

FOUNDING PHILOSOPHY

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The English noun *foundation* is derived from the Latin verb *fundo, fundare*: to set up, to establish. We may found a city by deciding to build it on a certain geographical spot; the building is subsequent to the decision. To found by decision is to set the mind in a certain way, to take something for something else, to assert an intention, to hold oneself in readiness to act in such and such a way. Buildings are artifacts that we produce as the result of a decision. The founder decides that his followers will live in a certain location; he sanctifies the ground and calls the city into being, but without producing any artifacts distinct from his pronouncements.

One could easily imagine a case in which a city is founded but never built; the site has been selected and the decision sanctified, yet the founder and his followers may be destroyed by an unexpected enemy before they are able to erect a single structure. The act of founding is here almost, but not quite, a phantom, waiting, perhaps forever, for some descendents of the slaughtered troops, the children of their children left in another town, or the children of these children -- someone may some day, having heard of the original founding, arrive at the site in order to bring the physical city into existence. Or consider the case of the soldier who decides that, from this moment forward, he will face the exigencies of battle with resolute courage, come what may, no matter how desperate his situation. All of his acts are henceforward founded in this decision, yet he builds nothing; in the extreme case, he may even do nothing but die suddenly by an unexpected blow from behind. Can we say that such a man died bravely or resolutely? If the decision was genuinely taken, then I

believe that we must, even though the man did not act on the foundation he established.

Unbuilt cities and principles that are never acted on: these are, of course, extreme examples of founding. I intend them, not to serve themselves as the foundation for an elaborate theory, but as evidence of the ambiguity of the concept "foundation." One can found without building, producing, or acting. We found ourselves by taking a stand in preparation for building, producing, or acting. Although the etymology is entirely spurious, we may nevertheless say that the inner logic of the concepts legitimates the claim that we find ourselves by founding ourselves in the properly grounded sense of the term. The foundation is the ground we stand on, as for example when we gaze at the stars on a clear night, or when we look instead into our souls in order to determine who we are.

What would it mean to be a person without foundations? Let us return to the example of the soldier; only now we imagine that he has failed to establish his mental or spiritual attitude toward danger and death. This soldier is neither brave nor cowardly, nor does he respond in accordance with any other principle, for example, that of expediency. He has not found himself; he cannot find what has not been established, nor can he even begin to look without deciding that there is something to be found. This latter decision is that of the skeptic, or more fully, of the man who looks to see what can be found. Skepticism is itself a founding or establishing oneself in a certain direction, which is possible only if we first come to a stand.

Our soldier is not a skeptic. He is the paradigm of the contingent individual: neither here nor there. One could not therefore say that he is a man of such and such a type; to use an old-fashioned expression for our own purposes, he lacks bottom. In the midst of battle, this soldier does not act; he only reacts, as for example by falling to the ground when he is shot. The brave man dies nobly; the coward dies basely. But the contingent man cannot properly be said to die; he is "terminated" or (still more brutally) "put down." This is the technical language of the contemporary adventure film, where the adventure consists largely of numerous acts of "termination" by a hero who is at least defined by his motives, however detached these become from his acts by the technical language that sterilizes them of any human content.

To be "put down" is to be transformed into a brute, or indeed, into an object. We put down a package on the table; we put down our shoes on the floor. In the adventure film, the hero "puts down" his victims, who are not human beings but obstacles to his progress. In the case of the radically contingent man, it is appropriate to speak of his being "put down" (more appropriate than to say that he has been "terminated with

extreme prejudice"). He has no foundation; hence he cannot stand or be kept erect. His falling to the ground is a motion of no significance, not a human act. Here *zu Grunde gehen* is an ungrounded dissolution. The radically contingent man was already dissolving before the bullet took his life. The bullet is the consequence of a founding; the undergoing of its impact is not.

This extreme example, different from the first two, is nevertheless equally instructive. The purpose of the first set of examples was to demonstrate that founding is independent of constructing artifacts, that is, entities separate from and produced by the act of founding itself. The purpose of the second example was to demonstrate that there are in fact no radically contingent human beings. Human life is founded; it is *foundational*.

