



**Donald Phillip Verene, Tõnu Viik**

## Myth and philosophy

*Interview with Donald Phillip Verene*

Donald Verene on the connections between myth and philosophy and the necessity of philosophy as a means to self-understanding.

**Tõnu Viik:** You have said that the following authors form your "secular gospel" – Cassirer, Hegel, Vico, and Joyce. Is it the correct chronological order of your interest?

**Donald Phillip Verene:** Yes. This is the correct chronological order. I discovered Cassirer in the final year of my undergraduate college by reading his little book *Sprache und Mythos*. I was struck by what a different approach to language it was. It was when the purely logical view of language of analytic philosophy was becoming dominant in America. I came to the importance of Hegel in my first year of doctoral study by reading the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. In it I encountered the principle that the true is the whole – a principle to which I still hold. Hegel showed how one could comprehend in a single vision all the forms of the human spirit, and also give each its own determinate place. Vico was a discovery of my early years of university teaching in which I was searching for the origin of philosophy of culture and found it in Vico's *Scienza nuova*. Vico is traditionally regarded as the founder of philosophy of history, and this involves the conception of the origin of culture. His work contains an account of all the institutions of human culture, what he calls the great city of the human race.

I came to Joyce as my fourth author only during recent years. I came to Joyce in fact through Vico. Joyce used Vico's *Scienza nuova* as the grid on which to base his masterpiece *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce advised his friends to read Vico's work to understand the *Wake*. He said: "I use his cycles as a trellis" referring to Vico's notion of history proceeding by *corso* and *ricorso*. Joyce attempts to attain original connections between words of different languages and to find by this means the basis of human experience. He is a Vichian. Joyce was especially fond of Vico's claim that imagination is memory, which is originally to be found in Aristotle. The line in the *Scienza nuova* is "la memoria è la stessa che la fantasia."

**TV:** Why did you chose these four figures?

**DV:** Important for me, of course, are many thinkers in all periods of the history of philosophy and literature, not just these four. You use the term "secular gospel" They are a kind of gospel, a tetrad. Joyce concentrates the Christian gospel into a unit that he calls "mamaluja" for Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Four figures are enough to allow a complex of dialectical interrelationships, which can suggest themes that no one of them commands alone. They are a personal canon, which was suggested to me by Vico's four authors that he describes in his *Autobiography*. His are Plato, Tacitus, Bacon, and Grotius. Such a gospel or tetrad is a locus from which to think and make connections with the wider canon of thinkers and works. Each person may decide on his own authors, which emerge in one's studies, as crucial for one's thought. They are in various ways one's alter egos, who tend to find one as much as one tends to find them. It is a kind of natural pedagogical process for which no fully rational justification can be given.

**TV:** You like to use the term "humanist philosophy" as an alternative to the commonly used distinction between "continental" and "analytical" philosophy. Why is that?

**DV:** The distinction between analytic and continental arose several decades ago in professional philosophy when Anglo-American philosophers of language were forced to acknowledge that there were other genuine movements of philosophical thought developing on the European continent, such as phenomenology and, later, hermeneutics. This account of contemporary philosophy has become a convenient way for the American Philosophical Association to divide up philosophy. It excludes much. It excludes the great traditions of speculative and humanist philosophy. By "humanist philosophy" I mean that philosophy which puts the ancient problem of self-knowledge at the centre of philosophical concern. It has roots in the Greeks and the Romans. For the most part it is found in the revival of classical philosophy by the Italian humanists in the Renaissance and in Vico. It also goes forward in thinkers like Montaigne and Rousseau, and is to be found in Hegel and in the philosophy of culture of Cassirer. Cassirer begins his *An Essay on Man* with the assertion that self-knowledge is the aim of philosophy.

**TV:** You claim in your book on Vico that he creates a philosophical method that is unique in modern philosophy, and that he offers an alternative to the type of philosophy which takes its origins from Descartes. How do their methods actually differ?

**DV:** Vico realizes the implications of the narrowness of Descartes' conception of truth as based in his four-step mathematical-like method. This conception of truth excludes from knowledge all that the ancient rhetoricians would call probable as opposed to logically certain or self-evident. It excludes all understanding of the world that we have which depends upon recollection and memory, including cultural memory. Descartes would have us put aside or consider as second rate our recollections of the past, on which history depends, as well as the autobiographical grasp of our own individual reality. He would also put aside the truths expressed in metaphor and poetry, as well as the great truths as expressed in myths that lie at the beginning of human culture.

