

## SOCRATES AND POPULISM. AN INQUIRY INTO THE ORIGINS OF GREGORY VLASTOS'S CAREER\*

**1. Whose Socratic Populism?** «The *Timaeus* is no manual of political theology. It is 'esoteric' philosophy: the private discourse of like-minded philosophers». The passage is taken from the very first study of Gregory Vlastos (1907-1991) dedicated to ancient philosophy - and particularly to Plato -, published in 1939 under the title «The Disorderly Motion in the *Timaeus*» (republished in *Studies in Greek Philosophy*)<sup>1</sup>; It would be after that very first study on *Timaeus* that Vlastos would distinguish himself and excel mainly by introducing into the study of ancient philosophy the methods and queries elaborated by analytical philosophy<sup>2</sup>. One of the high points of Vlastos's

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1. *Studies in Greek Philosophy*, vol. II: Socrates, Plato and their tradition, ed. D.W. Graham, Princeton, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1995, p. 259 (the article was originally published in *Classical Quarterly* 33, 1939, pp. 71-83). For information about the life and the scientific career of Vlastos, cf. A. P. D. MOURELATOS, † Gregory Vlastos, *Gnomon*, 65/4, 1993, pp. 378-382; D. W. GRAHAM, Gregory Vlastos (1907-1991), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 10, London-New York, Routledge, 1998, pp. 650-654; IDEM, Introduction, in G. VLASTOS, *Studies in Greek Philosophy. I: The Presocratics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. XV-XXIV; H. R. KRYGSMAN, *Freedom and Grace: Mainline Protestant Thought in Canada, 1900-1960*, Ph.D. thesis, Dpt. Of History, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, 1997, pp. 485-493; *A Memorial Service for Gregory Vlastos, July 27, 1907 - October 12, 1991*, Princeton University Chapel, December 8, 1991; AL. NEHAMAS, Gregory Vlastos, Department of Philosophy, *Luminaries. Princeton Faculty Remembered*, ed. Patricia H. Marks, Association of Princeton Graduate Alumni, Princeton, New Jersey, 1996, pp. 341-350; *Exegesis and Argument. Studies in Greek Philosophy Presented to Gregory Vlastos*, ed. E.N. Lee, A.P.D. Mourelatos & R.M. Rorty, New York, Humanities Press, 1973, XVIII+452 pp. (Phronesis: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy. Supplementary Vol. 1); *Virtue, Love & Forms. Essays in Memory of Gregory Vlastos*, ed. T. Irwin & M. C. Nussbaum, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, Academic Printing & Publishing, 1993, 224 pp. (Apeiron: a Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science, vol. XXVI, nos 3&4, Sept.-Dec. 1993).

2. Vlastos was the single instigator of analytical philosophy in the study of ancient Greek philosophy in North America - as G.E.L. Owen was in Britain -, thanks to his article, The Third





philosophical career is his book on Socrates, his last accomplishment, his philosophical testament, a work that marked the scientific research on the Socratic problem. There, in the chapter under the title «Earlier Socrates contra Middle Platonic Socrates», one of the ten theses advanced by the author in order to make clear the difference between the Socrates of the early dialogues (E for early) and the Socrates of the middle platonic dialogues (M for Middle), the thesis numbered VI, is the following: «VI (a): SocratesE's conception of philosophy is populist» and «VI (b): SocratesM's is elitist»<sup>3</sup> (p. 48). The word «populism» here is a term that might well surprise us in the context of the study of ancient Greek philosophy. According to Ch. H. Kahn, «Thesis VI may mark a genuine personal difference between the historical Socrates and Plato. The early Socrates appears to have what Vlastos calls a populist conception of philosophy; he practices in the Agora, with anyone he meets. But the Socrates of the *Republic* is an elitist, who would restrict dialectic to a small, select group of trained philosophers»<sup>4</sup>. The critical question here is what it is that Vlastos calls a populist conception of philosophy; the term «populism» is, as political scientists say, very difficult to define and far from being evident<sup>5</sup>. We cannot say what is the permanently valid signification of populism; we know only of historical instances of it. «The analysis of the term populism must start not with the question "what is populism?" but rather, "what currencies has the term 'populism' had?" The notion of currency helps us to focus on the relative and mobile value of a concept determined by its effective circulation and repetition, and to distance us from the search for pure, intrinsic, originary meanings»<sup>6</sup>.

In my article, I shall try to show that when Vlastos used the term «populism» he had in mind something very specific, something of which he had very substantial experience. Then I shall try to examine the possible relations between this experience of Vlastos and his later turn to the study of ancient Greek philosophy.

By the time Vlastos published his article on *Timaeus*, he had already had ten years of writing experience behind him, though of a different sort. A large part of the early writing production of Vlastos was dedicated to subjects of Christian socialism. Vlastos was born in Constantinople, as it was still called in those times. His father was Greek and his mother half Scottish-half Greek. He had

Man Argument in the Parmenides, *Philosophical Review*, 63, 1954, pp. 319-349; cf. A.P.D. MOURELATOS, † Gregory Vlastos, *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 379.

3. Gr. VLASTOS, *Socrates. Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 48.

4. Ch. H. KAHN, Vlastos's Socrates, *Phronesis*, 37/2, 1992, p. 243.

5. Cf. M. CANOVAN, *Populism*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981 and E. LACLAU, *The Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2002.

6. Cathy GREENFIELD, «In the People's Name»: Populism as a Political Form, *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3/2, 1985, p. 90.



studied at Robert (American) College of the city<sup>7</sup> and he was brought up as a Protestant. «Gregory Vlastos was (un unusual combination) both Greek and Presbyterian»<sup>8</sup>. When his family migrated to the United States, he pursued his studies at the Chicago Theological Seminar with the theologian H. N. Wieman, before receiving a Ph.D. at Harvard under A. N. Whitehead's supervision. This was during the period when Whitehead's interests were marked by a turn from philosophy of science toward metaphysics. After receiving his Ph.D. in 1931, Vlastos taught at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario.

Vlastos focused for a while on Whiteheadian metaphysics and did not withdraw from it because he committed himself to the history of Greek philosophy or to analytic philosophy. As a college senior, Vlastos said that he had found in Christianity «the one thing worth living and dying for»<sup>9</sup>. «For the young Gregory Vlastos, the search for reality led to disillusionment with liberal Protestantism and its apparent lack of radical commitment to the gospel ethic of love... Vlastos's earliest writings reflected the 'realism' of Henry Nelson Wieman, and also paralleled the turn of Reinhold Niebuhr to realism... Wieman's *bête noir* was the idealist sentimentalism of liberal Protestantism that reduced Christianity to merely human ideas... Similarly, Vlastos's youthful writings on the prospects of a clerical vocation posited a deep conflict between the 'common sense' of liberal Protestantism and 'radical religion'»<sup>10</sup>. Notably he rejected the «cleverness» and refinement of liberal Protestantism, which couldn't bear scientific doubts<sup>11</sup>. «From the late 1920's, Vlastos declared his determination to be both radical and modern. Rather than fearing the facts of modern science, he would regard them as merely relative, 'just facts', that were subject to change and new interpretations. Thus Vlastos's modernism implied the relativity and limits of empirical knowledge and was pessimistic about divine essence or absolutes in

7. Vlastos graduated from Robert College in 1925. The philosophical courses there were taught by the College director, Ch. Gates, and the manuals included Angell's *Psychology* and Jerusalem's and Roger's *Introduction to Philosophy*. Cf. *Alumni Register. Robert College, Constantinople Société Anonyme de Papeterie et d'Imprimerie*, 1931, p. 36.

8. Al. NEHAMAS, *op. cit.*, p. 342. The combination in a historical perspective may not be so unusual. The Greek historian Paparregopoulos saw Byzantine iconoclasm as a forerunner of reformatory thought; cf. C. PAPARRHIGOPOULOS, *History of the Greek Nation*, (in Greek), vol. IV, Athens, Nikas, n.d.; cf. also the remark of D. W. GRAHAM (Introduction, *op. cit.*, p. XXIV) that Vlastos was «Byzantium's last gift to us»; cf. also, the anecdote told by M.F. Burnyeat: «The scene is Constantinople. Young Gregory has just graduated from Robert College there and wants to go to America, to study divinity at the University of Chicago. The priest calls to give his opinion on the idea. The family is assembled and the priest declares that Gregory must not go to America: «Θὰ χάσει τὴν ψυχὴν τοῦ, he will lose his soul», in *A Memorial Service for Gregory Vlastos*, *op. cit.* and also in *Phronesis*, 37/2, 1992, p. 137.

9. H. R. KRYGSMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 492.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, p. 491



the natural world. On the other hand, his determination to be 'radical' assumed the 'reality' of moral absolutes that were not merely the product of human rules or 'philosophy'»<sup>12</sup>. Vlastos confessed that his position could seem romantic, but, according to his own words, «between a dead church and a romantic church, [he] chose the romantic church»<sup>13</sup>. Finally, Vlastos's turn from «romanticism», whether Christian or Whiteheadian, toward analysis is also characteristic of a more general movement in North-American philosophy<sup>14</sup>.

Vlastos's implication in the cause of Christian socialism was not only intellectual. Together with theologians John Line, R.B.Y. Scott and John King Gordon, Vlastos was a leading figure among new Christian socialists who «draw on the ideas of K. Marx, R. Tawney, and the British Christian Marxist John Macmurray to develop a 'realist' interpretation of the structures of modern capitalist society so as to critique them in the light of God's Kingdom»; the movement culminated in the creation of the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order (FCSO) which, at its height in 1936-37, counted some 1200 active members. «According to Gordon, Scott, Line and Vlastos provided the 'radical spiritual leadership' of the movement»<sup>15</sup>. Clearly, then, Vlastos was also interested in matters of organization and political action<sup>16</sup>.