What then does it mean to speak of "philosophy without foundations"? Are we to assume that philosophy is disconnected from human life? Even on the extreme hypothesis that philosophy is a life-long preparation for dying, the assumption cannot be sustained. The person who spends his life preparing to die has founded himself in a decision that regulates his thoughts and deeds. This foundation does not require the construction of what professors call an epistemology; one way in which to prepare to die is by discovering that knowledge is impossible, or in less extreme terms, that we cannot know that we know.

The serious question is not whether philosophy has foundations, but whether we found philosophy or it founds us. It would seem that this question cannot be pursued until we come to some decision as to the nature of philosophy. But this is, I think, an illusion; the desire to grasp the nature of philosophy is already a consequence of philosophy. The desire to know is not a tenet in a doctrine. Conversely, there is no useful doctrine of the desire to know that is not itself rooted in that desire.

These very simple reflections lead to the following thesis. We do not arrive at philosophy from the outside, as if we had encountered some external and initially alien entity on a voyage to a foreign land, or a monument the identity and significance of which must be determined by consulting a guide-book. In somewhat different terms, there is no method for the construction of philosophy, as if philosophy were the parts of an amplifier that come to us in the mail, together with instructions for their assembly. *Philosophy founds us*. This is my understanding of Aristotle's assertion at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* that all men desire by their nature to know.

This assertion is sometimes taken to be a demythologized version of the Platonic doctrine of Eros, according to which philosophy is the love of wisdom. I note in passing that *philia* or friendship is not the same as eros or erotic love. This apart, Eros is a daimon or a god who comes to us

from outside ourselves, but in response to our natural desires. The sense of the Platonic doctrine is in a way quite close to the typical axiom of modern philosophy: man is by nature desire for what he lacks. But Eros is not simply the expression of this desire or the attempt to satisfy it. Eros is a force that leads us to recollect what we possessed, or what we encountered, prior to our incarnate, human existence. Eros corrects or redirects our desires. Apart from Eros, desire does not know what it craves.

It would be possible to say that for Plato, man does not desire by his own nature, or by his own nature alone, to know. Eros is of course not "supernatural" in the Christian sense, but it expresses a bifurcation within nature between the human and the divine. The bifurcation is at the same time a root, as Diotima indicates in the *Symposium* when she calls Eros an intermediary who "interprets" the commands of the gods to mortals and the desires or prayers of mortals to the gods. Mortals and immortals are both natural; they are two different aspects of the cosmos, and so of the order of *physis*. Eros is the binding together of the two aspects. This binding takes place within human nature. Man is accordingly the expression of the bifurcation in nature, an expression that constitutes the bond itself.

Without man, there would be no cosmos but only a universe. Man is for Plato the measure of all things in the sense that Eros uses human nature to measure the cosmic order. Eros founds human nature in philosophy. In Aristotle, on the contrary, there are no daimons or intermediaries of this sort. The cosmic gods are indifferent to mankind. Even if one thinks of the active intellect, or of *noesis tes noeseos*, as the bond of the cosmos, *nous* is a *dynamis*, not a daimon. The power of *nous* is actualized in the species-form, not in the individual soul. There is no counterpart in Aristotle to Plato's poetical descriptions of the blessedness of the individual philosophical soul. The blessedness of Aristotle's *bios theoretikos* lies in pure contemplation, and so in the disappearance of the individual soul within the pure eidetic activity of the active intellect.

What then does Aristotle mean when he says that all men desire by nature to know? The only example he gives is that of the senses, which he says we esteem for their own sake, and in particular the sense of sight, whether or not action is contemplated. Aristotle goes on to derive memory from sensation and from this, experience, which gives rise to art (*techné*) and calculative reasoning (*logismos*). The impression is thus generated that philosophy arises as a consequence of the gradual perfection of our natural faculties.

There is of course a distinction in Aristotle between the human and the divine; but human being is no longer understood as the expression of a bifurcation within nature, and so the "desire" (*oreksis*) to know is no

longer the cosmic bond of Eros. As we have just seen, if there is a cosmic bond, it is *nous*, not *oreksis*, and the *nous* of god, not the passive intellect of mankind, and certainly not human desires, sensations, fantasies, moods, and so on.

