadot believes, philosophy was intended to *form, mold, and transform* human beings rather than to *inform* them. This primacy of orality, for Hadot, explains why ancient philosophical instruction primarily assumed the form of dialogue: because "only the living word, in dialogues and interviews pursued over a long period of time, can carry out this task." It follows, then, that the written work is a mere echo of or complement to oral instruction. For Plato (*Phaedrus* 276a–e, *Seventh Letter* 344b–c), as Hadot reminds us, "the written work engenders in its reader only a false knowledge, a ready-made truth. Only living dialogue is formative." Such living dialogue can best be pursued in a group of like-minded friends. The purpose of *writing* books of philosophy was "to prolong the action of language [*la parole*] in time and in space," thus enabling the memory of events and ideas to be preserved for future times (*Phaedrus* 276b). Still, the written Platonic dialogues as we have them today "are merely a distant echo of oral teachings, intended to make the latter known … a … game that imitates the amusement which the gods derived from the creation of the world." In the absence of the face-to-face contact and living exchange of dialogue that was constitutive of the master-disciple relationship, the Platonic dialogue acts at a distance, but much less effectively than living language or speech (*parole*).

For Plato, face-to-face instruction in a specific philosophical setting among friendly interlocutors, all of whom are motivated by a sincere desire to achieve a vision of the truth, which will transform them, allowing them to live a more authentic and intense existence, is clearly superior, as a method of learning, to merely reading books. The living *logos*, spoken by a skilled and experienced philosopher-teacher and heard in a disposition of openness by the student, has a unique kind formative power that cannot be matched by other means. But how does this process—the process of teaching and learning—work, according to Plato and his successors?

[1] For this and other quotations from Hadot, see "The Oral Teaching of Plato," cited in the "Furrther Reading" section.

Plato himself is notoriously reticent on this subject. He is happy to tell us what teaching is *not*. The transfer of knowledge from teacher to student is *not* a merely mechanical transfer of some kind of substance from one location to another:

Plato, *Symposium* 175d

Καὶ τὸν Σωκράτη καθίζεσθαι καὶ είπεῖν ὅτι Εὖ ἂν ἔχοι,
φάναι, ὦ Ἀγάθων, εί τοιοῦτον εἴη ἡ σοφία ὥστ’ έκ τοῦ πληρεστέρου είς τὸ κενώτερον ῥεῖν ἡμῶν, έὰν ἀπτώμεθα ἀλλήλων,
ὥσπερ τὸ έν ταῖς κύλιξιν ὕδωρ τὸ διὰ τοῦ έρίου ῥέον έκ τῆς πληρεστέρας είς τὴν κενωτέραν.

Then Socrates sat down, and—“How fine it would be, Agathon,” he said, “if wisdom were a sort of thing that could flow out of the one of us who is fuller into him who is emptier, by our mere contact with each other, as water will flow through wool from the fuller cup into the emptier.”

(Trans. Fowler)

For Plato, teaching is not just the mechanistic transfer of rationally formulable information from a more to a less knowledgeable person. Instead, teaching is indissociable from the Socratic notion of maieutics: Socrates himself likes to portray himself as a midwife who, far from inserting new knowledge into his students, merely helps them to give birth to the knowledge with which they are already, as it were, pregnant. This metaphor is in turn based on the idea of learning as memory or recollection (*anamnēsis*), according to which learning is merely the remembrance—the calling-to-mind or recollection—of knowledge. According to Plato’s metaphysical presuppositions, this perfect knowledge is the one that each soul enjoyed when, prior to its incarnation in a human body, it traveled, in the company of the gods and their retinue, around the world of intelligible Ideas or Forms, feasting its eyes on the direct vision of Truth itself, Beauty itself, and so on. Once they come down to earth, our souls are afflicted by forgetfulness of such visions of the Truth. Yet vestiges of these visions remain present in the soul as dim traces, which can be revived and reactivated by the words of a skillful teacher, as we can see in the example of the young slave “remembering” the principles of geometry in Plato’s *Meno*.

Yet the hints, metaphors, and allusions to the mechanisms of the process of learning scattered throughout the Platonic dialogues could not seem satisfactory to subsequent generations of philosophers, especially since as historical and social circumstances changed over time in the Greco-Roman world, the original context of teaching changed as well. For Plato and his contemporaries, the typical context of philosophical instruction consisted in a master engaged in face-to-face dialogue, often over a period of many years, with a close group of disciples. As Greco-Roman civilization spread from Athens and Rome throughout a vast empire, this expansion led to a gradual change in

the methods of philosophical instruction: instead of, or alongside, face-to-face oral instruction transmitted from teacher to disciple, during the Hellenistic period such teaching increasingly took the form of reading the writings of the great Founders of the six main philosophical schools. Henceforth, instead of—or in addition to—hearing the words of the master and engaging in dialogue with him, teaching came to take the form of commenting on the texts written by the Founders of the various philosophical schools. A canon of foundational texts was established in each school, along with a fixed order in which students were to read them. The teacher's main role was now to comment on these texts, a process in which each word was scrutinized and apparent contradictions were resolved through the discovery of hidden harmonies and levels of meaning, whether or not these really were on Plato's mind when he wrote.