One could wonder here whether Vlastos's political activism can be said to have had a populist tone. To respond to this, I shall rely on arguments drawn from Vlastos's own texts. In his early years, his political writings - the corpus that I shall examine - include mainly: *The Ethical Foundations*, in *Towards the Christian Revolution*, 1936, henceforth EF; *Christian Faith and Democracy*, 1938, henceforth CFD; *Prophetic Religion*, and *The Christian Answer to fascism. Speeches delivered at a Conference at St. Asaph, N. Wales, in August 1938*, henceforth PR<sup>17</sup>.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 492-493.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 493

14. As R. Rorty wrote: «Whitehead stood for charisma, genius, romance, and Wordsworth. Like Bloom, he agreed with Goethe that the ability to shudder with awe is the best feature of human beings. Ayer, by contrast, stood for logic, debunking, and knowingness. He wanted philosophy to be a matter of scientific teamwork, rather than of imaginative breakthroughs by heroic figures. He saw theology, metaphysics, and literature as devoid of what he called 'cognitive significance', and Whitehead as a good logician who had been ruined by poetry. Ayer regarded shudders of awe as neurotic symptoms. He helped create the philosophical tone which Iris Murdoch criticized in her celebrated essay 'Against Dryness'. In the space of two generations, Ayer and dryness won out over Whitehead and romance. Philosophy in the English-speaking world became 'analytic', antimetaphysical, unromantic, and highly professional»; R. RORTY, *Achieving Our Country*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 129.

15. H. R. KRYGSMAN, *op.cit.*, pp. 484, 485, 487.

16. «Vlastos helped to organize the April 1934 meeting in Kingston at which the several Christian Socialist movements joined to found the FCSO, and he would be a perennial officer of the FCSO's executive until the mid-1940's». *Ibid.*, pp. 487-8.

17. The full references are as follows: *The Ethical Foundations*, in *Towards the Christian*



**2. Young Vlastos and Populism.** In his political writings, Vlastos defended communitarism and personalism against individualism and totalitarianism. He refused to see human beings merely as individuals and society as a collection of individuals<sup>18</sup>. He thought of the former as a person and of the latter as a community<sup>19</sup>, that is as a totality of interpersonal relations and not at all as a sum of «windowless» monads. The nature of communal interpersonal relations is co-operative. Society is the sum of humans regardless of mutuality or with limited mutuality. Community holds in relation to society the status of an ethical ideal<sup>20</sup>. «Emancipation [of the personality] can take place only through social means and for social ends; to liberate personality we must construct a community» (EF, p. 65), he wrote. Christian community was the model for such a community of emancipated persons. «That the Christian faith sanctions and supports the democratic way of life is fast becoming a platitude. Therein lies our danger», Vlastos wrote. «A platitude, as the word suggests, is a flat truth: truth flattened out, deprived of its essential dimension of depth» (CFD, p. 14). In his effort to build solid foundations for Christian communitarism, Vlastos turned to the prophetic vision of religion<sup>21</sup>. To defend prophetic religion, Vlastos felt that he had to distinguish it from «mysterious»/«magical» religion. For him, the religion of the prophets is the religion of the common people<sup>22</sup>, magical religion is the religion of an *élite*, an unreal and exopragmatic religion, not suitable for human needs and preoccupations<sup>23</sup>. Magical religion is also considered as a source of

*Revolution*, R.B.Y. Scott and Gr. Vlastos ed., Willent Clark & Co., 1936, pp. 51-74; *Christian Faith and Democracy*, New York, Hazen Books, 1938 (1940?), 80 pp.; *Prophetic Religion, and The Christian Answer to fascism* in J. MACMURRAY, GR. VLASTOS, K. INGRAM, K. POLANYI, V. OGILVIE, H. VERNON, *The Christian Answer to fascism. Speeches delivered at a Conference at St. Asaph, N. Wales, in August 1938*, London, 1939?, pp. 17-26.

18. «Individualism... has thought of personality as “natural” and “inalienable”, as given once for all in the mere fact of individual consciousness. It has missed, therefore, its dependence on the community» (EF, p. 65).

19. «We can think of an individual only by an effort of abstraction in which we leave aside for the moment the fact of his relatedness to other individuals. Likewise we can make that effort in the opposite direction and think of the relationships apart from the individuals whom they relate. We thus derive a second abstraction, society... Community... refers to the co-operative society - or to the co-operative aspects of any given society. The term “person” refers likewise to a special type of individual: the individual who is a member of co-operative relations» (EF, p.63).

20. «The individualist confuses the individual with the person... He confuses society with community. Society is the existing state of affairs, with its conflict, its exploitation, its limited mutuality. Community is the ethical ideal» (EF, p. 66).

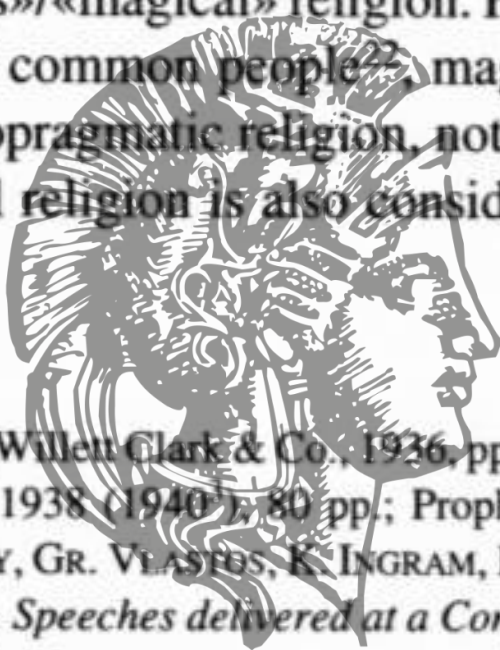
21. «The very insecurity of the life of the desert forces people together in firm solidarity» (CFD, p. 20).

22. «The prophets identify themselves and the God for whom they speak with the cause of the common people» (CFD, p. 18).

23. «And because it is a mystery, magic is exempt from the ordinary checks of responsible conduct: good sense, good taste, even good morals.(...) Because magic is a mystery, it cannot

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social inequality counter to prophetic religion, which promoted equality<sup>24</sup>. When Vlastos spoke of magical religion he did not necessarily mean only pagan religion, but also some expressions of biblical religion such as that of the Pharisees<sup>25</sup>. Prophetic religion is such that, although not materialistic, it does not abhor the material world and stays close to reality<sup>26</sup>. «The essential thing in this [prophetic] religion is not a mysterious act performed by one man, or a small class of men, on behalf of the whole community; it is an intelligible, reasonable service performed by every member of the community on his own behalf and on behalf of the whole community. It is an affirmation of a covenant, an understanding that the whole community makes with God, an agreement to obey God's law: it is the true basis of human conduct. And there is nothing essentially mysterious about it: the best human insight must be brought to bear upon it, re-interpret, and transform it with advancing understanding» (*CFD*, p. 20).

Vlastos does not search to avoid opposition with established Protestant theology. «In personal character» he wrote, Pharisees «would compare favorably with our protestant clergy today» (*CFD*, pp. 32-33). «In formal theology, even in formal ethics, Jesus is in close agreement with his bitter opponents» (*CFD*, pp. 31-32). Furthermore: «If God pervades all reality, he must pervade material reality. If God is not in the material world, he is unreal or half-real. Traditional theology is confused and confusing on this point... Thus many Christians are atheists in their conception of the material world and in their dealings with it» (*CFD*, p. 65). In a way, Vlastos's reproach toward religious bad faith may remind us of Sartre<sup>27</sup>. Augustinism is seen as an example of such a religious bad faith and formalist theology: «Witness St. Augustine's improvement on Aristotle's apology for slavery: If the slave is a bad man, then God is punishing him for former sin; if he is good, then God is testing his patience. If the slave-owner is a good man, God is rewarding him for his life of virtue; if he is evil, he is being exposed to the further temptation of pride. In any case, equality and freedom are things of the spirit», of the spirit

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permanently deliver men from fear» (*CFD*, p. 7).

24. «Social privilege is the cause of religious unreality» (*CFD*, p. 39); «Magical religion is indeed the "opium of the people"» (*CFD*, p. 8).

25. «Anyone looking with fresh eyes at their religion [the Pharisees'] would be struck by its grotesque unreality: the grotesque unreality of magic» (*CFD*, p.36); «The source of (a Pharisee's) unreality is pride, the pride of class» (*CFD*, p. 34).

26. «The "materialism" of prophetic religion is its intense and exclusive concern with human life and human relations in this world» (*CFD*, p. 51); «The peril of hypocrisy... I know of only one way to avoid it: to dig down to its material foundations and make sure that we are building our spiritual edifice on material rock» (*EF*, p. 57).

27. «The average man can play a role convincingly in real life only when he has first managed to convince himself» (*CFD*, p. 33); «Is... faith real or is it a fraud? I do not know. There is only one way by which the true answer can be known: by observing my action» (*CFD*, p. 30).



alone, he meant to say (*EF*, p. 71). This hypocritical love of the spiritual in society masks a sole interest for material gain. Vlastos distinguished between charity and the Christian ethic of love. Charity is another form of the hypocrisy mentioned before; charity cannot form a right<sup>28</sup>, cannot promote equality<sup>29</sup>. On the other hand, by love Vlastos did not mean egoistical, individual sentimentality; for him, love is an element of solidarity and democracy<sup>30</sup>, a synonym of justice<sup>31</sup>; love can become disturbing on the social level because of its potential critique of the establishment<sup>32</sup>.

In all these positions, Vlastos refused to appear as an idealist or a sentimentalist<sup>33</sup>. He considered himself to be a realist. «God», he writes, «is not the sum of men's moral ideals. He is the structure of reality, which men must discover and express in their ideas, in order to conform to it in their actions.

28. «The characteristic of charity is that can be solicited as a gratuity, but cannot be demanded as a right... And that is why the prophets have, on the whole, so little use for it» (*CFD*, p. 22).

29. «There is one thing that charity lacks: the assumption of equality» (*CFD*, p. 22). Vlastos refers to personal examples in order to show the inadequacy of the often socially offending charity: «England, that paradise of private charities, has a delightful tag-day for «Assistance to the Sick Animals of the Poor». When I first saw it in Oxford the idea struck me as so incongruous that I could hardly restrain an irreverent grin» (*ibid.*, p. 22). And elsewhere: «Years ago a certain vegetable vendor used to come to our house almost every Monday. I do not know whether my mother disliked the man or his vegetables. He would ring the bell, look up and ask, «How about some nice fresh vegetables today?» And invariably mother would answer, «Tomorrow». But he came only on Mondays. So one day I finally asked her, «Mother, why do you say that?» To which she very properly replied: «Because I don't want any of his vegetables, and he won't be here tomorrow»» (*ibid.*, p. 38); «Coming out of a restaurant, I see a man on the street stooping to pick up a cigarette-butt. My eyes follow him. Twenty steps away he stoops again for a cigarette-butt. I have just finished a sixty-cent lunch. I know all the standard explanations, and some original ones as well, which make it perfectly clear that there is nothing to worry about in the fact that some men have surfeit while others go hungry... And I know the most plausible of all excuses, with which all these people wind up the argument with their conscience: «Tomorrow». And all these explanations are unconvincing... Yet I cannot help but pass by. I may give charity, but I know that charity, a tragic necessity, can be only a fraudulent substitute for love... And as long as we let it stand, faith in love will lack the substance of action, and no one can profess it without a measure of hypocrisy» (*ibid.*, pp. 41-42).

