

Canon, coherence and meaning.

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1.

It seems to be a fairly recent development of Western intellectual culture to subject its own tradition to a critical assessment. Starting with a historically and philologically inspired critique of the biblical canon after the Renaissance, more and more crucial texts of the tradition were being scrutinized. Moreover, a tradition which includes central texts and authors and excludes alternative contents and positions while merely preserving its own, became in itself suspect.

What one should not forget is the fact that the existence of a canon is not specific to Western culture, as it is also found in ancient Egypt, Confucian China, Hinduism and Buddhism, Judaism as well as its descendants Christianity and Islam. So it will be quite hard to abstract contents which all these 'canonical' cultures have in common, due to their canonicity. (At least one could say that practices of dogmatism and 'scholasticism' -which rely heavily on canonicity- can be found in all these traditions.)

Even on a more general level, considering the importance of means to preserve meaning-products, it has been stated (Goody 1977) that the development of writing (in forms like the list, the table and the formula) played an important role in the historical process of human thought, as it does for each individual. Without these records problem-raising and problem-solving, which implicate both the introduction of new elements and the preserving of old ones, would be much more difficult.

Seen from a perspective that accounts for these facts, one should perhaps conclude that canonicity might be in some way essential to various kinds of meaning production. More specifically: while canonicity can be seen as a form of coherence, coherence is considered vital to meaning production in general. At present coherence plays an important role in the philosophy of language and semantics (in Anglo-Saxon as well as in continental philosophy). Reference or correspondence to an external reality, containing knowable essences -as Western tradition is held to have thought- has been replaced by coherence as a crucial factor for meaning; coherence not only as a semantic aspect of language, but even considered as a cultural or social factor.

I will try to look at this -perhaps somewhat provocatively stated- perspective, from which canonicity and coherence are in a direct line with each other.

2.

It is not very difficult to show that the emphasis on coherence as a feature of meaning production is not new at all. Before discussing Aristotle's position in relation to this topic, I would like to refer to some earlier Greek texts which show awareness of the importance of coherence or even show how from the first existence of written texts (in ancient

Greece, apart from the very different earlier Minoan texts), some form of canonicity played a part.

To begin with the latter, it is well known that Homer was thought of as the main Greek 'teacher', even still in Hellenistic times, and the *Odysseia* and *Iliad* as functioning as the founding texts of Greek culture. These texts functioned thus as a canon, from which later Greek culture should derive its contents¹ and even its ideals. Obviously, it is due to his canonicity that later writers felt obliged to relate their work to that of Homer and thus both conforming and -sometimes- criticizing it. The way in which Hesiod quotes the Muses, who ensure him how they often tell "apparently true lies, although knowing -when willing to- how to state the truth" (*Theogony* 26-29), makes it highly likely that he refers in a depreciating manner to Homer (whom he indeed seems to correct at several places in his account of the Olympian gods). That a systematic rendering, though inspired by the Muses, must not contain divergencies or incoherences, is also being stressed by Hesiod. He mentions that the nine Muses, daughters of Mnemosyne (Remembrance) and Zeus, are 'homophronas' (*ibid.*, 60) and he is himself aiming at giving a full and complete description of the *Theogony*.

The importance of authority and unanimity in classical antiquity in defining the contents of thought can be shown in the writings even of such a methodologically and epistemologically sophisticated writer as Aristotle.

This might even be shown by the metaphor which Aristotle uses to describe the formation of a principle through abstraction. In Aristotle's theory of demonstration, principles are of importance in guaranteeing the coherence and validity of the arguments in a discussion or a demonstration. The emergence of these principles are described as a fleeing army getting to a standstill, with first only a few soldiers halting. (*An.Pos.* II, 19) A principle -in Greek nearly the same word as 'line of attack'²- can be thus viewed as a group, acting alike while intending more or less the same. That the coherence of the halting group depends in part on the authority of its leader can be assumed from the fact that Aristotle's terminus technicus for induction, 'epagogè' is also a military term, meaning: officering.³

Although this metaphor can reveal to us only some associations Aristotle uses when talking about the principles of an argument, it is elsewhere that he explicitly states the importance of authority and unanimity. The starting-points of dialectic are sometimes referred to as 'doxa', common opinions, although he sometimes adds that not all opinions should be considered equally, preferring those of the wise or experts. (cf. *EE* 1214b28 f.; *Top.* 170b6-8) Especially in ethical matters (less in the area of natural philosophy) we are urged to leave the most authoritative and reputable opinions undisturbed (*EN* 1145b8).

