Melancholy Philosophy
Polis-Praxis-Phronesis and the Slave’s Know-How

Anup Dhar

This paper places “philosophy” at the cusp of the “act of mourning” and the “fact of melancholia”. The paper argues that one side of philosophy has, as if, completed the act of mourning for what it (has) lost. What has it lost is, however, the question: has it lost, as Arendt (2005) in The Promise of Politics suggests, the old and short-lived Socratic urge to be in the polis, be in polis life; to lead a life tied to the polis, tied to life in the polis? Has it lost its touch with, as Marx (2002 [1845]) in Feuerbach suggests, praxis; or as Tagore (2011 [1925]) in Prospectus for ‘A Viswa-Bharati Institute for Rural Reconstruction at Sriniketan’ suggests, coordination of brain and hand? Has it lost touch with, as Heidegger (1985) in Being and Time suggests, phronesis? Has it lost its contact, as Lacan (2007) in The Other Side of Psychoanalysis suggests, with the “slave”, with slave life-worlds, and especially with the slave’s “know-how”? This side of philosophy has, as if, moved on, with manic determination to the side of theoria, sophia, or episteme. It has in turn led to the hyper-separation of “thought and action” (see Arendt, 2005 below) and the world of knowing (theoria), world of making (poiesis) and the world of doing (praxis) (see Carr 2006 below). “The Other Side of Philosophy” has, as if, remained melancholic about what it (has) lost. One side of philosophy, the official side triumphs over the loss through mourning. The Other side of philosophy remains haunted by the loss/lost. The image (mago) of the lost, or the shadow of the lost works as a haunting rem(inder) over this side of philosophy and there is melancholia; this side of philosophy finds itself identified with an object of a jouissance from which it cannot separate itself (Lacan 1990). What, however, is to remain melancholic?

This paper takes off from Freud’s 1917 piece ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (trauer und Melancholie) to explore the structural distinction between “mourning” and “melancholia”. One

---

1 While ‘the ego probably succumbs in melancholia’, in mania ‘it has overcome it or pushed it aside’ (Freud, 2006).

2 The inspiration of this paper comes from late Lacan’s (1969-70) attempts to move to ‘The Other Side of Psychoanalysis’ (2007): the move to the Other Side is the move to that side psychoanalysis has been melancholic about. It is the move to the Other Side of “case histories”, or what in psychiatrized or psychologized psychoanalysis is called “clinical”; move to what psychoanalysis remains melancholic about: the lost “social”, the absent “political”; it is the move to the side of the Four Discourses: ‘discourse without speech’ (Lacan 2007: 12), the move to ‘revival of psychoanalysis’ from the other direction (Lacan 2007: 12): the non-clinical, the non-dyadic, the non-Oedipalized direction. Taking off from Lacan this paper asks: what is it to move to ‘The Other Side of Philosophy’ to the side philosophy is melancholic about?

note of caution: the psychoanalytic perspective and the psychoanalytic experience put to question the standard way of clubbing (/reducing) and confusing all or most states of sadness, withdrawn-ness, inhibition, passivity, quietness, solitudinal proclivity into a catch-all represent-all psychiatric category called ‘depression’. It’s not that psychoanalysts do not deploy the concept of depression in their work. That, however, would be psychiatric psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis could be practiced in a psychiatrized or a psychologized form. Most often than not that is the case. Freudian psychoanalysis (not psychiatrized or psychologized psychoanalysis), however, with its infinite attention to the workings of the unconscious would mark the differences in the analysand’s experience and condition much more carefully, in more detail and with depth. One such fine distinction is that between mourning and melancholia. This attention to, on the one hand, the fine structural distinction in psychoanalysis and, on the other, of psychoanalysis’ resistance to the category depression has of late assumed an “ethical urgency”, partly in view of the globalizing of the “non-differentiating cloak of depression” and the mass consumerism of so-called “happiness pills” (see Skriabin 1997 in http://www.lacan.com/depression.htm and Miller 2007 in http://www.lacan.com/lacinkXXX12.htm). Skriabin (1997) sees depression as ‘no more than one of the symptoms of the discontent[s] in civilization’ resulting from its ‘invasion by the discourse of science and from the precariousness, stressed by Lacan, of our mode of existence’ (see Lacan 1990). Depression, like fever, is asymptomatic; it is a symptom of something deeper, something hidden.

Freud searches for the hidden or deeper causality. He reaches, through an archaeology of our experience of and response to loss, the structural distinction between mourning and melancholia. He shows how to the same experience, loss (loss of a loved person, loss of some abstraction such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal etc.), there could be two responses: one where the loss occurs sublimated and the ego (re)covers (from) the loss, the lost is replaced by a new “found”. Freud calls this “act” mourning. The other is where the shadow of the loss (not just the shadow of the lost object: this is why Freud says that the deeper question in the anatomy of loss is who is lost but what is lost) prevails, longue durée (because the existence of the lost object [or of loss] is psychically prolonged), like a self-consuming self-cannibalizing shadow over the everyday workings of the ego. Freud calls this the blocked dialectic of melancholia. What, however, is the structural distinction between mourning and melancholia? ‘The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revolting, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. This picture becomes a little more intelligible when we consider that, with one exception, the same traits are met with in mourning. The disturbance of self-regard is absent in mourning but otherwise the features are the same’ (Freud 1953: 153; italics mine).

The melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning — an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished. He abases himself before everyone and commiserates with his own relatives for being connected with anyone so unworthy. He is not of the opinion that a change has taken place in him, but extends his self-criticism back over the past; he

4 Freud also talks of a third response in the same piece: ‘a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis’. However, ‘normally, respect for reality gains the day’ and the subject ends up acknowledging and mourning the lost/loss.
declares that he was never any better. … one part of the ego sets itself over against the other judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object. (Freud 1953: 153; italics mine)

The ‘economics of pain’ or of suffering is thus different in mourning and in melancholia. Mourning is driven by the teleological: ‘when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again’. In melancholia, however, the dialectic is, as if blocked, halted, prolonged in an interminable way: the ego is never freed from the ‘delusion of (mainly moral) inferiority’ (‘there is [however] no correspondence … between the degree of self-abasement and its real justification’). Mourning is conscious; melancholia is unconscious: ‘melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious’. Freud shows, how in melancholia, ‘the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There … it served to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification’ (Freud 1953: 159). The conflict between the ego and the lost object has, as if, been translated, displaced in melancholia into a conflict between one part of the ego with another part of the ego (blame had become self-blame; the lack in the Other had become lack-in-self: “why did he go away? Did I not love him enough?” “Was I not good enough” “Where did I lack” emerge as questions). It had become a conflict within: between ego and alter ego, between two mirror ego-s, one representing the object and the other the subject, the object register cannibalizing the subject register. The lost Other is not lost, the loss is circumvented; the Other is, as if, lodged within the ego,

\[5\] Zizek (2000) however argues that melancholia occurs not when we lose the object, but rather when we no longer desire it. It is the lack of desire, not the loss of the object that makes one melancholic. It is lack of desire that complicates the relationship of the object to the subject; it is the lack of desire that renders the object quasi-lost to the subject. In this reading, reading from the pole of desire (i.e. reading from the psychoanalytic angle) and not from the pole of loss (i.e. reading from the historical, more evental angle), it is the subject who has lost (desire for) the object; it is not the object that has abandoned the subject; it is desire that has abandoned the subject. The question then is who is lost but what is lost. It is desire that is lost. The subject has lost desire (for the object). It is not the object but the object cause of desire that is lost (melancholia is, as if, premature mourning for an object before it is lost [see https://cengizerdem.wordpress.com/2013/01/27/melancholia-and-the-cartesian-subject/]). Freud writes in Mourning and Melancholia ‘the object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted)’. One can read ‘lost as an object of love’ in at least two ways: one, where the subject has lost the object; two, where the subject has lost love for the object, i.e. where the object is no more the object of love. The question the paper asks: has philosophy lost desire for the Socratic moment of being-in-the-polis, for being in touch with praxis, with phronesis, with the slave and the slave’s know-how? Has contemporary philosophy lost desire for the ‘pre-modern tradition of practical philosophy’ — a tradition that permeated western intellectual culture until the seventeenth century and that has only been finally discarded in our own modern times’ (Toulmin 1988).

\[6\] Object loss ‘does not mean that the loved object has died or gone away or been unfaithful, though any of these may have been the precipitating event that created the danger of the loss of the object, and though psychologically any and all of these things may have happened. Object loss means that something catastrophic has happened to the subject’s internal connection with his object’ (Roth in Fiorini, Bokanowski and Lewkowicz 2009: 38). This takes us back to Zizek (2000) and the question the paper asks: did something catastrophic happen in the transition from Socrates to Plato? Did philosophy lose its “internal connection” with the polis, with life in the polis? Did philosophy lose its connection with praxis, with phronesis, with the slave and with the slave’s know-how?
or as ego, as a part of the ego through identification: ‘people never willingly abandon a libidinal position’. Even if the object is lost, the object-libido is retained: it is either introjected a la Klein or incorporated a la Abraham-Torok into the ego. Crypted in the ego is the tombstone of the lost or of loss, though walled up, buried, buried alive. It is, as if, a topographical arrangement that has been made to keep (conserve-hide) the living dead; it is, as if, a sepulcher had been erected, a commemorative monument as rem(a)inder of the Other, but which, paradoxically, marked the spot of an extreme jouissance, a sinister jouissance, a pleasure entirely real: “real” in the Lacanian sense (in the sense of being inassimilable, in the sense of being reminiscent of avoids). The ego is, thus, a repository of ghost effects, of an interminable experience of the hauntological.