30. «Love affirms every man's destiny to find life for himself only as he gives his life in service to the whole community. Democracy has meaning only in so far as that kind of love forms its motive and that kind of justice its goal» (*CFD*, p. 26).

31. «And because there is no dualism between religion and politics, neither is there a dualism between love and justice. Separate love from justice, and it degenerates into charity» (*PR*, p. 19).

32. «What is disturbing and revolutionary about the command to love is its challenge to a new way of living which begins immediately, destroys all class divisions, creates a new fellowship, and is ready for the Kingdom of God» (*EF*, p. 57).

33. «The test of our sincerity in the pursuit of spiritual values will come back to the question: How seriously do we take their material conditions? Any one who claims that his regard for spiritual things is so great that he has no time for material values is a sentimentalist and a materialist. Any one who tells us that religion must concentrate on spiritual values and have nothing to say about the material means of realizing those values is a sentimentalist and a materialist» (*EF*, pp. 61-62).



Moral idealism is the last refuge of anthropomorphism» (*EF*, p. 70). He insisted on the material foundations of the ethical community<sup>34</sup>. Vlastos presented himself as a moral objectivist and a Christian realist<sup>35</sup>. The desire for a face-the-facts realism was balanced by a longing to put Christian principles into action. «Our problem as Christians is the unreality of our faith: We have a faith in love that is no faith, because we cannot live it out. And a faith that is not a living faith is a pious fraud. The solution must be a choice between two possibilities: We can keep our faith, and change our practice. Or we can keep our practice, and change our faith» (*CFD*, p. 43). Yet, being a realist in that sense signifies that Vlastos does not bend before the *faits accomplis*<sup>36</sup>. «[God's] justice must appear on the plane of history» (*PR*, p. 20), he said. «The morality [that the Gospels] enjoin is not something which would be ideally best at any time and practically relevant for no particular time. It is meant for the immediate present. It is not a speculative rightness that recommends it, but an historical fitness» (*EF*, p. 53). Faith is not formal theology, it is a compulsion to action. «Faith is knowledge. But is not mere knowledge. It is knowledge on which I am prepared to risk myself in action... The opposite of faith is not knowledge. It is fear... Why the element of risk? Because there is no action without risk» (*CFD*, p. 28)<sup>37</sup>. Christian communitarianism is at the same time a reality and an ideal. «There is no assurance that the community of love and justice will triumph today, or tomorrow, or twenty years hence. But there is the certainty that no other community can triumph, for none other fits the structure of reality» (*CFD*, p. 67)<sup>38</sup>.

34. «Whenever a spiritual value is enjoyed in disregard of the context of co-operative community, the result is sentimentalism» (*EF*, p. 59).

35. «Too long have Christians distinguished themselves by misty idealism. Faith is no substitute for clear vision. Faith is the vision of reality» (*CFD*, p. 76).

36. «Whenever we read the Gospels with fresh and open mind, we cannot help being struck by the fact that they announce a new way of life... Our ethical systems seem drab and unimaginative beside them. [The Gospels] leave us with a breathless sense of reality - the kind of reality whose sign is to expose, condemn and command» (*EF*, p. 51).

37. I cannot resist including a personal memoir of Vlastos: «There is only one certain test, and that is action... I think I was about thirteen when I first learned the back dive. To a boy who was not much of an athlete this was quite an accomplishment. No sense of false modesty kept me back from displaying it at every opportunity. Then one day something happened to a friend of mine, an older boy, a better athlete than myself, who had taught me the back dive. He must have slipped while taking off. He threw himself high, but not so far out as usual. There was a split second in which I was certain that he would smash the back of his head against the diving board. His head missed it. But he scratched his back badly, and had to spend days in the hospital. From that time I have never done the back dive. But for a long time I still believed that I could. I assured everybody, including myself, that I could do it if I wanted to. But I always had to add that, for some reason or other, I did not want to do it today. So my faith in my ability to do the back dive was unreal, though it seemed to be perfectly sincere. It was a fraud, though never a deliberate fraud. And the proof of its unreality was at the point of action» (*CFD*, p. 30).

38. «One cannot overestimate the importance of this point. For it means that the command to love is written in the material structure of our everyday life. Mutuality is not just a shiny ideal that



Vlastos's populism is more than a hypothesis founded on ideas; he seems to have collaborated with political and ecclesiastical men such as J. S. Woodsworth and J.S.T.C. Douglas, the Canadian populist, who «became leaders in the organization and development of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, the socialist party of Canada. In this enterprise they were assisted by a number of philosophers, and especially by Gregory Vlastos»<sup>39</sup>. Vlastos's positions appear to have been very close to some basic ideas of Canadian religious populism, such as those expressed in the following statement of Douglas: «Jesus more than anyone else who lived up to his time, and more than anyone since, epitomized the idea of the value of the individual... Jesus was in his day, and he hasn't been surpassed since, a great moral teacher who recognized man's place in society, the kind of society that man could build... that the great motivating force in society is love for your fellow man... and that there is something that, for want of a better term, they call the Kingdom of God, which is simply an association of people who have certain ideas in common»<sup>40</sup>. Vlastos's populism is rather obvious when he states that, «the workers and the farmers, as well as the middle classes have everything to gain and nothing to lose from the preservation of popular sovereignty»; «They have that destiny not because they are saints, but because they are victims» (CFD, pp. 73, 69). It is interesting to refer here to the book on Socrates, comparing the «populist Socrates» (thesis VI) with the «pious Socrates» as the latter appears in the formulation of the thesis IX in the chapter mentioned above: «IX (a) For SocratesE piety consists in service to a deity, which, though fully supernatural, is rigorously ethical in its own character and in the demands it makes on men. His personal religion is practical, realized in action. IX (b) Socrates's personal religion centers in communion with divine, but impersonal, Forms. It is mystical, realized in contemplation»<sup>41</sup>. The relation of the pious SocratesE to the ideas of young Vlastos is clear.

A particular characteristic of Vlastos's political ideas was that his struggle against idealistic, magical religion coincided with his struggle against totalitarianism, fascism and nazism. A fascist community is a pseudo-community based not on equality but on superiority; it «is based on the consciousness of superiority...», he wrote. «It follows that the basis of

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catches the eye of a few idealists. It is the demand of the historic progress. It is not merely a moral obligation, which can be set aside because of more urgent practical necessities. It is the most urgently practical need of our life. It is a moral obligation precisely because it is also a material necessity» (CFD, p. 66).

39. John A. IRVING, *Philosophical Trends in Canada Between 1850 and 1950, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 12/2, 1951, p. 241.

40. Cf. Bruce L. GUENTHER, *Populism, Politics and Christianity in Western Canada, Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History*, 2000, p. 101.

41. Gr. VLASTOS, *Socrates, op. cit.*, p. 49.



community is an ideal, imaginative union» (*PR*, p. 23). Behind his hypocritical concern for the spiritual world, the fascist hides his justification of material inequality and requires that the individual personality is absorbed into mystical totalities<sup>42</sup>, the only valid relationship being that of a leader to his followers<sup>43</sup>. The unreal fascist community, as the unreal Christian community, leads finally into solipsism<sup>44</sup>.

**3. Young Vlastos and Philosophy.** Vlastos's struggle against fascism and nazism was in a way parallel to his disdain for German idealism. In various points, Vlastos attacked Hegel; he wrote: «Take for example, such a definition of love as that given by Hegel: "Love is the consciousness of unity of myself with another". Innocent as this may seem it opens wide the door to moral bullying. It leaves me free to impose my own ideas, my own preferences, on those I love» (*EF*, p. 58). In certain passages, Vlastos seems to use the Hegelian dialectic of the master and the serf in an adjusting effort<sup>45</sup>. Vlastos also challenged those American philosophers who were tainted by Hegelian idealism like Dewey<sup>46</sup>; we

42. «The fascist disregards this material inequality. Personality, he thinks, is a spiritual fact; it has nothing to do with material facts. To achieve personality, he declares, one must transcend the material facts of his physical body, economic status, etc., and identify himself with the Spirit of the Nation... Every one can participate in the mystic unity of the whole. We are thus back to sentimentalism and materialism, making a spiritual unity a substitute for material unity. We are asking the underpaid labourer to find his personality in a mystical participation in the spirit of the whole, notwithstanding the fact that this whole exploits him» (*EF*, p. 67).

43. «The relation of follower to leader is indeed a mystical one; «magical» would be an even more exact description. For magic alone can express the mood of ecstatic release from critical thinking, the acceptance of blind devotion and blind obedience to another man's will, the willingness of multitudes to abdicate common sense, intellect, even conscience... The real modern alternative to unreal Christianity [meaning fascism] is a community of modernized magic» (*CFD*, pp. 58-59).

44. «Thus the community based on superiority has collapsed into solipsism» (*PR*, p. 25).

45. «The pagan lord can live only by dominating others. The price of his leisure is other's toil; the price of his freedom others' bondage. But my life is different. I live only to work for others, to liberate others. With my life I pay the price of their liberation, the ransom of their release» (*CFD*, p. 25); «the measure of human greatness is not one's ability to dominate, but one's ability to serve» (*ibid.*, pp. 25-26); «How real is [nazist] community? It becomes unreal for the inferior the moment he is forced to think, act, and feel on his own initiative... (b) It is unreal even for the superior. His consciousness of superiority is consciousness of his own aloofness and remoteness from others. He cannot identify himself with those who are inferior to himself without self-abasement. Thus the highest experience of man in Nazi philosophy is not love but lonely self-awareness» (*PR*, p. 24).