Not at all wanting to be derogatory to Aristotle's reputation as an uncompromising and critical thinker, I want to point to the fact, that authority and unanimity do not per se imply strict excluding canonicity. On the contrary, it has been remarked that the important presence of the Homeric epics, telling about the golden past of archaic Greece, might have provoked the comparatively early emergence of critical self-reflection in classical Greece (Snell 1975, 140). Indeed, canons cannot preclude alternative meanings, perhaps even on the contrary.⁴

On the other hand, in classical Greece we also find proof of an 'open and ongoing'

conversation, leading -contrary to some contemporary expectations- to dogmatism, where the importance of argumentation does lead to improvements of rethorical defences of various viewpoints, rather than -empirically- enrichening and improving the theories itself (cf. Lloyd 1979, 97).⁵ In a way this situation resembled forms of scholasticism, in which some important principles were themselves not discussed.

3.

I shall now turn briefly to modern philosophy in order to reflect on the thesis that all meaning and meaning production depends on (various forms of) coherence, which was above postulated to be the genus, from which canonicity forms a species.

One who has made coherence a crucial feature of his theory of meaning is Davidson. A correspondence theory of truth has of course explicitly been rejected by him (Davidson 1990, 281), because we cannot directly -without mediating language- refer to non-linguistic phenomena. (Davidson 1984, 127; 240) It is only within a rather extensive theory of interpretation that we can make sense of one's utterances: not only of another person, but even one's own utterances ask for interpretation within a extensive framework. Communication by speech does even demand "a fit between how speakers intend to be interpreted and how their interpreters understand them." (Davidson 1990, 311)

Are canons sometimes connected with an institutionalized orthodoxy, prescribing what to include in a canon and how to interpret it, Davidson thinks that even in personal contact one cannot avoid thinking that other beliefs are incorporated in a pattern that is essentially like the pattern of our own beliefs. He even speaks of the necessity of projecting our own logic onto the beliefs of others. (Davidson 1980, 7) What he is consequently criticizing and even rejecting, is the idea of a conceptual relativism, which would leave two languages, concepts or beliefs not intertranslatable and understable. He is not, of course, closing his eyes for the indeterminacy of interpretation. His stressing this indeterminacy might even lead us to put even more weight on the interdependence of a canon and its alternatives: since the interpretation and thus the contents of a canon are principally indeterminable⁶ (though perhaps by force it is), its in- and excluding forces should not be overestimated.

4.

What I have done so far is shedding some light on the notion of coherence as a crucial factor to meaning and meaning production. Consequently it is not easy to distinguish canonicity from other forms of coherence if not by its forceful and institutionalized practices - which are then to be criticized as such. Although meaning production and sense-giving cannot rest upon a strictly isolated word or artifact but requires greater coherence to gain meaning, we are still left with the possibilities that in different cultures also different canons can be found which are unrelatable to each other, or that within one culture both canonical and non-canonical meaning products exist. I will briefly focus on a situation, which resembles the latter possibility.

It is at the other end of the 'canonical' history of Western philosophy, that Hegel in his writings also reflects systematically on the dependence of meaning on coherence. Due to

this, not only in his Science of Logic, but also in other writings he analyses the importance of language in various situations and relations. Interestingly enough, in the chapter 'Die Bildung und ihr Reich der Wirklichkeit' (Erudition and its empire of reality) Hegel analyses in his 'Phenomenology of Spirit' the so-called 'language of division' ('Sprache der Zerrissenheit'). In this chapter he analyses the position of the individual, who is alienated from his social environment and the state. But knowing about his position and about the dependence of the state on its individual supporters, he (she) tries to externalize himself, to enlarge his influence, reaching in the end a unity of the state with himself, as well as having the state support him as an individual.

Before turning to this chapter, I think it is worth mentioning that Hegel in general seems to be well aware of the fact that in (western) history there have been many moments in which thought found itself confronted with a given body of meanings, with some form of presupposition, which had to be overcome, for example in medieval times. (Hegel 19, 542f.) Quite early in his work, he even stated: "Division is the origin of the need of philosophy and is, as [-in the form of-] the erudition of a period [Bildung des Zeitalters], the unfree, given side of its figure [Gestalt]. (Hegel 2, 20) The culture or the erudition of a certain period is given to, instead of chosen by, its participants and leads as such to some kind of division, because this erudition appears as something independent. This situation is at the same time the origin of a need for philosophy, which sets as its primary goal the elimination of the division.