Despite these changes, however, the basic presuppositions of Platonic pedagogic methodology were not only maintained, but, like every other aspect of Plato's thought, systematized and made more explicit in a variety of ways, some of which we moderns would tend to regard as legitimate interpretations, others less so. One of the clearest and most detailed accounts of the mechanisms and theoretical-methodological presuppositions underlying Neoplatonic educational practice at the end of Antiquity is our source text, taken from Simplicius's commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, in the context of a discussion of the relations between words, things, and concepts.

As Simplicius explains here, when our souls are in the intelligible world, there is no distinction between words, concepts, and realities. In fact, there is no need for language at all, since there is no distinction between subject and object in that world: cognition of reality is thus direct, immediate, and with no possibility of error. It's a different story when the soul leaves the intelligible world on its way to become incarnated in a body on Earth: henceforth, words, language and concepts are separated from each other. This phenomenon becomes more pronounced the farther the soul descends into the sensible world, where it is afflicted by forgetfulness. Once we are on Earth, our only hope of remembering our previously immediate grasp of true reality is to find a good teacher who, because she herself has successfully risen to a vision of reality, knows how to speak the precise words that will act on our innate notions and reawaken them, just as a fan can reignite smoldering embers that lie buried beneath ashes. This process, vehicled by appropriate speech acts, of bringing about a "match" between the teacher's developed, articulated innate ideas and the innate ideas of the student, which are initially dim, inchoate, and confused, can gradually reduce the distance between the student's thoughts and reality. This "matching" is thus the necessary condition for helping the student to begin the process of reascending to the intelligible world, where the distance between subject and object will ultimately be abolished once again, and language will no longer be needed.

Further Reading

Brisson, Luc. “L’incantation de Zalmoxis dans le ‘Charmide’ (156 d–157 c).” *In Plato: “Euthydemus,” “Lysis,” “Charmides”: Proceedings of the V Symposium Platonicum*, edited by Thomas M. Robinson and Luc Brisson. Sankt Augustin: Academia, 2000.

Hadot, Pierre. *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* Translated by Michael Chase. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002.

Hadot, Pierre. “The Oral Teaching of Plato.” In *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as Practice*, translated by Matthew Sharpe and Federico Testa, introduction by Arnold I. Davidson and Daniele Lorenzini, 81–90. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

Hoffmann, Phillipe. “Catégories et langage selon Simplicius—la question du σκοπός du traité aristotélicien des *Catégories*.” In *Simplicius: sa vie, son œuvre, sa survie, Actes du Colloque international de Paris (28 sept.–1er oct. 1985)*, edited by Ilsetraut Hadot, 61–90. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1987.

Source Text

Simplicii in Aristotelis categorias commentarium, edited by Karl Kalbfleisch (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1907), p. 12, line 13–p. 13, line 4.

οὔτε τῶν σημαντικῶν λέξεων πάντῃ κεχωρισμένων τῆς τῶν ὄντων φύσεως οὔτε τῶν ὄντων ἀπηρτημένων τῶν σημαίνειν αὐτὰ πεφυκότων ὀνομάτων, ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ τῶν νοημάτων ἔξω τῆς ἀμφοῖν ὄντων

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φύσεως· ἓν γὰρ ὄντα πρότερον τὰ τρία ταῦτα διεκρίθησαν ὕστερον. ὁ μὲν γὰρ νοῦς αὐτὰ τὰ πράγματα ὢν καὶ αὐτὴ ἡ νόησις ταὐτὸν ἔχει τά τε ὄντα καὶ τὰ τῶν ὄντων νοήματα διὰ τὴν ἀδιάκριτον ἕνωσιν, καὶ φωνῆς ἐκεῖ οὐδὲν χρεία· ψυχὴ δὲ πρὸς μὲν νοῦν ἐστραμμένη τὰ αὐτὰ δευτέρως ἔχει, ὅτε καὶ γεννητικούς, ἀλλ’ οὐ γνωστικοὺς μόνον ἔχει τοὺς ἐν αὐτῇ

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λόγους, ἀποστᾶσα δὲ ἐκεῖθεν καὶ τοὺς ἐν αὐτῇ λόγους τῶν ὄντων χωρίσασα καὶ διὰ τοῦτο εἰκόνας αὐτοὺς ἀντὶ τῶν πρωτοτύπων ποιήσασα διέστησεν ἀπὸ τῶν πραγμάτων

τὴν νόησιν, καὶ τοσούτῳ μᾶλλον, ὅσῳ καὶ τῆς πρὸς τὸν νοῦν ὁμοιότητος ἀπέστη, καὶ λοιπὸν ἀγαπᾷ σύμφωνα τοῖς πράγμασιν προβάλλεσθαι τὰ νοήματα.