46. «...what John Dewey has described as "shared meanings" or "shared values", individualistic critics have accused it of being "mystical". Mystical it no doubt is - in the only sense in which mysticism is a valid and necessary experience: the discovery that one's private values are undergirded and determined by a structure which far transcends the limits of one's individual self... Consider now the totalitarian's travesty of this fact when he identifies this ideal community with the actual disunities of Hegel's Prussia or Hitler's Germany. He points to the indubitable fact of social relatedness and insists justly that apart from the social organism there could be no such thing as individual personality.



also find, I believe, hints of opposition to William James's philosophy of consciousness<sup>47</sup>.

Furthermore, Vlastos appears to accuse philosophy *in toto*. He wrote: «I go back, think through the meaning of love once again. No, there is no other way of life that will stand comparison with it. Stoic self-sufficiency, Nietzschean will-to-power, Bentham's pleasure calculus, Epicurus' delicate self-protection against pain – these philosophies, and others, break down where they miss the truth that one can find life only by losing it» (*CFD*, p. 40). He seems to appreciate mainly the moral philosophy that forces itself to look on and name the evil, such as Hobbes's moral philosophy. He wrote: Kant's «moral law requires no empirical fact for its formulation, no psychological motive for its operation, no given social environment for its validity. It is an unconditional "ought" that must be obeyed quite apart from history, psychology or economics. Plato did not go to such lengths. Yet his "pattern in heaven" is a more delicate version of the same assumption. Rarely do we find a man like Hobbes, who comes to ethics with the bias of the unregenerate realist and gives in his moral theory an account of human nature at its egoistic worst» (*EF*, p. 70)<sup>48</sup>. Yet, Vlastos could not accept a morality of *faits accomplis* as I have already said. «[Hobbes's] procedure is very refreshing, but, unfortunately, morality disappears in the result. We seem to be left with a dilemma: either we shall state what ought to be, or else we shall describe what is» (*EF*, p. 70). «It is right here, I think,» Vlastos added, «that the religious approach to ethics makes its distinctive contribution. For religion cannot tolerate the chasm between essence and existence, between

But not every kind of social organism facilitates the development of individual personality. There are plenty of social organisms which seem specially fitted to crush out the personalities of most of their members for the sake of securing exclusive material advantages to a leisure class» (*EF*, pp. 66-67).

47. Cf. for example: «All states of consciousness are equally real - hallucination is as real as veridical perception. It is only when we compare the state of consciousness with its intended material fact that we can test its veracity or deceptiveness, its sincerity or insincerity» (*EF*, p. 57); «The fact of love is not the consciousness of love, any more than the fact of life is the consciousness of life. If love exists at all, it exists as a material activity» (*ibid.*, p. 59); «The first maxim of the ethic of love, therefore, is concern for material values. Without material values there can be varieties of conscious experience, but no co-operation; without co-operation there can be no community, no genuine love» (*ibid.*, p. 61); «If one were concerned only to cultivate the varieties of religious experience in the poor-soil garden of one's own consciousness, then the paradox would not be so great. But if one conceives oneself as the herald of a Kingdom, if one is working for a great society, and undertakes to do all this as an individualist, then the paradox is fantastic, and it involves tragic ineffectiveness» (*CFD*, p. 61). Cf. B. T. WILKINS, James, Dewey, and Hegelian Idealism, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 17/3, 1956, pp. 332-346.

48. Vlastos seems to know and appreciate Strauss's book on Hobbes (*The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1936). «An early work of his», he wrote, «published in 1936 ranks with the finest work on Hobbes produced in my lifetime. Its scholarship is solid from beginning to end, daring and provocative, but never eccentric», *Times Literary Supplement*, April 24, 1986, p. 51.



ideal rightness and existential realization» (EF, p. 70).

Vlastos marked a clear distinction between Hebrew religion and Greek ethics. «What could justify the intrusion of religious judgments in the political sphere?», he asks. «Only the sense that the realm of history is the realm of God; so that whatever happens in history has ipso facto religious significance. God made a covenant with His people, and the only way His people can keep their covenant with God is in and through their relations to one another... There is no division here of acts towards God (religion) from acts towards men (ethics). The idea of ethics is unknown to the Hebrews: it is a Greek idea» (PR, p. 19)<sup>49</sup>. Also, Vlastos sharply criticised Plato: «The greatest Greek philosophers echo the same undemocratic estimate of human life. Even in his ideal *Republic*, Plato takes for granted that the masses of the people must live in docile industry, with no voice in the decisions of the common life; the right of self-determination is reserved for a small minority of privileged intellectuals. Aristotle, suspicious of utopias and champion of common sense criticizes his master. And the point of his criticism is not that Plato was too aristocratic, but that he was not aristocratic enough. Plato at least admitted the farmer, the artisan, the trader, and the sailor to the status of citizenship, though it was inferior citizenship. Aristotle would deny them that status altogether. Only the man of leisure, the man who lives entirely by the labor of others and can devote all his time to intellectual pursuits, is worthy to be a citizen of a free republic» (CFD, p. 15). The example of Greek tragedy serves to indicate the superiority of Christian ethical ideas. Greek tragedy cannot fight fear, as the prophets managed to do, so it cannot compel men to action<sup>50</sup>.

Many of Vlastos's positions were formed during his years of study at the Chicago Theological Seminar. Already in his Master of Arts Dissertation on *The Religious Implications of the Philosophy of Santayana*, Vlastos described philosophy as a sort of superstructure of religion<sup>51</sup>. Vlastos was led to the study

49. The Jew asks: «What shall I do to inherit eternal life? He asks, What shall I do? Not, as a Greek or a modern Westerner would probably have asked, What shall I believe; Here is at least one common premise between the rabbis of the time and Jesus: They all belong to a tradition that asserts the primacy of action in religious faith» (CFD, p. 31).

50. «The test of mature religion is its ability to meet tragedy without fear... The Greeks were mature enough to accept tragedy. But their vision of tragedy was not free from fear» (CFD, p. 11); On Tragedy he wrote: «the protagonists of that popular spectacle were the vanished rulers of a vanished kingdom... the common people had no part in the action of the tragedy. They appeared only in the chorus» (*ibid.*, p. 15); «Between fate and destiny lies the difference of meaningful choice and responsible decision. Fate is destiny without choice. Destiny is the choice of fate. The prophets never announce a fate without inviting a choice» (*ibid.*, p. 12); «That is why [Christian] faith is the supreme evidence of the mature religious attitude towards reality» (*ibid.*, p. 29). His lack of appreciation for the tragic sense may stem from the theology of R. Niebuhr, a writer than has influenced greatly young Vlastos.

51. Gregory VLASTOS, *The Religious Implications of the Philosophy of Santayana*. A dissertation



of Santayana by a general trend at the Chicago School of Theology and by his teacher Wieman more specifically. In Chicago, there was «a strong emphasis on the value or function of religion, of how it has enhanced or hindered human life in specific contexts. This was often conceived in psychological or social terms. This value of function was often used in a pragmatic sense as a principle of evaluation, although great pains were taken, for example, by Wieman, to indicate that religions can transform human values, so that we do not end up with a simple humanism»<sup>52</sup>. The relation to Wieman was also of great importance for the formation of young Vlastos's intellectual profile. «Henry Nelson Wieman (1884-1975) was the most consistently empirical philosopher of religion and the leading radical Christian theologian of the golden age of American liberal religious thought, a period which extended from the beginning of the twentieth century until the end of the Second World War... He taught at the University of Chicago from 1927 to 1947... In the 1920s, he introduced the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead to the school, thus helping to initiate the development of process theology as a distinct approach to religion. Wieman's own work demonstrates Whitehead's influence but relies even more heavily on the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey, with whose writings he was concerned throughout his life, and on the insights of Josiah Royce and William James... Wieman was a radical modernist who embraced religion's liberalism, naturalism, empiricism and process thought in his work»<sup>53</sup>. Wieman, like his student Vlastos, made a clear distinction between Hebrew religion and Greek philosophy and insisted on the material aspect of faith in opposition to religious transcendentalism<sup>54</sup>.

submitted to the graduate faculty in candidacy for the degree of Master of Arts, Department of Christian Theology and Ethics, Chicago, Illinois, June 1929, pp. 1-2: «Religion is practically what philosophy is theoretically: an effort to integrate man's independent and quarrelsome specialized pursuits into the peaceable harmony of an *organic whole*. Philosophy is the critic of life. Or if "critic" has come to mean a bilious, scoldy fault-finding instead of an impartial judge, let us say that philosophy is the interpreter of life... Its task is two-fold: (1) Critical, in that it examines beliefs, reminds them that they are abstractions, specialized perspectives, warns them against the all-too-common fallacy of «misplaced concreteness» [note: Whitehead, A.N., *Science and the Modern World*, p. 77], and determine whether those abstractions are judicious enough to yield the maximum of fruitfulness in their own field. (2) Ethical, in that it compares those specialized pursuits with each other, estimates their relative dignity, and allocates their importance in a rational scheme of life [Compare the Greek view of philosophy, love of wisdom (σοφία), wisdom being skill and sagacity in the strategy of life».

52. *The Chicago School of Theology-Pioneers in Religious Inquiry*, vol. I, W. Creighton Peden and Jerome A. Stone eds., Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996, p. V.

53. *The Chicago School of Theology-Pioneers in Religious Inquiry*, vol. II, *op.cit.*, pp. 55, 56.

54. Wieman wrote: «In selecting this naturalistic version of reality, we have had to choose between two great traditions which Western civilization has inherited. Each presents its own interpretation of what is supremely important for all human living. One is Jewish Christian, the other Greek Christian. The Jewish tradition declares that the sovereign good works creatively in history.