In the chapter 'Erudition and its empire of reality' we observe the relation of the individual to the power of the state and the monarch who obtains this power. First the individual appears as alienated from the state, both appearing only in himself, unrelated. The mutual dependency and enrichment has yet to be worked out. Through service to the state, the individual realises, shows, the dependency of the state on its supporters, which implies also the self-alienation of the state. Because the individual derives meaning from this dependency of the state on his service, he recognizes and is thankful to the state - the state, which now may start to realize its power over its grateful subject. (Hegel PhG 279-280) The domination by the state (monarch) shocks the individual, when he notices his own dependency. Would he formerly have given service to the state (which had obviously no power and content), now the subject uses another medium to relate to this governing substance: "The language of division is the complete language and the real existing spirit of this whole world of erudition." (PhG 282) As mentioned, there is no insight yet in the mutual dependency of subject (individual) and substance (state), which gives rise to various spoken attitudes towards the state. These attitudes include flattering (PhG 282) and sneering (PhG 285) and on the whole this world of erudition is essentially a world of alienation; alienation of reality and thought from one another, leaving neither the existing essences of power and richness nor notions of good and bad, with meaning or truth, since all can be turned into its opposites, as the shocked subject is eager to do. Doing this, the self (of this subject that is thrown back on himself, since it noticed -with a shock- the domination by the state) also shocks -by judging and chatting- the stable essences and notions, not yet being able to realize his unity with this shocking substance. (PhG 285-6) It is with his spiritual language, that he tears apart and divides the existing relations, in this way proving himself to be dominant - and perhaps even showing his own dismay at the realization of his dependency as partly superfluous!

Having dwelt too long on this interesting chapter, I will very shortly outline what I think we could derive from this for our present discussion of coherence and canonicity. I will state this in a more negative way, posing it merely as something to be discussed.

I don't think it is easy to show that some body of meaning, or a canon, can independently exercise its power over individuals or a culture, leaving them with no means to realize their own independence to produce other meanings. Not only does a canon emerge within the history and development of a culture and is it committed to supporters; it is (as is the case with every meaning product, as is discussed above) indeterminate in its interpretation, which it inevitably needs. Since some analyses of translation and interpretation point to the significance of coherence, canonicity and coherence appear to be kindred phenomena.

Therefore, canonicity in its strict form should be avoided, but still we can expect that every canon inevitably leaves opportunities for criticism and creates its own, self-de(constructive)⁷ can(n)on-balls.

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Notes:

1. The historian Herodotus mentions Hesiod and Homer as those, who created the Greek theogony and gave descriptions of the gods (Histories, II, 53), in their systematization using older - in part Egyptian - material.

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2. Barnes even prefers to read 'alkè' instead of 'archè' because he thinks that 'principle' makes no sense here. But what Aristotle means here of course, is the order in the beginning, as it was both in the perceived object as well as in the metaphorical army. (Barnes 1975, 254)
3. Besides, the same metaphor is used in the -disputed- *Problemata*, where the leader is said to determine the standstill of the forces under his command. (Probl. 917 a 28-32)
4. Hahn even states that an orthodoxy defines itself through its difference from a heterodoxy, leading to the preservation of these threatening alternatives. (Hahn 1987, 27)
5. This situation resembles Lyotard's analysis, including the thesis that we lack universal rules, by which we can decide between different argumentations - a fact which would render Auschwitz (whose gaschambers have left no witnesses alive who could decide between different statements about them) the most real reality. (Lyotard 1983, 91)
6. I think Wheeler is somewhat overoptimistical in putting Davidson on a par with Derrida because of both' emphasis on indeterminacy of meaning. (Wheeler 1986) There seems to be too much naturalism left in Davidson's talk of 'causal connections [of belief] to the world' for such a comparison. (Davidson 1990, 305)
7. The singleness of the monarch is being realized in his generally recognized name, which points also out his dependency on his supporters, who call him by his name. It is this dialectic of the name which seems to be overlooked by Derrida, who appears to criticize Hegel with his remark: "Today we [as Hegel apparently did not, M.K.] know that the word no longer has the linguistic rank that had almost always been accorded to it. It is a relative unity, made to stand out between larger or smaller unities." (Derrida 1982, 96; cf. his criticism of Hegel's 'Aufhebung of natural exteriority' which is not entirely in place here (ibid. 93)) Aristotle's reflection on the unity of definition and the interrelatedness of its terms shows that 'today' might have begun already quite long ago. (cf. *Meta.* 1058a7f.; *Part.An.* 643a1-5) Indeed, the 'extra-canonization' and destruction of Aristotles biological writings in the Middle Ages have had negative effects on the development of Western thought, until 'today'.