The introjected or incorporated Other, the shadow of the Other on the ego is in conflict with the self. There is, as Girindrasekhar Bose (1948, 1951, 1952) suggests, an internal compass marked by the see-saw of the double ego, the doubled up ego, and the irreducible (two-ness”, like the Irigarayan “two lips”, and not with or binarism) of an interiority of ambivalence or an ambivalent interiority: love hate, Other-love self-hate, sadism masochism forming what Bose calls the ambivalence of the double wish. If the love for the object – a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up – takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering. The self-tormenting in melancholia, which is without doubt enjoyable, signifies a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned round upon the subject’s own self (Freud, 1953: 161-162). The paper argues that one side of philosophy – one could call it the Other Side of Philosophy – suffers from this constitutive ambivalence (see Bose, 1949), so symptomatic of melancholia. The three preconditions of melancholia: the loss of the object a la Freud/loss of love for the object a la Zizek, ambivalence and the regression of the libido into the ego, i.e. the turning of object-loss into ego-loss could help us look into philosophy, its conflicted history and its ambivalent proclivities – with respect to its relationship with the polis, with praxis, and with the slave/subaltern – in a manner that is different. Marx, Tagore, Heidegger, Arendt and Lacan remain symptomatic of such melancholic moments in philosophy’s relationship with loss, with what it lost, perhaps in the Greek theatre.

Melancholy Gender

... The free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There ... it served to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. (Freud 1953: 159)

The urge and inspiration of this paper ‘Melancholy Philosophy’ comes from Butler’s (1997: 132-150) understanding of gender as melancholic (identification) through a re-reading of ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ and The Ego and the Id. Butler shows how in both texts Freud argues that in melancholia an “object cathexis” is replaced by an “identification”. Butler thus connects loss and identification. There is, as if, a compensatory over-identification with what has been lost (however, to designate gender as “melancholy” or for that matter, to designate philosophy “melancholy”, one

7 ‘Incorporation denotes a fantasy, introjection a process’. Two interrelated processes constitute incorporation: ‘demetaphorization (taking literally what is meant figuratively)’ and ‘objectivation (pretending that the suffering is not an injury to the subject but instead a loss sustained by the love object)’ ... incorporation [thus] is the refusal to acknowledge the full import of the loss.’ Introjection, on the other hand, is the process of ‘broadening the ego’ through ‘transferring love’ (Abraham and Torok, 1994).
will have to take note of the three fundamental features of melancholia: loss and ego-splitting, loss and ambivalence, loss and ego-loss). Building on Freud Butler argues that ‘this kind of substitution [of loss by identification] has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego and that it makes an essential contribution toward building up what is called its ‘character’:

When it happens that a person has to give up a sexual object, there quite often ensues an alteration of his ego which can only be described as a setting up of the objectinside the ego, as it occurs in melancholia … “it may be that this identification is the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects … the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes” (1997: 133-34).

The architecture of the ego is marked by the ‘sedimentation of objects loved and lost/abandoned’. The ego is an ‘archaeological remainder’ of past object-choices and of unresolved grief. Melancholy, is thus read by Butler, as the ‘unfinished process of grieving’ (however, the ego is not just a passive remainder; it is marked/scarred by a constant and painful reminder of things past, of things lost; it is a force-field of negative affect: there is splitting; there is ambivalence: i.e. the see-saw between doubled up wishes – love/hate, sadism masochism [Bose 1949]).

Butler shows how in The Ego and the Id Freud makes room for the notion that melancholic identification may be a prerequisite for letting the object go. There is thus no object-loss. There is rebound and exaggerated identification where identification becomes a magical, a psychic form of preserving the object (yes, but that serves asanti-preservation for the ego. The ego is, as if, eaten up by the identification: there is an auto-eating, an auto-cannibalism, an auto-thanato-graph). Insofar as identification is the psychic shadow, or psychic remainder of the object, ‘the lost object continues to haunt and inhabit the ego as one of its constitutive identifications’. There is thus no complete loss or full abandonment of the object. There is just a transfer of the object from outside to inside, from an exteriorized entity to an interiorized shadow/trace. ‘Giving up the object becomes possible only on the condition of a melancholic internalization or, what might for our purposes turn out to be even more important, a melancholic incorporation’ and “internalization will be a way to disavow the loss, to keep it at bay, to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss’ (Butler 1997: 134)

Gender [is] produced through melancholic identification. … It seems clear that the positions of “masculine” and “feminine”, which Freud in Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905) understood as the effects of laborious and uncertain accomplishment, are established in part through prohibitions which demand the loss of certain sexual attachments, and demand as well that those losses not be avowed, and not be grieved. If the assumption of femininity and the assumption of masculinity proceed through the accomplishment of an always tenuous heterosexuality, we might understand the force of this accomplishment as mandating the abandonment of homosexual attachments; or, perhaps more trenchantly, preempts the possibility of homosexual attachment, a foreclosure of possibility which produces a domain of homosexuality understood available and ungrievable loss. (Butler 1997: 135)