Wieman was probably the man that led Vlastos to prepare a Ph.D. dissertation under Whitehead's supervision<sup>55</sup>. Vlastos completed a thesis on the subject of *God as a metaphysical concept* (June 1931) and started his philosophical career as a pupil of Whitehead, «whom», as he himself wrote, «I had come to know well in 1929-31. I was enrolled in two of his graduate seminars and he served as the supervisor of my thesis. I used to drop in on his famed Sunday evenings at-home. I attended his lectures on cosmologies from Plato to Einstein»<sup>56</sup>. «[Whitehead] was the most inspired and inspiring of my Harvard teachers», he was to confess<sup>57</sup>. Young Vlastos dedicated to Whiteheadian philosophy three articles, namely «Whitehead, Critic of Abstractions (the story of a philosopher who first begun with science and ended with metaphysics)», written when Vlastos was still at Chicago (1929), «The problem of Incompatibility in the Philosophy of Organism» (1930), and «Organic Categories in Whitehead» (1937)<sup>58</sup>. In the first

While this ruling creativity is said to have form, the importance of it lies in its creative potentialities and not in its form. The Greek tradition, on the other hand, declares that the sovereign good is essentially a system of Forms or a Supreme Form. The one tradition gives supreme authority to the creative event, the other to the Form. Our interpretation follows the Jewish tradition in giving priority to the creative event.» (*ibid.*, p. 87). «Thus the active God derived from the Jewish tradition and the Forms derived from the Greek tradition are both brought down into the world of time, space, and matter and are there identified as events displaying a definite structure with possibilities. When we insist that nothing has casual efficacy except material events, by «material» we mean not merely pellets of inanimate matter but also events that include the biological, social, and historical forms of existence. These, however, never cease to be material. Nothing has value except material events, thus understood, and their possibilities» (*ibid.*). «These claims rest upon an analysis of our experience, revealing that no transcendental reality could ever do anything. It could not make the slightest difference in our lives except in the form of some happening, some event. In other words, nothing can happen if it does not happen... Therefore, the transcendental must be ignored, except as an imaginative construction of the human mind» (*ibid.*, pp. 87-88).

55. Another such link to Whitehead was perhaps Raphael Demos, also a Greek from Asia Minor, an assistant to Whitehead at Harvard. Upon his arrival at Harvard, Whitehead needed «an assistant to take care of routine chores and read student's papers. For this job... the Department chose, the most experienced of its untenured members, Raphael Demos, who was thirty-two, and had been Instructor and Tutor in Philosophy for five years. Demos was the sort of young man Whitehead found most interesting. Born Demetracopoulos, he had come to Cambridge as a poor immigrant eleven years before ; as a graduate student he had caught Bertrand Russell's attention when Russell was Visiting Lecturer at Harvard in 1914. Demos was absorbed in metaphysics (he had once given the Department's course in it) and - like Whitehead - was a passionate admirer of Plato. Demos and Whitehead had met in London in 1919, for young Demos had impressed the Harvard Department, earned his Ph.D. quickly, and been enabled to study for a year in the English Cambridge», Victor LOWE, *Alfred North Whitehead. The Man and His Work, vol. II: 1910-1947*, ed. by J.B. Schneewind, Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University press, 1990, p. 139.

56. Letter of Vlastos to the *Times Literary Supplement*, 14, 1484, 8 Feb. 1991, p. 41.

57. *Ibid.*

58. The articles were published respectively in *The Monist*, XXXIX, 2, April 1929, pp. 170-203, *The Monist*, XL, October 1930, pp. 535-551, and in *The Journal of Philosophy*, XXXIV, No 10, May 13, 1937, pp. 253-262.



two Vlastos exposes some problems of Whiteheadian metaphysics, in a witty and vivid style; the third is much closer to the style of his later scientific writing and it is far more critical of Whitehead. It is the third article that Vlastos reprinted in collective volumes concerning the philosophy of Whitehead. In the first two articles on Whitehead, Vlastos held a mainly positive view on his metaphysics, pointing out that the metaphysical system of Whitehead is beyond critique: «understand it, if you can; admire it, if you wish; believe it, if you must. But you can neither accept nor reject it. It was never meant to be so taken»<sup>59</sup>. In his third and final approach to Whiteheadian metaphysics, Vlastos outlined its dependance upon Hegel. Whitehead's «doctrine of mind is a doctrine of the organic foundations of mind. He employs in this analysis a unique variant of the Hegelian dialectic», he wrote. In Whitehead, «we have a biological theory of mind» and «organic relatedness identifies the individual with the organic whole». «Whitehead agrees with Hegel that the organic whole, the actual entity, is the individual». Vlastos pointed out that here, «the limitation is inherent in his organic concepts: something more than merely organic relatedness seems necessary to account for the distinctive features of human association». Furthermore, Whitehead's God, «is the reconciliation of permanence and flux in an everlasting reality, just as Hegel's Absolute provides a reconciliation of universal and particular, subjectivity and objectivity in an Infinite Whole»<sup>60</sup>.

We have seen that all these positions were the object of firm critique in Vlastos's political writings. But how did Vlastos come to hold those views distinct from Whitehead? Already in his thesis, Vlastos accepted Whitehead's theology only with some reserve. In the summary preceding the thesis, we read: «of the three views examined [that is Spinoza's, Leibniz's and Whitehead's], the last appears to me as the most satisfactory. A caution is needed, however, lest this God be taken as another entity behind the empirical facts, rather than a description of the surface-facts themselves. My own conclusion is in favor of a God who is no new individual with his own experience and his own consciousness, but simply a specified constant in the behavior of the known individuals of empirical existence: that constant of behavior which I have defined as *interest in interest* [my emphasis; by that, Vlastos implies value]»<sup>61</sup>. It became rather evident to Vlastos that Whitehead, in his book *Process and Reality*, did exactly that: he established a personal and conscious God. Vlastos had diagnosed already by 1930 a sort of Augustinian platonism in Whitehead<sup>62</sup>.

59. The Problem of Incompatibility..., *op.cit.*, p. 551.

60. Organic Categories..., *op. cit.*, pp. 258, 259, 260, 261, 262.

61. Gr. VLASTOS, Summary, *God as a Metaphysical Concept*, Ph. D. Thesis, Harvard University, 1931, p. 3.

62. In Whitehead's Augustinian Platonism «forms are eternally relevant to the passing world, by virtue of their inclusion in the "primordial appetite of God". God is the first-born of the creative process: the original envisagement of all eternal objects as possibilities for realization within the



Can it be that Vlastos was in this occasion influenced by Wieman's opposition to Whitehead? In 1927, there was a near-identity of views between Wieman and Whitehead but Wieman drifted away from Whitehead also after *Process and Reality*<sup>63</sup>. Vlastos's theological positions in the 1930s, though largely influenced by Wieman's<sup>64</sup>, did not coincide with them and for that we cannot affirm that Vlastos broke up with Whiteheadian philosophy for the same reasons as Wieman did. At this point a case must be made not only for Vlastos's intellectual preferences but also for his experiences: Wieman had expressed some reserve on the importance of preaching from the point of view of theological rationality<sup>65</sup>, but Vlastos, after having been ordained a minister in Montana, came to know very well the importance of communicating truth to simple people. Vlastos's radicalism was not a pure intellectual choice, but one rooted in life: as a student pastor in rural Montana, he soon realized that a refined and intellectual religion had little to say to the hearts of the men and women of «that Sunday congregation whose faces haunted me day and night even in my sleep»<sup>66</sup>. Anxious to communicate his faith, he ended up preaching the foolishness of religion instead of theological rationality. In his own words: «I preached a sermon on the cross. I spoke about the foolishness of the cross, its shame, its failure, its defeat. And I told them that this was Christianity. They listened. The Sunday before they had looked out of the window as I spoke, and then congratulated me at the end. Now they listened, and did not say much after church»<sup>67</sup>.

Vlastos doubted in particular the organicistic model of Whitehead and, in his political writings, the mechanistic model kept a constant value. It was not that

temporal world» (The Problem of Incompatibility..., *op. cit.*, p. 545). Quentin Lauer has stressed the methodological similarity between Augustine and Hegel in terms of their analysis of the divine being as reflected in the structure of human consciousness (cf. Q. LAUER, *Hegel's Idea of Philosophy*, New York, 1974, pp. 56-66); on Augustine's central role in the formulation of the Western historicism, Hegel included, cf. R. NISBET, *History of the Idea of Progress*, New York, 1980, pp. 62-76, 287, 308.

63. Lewis S. FORD, *The Emergence of Whitehead's Metaphysics 1925-1929*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1984: Note: Wieman's Development of Whitehead's Idea of God, pp. 147-149.

64. Vlastos does not seem the least influenced by James as Wieman was and his feelings for Dewey were mixed.

65. Wieman wrote: «Preaching has rendered a great service to religion. But it has imposed one great curse. To be preachable, religion must be dramatic. Therefore professional religionists have insisted that God, and all reality which concerns religion, shall have dramatic form. But the truth is not necessarily dramatic. At any rate, we must first of all have the truth, and then see if it can or cannot be put in dramatic form. But the way institutional religion has functioned, has just reversed this order. We have first insisted on dramatic form, and then tried to see if we could make the results correspond to the truth» (*The Chicago School of Theology-Pioneers in Religious Inquiry*, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 63).

66. H. R. KRYGSMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 492.

67. *Ibid.*



he disliked the idea of thinking about totalities but he rejected the biological reduction implied in organicism. In the idea of the machine he saw a great achievement of western civilization, equal to language and established on material grounds as he believed spiritual things must be<sup>68</sup>. In this regard, another intellectual who seemed to have greatly influenced young Vlastos was John Macmurray. Vlastos cites his name and his ideas frequently in his political writings<sup>69</sup>. Macmurray, a social philosopher, was born in 1891 and died in 1976; «an eccentric Scot», he was a key figure in the Christian Left. In him we find a number of characteristics that appear in Vlastos: Macmurray is considered the chief British representative of personalism<sup>70</sup>; religion was for him a key element in his theory of personality<sup>71</sup>. He stood against idealism and dualism, against religious subjectivism<sup>72</sup>; he was an adherent of prophetic religion<sup>73</sup>; he valued action above theory<sup>74</sup>; Macmurray, was strongly opposed

68. «We are constantly told that Western technology is essentially materialistic... far from being inherently materialistic, the machine is, with the one exception of language, the greatest instrument of co-operative community that men have yet discovered» (EF, pp. 60-61).

69. Cf.: «Hypocrisy. John Macmurray calls attention to the literal meaning of that word: play acting» (CFD, p. 33); «John Macmurray ventured the suggestion: An upper class is a group of people who act unnaturally» (ibid., p. 34); «John Macmurray has insisted that "religion is about community". National Socialism is religion in just that sense» (PR, p. 22). And the evidence of a personal contact with Macmurray: «The necessity for choice arises when it becomes plain that a human order of value - a particular order of ideas, intuitions and sentiments, as well as of practices and institutions - is beginning to cut across the divine order of value. A product of history is cutting across the grain of historic creativity (The phrase is, at least partly, John Macmurray's. So is the idea of the whole paragraph. The first and last sections of this chapter were written under the influence of his lectures at a seminar of the Canadian Student Christian Movement, at Albert College, Belleville, this June)» (EF, p. 73).