**TV:** You touch upon many important things here. What is recollection, and how does it differ from the method of Descartes? In what way is memory cultural?

**DV:** Aristotle in his little treatise *On Memory* distinguishes between recollection and memory. Memory involves the recall what was at one time in perception, something which is past and is brought back into the present. Recollection, however, involves putting what is remembered into a particular order so that one thing is understood to follow from the other. Recollection is

not just contacting with the mind what is past but involves the process of ordering what is past. And this kind of ordering gives us a knowledge in a causal sense – a knowledge *per causas*.

Everything in the human world has a past. Nothing exists merely in the present. In that sense everything in the world exists in a theatre of memory. All words have histories, all institutions have histories, all laws and customs have histories, all doctrines and ideas. And each human being has history, which is tied up with the history of the cultural world in which the human individual lives.

**TV:** Is this the reason for saying that the self of a human being has to be grasped autobiographically? That is, one has to tell oneself the story of oneself, which, as you say, is tied up with the story of the rest of the world?

**DV:** Yes, without a self–narrative one doesn't, in a sense, really exist. To have a life story is part of having a life, that is, a human life. To merely have a life without a story of it would be to have an animal life, which consists in representing a species.

**TV:** What is the relationship between narration and philosophy? It could be argued that self–narrative is not a philosophical knowledge of one's self.

**DV:** I am reminded of the view to be found in German nineteenth century philosophy; perhaps it is attributable to Lessing. Show me someone's philosophy, and I show you what kind of person he is. Certainly in some sense all philosophies, or at least speculative philosophies, are examples of self–knowledge. I do not mean that they are reducible to the particular psychologies of their authors, but they are grand narratives in which the human attempts to confront itself and to confront itself in a relationship to what is not human – the natural and the divine. Philosophies really are narratives of a particular sort. Philosophy is a kind of literature that allows itself to be guided not just by imagination, but by the imagination joined to reason. I think that is what Hegel meant in one of his early fragments when he spoke about the need for a "mythology of reason." In all philosophies of any lasting power we find what we might call a philosophical imaginary joined to and tempered by a philosophical rationality.

**TV:** Usually the birth of philosophy is thought to come about by breaking free from mythology...

**DV:** Yes, philosophy is born as a way of understanding the world that is different from myth. But myths are the original way that human beings form their world. And philosophy, once born, and developed away from myth, must always return to a contact with it. By this I do not mean that philosophical theory should attempt to become mythical, but philosophy must understand what myth is. Myths are the first form of human knowledge. Without acknowledging this, philosophy would be like a person who does not understand that he was born under certain conditions. Thus Vico says the first science to be learned should be mythology or the interpretation of fables. In the same way Cassirer holds rightly that any theory of knowledge must be grounded in a philosophy of mythology. Theory of knowledge requires as part of its theory an account of the origins of knowledge. Forms of human knowledge never exist *sui generis*. They are always rooted in forms of symbolism and culture. This is the thesis of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms.

**TV:** Are you claiming against Lyotard that philosophy actually needs a grand narrative in order to understand itself, and that insofar as philosophy is a self-reflective activity, it cannot abandon the story about itself?

**DV:** Lyotard is the coiner of the word "postmodernism," and, in a sense, of its idea. Lyotard was for the last several years a colleague of mine in the Emory Department of Philosophy, and I think his observations on the idea of the postmodern condition are astute. One recent reviewer of my book *Philosophy and the Return to Self-knowledge* referred to its position as "premodern" in a positive way. What I would say against the "postmodern condition" is that there still exist those ways of thinking which hold to the possibility of truth, the truth which is not reducible to the political or psychological conditions under which the text is formulated by the author, nor to the author's social class, gender, or historical period. It is possible to think great thoughts that transcend in their truth the conditions of their origin. Once again I come back to Hegel's principle that the true is the whole, the principle that we also find in Vico who says that the whole is really the flower of wisdom. When we fail to have the courage to attempt a speech about the whole of things, then we remain fragmented. We have nothing to set off against our own fragmentation.

**TV:** So your view is that Hegel is one who has attempted the speech about the whole. And yet in your book on Hegel you claim that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is comedy on each stage of it, a *Narrenschiff* or *ship of fools*, but as whole it composes a tragedy. How does a tragedy, which is comedy on each stage of it, account for speech of the whole?