Butler moves between identification, internalization and incorporation, though she largely focuses on identification. I would, however, like to distinguish a little more closely among these three. Identification in psychoanalytic parlance is a process of getting assimilated into an aspect, property, or attribute of the Other. Such assimilation into the traits of the Other transforms, wholly or partially, the self/subject (as is the case, perhaps, in melancholia, but only in a limited sense; this is because melancholia is not just about identification: all forms of identification do not render the subject melancholic). Personality is seen in psychoanalysis as a product of processes of identification. One identifies with Others or traits of significant Others early in childhood, which in turn shapes and constitutes personality. However, identification cannot be the only aspect of melancholia. In
melancholia we shall have to account for the splitting or compartmentalization of the ego and the cocooning of the trace of the Other in one compartment of the ego, which functions as that part of the ego that “eats up” the other part: Hence the self-deprecation. Internalization, on the other hand, is constitutive of the formation of the “super-ego” function: internalization, say, of the Father’s “no.”. Incorporation is a concept that Freud did not develop much. It was Abraham and Torok who developed the concept of incorporation through a close reading of the Wolf Man case in the context of the transmission of a (family) secret and the secret transmission of an intergenerational trauma, through “phantom effects”. Incorporation, as distinguished from introjection, is a secret identification with the Other. Crypt, the twin concept, is the burial, as I have shown above, of an inadmissible (as also inassimilable) identification — identification with an Other, an experience, more specifically a signifier. Incorporation and “crypt effect” as twin concepts (though different, as Derrida argues) gives an interesting twist to the melancholic’s tale. In fact, the Freudian unconscious gets re-written, re-drawn, remapped as psychic crypt; and a third path (see Abraham and Torok 1986, 1994) gets inaugurated — beyond Freudianism and Lacanianism (Deleuze and Guattari inaugurate the fourth in Anti-Oedipus). Crypt is where the lost object is swallowed and preserved (my stress is on the preserved), like as “living dead”. Crypt is also the place where the secrets and phantoms of the past are entombed or sepulchered. We have seen above how two interrelated processes constitute incorporation: “demetaphorization” and “objectivation” (see Abraham and Torok, 1994). Incorporation [thus] is the refusal to acknowledge the full import of the loss. The question that this paper confronts, is, then, the following: which one is at work in philosophy and how? How do loss and identification, loss and incorporation, loss and ego-splitting, loss and ambivalence, loss and ego-loss work in philosophy? Where is the place for self-reproach or self-beratement in philosophy? How do they work? Do they? What is the place of family secrets in philosophy? What are the phantom effects and crypt effects? The next section is an exploration of the possibility of seeing (marginal) moments in philosophy — moments that are (a) at times, circulating around proper names: Socrates (through Arendt), Marx, Tagore, Heidegger, Lacan, (b) at other times, circulating around concepts:peitthein, doxa, phronesis, praxis, and (c) at yet other times, circulating as a register: the “slave’s know-how” — as melancholic.

Melancholy Philosophy

The free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There ... it served to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss, and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification (Freud 1953: 159).

This section of the paper is a presencing of moments of loss in the history of western philosophy: loss of touch with the polis, loss of the perspective of praxis (and the consequent hyper-separation of thought and action) and phronesis (and the overemphasis on theoria, sophia or episteme), loss of contact with the slave and the slave’s know-how. It is a foregrounding of how at times, in the work of some philosophers, actually few philosophers (while most others moved on), the lost/loss was withdrawn into the philosophical ego; it is to ask: how the identification of the philosophical ego with the lost/loss nevertheless remained and continued to linger in some philosophers, and how such incorporated yet crypted loss rendered the philosophical ego self-reviling. This is the melancholy face(t) of philosophy. Melancholy philosophy is the minor chord of
philosophy. Much of philosophy has mourned such loss and has moved on with renewed vigor to substitute objects. Only a few have continued to be melancholic. One is Arendt.

The Abyss between Thought and Action:

Arendt (2005: 6) introduces a decisive wedge between Socrates and Plato. She shows how this wedge produced an “abyss” – an abyss more serious, perhaps, than the wedge – an abyss, which “immediately opened between thought and action, and which never since has been closed” Marx, Tagore and Heidegger return to this abyss between thought and action. These thinkers remain haunted by this originary loss, by the loss of the perspective of action in philosophy. For all three (especially Marx and Tagore) this loss (the trace of which is cocooned and crypted in their philosophical ego), led in turn to a self-reproach and self-beratement. While much of philosophy had mourned this loss and had moved on to compensatory overdrive around thought, Marx, Tagore and Heidegger remain melancholic about this loss. They find their philosophical egos haunted by this loss, by philosophy’s loss of libido for action, practice, and labor. Philosophy’s family secret had phantom effects on their work and corpus.