70. cf. Ph. CONFORD, Introduction, *The Personal World. John Macmurray on Self and Society*, London, Floris Books, 1996, p. 19.

71. For Macmurray, «religion gives the most complete knowledge of all because it deals with personal relationships and he believed that the world can be fully understood only in terms of personality»; *ibid.*, p. 22.

72. «If the individual is no more than a detached consciousness, action becomes inexplicable and the existence of other people problematic: that of God, even more so. Here is the genesis of idealism, or dualism, to which Macmurray was implacably opposed: the splitting of experience into mind and matter, the spiritual and the secular, ideal freedom and material subservience to law. Religion if not rejected outright as illusory, becomes a question of pure subjectivity, while the organization of everyday life is surrendered to scientists, managers and technocrats. In short, idealism breeds materialism»; *ibid.*, p. 21.

73. «Macmurray admired the Hebrew achievement which he saw as a recognition, first by the Prophets and then most fully by Jesus, of the personal nature of human life. While, like Marx, he rejected idealism, he did not believe religion, in any mature form, to be idealist, and argued that a study of the Hebrews, from whom Christianity derives, demonstrates this conclusively. In his view, the Hebrew tradition is concerned with progress towards a world community based on recognition of shared humanity and equal standing in relation to God»; *ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

74. «Macmurray preferred to see knowledge as something gained through experience in action.



to the application of the organic paradigm<sup>75</sup> to personal life<sup>76</sup>; above all, Macmurray was a popular philosopher, and that aspect relates very well to the issue of young Vlastos's populism.

**4. The «Turn» in Vlastos's Philosophical Career.** All the evidence about Vlastos's early thought makes us wonder about the relation of it to his later development. Here is a résumé of the main aspects of Vlastos's «turn»: from action to contemplation; from preaching to detailed argument; from Hebrew prophets to Greek philosophers; from religion to philosophy; from Christian cooperation to ethics. What sort of change could provoke such a disjunction of intellectual interest? Was it a progressive transformation? Was it a deep and sudden crisis? Was it a loss of faith? Can we not distinguish some sign of the man's intellectual future in these early years, some elements that point to the direction of a continuity in his career? Problems of transformation and development haunt the history of philosophy and they surely haunted Vlastos when he analyzed the Socratic problem, the philosophical prototype for this type of questioning.

It is worth noting that in his early political writings Vlastos pointed to the fact that Greek philosophy was not idealism: comparing Kantian and Aristotelian ethics, he wrote that Aristotle managed to keep up with the facts: «An individual would be treated by others simply as a means, never as an end... He would be not a person but a human thing - a living instrument, as Aristotle described the slave of his own day. Whatever we may think of Aristotle's shameless rationalization of a vicious institution - he is no worse in this respect than a good many other intellectuals - we must at least admit that what he says is pretty true to the facts» (EF, p. 64). In these early years, his attitude towards the history of philosophy was formed by the theologians and the philosophers whom and under whom he studied: Wieman, Whitehead, Santayana. Regarding

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Action - if it is to be action and not mere movement, response, or activity - necessarily involves the element of thought, a degree of conscious intention. It is therefore a more inclusive mode of experience than pure thought»; *ibid.*, p. 21.

75. «Macmurray saw the history of philosophy since Descartes as falling into two phases. During the first of these, influenced by the achievements of the physical sciences, philosophers interpreted the world in terms of mechanism; during the second, as they responded to the rise of biological science, in terms of organism. Macmurray thought that the development of the human sciences should have led philosophers to interpret the world in terms of personality; instead the organic analogy continued to hold sway, with disastrous results in the political sphere»; *ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

76. Macmurray, «disputes the validity of organic analogies applied to the personal aspect of human life. He insists that personal life is not mere matter of fact - of response to stimulus or of inevitable process - but is a matter of *intention*. The organic is the negative but essential aspect of personal life: personal life cannot exist without it, but it must not be identified with personal life. Similarly, human societies are sustained by conscious intention and cannot be accurately likened to organisms. Applied to society the organic analogy results in the totalitarian state»; *ibid.*, p. 24.



especially the latter, it is interesting to note that Santayana gave a great push toward the abandonment of educational humanism in northern America. That was part of a large change provoked by Santayana in literature, also in «religion [where] it led to the elimination of the supernatural and even of the thought of a personal God and of personal immortality for man [and] in ethics, [where] it caused the dropping of all notions about a universal and abiding moral order, for which was substituted the personally satisfactory and socially useful as the only criterion of values»<sup>77</sup>. On the contrary, «the assumption of a dualism between man's higher and lower natures had definite implications for the Humanist's conceptions of knowledge, truth and human values. In contrast to the naturalistic view of knowledge and value as arising from experience and the social situation, the Humanists insisted on the existence of absolute and supernatural standards of value and the unchanging character of knowledge and truth»<sup>78</sup>. It is evident that in his approach to philosophy or even to political philosophy, Vlastos tried to surpass an abstract humanism<sup>79</sup>.

In his mature years Vlastos will continue to value Santayana's contribution in the field of Platonic literature<sup>80</sup>, but he will judge his anti-humanism as lacking methodology. It is interesting to quote the whole passage, because it will show the new methodological criteria that will orient Vlastos's approach after his "turn"; Speaking of the experience of the idea of beauty, real beauty, he noted that it «has had little attention in English-speaking philosophical commentaries in recent years. With rare exceptions, their authors seem as embarrassed by these passages as was my mother by certain indelicate lines in the Old Testament stories she read us, skipping when she reached those lines, or rushing through them in a thin, dry voice. For serious efforts to see what can be made of this part of Plato's work we would have to go back to older books like Santayana's *Platonism and the Spiritual Life*, Cornford's early work, *From Religion to Philosophy*, or still earlier, Walter Pater's *Plato and Platonism*. But in these works sound insights are marred by license of interpretation, or

77. L.J.A. MERCIER quoted in K. W. HARRINGTON, Santayana and the Humanists on Plato, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 38/1, 1977, p. 69.

78. *Ibid.*

79. Yet, later, Vlastos will also seem to value the humanists' contribution to platonic studies. He wrote on Paul Shorey, one of the Humanists, and the chapter on Plato's ethics from Shorey's book *Unity of Plato's Thought* (1903): «This seems to have fallen into undeserved oblivion. I cannot recall a single reference to it in current discussions of its theme. Yet no later essay can compete with it in giving in so brief a compass an incisive, comprehensive, and richly documented account of Plato's ethical doctrines»; G. VLASTOS, Editor's Introduction, *Plato II. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1971, pp. X-XI.

80. Vlastos did not share Santayana's scepticism; against Santayana's scepticism on values, he wrote: «If you are objective in your view of scientific objects, you must maintain the same attitude when you come to other types of experience. If electrons are facts, so are organisms, value, and God. Objectivist once, objectivist always»; Gr. VLASTOS, Whitehead, Critic of Abstractions, *op.cit.*, p. 194.



inaccurate scholarship, or sentimentality, or all three»<sup>81</sup>. Thus, license of interpretation, inaccurate scholarship and sentimentality are the three obstacles to scientific knowledge, sentimentalism being the only subject of criticism persisting from his early intellectual years.

His epistemological attitude toward Whitehead is also illuminating. In the preface of his *Socrates*, Vlastos will trace rapidly his intellectual progress from Whitehead to analytical philosophy: «I had got precious little of this [modern analytical philosophy] in my graduate days at Harvard, where A. N. Whitehead, my supervisor, had befriended and inspired me, but taught me little of contemporary philosophy except his own along with a powerfully Whiteheadianized Plato - a heady brew from whose high I luckily sobered up soon after leaving Harvard to start learning Plato for myself while teaching philosophy to undergraduates at Queen's in Canada. At Cornell I ingested great gobs of analytical epistemology in our philosophical discussion club from Norman Malcolm, Max Black, Arthur Murphy, and their students»<sup>82</sup>. As we have seen, Vlastos's conversion to analytical philosophy was not immediate but was preceded by his distancing himself from Whitehead after perceiving in the latter's philosophy elements of idealism; more notably, Vlastos argued against Whitehead's organic paradigm. His references to Macmurray, as I have said, are most significant in this aspect. Furthermore, Macmurray, already by 1933, in his book *Interpreting the Universe*, «analyzed mechanistic and organic interpretations of life, arguing that they cannot do justice to human experience. He concluded that the century's chief philosophical task is to develop a logical form adequate to the nature of personality»<sup>83</sup>. By that, he probably contributed to Vlastos's "turn" toward analytical argumentation.

One of the elements that probably contributed to Vlastos's change of scope and method, particularly for a man who cherished action, must be educational action. In his political writings, Vlastos saw the educator as an *éclairateur* of the people and he wrote: «Some of us are educators. Our task is to educate, not to indoctrinate. It is to bring men and women, especially young men and young women, face to face with the essential facts about our economic system and about the political scene at home and abroad, about race and religion» (*CFD*, p. 71). Years later, his own teaching attitude will be judged as «impersonal». One of his students gave the following description of his attitude as a teacher: «There is something deeply impersonal in the gratitude with which I remember him... his intellectual interactions did not involve the affective side of his personality directly... The reason for my impersonal reaction to Vlastos - a

81. *Platonic Studies*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973, pp. 51-52. It is worth noting, here, once more the presence of the maternal figure.

82. G. VLASTOS, *Socrates*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

83. Ph. CONFORD, Introduction, *op. cit.*, p. 16.



reason that explains why I care whether what I say about him is true but less whether it would have pleased him - is that the primary goal of his own teaching was itself impersonal. He was deeply committed to making the study of Greek philosophy central to his discipline, and he was exercised by a series of philosophical questions raised by the Presocratic philosophers and Plato. He wanted answers to these questions, and he took his students as collaborators in his own projects of search and research. He was of course concerned with our improvement and he paid close attention to us and our works; no one ever wrote more detailed or more helpful comments on my term papers or on the essays I continued to send him years after we had both left Princeton. He had a serious stake in us, but that stake was purely intellectual. In order to answer his questions, he needed the best collaborators he could find, and he was fore that reason willing, even eager, to help us become as good philosophers as we could be: the better his students, the more likely he was to get help from them with his work and the more likely it was that Greek philosophy would continue to flourish. But that was just what made his attitude towards us so impersonal»<sup>84</sup>.