It should not be forgotten that there is in Plato a strong tendency to conceive of philosophy as a preparation for dying (*Phaedo*) or as total obliviousness to the human as human (*Theaetetus*); more generally, there is a tendency to conceive of philosophy as the striving for extinction of human awareness in a pure vision of Platonic Ideas. This is the Platonic basis for Aristotle's doctrine of *theoria*, or the thinking of pure forms. In another context, one would have to decide the ultimate significance of Plato's poetic celebration of the blessedness of the philosophical life. According to Plato, human beings are incapable of wisdom. Aristotle is not so modest; he speaks of his "first philosophy" or knowledge of the highest principles and causes as wisdom (*sophia*).

Whatever may be Plato's final opinion, this much is clear. In Aristotle, human beings are capable of wisdom; the gods are not jealous, as Aristotle puts it. This means that human beings may live the life of the gods, or of the god of the philosophers: our humanity may be overcome in the common accessibility of *noesis tes noeseos*, of thinking thinking itself. In other words, we do not become divine by engaging in thinking *about* thinking, as for example by constructing psychological or epistemological doctrines. Divinity is thinking itself, the activity of pure thinking, which we achieve in the actualizing of forms.

I want to make one more remark about Aristotle. There is no Aristotelian psychology, and thus no epistemology, because thinking has no structure or form. One can of course describe the consequences of thinking, or analyze the steps taken by thinking after these steps have been accomplished. But thinking is not the steps that it takes, just as it is not the form of what it thinks. Thinking is possible only because it is formless, and so can assume the form of whatever it thinks. Thinking is not a privation; it is *nothing* that can become anything.

This is not a scholarly interpretation of Plato and Aristotle, and I leave it at the following observation. One could say that since for Aristotle the desire to know is natural, philosophy is accordingly founded by nature. So too is wisdom, or the satisfaction of that desire. The bifurcation in nature, vividly present in Plato, is muted or absent in Aristotle. For Plato, the cosmos is the highest, deepest, and most comprehensive expression of our desire. *But this desire cannot be satisfied.* This is why philosophy is for him a way of life; there is no separation for Plato between the *bios theoretikos* and the *bios praktikos*. To philosophize is necessarily to live as a human being who strives to become divine. For Aristotle, on the other hand, the cosmos is not the expression of human desire but the sign

of its satisfaction. To understand this is to live the theoretical life, or to cease to be merely human.

I come back now to the question of the foundation. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel objects to what one can call the Platonic thesis that it is impossible to love what one does not know. If this objection is taken literally, it means, not that philosophy must eventually be replaced by wisdom, but that philosophy is already wisdom. A Hegelian could reply as follows: philosophy is potential wisdom. We initially know only imperfectly what we love; as our love deepens, so too does our knowledge of the beloved. This argument is not entirely convincing, as reflection upon our own love affairs makes clear. Knowledge of the beloved may become radically more imperfect as familiarity increases.

It would be more plausible to maintain that the actualization of potential wisdom runs the risk of begging the question: we end up with a detailed rationalization of what we desired, and so believed ourselves to know in the first place. To say this, however, is to grant part of the force of the Hegelian contention. There is something incorrigible about desire, whether understood as love or friendship. My thirst is a craving for liquid of a certain kind; I may know nothing of the chemical composition of a suitable liquid, and drink poison by mistake. Nevertheless, I did not desire the poison, but (let us say) water.

In the case of love for another human being, the example is even more vivid. The person I desire may be unsuitable for me; should my love be returned, the results could be disastrous. But one cannot simply say that I love the wrong person. I have not made a mistake about which person I love; my error lies in a lack of understanding of the character of that person. In the *Philebus*, Socrates argues that there are false pleasures, namely, those that arise from an illusion or an object which we have erroneously identified. But this argument assimilates opinion (*doksa*) to pleasure; the error lies in the opinion about the pleasure, not in the pleasure itself. Someone can explain to me that I love the wrong person, and I can accept this judgment even while continuing to be possessed by that love.