Praxis:

Marx shows in the first of the eleven Theses on Feuerbach how in The Essence of Christianity[Das Wesen des Christenthums] Feuerbach ‘regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice [Praxis] is conceived and defined only in its dirty-Jewish form of appearance [Erscheinungsform]. Hence he does not grasp the significance of ‘revolutionary’, of ‘practical-critical’, activity (see Marx 2002 [1845]). Why, however, is practice Jewish? Why is practice dirty? Here Marx (see footnote 1 by Smith and Cuckson) looks to be guided by an interesting distinction – a distinction that looks to have been missed in the hyper-secular rhetoric of most Marxists – between the Christian discourse on creation and the Judaic discourse on creation. Smith and Cuckson quote Marshall Berman to argue that “dirty-Jewish” is possibly ‘an allusion to the Jewish God of the Old Testament’, who had to ‘get his hands dirty’ while creating the world, and is tied up with a ‘symbolic contrast between the Christian God of the Word, and the God of the Deed, symbolizing practical life’ (see Marx 2002, footnote 1). This distinct marking of the Deed as against the “dead” (i.e., dead or inert matter), in sharp contradistinction to Feuerbach, is key to the Marxian perspective on materialism. Marx is thus marking a distinction not just between the “real” and the “speculative,” between matter and idea, materialism and idealism, but also between the mere Word and the Deed — which is why Marx (2002) feels that the ‘dispute over the reality or unreality of thinking’ is a ‘practical question’ and ‘it is in practice [in Deed, indeed] that man must prove the truth’.

While Marx remains melancholic about the lost perspective of praxis in philosophy, Tagore remains melancholic about the lost perspective of the praxial nature of thought. For Tagore it is the

---

8 ‘All thinking activity that is not simply the calculation of means to obtain an intended or willed end, but is concerned with meaning in the most general sense, came to play the role of an “afterthought,” that is, after action had decided and determined reality. Action, on the other hand, was relegated to the meaningless realm of the accidental and haphazard’ (Arendt, 2005: 6).

9 ‘Theses on Feuerbach was written by Marx in Brussels in the spring of 1845. Marx’s original text was first published in 1924. The English translation was first published in The German Ideology in 1938. The version I am quoting has been translated by Cyril Smith in 2002 and is based on work done jointly with Don Cuckson (https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/).
praxical ground of thought that birth’s the being’s world; it is the praxical substratum that births the being’s ways of being in the world.

Our tapovanas, which were our natural Universities were not abstracted from life... and the spiritual education, which the students had, was a part of the spiritual life itself which comprehended all life. ... Such an institution must group round it all the neighbouring villages and virtually unite them with itself in all its economic endeavours. ... In a word, it should never be like a meteor – only a stray fragment of a world – but a complete world in itself... (Tagore, 2011: 160).

Tagore tries to return in Shantiniketan (the abode of peace) and thereafter in Sriniketan (the abode of the aesthetic) to the coordinated experience of brain and hand in the everyday life-world of school going children.

When the time comes for our thinkers and intellectuals to take agricultural activities under their responsibility, the schism that at present exists between the hand and the brain ... will vanish. (Tagore, 2011: 139)

Tagore remains haunted by the lost perspective of praxis; praxis as the foreclosed of the University imagination – an imagination steeped in and limited to the learning, teaching, writing of the cognitivist sciences. While the classical imagination of the university sharpened largely the cognitive and the intellectual self, Tagore inaugurated in the ‘culture of the self’, the creative expression and praxis of the affective, the aesthetic, and the ethical; the praxis of being-in-the-world which is “disclosed” and being-with-nature; the praxis of labouring activities in the “average everydayness” of the ashram; the praxis of self- and social transformation. Tagore’s turn to Shantiniketan and Sriniketan could be seen as a departure from the classical university imagination and from the kind of cognitivist student subject the University mass-produces. Such mass production of cognitive student subjects in turn creates a culture of turning away from the (laboring) masses (or as Arendt suggests: the polis; or as Lacan suggests: the slave and the slave’s know-how); more on the history of this loss in the context of the birth of western philosophy in Plato’s dialogues below (see Lacan 2007).

Phronesis:

If Marx and Tagore were melancholic about the lost perspective of praxis, Heidegger (1985, 1997) was melancholic about the lost perspective of phronesis. In 1923 at the University of Freiburg,

---

10 ‘... the thrust of Heidegger’s critique is not that previous philosophies had simply failed to grasp life, although that surely happened, but that previous philosophies presuppose life and also the living character of philosophy itself. In essence, their failure to grasp life in and for itself is due to the fact that life is always already present in the background of their philosophy’. However, ‘what is at stake for Heidegger is not whether philosophy can or cannot give us access to life and lived-experience [in a radically new, pre-objective, pre-theoretical way], but rather to understand how philosophy itself is lived and situated in life. ... previous attempts to grasp life philosophically failed because philosophy itself had become divorced from life and therefore the attempt to approach life philosophically was an artificial effort to grasp life ‘from outside’. ... this required retracing the way in which philosophy becomes alienated from life’ (see Bowler, 2008: 2-6 and 116-137). Thus if Heidegger was trying to restitute philosophy in life, Tagore was trying to restitute the experience of education in “spiritual life” which in turn “comprehended all life”.