What is the precise nature of the change at this particular point? From the very beginning, Vlastos's personality was marked by profound ethical considerations. His involvement with Christian socialism was due to them; his attitude toward science and education was no less a matter of ethics. At this point, a case must be made for the role that the paradigmatic figure of Wittgenstein played in Vlastos's thought. Wittgenstein was already in the 1930s known to Vlastos. In a review of Joseph Needham's *The Great Amphibium* (1932), Vlastos argued both against the dissociation of religion and science and against their organic coherence and he referred to Wittgenstein: «In a day when in many minds science and religion have not only been reconciled but confused Mr Needham's clear differentiation comes as a timely corrective. But this is only stating the problem. Mr. Needham's conclusion to "accept the Lucretian estimate of the world in the laboratory as well as that of St. Augustine or St. Theresa at other moments and in other places" is no solution. That is the road that leads to dissociation; and one does not heal a divided personality by calling it the "Great Amphibium". "Who wants coherence?" asks the author. This is a dangerous question: there are times when it amounts to, Who wants to think? "Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* is", Wittgenstein is approvingly quoted. But that is not altogether true: that it is what it is, is the mystical. Religion, even mystical religion, is not mere feeling: it is feeling elicited by an object, and expressed in an object. If an object, then beliefs about that object; and Mr. Needham's statement that religion "has no

84. Al. NEHAMAS, Gregory Vlastos, *op.cit.* The difference between the educator as prophet and the professional of education is described by Max WEBER, *Wissenschaft als Beruf, Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, Tübingen, 1922, pp. 524-55. Originally a speech at Munich University, 1918, published in 1919 by Duncker & Humblodt, Munich.



intellectual business to do" needs reconsideration»<sup>85</sup>.

Wittgenstein seems to hold a paradigmatic role in *Socrates: Ironist and moral philosopher*. There we see Wittgenstein at one time appearing as Plato, and at another, as a teacher, similar to Socrates; on a third occasion, very characteristically, Wittgenstein is given as a paradigm for the reader to understand the difference between Socrates and the Platonic Socrates<sup>86</sup>. I do not think that Wittgenstein held for Vlastos the same position as Socrates, but rather that Vlastos saw in the legendary figure of the modern philosopher the material for comparison with a similarly legendary figure of ancient Greek philosophy. It is possible that Vlastos saw in those two thinkers two instances of the ethical ideals that he cherished during his youth: they were both prophets of the philosophical religion. One could ask here, what is the place of Vlastos's early populism in all that? Populism, in a soft as opposed to a radical version, would have to do with the silence of the moral philosopher before his interlocutors; the silence of Socrates, the silence of Wittgenstein whose *Tractatus* «begins with the world and ends in silence»<sup>87</sup>. The silence of Vlastos himself as an «impersonal» professional philosopher is the silence of the thinker who democratically gives to the others, to the people, the freedom to speak. The philosophers know more than the people, but in order to play fully their didactic role, that is in order to produce some real change, they have to cease speaking; solutions that are found in common, that is within a community of persons, are the only possible solutions<sup>88</sup>. Yet, is this true for Vlastos?

In a paper on Vlastos's *Socrates*, Alexander Nehamas examines Socratic silence there: «Vlastos in fact builds his interpretation [of Socrates] upon silence», upon the fact that «Socrates is unwilling to present views of his own». Vlastos's book, according to Nehamas, «is an extended effort to break those forms of silence, to hear the voice that still, Vlastos believes, is speaking to us through them». Vlastos is opposite to Kierkegaard's interpretation of the Socratic silence being a manifestation of an interiority. For Vlastos's Socrates, «the public and the private, the inner and the outer, finally merge». If, with

85. Gregory VLASTOS, A Biologist on Religion, in *The Journal of Religion*, XIII, 1933, (an edition of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago), pp. 100-101.

86. *Socrates*, pp. 81, 116, 98. «Vlastos develops a brilliant parallel with an imaginary Wittgenstein who wrote nothing but whose pupil Paul (= Plato) wrote two books of Wittgensteinian dialogues, while Paul's pupil Arnold (= Aristotle) was able in the dialogues to distinguish between the views of Wittgenstein in the first book and the views of Paul in the second», Ch. H. KAHN, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

87. A. W. LEVI, Wittgenstein as Dialectician, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 61/4, 1964, p. 130. Jacques Bouveresse speaks of «populism» in Wittgensteinian ethics, J. BOUVERESSE, *Wittgenstein: La rime et la raison*, Paris, Les éditions de Minuit, 1973, pp. 76 ff; cf. M. DRAGONA-MONACHOU, Wittgenstein's Moral Aphorisms, (in Greek), *Philosophia*, 10-11, 1980-81, pp. 433-483.

88. Vlastos «in Socratic fashion claimed to learn more from his students than they learned from him», GRAHAM, Introduction, *op. cit.*, p. XVIII.



Kierkegaard, we have a psychological use of silence, in Vlastos we have a social use. The Socratic paradoxes such as disavowal of knowledge, «once interpreted as Vlastos proposes, disappear into protreptic devices designed to get others to see that truth for themselves»; At the bottom of the line, Socrates's silence is conditioned not by his interiority - would not that be a sentimentalist's view, according to Vlastos? - but by the fact that he has things to teach or, in Nehamas's words, «there are truths that Socrates knows and that he knows that he knows». The meaning of Socratic irony is pedagogism. Socrates's irony «turns out to be only a mask and a *teacher's device*»<sup>89</sup> (my emphasis). Nehamas quotes the following passage from the *Socrates* book: «In the conventional sense, where to "teach" is simply to transfer knowledge from a teacher's to a learner's mind, Socrates means what he says. But in the sense he would give to "teaching" - engaging would-be learners in elenctic argument to make them aware of their own ignorance and to enable them to discover for themselves the truth the teacher had held back - in that sense of "teaching" Socrates would want to say that he is a teacher, the only true teacher: his dialogue with his fellows is meant to have, and does have, the effect of evoking and assisting their efforts at moral self-improvement»<sup>90</sup>. Socrates's pedagogical style is deliberately impersonal: «his talk ultimately communicates very little about himself»<sup>91</sup>.

Thus, Vlastos's great portrait of the silent Athenian philosopher seems to be a logical continuation of his own early steps in thought. The need to educate others, the absence of self-representation, his self-iconoclasm that will eventually match so well with the use of an argumentative technique borrowed from analytical philosophy, the silence that gives full freedom of speech to others, all seem to be personal characteristics attributed to the Athenian master. In order to do so, I think, and still be scientifically plausible, Vlastos must have, at a certain point of his career, objectified his early experiences so that to see them as purely historical phenomena. This must have happened between the end of the 30s and up to the mid-50s when he was engaged wholeheartedly in redirecting the study of ancient Greek philosophy. As early as 1942, in a review of Alban Dewes Winspear's *The Genesis of Plato's Thought*<sup>92</sup>, we see Vlastos refuting the idea that Plato was an oligarch, an aristocrat spokesman of landed conservatism, a view that himself had held until then. Furthermore, in a text intitled «On Sovereignty in Church and State», we see Vlastos criticizing Jacques Maritain's views on the relation between state and church authority<sup>93</sup>. He admits here, in

89. Al. NEHAMAS, *Voices of Silence: On Gregory Vlastos's Socrates, Virtues of Authenticity. Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, pp. 83, 84, 101, 102.

90. Gr. VLASTOS, *Socrates*, op. cit., p. 32; NEHAMAS, *ibid.*, p. 101.

91. NEHAMAS, *ibid.*, p. 96.

92. *Philosophical Review*, 51, 1942, pp. 421-423.

93. The response to Maritain inserts Vlastos's social thought in the great debate that took place in the United States over the relations between reason and value, a debate that originated from the



continuity with his political past, that «there are a wide variety of issues where I would follow him [Maritain] in rejecting both laissez-faire individualism and authoritarian communism in favor of his “personalist” concept of the good society, my main question being whether the latter is peculiar to, or even compatible with, the authoritarian concept of spiritual society». That remark is very interesting because it introduces us to Vlastos’s new conceptions on the place of religion in society. The adjusting tendency of his former views is evident in the way Vlastos writes about a philosopher he had formerly criticized: «Hegel held strange theories of substance, concept, self, spirit, and many other things. Is the rejection of these theories any reason for excising the corresponding terms from philosophical discourse? This kind of surgery would mutilate the body of philosophical thought beyond the wildest design of the positivists». This reappraisal of philosophical language goes together with an interrogation on the relation between church and society in opposition to Maritain’s ideas; in short, Maritain stated that the people’s authority is the only legal authority and yet he claimed that his democratic populism is consistent with ecclesiastical absolutist (papal) authority. This logical inconsistency according to Vlastos, is due to the view that «natural law» overlaps in significance with «divine law». (Here, we should perhaps take natural law to be what Vlastos himself once called the «structure of reality»). The Church deciding what is natural, «the authority of the Church would annul at this point the political authority of the democratic state». Vlastos never appeared in his political writings as a church man and up to this point he is consistent with his early views on the subject. Is it possible that Vlastos refuses here to admit that the people as a whole and every individual separately should obey higher moral standards than the people’s authority? Vlastos himself clears up that this is not the case. Of course, he writes, «obedience to any political authority, including that of the democratic State, is always qualified by the higher duty of obedience to the moral law. This view is implied by the doctrine of “natural law”, but it is not at all peculiar to this doctrine. It is common to *all* theories which hold that there is a higher allegiance than allegiance to the State... Indeed I cannot imagine how anyone could fail to hold [this view] without imputing absolute moral authority to the acts of the State, something which no thoughtful democrat would wish to do. *If there is anyone who would, he has not been heard from in philosophical discussions for many years*»<sup>94</sup> (my emphasis). The core of the difference with Maritain lies

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north-American reception of Weber’s ideas and in which Maritain also played a role. Cf. St. P. TURNER, R.A. FACTOR, *Max Weber and the Dispute over Reason and Value*, London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, pp. 161 ff.

94. Gr. VLASTOS, On Sovereignty in Church and State, *The Philosophical Review*, 62, 1953, pp.562, 576, 572; cf. also Gr. VLASTOS, Rejoinder, *The Philosophical Review*, 63/3, 1954, pp. 424-427, a response to the objections of the Catholic Professor Hess to the article above.



elsewhere: does an unjust democratic law have the moral authority of democratic law? Maritain says no, giving ecclesiastical authority a strong regulating function. To the same question, Vlastos says yes. An unjust democratic law constitutes a moral dilemma and in no case should we escape the dilemma by leaving the choice of how to deal with it to some other authority. This moral dilemma belongs to a democratic society and every effort to avoid it is literally unethical. Vlastos does not say so explicitly, but if we subtract the moral dilemma from an unjust democratic law then this is the same as if we make Socrates's fatal obedience to the law of Athens an irrational and morally gratuitous act.