πεσοῦσα δὲ είς γένεσιν καὶ λήθης ἀναπλησθεῖσα

(25)
ἐδεήθη μὲν ὄψεως, ἐδεήθη δὲ ἀκοῆς πρὸς ἀνάμνησιν· δεῖται γὰρ τοῦ ἤδη τεθεαμένου τὴν ἀλήθειαν διὰ φωνῆς ἀπὸ τῆς ἐννοίας προφερομένης κινοῦντος καὶ τὴν ἐν αὐτῇ τέως ἀπεψυγμένην ἔννοιαν·

καὶ οὕτως ἡ τῆς φωνῆς ἐγένετο χρεία προσεχῶς μὲν τοῖς νοήμασιν ἐξομοιοῦσθαι σπευδούσης, δι'ἐκείνων δὲ καὶ τοῖς πράγμασιν ἐφαρμοττούσης καὶ συμφυομένης πρὸς αὐτά,

(30)
ἵνα μὴ μάτην αἱ φωναὶ λέγοιντο ὥσπερ ἡ βλίτυρι, ἀλλὰ κινοῖεν ἐν τῷ ἀκούοντι τὰς ὁμοίας ταῖς κινητικαῖς νοήσεσιν. ἀπὸ γὰρ νοήσεων προϊοῦσαι

(p. 13)

νοήσεις καὶ αὐταὶ κινοῦσι προσεχῶς καὶ συνάπτουσι τὰς τοῦ μανθάνοντος ταῖς τοῦ διδάσκοντος, μεσότητες ἀμφοῖν γινόμεναι. αἱ δὲ νοήσεις οἰκείως κινηθεῖσαι ἐφαρμόττουσι τοῖς πράγμασιν, καὶ οὕτως γίνεται ἡ τῶν ὄντων γνῶσις καὶ ὁ αὐτοφυὴς ἔρως τῆς ψυχῆς ἀποπίμπλαται.

Translation

Slightly modified from: Simplicius, *On Aristotle Categories 1–4*, translated by Michael Chase (London: Duckworth, 2003), pp. 27–28. Courtesy of Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing plc.

For neither are significant expressions wholly separate from the nature of beings, nor are beings detached from the names which are naturally suited to signify them. Nor, finally, are concepts extraneous to the nature of the other

[p. 12, line 15]

two; for these three things were previously one, and became differentiated later. For Intellect, being identical with realities and with intellection, possesses as one both beings and the concepts of beings, by virtue of its undifferentiated unity, and there [sc. in the intelligible world] there is no need for language. For the soul, when it is turned towards the Intellect, possesses the same things [as the Intellect] in a secondary way, when it possesses the rational principles (*logoi*) within it as not only cognitive, but

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generative. Once the soul has departed from there [sc. the intelligible world], however, it also separates the formulae (*logoi*) within itself from beings, thereby converting them into images instead of prototypes, and it introduces a distance between intellection and realities. This is all the more true, the further the soul has departed from its similarity to the Intellect, and it is henceforth content to project (*proballesthai*) concepts that are consonant with realities.

When, however, the soul has fallen into the realm of becoming, and has become filled with forgetfulness,

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it requires sight and hearing in order to be able to recollect. For the soul needs someone who has already beheld the truth, who, by means of language uttered forth from the concept (*ennoia*), also moves the concept within [the soul of the student], which had in the meantime grown cold.

This, then, is how the usefulness of language arose: on the one hand, it strives immediately to assimilate itself to notions, while, on the other, by means of them it adjusts to realities and becomes of one nature with them,

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in order that words might not be spoken in vain—as in the case of 'blituri'—but might rather set in motion within the listener those [concepts] which are similar to the kinetic notions. For intellections which proceed

[p. 13]

forth from other intellections also set in motion immediately [the student's intellections], and they join the learner's notions to those of the teacher, by becoming intermediaries between the two. When intellections are set in motion in an appropriate way, they adjust themselves to realities, and thus there comes about the knowledge of beings, and the soul's spontaneous desire (*eros*) is fulfilled.