Heidegger delivered a seminar on the Aristotelian concept (invoked in Book 4 of the Nicomachean Ethics) of phronesis — phronesis as distinct from "sophia" and "episteme"; phronesis as the "other reason" or the other (way to) truth; phronesis as pointing to the possibility of developing a critically self-reflective model of ontological knowledge firmly embedded in the finito-world (Heidegger 1985: 59-61) and in life; phronesis as being-related to the with-which. What is phronesis? In one sense, practical reason, as distinct from theoretical reason. In another sense, it is reasoning based on concrete practical action, as distinct from speculative reason. In yet another but related sense, it is reason based on experience as distinct from abstract deductions. Phronesis is thus a form of knowledge capable of critically considering [i.e., reflecting upon] the conditions of its own operation (Long 2002: 36). Where sophia seeks "eternal certainty" (i.e. what cannot be otherwise), phronesis settles for the "contingent existence of human beings" (i.e. what can be otherwise) and works with "dynamic, contingent principles endemic to ethics" (Ibid: 37); where sophia posits the absolute authority of "first principles", phronesis identifies the concrete encounter with the other qua other as the ultimate ground for truth; where sophia demeans "being-related to the with-which", phronesis affirms its fundamental significance as a determining condition for truth. An ontology directed by phronesis rather than sophia would not seek refuge in the realm of "universal knowledge" but would recognize its own inherent embeddedness in the world of praxis and being-related, and would thus be capable of critically considering the historico-ethico-political conditions under which it is deployed (also see Bowler 2008).

Carr shows how "within the dominant culture of modernity, the concepts of phronesis and praxis have been rendered marginal and now face something approaching total obliteration" (2006: 434) and how practical philosophy is now largely a lost tradition (see Gadamer 1980). Taking off once again from Aristotle in The Nicomachean Ethics (1955), Carr marks the distinction, not between sophia/episteme and phronesis but between poiesis and praxis: "poiesis refers to the numerous productive activities that form the basis of economic life. Because it is a form of "making action" whose end is known prior to the practical means taken to achieve it, poiesis is guided by the form of reasoning that the Greeks called techne and that we would today call instrumental "means-end" reasoning. Poiesis is thus a form of instrumental action that requires a mastery of the knowledge, methods and skills that together constitute technical expertise. For the Greeks, the activities of craftsmen and artisans were paradigm cases of poiesis guided by techne. And, as such, they were guided by "productive philosophy" — what we would today call "applied science" — which provide the principles, procedures and operational methods which together constitute the most effective means for achieving some pre-determined end" (Carr 2006: 426). Praxis, on the other hand, is to progressively realize the idea of the "good" that is constitutive of a morally worthwhile form of human life; the "end" of praxis hence is not to make or produce some object or artifact. The good of praxis, however, cannot be "made": it can only be "done". Praxis is thus a form of "doing" action precisely because its "end" — to arrive at good life — only exists, and can only be realized, in and

11 "The aletheia of phronesis is living itself"; for Heidegger, "philosophy is the intensification of life. It is, he argues, philosophizing. And philosophizing is just a pre-eminent form of the praxis of life" (Bowler 2008: 135-136).
12 "Practical" behavior is not "atheoretical" in the sense of sightlessness [i.e. a lack of seeing]. The way it differs from theoretical behavior does not lie simply in the fact that in theoretical behavior one observes, while in practical behavior one acts [get handelt wird], and that action must apply theoretical cognition if it is not to remain blind; for the fact that observation is a kind of concern [or taking care] is just as primordial as the fact that action has its own kind of sight [seeing] (Heidegger 1985: 99)
13 Dhar and Chakrabarti highlight Heidegger’s turn to phronesis and his turning away from episteme or sophia (2016: 572-574).
through praxis itself' (Carr 2006: 426). 'Praxis also differs from poiesis in that knowledge of its end cannot be theoretically specified in advance and can only be acquired on the basis of an understanding of how, in a particular concrete situation, this knowledge is being interpreted and applied. Praxis is thus nothing other than a practical manifestation of how the idea of the good is being understood, just as knowledge of the good is nothing other than an abstract way of specifying the mode of human conduct through which this idea is given practical expression. In praxis, acquiring knowledge of what the good is and knowing how to apply it in particular situations are thus not two separate processes but two mutually supportive constitutive elements within a single dialectical process of practical reasoning' (Carr 2006: 426; also see Dunne 1993).

Carr remains haunted by the lost perspective of phronesis (as against thought atheoria) and praxis (as against action as poiesis). Entombed in the "abyss of thought and action" are two losses: loss of the perspective of phronesis and of praxis; both losses continue to haunt philosophy and render Marxian, Tagorite or Heideggerian philosophy melancholic.

The Loss of the Relation with the Polis:

If the abyss between thought and action and the loss of the perspective of action is one, the other is what Arendt (2005: 6) designates as ‘the gulf between philosophy and politics opened historically with the trial and condemnation of Socrates, which in the history of political thought plays the same role of a turning point that the trial and condemnation of Jesus plays in the history of religion’:

… the death of Socrates made Plato despair of polis life and, at the same time, doubt certain fundamentals of Socrates' teachings. The fact that Socrates had not been able to persuade his judges of his innocence and his merits, which were so obvious to the better and younger of Athens' citizens, made Plato doubt the validity of persuasion. … "persuasion" is a very weak and inadequate translation of the ancient peithein, the political importance of which is indicated by the fact that Peitho, the goddess of persuasion, had a temple in Athens. To persuadepeitein, was the specifically political form of speech, and since the Athenians were proud that they, in distinction to the barbarians, conducted their political affairs in the form of speech and without compulsion, they considered rhetoric, the art of persuasion, the highest, the truly political art. (Arendt 2005: 6-7)