Although many of the ideas above can be found in Vlastos's early political writings, the change of tone is evident: the ethical ideal is no longer the community but the morally divided individual. Furthermore, every intellectual effort to remove ethical significance from the individual in order to give it to a collectivity is, as Vlastos puts it, a discourse out of philosophical fashion<sup>95</sup>. It is probably at this point that the Socratic political conscience meets Wittgenstein's anxious individuality. In the 1960s, Vlastos wrote a review of the book *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* by Norman Malcolm. (Malcolm was, as noted above, his colleague at Cornell and one of his initiators into analytical philosophy). In his review Vlastos agreed with Malcolm's statement that Wittgenstein, «“had an abhorrence of academic life in general and of the life of a professional philosopher in particular. He believed that a normal human being could not be a university teacher and also an honest and serious person”. Can there be», Vlastos added, «any doubt that (this account) is exactly right?». The educational preoccupations of Vlastos are obvious here. Emphasis is also given to Malcolm's account of Wittgenstein's religion: Vlastos said that Malcolm did not «imply that Wittgenstein was not a religious person unless we fix too narrow a boundary for religion» and he pointed in relation to it to this phrase of Wittgenstein: «I have occasionally queer states of nervous instability about which I'll only say that they're rotten while they last, and teach one to pray»<sup>96</sup>. We see that even in the 1960s Vlastos took interest in the religious aspects of the philosophy he now cared for. Yet Wittgenstein's position on religion that seems to intrigue him is closer to an individualistic religion than to that of an ideal community.

95. That does not mean a complete cut off from his past as a political activist: «True to his moral and political commitments, Vlastos became an activist in the movement against Vietnam War (as he had earlier been an opponent of McCarthyism)»; D.W. GRAHAM, Introduction, *op. cit.*, p. XVIII.

96. Gr. VLASTOS, review of N. Malcolm's, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, *The Philosophical Review*, 69, 1960, pp. 106, 107, 108. Another colleague of Vlastos at Cornell, Max Black, was also a follower of Wittgensteinian philosophy. Yet, Vlastos knew of the *Tractatus*, as we have seen, already by 1933.



**5. A Final Brief Note.** Up to this point I have tried to fix the intellectual portrait of young Vlastos as combining Christian populism, religious and political thinking and Whiteheadian metaphysics. I have also tried to show the continuity and the disjunction in his career that led him to the study of ancient Greek philosophy and to the writing of his later work. There is indeed disjunction, but I think that Vlastos's "turn", seen *a posteriori*, contains many elements that are a logical continuation of his early years as an intellectual. Take for example the following remark by Graham: «In America Vlastos's students from both Cornell and Princeton... *carried forth the gospel* that Greek philosophy was important for understanding contemporary philosophy» (my emphasis)<sup>97</sup>. Of course, things are not yet crystal clear; Nehamas sees in Vlastos's *Socrates* a division of the philosophical public that almost drives to a dialectic abyss due to some cunning of interpretative reason<sup>98</sup>. At this point it would be justifiable to remember Vlastos's phrase that opened this article, about philosophy being «'esoteric' philosophy: the private discourse of like-minded philosophers». The question within the limits of this study is whether Vlastos finally came to think of philosophers as an *élite*, as a group whose whole work, although not political at the outset, would ultimately be profitable to the people<sup>99</sup>.

A final problem concerns the distinction between romanticism and analytical philosophy, and consequently the idea of a romantic Vlastos. Of the criteria posed by Anat Matar in order to distinguish romanticism from the rationalism of analytical philosophy, young Vlastos satisfies only some of them, but to other he is in complete opposition. It is true that he cherished faith, but not sensibility, imagination, or the mystical. He prioritized history over noetic principles but did not doubt the generalizing discourse for the sake of the ineffable. Matar sums up that «the rationalist/romantic debate is easily led to empty rhetoric»<sup>100</sup> and claims that the two schools' characteristics often seem

97. GRAHAM, p. XIX

98. Al. NEHAMAS, *Voices of silence...*, *op. cit.*, p. 102: «Should we then allow Socratic irony to transform itself so quickly into an educational ploy? Does Socrates really abandon his silence, dividing his listeners into two groups, one (which includes all of his interlocutors in Plato's dialogues) consisting of those who «may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand», and another (which, it fortunately turns out, includes most of us) consisting of those who both see and perceive, who both hear and understand, and for whom his silence is only an invitation to listen more carefully for his voice? Could the Socrates presented in this book have inspired the almost endlessly different efforts to come to terms with him and his "strangeness"? Is, in fact, this strangeness something we should want to account for, to explain, perhaps even to explain away? Or should we rather try to leave it intact, considering any effort to come to terms with it, such as Vlastos's own, as just one more of its products, another one of its symptoms?».

99. The importance of Gregory Vlastos's philosophical temper becomes here evident besides his value as historian of ancient Greek philosophy.

100. A. MATAR, *Analytic Philosophy: Rationalism vs. Romanticism, The Story of Analytic Philosophy. Plots and Heroes*, London, New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 85.



to overlap, in a way that no easy and clear-cut distinction can be traced between them. Vlastos's early refutation of the mystical is clearly that of a rationalist. But to my mind, Vlastos is also clearly a deeply sensitive man; only such a man would have felt the need to affront sentimentalism. It is also my belief, although I cannot prove it, that whatever change came into his philosophical evolution was not a retreat from his early convictions but a sort of conversion, due to a crisis<sup>101</sup> or to something like a sudden mystical experience that led him from political action to philosophical contemplation. The idea of a crisis, the idea of a mystical intuition, comes easily to mind when I think of Vlastos, an early opponent of fascism, facing up to World War II. A moral disaster of such magnitude could not have left such a great sensibility unmoved.

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101. The crisis hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that Vlastos chose not to publish a manuscript of 30.000 words on *Religion and the State in Plato*, completed already in 1938; cf. A.P.D. MOURELATOS, *op.cit.*, p. 380. Mourelatos speaks of «a trait of uncompromising self-criticism that became characteristic of his whole career» (*ibid.*). The trait is, as we have seen, that of a far more radical change.





ΣΩΚΡΑΤΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΛΑΪΚΙΣΜΟΣ. ΕΡΕΥΝΕΣ ΠΕΡΙ ΤΩΝ ΑΠΑΡΧΩΝ  
ΤΗΣ ΣΤΑΔΙΟΔΡΟΜΙΑΣ ΤΟΥ ΓΡΗΓΟΡΗ ΒΛΑΣΤΟΥ.

Π ε ρ ί λ η ψ η

Ο Γρηγόριος Βλαστός (1907-1991) απέκτησε μεγάλη επιρροή στην Βορειο-αμερικανική φιλοσοφική σκηνή επειδή ήταν αυτός που εισήγαγε στην μελέτη της Αρχαίας Έλληνικής φιλοσοφίας την μεθοδολογία της αναλυτικής σχολής. Ωστόσο, οι άπαρχές του ως στοχαστή ήταν έντελως διαφορετικές. Στο τελευταίο βιβλίο που έγραψε, με θέμα τον Σωκράτη, ο Βλαστός όμιλει περί «λαϊκιστικής σύλληψης της φιλοσοφίας» στον ιστορικό Σωκράτη. Η έννοια «λαϊκισμός» προέρχεται από τις πολιτικές επιστήμες, ενώ το συγκεκριμένο φαινόμενο είναι πολύ δύσκολο να οριστεί με ξεκάθαρο τρόπο, έξω από τις συγκεκριμένες κάθε φορά ιστορικές εμφανίσεις του· ο Βλαστός, όμως, είχε προσωπική εμπειρία του λαϊκισμού. Γεννημένος στην Κωνσταντινούπολη, από Έλληνα πατέρα και Έλληνο-σκωτσέζα μητέρα, φοίτησε στο Ροβέρτειο (Αμερικανικό) Κολλέγιο της πόλης και υπήρξε, σύμφωνα με τα λεγόμενα του μαθητή του Άλ. Νεχαμά, «ένα περίεργο μείγμα Έλληνα και πρεσβυτεριανού». Ανώτερες σπουδές πραγματοποίησε στη Θεολογική Σχολή του Σικάγο, όπου και συνέγραψε διπλωματική εργασία με θέμα τις περί θρησκείας αντιλήψεις του George Santayana, ενώ εκπόνησε και διδακτορική διατριβή στο Χάρβαρντ, υπό την επίβλεψη του A.N. Whitehead, με θέμα «ο Θεός ως μεταφυσική έννοια». Για λίγο καιρό εργάστηκε ως πάστορας στην Μοντάνα, όπου και αντιμετώπισε τις δυσκολίες της ενστάλαξης του Ευαγγελίου στις ψυχές του απλού λαού. Καθηγητής φιλοσοφίας στο Πανεπιστήμιο Queen's του Οντάριο, ανέπτυξε πολιτική δράση στις τάξεις του καναδικού λαϊκισμού που έμπνευταν από το παράδειγμα του χριστιανικού κοινοτισμού, ενώ άσκησε σκληρή πολεμική κατά του ανερχόμενου τότε (δεκαετία του 1930) φασισμού και ναζισμού, δημοσιεύοντας κείμενα και βιβλία με τις ιδέες του. Αργότερα, ωστόσο, η ζωή και η πνευματική του στάση παρουσίασαν μία σημαντική στροφή, από την πολιτική δράση στην θεωρία, από την Βίβλο στην Αρχαία Έλληνική Φιλοσοφία. Στην στροφή αυτή, εκφράζεται μία ρήξη με το παρελθόν αλλά και μία διάθεση συνέχειας μέσα από μία αναστοχαστική στάση περί της κοινωνικής αποστολής του σύγχρονου φιλοσόφου-παιδαγωγού. Τέλος, η εν λόγω στροφή του Βλαστού υποδηλώνει την δοκιμασία μίας βαθιάς ηθικής κρίσης, απέναντι μάλιστα στο καταστροφικό γεγονός του Β' Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου.

Γεώργιος ΑΡΑΜΠΑΤΖΗΣ