For reasons of his own, Socrates wishes to "rationalize" pleasure as much as possible. That is to say, he wishes to subordinate pleasure to judgment or opinion. But love is not an opinion; strictly speaking, it is not even a pleasure, or not merely a pleasure, both because it includes pain and because it is something much more than pleasure or pain. Whatever else love may be, it is need, and a need that is founded by, even though it does not originate in, the beloved. More precisely: in our example, love is the need of one human being for another. But this need, although it originates within, and even defines, the lover, does not

activate itself. I must "fall in love" or "be overcome by love."

These examples suggest an important inference. The love of knowledge is not knowledge, any more than the love of wisdom is wisdom. And yet, just as the lover is defined or founded by the nature of his beloved, so too the lover of knowledge is founded by knowledge and the lover of wisdom by wisdom. The philosopher, as founded by wisdom, is wise, albeit not in the same sense as the Aristotelian or Hegelian sage. This is what Socrates means when he says in the *Philebus* (16c1ff) that the road (*hodos*), on which everything we possess by *techné* has been discovered, is a gift from the gods, thanks to some Prometheus, who has cast it down to us together with an extremely bright fire. This fire lights up the road and thus permits us to make our technical discoveries. But the fire is not itself *techné*.

A similar point is made by Heraclitus (Diels, Fr. 18): "if he does not hope, he will not discover what is un hoped for, since it will be indiscernible and inaccessible." From the contemporary psychologistic standpoint, this is a license to wish-fulfilment. Heraclitus, however, is not referring to wishes, nor is he licensing self-deception. Hope is a light that illuminates, not a shadow that blinds. The philosopher does not hope for some predetermined object or the gratification of a particular desire. If I may combine the images from Plato and Heraclitus, the philosopher is the man who hopes to see what will be found on the road of *techné*.

The complex image of a divine gift, fire, and a road containing technical discoveries, is an expression of the founding of philosophy. By *techné* we must understand all attempts to discern the natures of things that proceed through calculation and analysis: through counting and measuring, distinguishing, assessing, and by extension, through the construction of conceptual schemes and doctrines. In the *Philebus* passage, Socrates explains the "road" of *techné* as the counting of the eidetic elements in formal compounds. This road is very beautiful, and Socrates refers to himself as its "lover" (*erastes*: 16b5-6). We can easily connect this passage to the discussion of Eros in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Love is the response of the soul to the natural beauty of intelligibility. It is a desire for the formal structure that the soul itself lacks.

As is notorious, formal structure is often referred to in the Platonic dialogues by the term *idea* or *eidós*. Can we therefore say that Plato is a "foundationalist," in the sense that he posits the Ideas as the completely accessible, entirely secure, and incorrigible foundation for knowledge? I have already shown that such an assertion is unwarranted. The thesis of "foundationalism," when applied to thinkers like Plato, betrays the worst sort of academic vulgarity. Texts are brutalized in the service of technical constructions; subtlety and nuance are ground to dust in the gears of ideological sloganeering.

"Antifoundationalism" of this sort, which purports to rescue us from

the reifications and subjective prejudices of foundationalism, is itself unconscious foundationalism; only now the foundation is radical contingency, hopelessness, unfounded transience, or chaos. The "foundationalist" Platonism of the primacy of vision is replaced by the anti-Platonist foundationalism of blindness. We are said to be free because we can no longer see the obstacles in our path. We are free because we cannot see the path itself.

All this is based upon a complete misunderstanding of the Platonic dialogues, but more importantly, upon a misunderstanding of the nature of the philosopher. Socrates was not primarily involved in the investigation of the Ideas; he came upon the hypothesis of the Ideas (*Phaedo* 100a3) in the course of investigating himself. Socrates wishes to know whether he is indeed the wisest Athenian, as was claimed by the Delphic oracle (*Apology* 21a5ff); he wishes to know whether he is a violent beast or a gentle and divine creature (*Phaedrus* 229e5ff). To give one last example, the stated purpose of the conversation with Theaetetus is not to determine the nature of knowledge, but to discover whether the soul of the young mathematician resembles that of the philosopher, as does his body (*Theaetetus* 145b1ff).