Arendt shows how Plato’s 'doubt about the validity of persuasion' was supplemented by Plato's 'furious denunciation ofdoxa, opinion'. This led to Plato's 'despair of polis life' or 'life in the polis' or the 'philosopher's life in the polis, tied to the polis, to life in the polis, to polis life. It came at a cost, a deadly cost: death; and with the death of Socrates came the death of the philosophic-political praxis of being-in-the-polis'. Socrates had tried to make philosophy relevant to the polis; or the polis relevant to philosophy. But philosophy ended impolitia, the 'indifference and contempt for the world of the city, so characteristic of all post-Platonic philosophy'; as if, the philosopher had to protect himself or herself from the world around; as if, being in the world was detrimental to the sacred task of philosophizing about the world. Arendt (2005) shows how with Aristotle the time begins when philosophers no longer feel responsible for the city, and this not only in the sense that philosophy has no special task in the realm of politics, but in the much larger sense that the philosopher has less responsibility for it than any of his fellow citizens, that the philosopher's way of life is different. There was consensus about the inherent incompatibility between the fundamental philosophical and the fundamental political experiences: 'The Socratic position was lost in this

---

14 "The opposition of truth and opinion was certainly the most anti-Socratic conclusion that Plato drew from Socrates' trial’ (Arendt 2005: 8).
process, not because Socrates did not leave any writings behind or because Plato willfully distorted
him, but because the Socratic insights, born out of a still-intact relationship between politics and the
specifically philosophical experience, was lost’ (Arendt 2005: 36). Melancholic Marx, melancholic
about philosophy’s lost touch with the polis and the political, engender the rebirthing of the Socratic
moment.

The Loss of the Slave’s Know-How:

Tagore’s critique (2011; also see above) of the classical university imagination and of the cognitivist
perspective (Tagore’s writings and Tagore’s actions – i.e. Tagore’s turning away from the kind of
parrot’s training Universities impart and the creation of Shantiniketan for practices of self-
transformation through the realization of creative freedom and Sriniketan for practices of social
transformation through “rural reconstruction” – stand testimony to such a critique) finds a
somewhat surprising ally in Lacan (2007: 11-26). Lacan speaks, however, of a Discourse of the
University. Lacan, unlike Foucault, talks of only Four Discourses though: the Discourse of the
University, the Master’s Discourse, the Hysteric’s Discourse, and the Analyst’s Discourse. Discourse
is for Lacan the structure of a ‘fundamental relation’ of one signifier to another’ and from this
relation emerges what Lacan calls “the subject” (Lacan 2007: 13). And all four discourses revolve
around a fundamental impossibility: of education, of mastery, of ‘inciting of desire’, and of analysis.
In each Discourse, a truth drives the agent, the agent addresses the Other, leading to a product. But
the position of truth, agent, Other and product can be occupied by any one of the “four terms”:
‘master signifier’, ‘Knowledge’, ‘object petit a’ and ‘divided subject’.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Four terms:} \\
\text{master signifier ($S_1$)} \\
\text{Knowledge ($S_2$)} \\
\text{objet petit a ($a$)} \\
\text{divided subject ($\mathcal{S}$)} \\
\text{University Discourse} & \quad \text{Master's Discourse} \\
S_2 & \rightarrow a \\
S_1 & \rightarrow S_2 \\
\mathcal{S} & \rightarrow a \\
Hysteric’s Discourse & \quad \text{Analyst’s Discourse} \\
\mathcal{S} & \rightarrow S_1 \\
a & \rightarrow \mathcal{S} \\
a & \rightarrow S_2 \\
S_2 & \rightarrow S_1
\end{align*}
\]
Let us discuss the Discourse of the Master; all the more because the Discourse of the University, contrary to all expectation, looks to be apposite to and not the opposite of the Master’s Discourse. The Discourse of the Master can be seen in the master-slave relation (Lacan 2007: 29-32) or in authoritarianism where a ‘master signifier’ standing in for the master/dictator issues orders. In the Discourse of the Master, a master/dictator would speak from the position of agent unaware of its own vulnerability. Let us now move to the Discourse of the University and its relationship with the Master’s Discourse; a quarter turn in the anti-clockwise direction takes the Master’s Discourse to the Discourse of the University; where the master signifier is ‘unconscious original knowledge’ that supports the knowledge that is to be taught in classroom context, and the knowledge that is to be taught is addressed to the student-lacking-in-knowledge. The Discourse of the University, according to Lacan, is the secret rationalization of the Master’s Discourse. It is the delusional veil of knowledge over the master’s lack of discourse; the Discourse of the University covers the master’s lack (see Lacan 2007: 41). Lacan’s (2007 [1969-1970]) enumeration of the Discourse of the University the side of the Master’s Discourse comes as a surprise. We were expecting the Discourse of the University to be on the other side of the Master’s Discourse, to be on the side of the lived experience and discourse of the “slave”; the University looked to be aligned with the world of the “slave”. It is in this context, that Lacan foregrounds the ‘theft, abduction, stealing slavery of its knowledge, [transference, plundering, spoliation of what, at the beginning of knowledge, was inscribed, hidden, in the slave’s world] through the maneuvers of the master’ in Plato’s dialogues (Lacan 2007: 21, 34, 38, 51, 79). The entire function of the episteme as ‘transmissible knowledge’ is borrowed from the techniques of the craftsmen, of the serfs, of women working in households: ‘It is a matter of extracting the essence of this [community] knowledge in order for it to become the master’s knowledge’, or ‘theoretical knowledge’ – theoretical knowledge in the emphatic sense that the word “theoria” has in Aristotle, or has in Hegel with respect to “absolute knowledge” (Lacan 2007: 22). Lacan referred to Meno in saying that Socrates intervened as the Master in order to convert the know-how of the slave into a transmissible episteme, that is, the knowledge of the geometry (Lacan 2007: 22-23). Lacan is also concerned about the ‘persistence of a master’s discourse’, about what happens between the classical and coercive Master’s Discourse and that of the modern secular subtle master – the consent generating University – is a modification in the place of knowledge: this is how knowledge becomes theoretical and cognitive. The western philosophical tradition ‘has some responsibility of this transmutation’ (Lacan 2007: 31). ‘Philosophy in its historical function is the extraction, of the slave’s knowledge [for Lacan, and of the woman’s knowledge for Irigaray], in order to obtain its transmutation into the master’s knowledge’ (Lacan 2007: 22).