**DV:** Each stage of consciousness of Hegel's phenomenology is a type of foolishness about the nature of reality, just as each kind of folly is a cabin on Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff*. Brant's forms of foolishness are each failures of the self to grasp its true purpose in relation to God and the world. Each form of consciousness in Hegel's work is foolish, for it takes the partial view of the whole as the whole itself. As the consciousness attempts to demonstrate its truth, its world falls apart. We readers watch each form of consciousness committing this blunder as we watch a character in a comedy. But the whole system of these forms of consciousness is a kind of tragedy. Absolute knowing, the final stage of consciousness for Hegel, in my view is not a state of perfection and unity, but an acceptance of all these forms of folly as forms of folly. Thus the forms of folly are the actual structure of life. When we attain absolute knowing we fall from a high place to accept things as they are. We learn to accept the oppositions and differences that exist in the whole as real. More correctly, I would describe Hegel's philosophy as a tragicomedy. I think all the true philosophy is such.

**TV:** Why do you think that?

**DV:** All true philosophy struggles, as did Hegel, with how to speak about the opposites of experience. Tragedy and comedy are important opposites, especially if we understand the world as a kind of theatre, in which the philosopher attempts to discover the script and to comprehend the play of opposites within the world. Thus any such philosophy must have within it the play of comedy in relationship to tragedy.

**TV:** Philosophy in this sense seems to be totally absent in the philosophy departments of our time. Academic philosophers have somehow avoided being involved in any comedy or tragedy.

**DV:** I think that there is always the tendency in contemporary philosophy to become professional. Professionalism tends to emphasize the comic. Descartes said that he stepped on the stage of the world like a comedian. I think that the sense of method that stems from Descartes fits very well with modern professional philosophy, which proceeds by working on problems. To work on problems is always to presume a happy ending. It is in that sense a comedic activity. Perhaps contemporary philosophers, whom Hegel would describe as literal-minded, should give attention to the Spanish philosopher Unamuno's book *The Tragic Sense of Life*, or at least just to the idea of its title. I don't mean to turn philosophy back into a kind of existentialism, but I want contemporary philosophy to take seriously that there is a human condition, and that philosophy should take it as a duty to attempt to grasp the nature of the human condition. This requires more than what we find in deconstructionism, or structuralism, or hermeneutics, or any of the particular movements that give up on connecting philosophy with the real vision of things.

**TV:** Why do you think that such ways of philosophizing, which do not account for the human condition, prevail?

**DV:** For that I would go again back to Hegel and his famous dictum that philosophies are their own times apprehended in thought. If we look to the fact that modern society is technological society, I think we might find the answer to why philosophy becomes analytical and hermeneutical. These are philosophies of the part, not of the whole; they are directed to analyzing specific problems and to producing specific types of interpretations. Although they do not tie themselves to a particular doctrine of method, at least not with the clarity of Descartes, they are very much methodological in spirit. The technological society is a culture of problem-solving. It has no need for vision, no need for a sense of transcendence. The functionary only works at things, he doesn't attempt to speculate on the larger meaning of things. In that sense, it seems to me, the contemporary movements of philosophy are very much understandable as the technological society done over at the level of thought.

**TV:** Do you have any hopes for improvement?

**DV:** My frank answer to that question is that my pessimism is whole and complete. I don't see that philosophy can effect changes in the course of technological society. There might be a consolation of philosophy, because there is some consolation in the power of philosophy to allow us to understand what is, and what the human condition is, in relation to the forces of the contemporary world that play upon it. Philosophy can still hold out its ancient values for those who can grasp and appreciate them. Thus on the individual level the study of philosophy can help one make a life in the midst of conditions that are not ideal. Through the appeal that philosophy can have on some individuals, I think that philosophy itself can be kept alive but this can only be done as an activity among friends. Perhaps this is all that has ever kept philosophy alive. There is a Platonic notion of the "friends of the forms," and friendship such as this may be all that a philosopher in the contemporary world can hope for.

**TV:** What about philosophy in educational institutions? Usually they are thought to be keeping philosophy alive.

**DV:** There have been twenty-five centuries of continuous philosophical thought. Philosophy has been transmitted under a great variety of conditions from one generation to the next. This occurred under many conceptions of

human education, under many forms of educational practice. It is true that philosophy finds itself in the contemporary world very much within universities. I think all philosophy can expect is the freedom to speak its mind, and when philosophy is being done there are those students who can hear it and will be attracted to it. I think there is no special system or method for its transmission other than to hold the belief that when philosophy is being done those who come in contact with it will respond to it. In that way philosophy will continue. In this sense I think that philosophy has its own momentum, because, for those who can respond to it, it serves a purpose of being a way to form the basic human need for self-knowledge.

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