The sense of these passages is contained in a fragment from Heraclitus: "I sought for myself" (*edizesamen emeauton*: Diels, 101). The verb *edizesamen* is in the middle voice of *dizo*, "to be in doubt." This doubt as to his own nature leads the philosopher to investigate himself. One will object that doubt has nothing to do with Eros; but this objection is false. Doubt is not a shadow that blinds but a light that reveals; the philosopher is detached from the darkness of everyday life by the illumination of his need. Eros, the fire of Prometheus, the oracle at Delphi: all these images are the same. A force from outside enters into the soul and founds us in our need to discover who we are. I note in passing that this force from outside could also be wonder (*thauma*) at the beauty and intelligibility of the heavenly motions or cosmic order.

It would be easy enough to show in detail that there is no basis in the Platonic dialogues for speaking of a "theory" of Ideas in the modern sense of a discursive account of their natures, and so no basis to refer to the Ideas as the foundation of philosophy. I have done this elsewhere at some length and will not repeat myself here.¹ Let me instead make the point in my own voice. What Plato calls "Ideas" may be the foundation of the cosmos, but they are certainly not the foundation of philosophy. Philosophy is a human activity, not a "theory" or conceptual construction. The activity of philosophy is the expression of our need, not simply for knowledge, but for the satisfaction of our most fundamental desire. In the language of the ancients, the philosopher strives for blessedness or godhood. But blessedness is not identical with a pure *Wesensschau*, or

with the extinction of the self in the noetic apprehension of Platonic Ideas. The blessed man is transported to the Happy Isles or, to employ an image of Nietzsche, to the land of the Hyperboreans, who dwell far to the North, unreachable by land or by sea; in other words, outside of history and the multiplicity of human perspectives. The perspective of the Hyperborean is synoptic: it does not change the perspectivist nature of human existence but makes it fully intelligible.

One might have a perfect knowledge of the Platonic Ideas and still not be blessed; a knowledge of the structure of intelligibility is not enough to find the way to the land of the Hyperboreans. For this, we require hope in the sense of Heraclitus; what is not hoped for must remain indiscernible and inaccessible (*aporon*). Ours is an age in which all talk of hope or divine illumination is relegated to the sphere of religion at best and superstition at worst. This is as true of literature as it is of philosophy; those who turn from philosophy to literature in order to find a deeper understanding of human nature must accordingly fail, so long as their perceptions are veiled by late modern despair.

"We are the eyelids of defeated caves." This line from Allen Tate's poem "The Meaning of Death" expresses beautifully and succinctly the anti-foundationalism of post-philosophy. The eye of the soul is veiled by the eyelid of the perspective of the decadent city, which Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* calls the city of the Motley Cow. More precisely: in the Socratic allegory, the cave represents the polis; but the eye of the soul is not veiled by the eyelid of defeat. A transformation of the soul is still possible: philosophy is possible. The city can thus serve as the foundation for its own transcendence.

The city of the Motley Cow, on the other hand, looks up to the tightrope walker, whom it mistakes for the superman. Zarathustra can voyage between the Blessed Isles and the decadent city in the vessel of his own spirit; but this coming and going is not the same as the exit of the philosopher into the sunlight and his return to assist his fellow citizens toward spiritual emancipation. Zarathustra is able to communicate his teaching at best only to his animals, or to the spirit of gravity, or to some metaphorical representation of the restricted understanding of late-modern Europe. As to his disciples, these are regularly repudiated.

The crossroad of past and future, represented by the Instant of the gateway of time, is Nietzsche's version of the Socratic cave, with its exit toward the sunlight. Zarathustra stands outside the gateway and attempts to explain its significance to the dwarf-figure of the spirit of gravity. This attempt is a failure; both dwarf and gateway disappear and are replaced by a shepherd who lies strangling on a black snake that has entered into his mouth while he slept and has bitten deep into his throat. Zarathustra sees a parable of hope; the shepherd heeds his cry and bites off the head of the

black snake. Having done so, the shepherd is transformed into a no longer human, radiant, laughing prefiguration of what Zarathustra longs for: the transfiguration of mankind by its conquest of the nihilistic implications of the doctrine of the eternal return.