In Antiquity this was not simply a class, as with our modern slave, it was function inscribed in the family. The slave Aristotle speaks of is just as much a part of the family as he is a part of the State, and even more a part of the family than a part of the State. This is because he is the one who has the know-how(savoir-faire). Before we can know whether the knowledge is known, whether a subject can be founded on the perspective of a knowledge that is totally transparent in itself, it is important to know how to mop up the register of what, at its origins, know-how is. Now, what is it that happens right before our very eyes, which gives meaning, an initial meaning – as you will see, there are other meanings – to philosophy? Fortunately we have traces of this thanks to Plato, and it is quite essential to remember this so as to put what is at issue in its place and, after all, if anything in what is bothering us has any sense, it can only come from putting things in their place. What does philosophy designate over its entire evolution? It’s this-theft, abduction, stealing slavery of its knowledge, through the maneuvers of the master. To see this it is enough to read Plato’s dialogues ... I begin by distinguishing what on this occasion I will call the two aspects of knowledge, the articulated aspect and this know-
how akin to animal knowledge, but which in the slave is not totally devoid of the apparatus that transforms it into one of the most articulated networks of language. The point is that this, the second layer, the articulated apparatus can be transmitted, which means it can be transmitted from the slave’s pocket to the master’s – as summing they had pockets in those days. It is here that you have the entire effort to isolate what is called episteme. (Lacan, 2007: 21-22)

Lacan uncorks the master’s discourse, and what one gets is the University Discourse. University Discourse is the ‘new tyranny of knowledge’, as the (modern secular) sieve through which we are on the whole all recruited. The dominant position in the University Discourse is occupied by theoretical and cognitive knowledge. This illustrates the fact that behind all attempts to impart an apparently “neutral” knowledge, one can see an attempt at mastery (mastery of knowledge, and domination of the Other to whom this knowledge is imparted). Lacan hence asserts: Who can deny that philosophy has ever been anything other than a fascinating enterprise for the master’s benefit? (see Dolar 2006).15 The translation of the slave’s know-how into the master’s theoria is a moment of loss for Lacan: it is a loss that in turn haunts Lacan’s philosophy. Lacan’s anti-philosophy is not a position against philosophy; it is the melancholic side of philosophy, it is the Other Side of Philosophy.

It is when philosophy touches melancholy16, it’s own, as also ours, our collective melancholy, that philosophy becomes a touching exercise.

References:


---

15 Mladen Dolar, in “Hegel as the Other Side of Psychoanalysis”, explores ‘the multiple place that Hegel occupies in the four discourses’. Hegel at once functions as a representative of the master’s, the hysteric’s, and the university discourse, and, ultimately, can be seen to occupy the analyst’s place objet a as well’ (Clemen’s and Grigg 2006: 5). Lacan argues: “at the level of the master’s discourse something appeared which is of interest to us concerning discourse, irrespective of its ambiguity, and which is called philosophy” (Lacan 2007: 20).

16 The MPhil programme in Development Practice (not Studies) at Ambedkar University Delhi is an attempt – small albeit – at turning to polis-praxis-phonesis and the slave’s know-how, and being in touch with the Other side of philosophy, the melancholic side.
Bose, Girindrasekhar, ‘Ambivalence’ in Samiksha, Vol 3, No 2 (1949),

Bose, Girindrasekhar, ‘The Nature of the Wish’ in Samiksha, Vol 5, No 4 (1951),

Bose, Girindrasekhar, ‘Analysis of Wish’ in Samiksha, Vol 6, No 1 (1952),