But this is a vision of longing; Zarathustra did not actually step into the gateway, in the sense that it represents, not simply the general structure of time, but the active appropriation of the future by the spirit of overcoming. And the vision is related, not to the residents of the city of the Motley Cow, but to the crew of the ship that sails to and from the Blessed Isles. As recounted by the dramatic circumstances of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the prophet's enterprise is a political failure. The philosophy of the future cannot take place within the city, which has room only for professors and inverted cripples who resemble, or rather are, giant eyes or ears.

In Plato, philosophy is founded within the city by an illumination from beyond it. For Nietzsche, philosophy is founded on mountain peaks, or among the Hyperboreans, or on the Blessed Isles, but it can no longer enter the city: what is outside the city has lost its founding force, except as a vision or expression of hope of a future epoch. It is within the city of the Motley Cow that epistemology and ontology arise as fantasms of philosophy. The eyelid closes over the defeated cave. Hope is extinguished in the quarrel between foundationalists and antifoundationalists.

Epistemology and ontology are technical artifacts that serve as eyelids in the specific sense that they cut us off from knowing and being by the very claim to render them securely accessible. To say instead that philosophy is founded by an illumination from outside is not to engage in mystical rhetoric, but to leave open the path to diverse forms of knowing and being. Security cannot be purchased in philosophy by a narrowing of the eyes. Those who think otherwise have been led to conceive of philosophy in light of a squint-eyed image of science. According to this image, science advances by putting nature to the torture, that is, by forcing her to answer questions which we have formulated. But the genuine force of the image lies in our capacity to formulate questions, and hence procedures and methods that are appropriate to the phenomena; it does not lie in our adherence to a method, nor can philosophical force be derived from adherence to a doctrine of knowledge or being.

To this extent, I am in agreement with the antifoundationalists, but not for their reasons. It is one thing to remove spectacles that have been ground to the wrong prescription, but something else again to open one's eyes. Let me repeat: philosophy founds us; we do not found philosophy. And neither do we abolish it. What we can do is hope.

And we *can* hope: this is the crucial point. Hope is not a private indulgence in edifying wishes or daydreams but the human response to

the problematic nature of existence. I must decide how to live and how to die, not because I am an ego cogitans that grounds its own certainty in the projection of a perspective, but because I am constituted by the bifurcation in nature between mortal and immortal. I am founded as the assertion of the problem of human life.

Of course, I can also despair; otherwise, I could not hope. Anti-foundationalism is in my opinion something beyond despair; one thinks here of Nietzsche's last men, who are confident of the progressive illumination of their dissolution within contingency, as though the energy released by that dissolution replaces the Enlightenment of the modern age. For the foundationalist, there is no problem so long as we adhere to the established, presumably incorrigible criteria of knowledge. For the antifoundationalist, there is no problem because there are no incorrigible criteria; more radically, there is no privileged bifurcation of nature. There is no nature, no continuity, but at each point, only the bifurcation of discontinuity.

Antifoundationalism is closely associated with such postmodernist movements as deconstruction, genealogical hermeneutics, post-Heideggerian critiques of metaphysics as the doctrine of *das Seiende* as *Anwesenheit*, and so too of the implicit replacement of being by Being, understood as concealment, process, departure, and difference.

Postmodernism is the age of post-history, post-anthropology, and post-philosophy. In fact, of course, there is no postmodern age; if there were, it would be chaos. Postmodernists do not live in accord with their own principles, nor could they. They hold together the ostensible world of radical contingency with the usual devices of power politics, academic fashion, ideological rhetoric, and technicist love of scholastic verbal constructions.

This is hypocrisy, and it may well be despicable. But there is something of crucial importance to be learned from hypocrisy. The hypocrite dissimulates because he is forced to do so by the nature of reality. Antifoundationalism is thus the simulacrum of foundationalism. But simulacra exist: they are *onta*. Perhaps the next act of philosophical founding will be to regain the old Platonic understanding of the nature of fantasm. Let me close with one cautionary word: this understanding is neither ontology nor epistemology but rather the description of human existence as rooted firmly in the inexplicable yet everywhere visible relation of original and image.

1. See my *Plato's Sophist* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London: 1983).