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Booknotes

For many people, esoteric philosophy is an idea associated with the name of Leo Strauss, and for many again, that is enough to dismiss it (usually without any attempt to get to grips with what Strauss thought and wrote). But the idea of a private subtext lurking below the surface of what actually appears on the page is not necessarily so bizarre. Christ spoke in parables. Virgil may well have inserted reservations about the Roman imperium into the *Aeneid*, but indirectly. 'Pious' Aeneas, Rome's legendary founder, performs an act of vicious fury in the very last words of that epic, in striking contrast to Achilles' compassionate turn at the end of the *Iliad*; as self-conscious a writer as Virgil could not but have intended this comparison, which some of his more careful readers, even perhaps Octavian, may have noticed. So it could be reasonable to speculate that Plato may have intended the *Republic* in part as a warning against what might follow were a ruler to attempt to enact a certain inhuman vision of justice, or that Machiavelli, from the heart of the Medici court, was warning his fellow citizens about what princes were really like, even if in 16th century Florence – still technically a republic when Machiavelli wrote – they probably knew that anyway).

From the heart of the Medici court: that, of course, suggests one reason that philosophers might want to hide their esoteric message beneath a bland exoteric exterior. They might also, for pragmatic or even altruistic motives, be wary of upsetting the social order, even though they are critical of it, and so not want to undermine its religious and mythological supports too directly and radically. They might also feel that the messages they want to convey are not for the general public; they have to be worked at, by a philosophical elite, who have to take them deep into their souls, philosophy being the old Platonic turning of the soul, and not a fit subject for feuilleton journalism or 'public intellectuals' or their readers in newspapers.

In his fascinating *Philosophy Between the Lines* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), Arthur M.Melzer attempts to show, in strikingly un-Straussian language, how, for the reasons already given and for others as well, esotericism was the norm rather than the exception in philosophy, at least until the time of the Enlightenment. Even then many of its leading figures, including Voltaire and Diderot were careful to disguise the full implications of what they thought, and in the case of Rousseau were quite explicit about doing this.

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Things have, of course, changed since, at least on the surface, because philosophers no longer have to fear priests and kings; in that sense reason and openness have won, as we all know. But Melzer also points to a deeper aspect of the transformation we have witnessed. For most of philosophy's history, thoughtful people did not believe that politics and the social order can be run on rational, open principles. They recognised, when they thought about it, that all societies arose out of primeval crimes, and are all maintained by a degree of repression. So philosophy, with its critical-rational and sceptical bent, and the myths which maintain the social order have been at odds. Philosophy's characteristic stance has been a sceptical Socratic rationalism, distancing itself from goings on in the cave of politics, and indeed from the poetry which resonates in the cave. Though Melzer does not say this, this is the old complaint of Aristophanes against the rationalistic Euripides in *The Frogs*, echoed by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, when Socrates is rolled up with Euripides.

Philosophers in the Enlightenment tradition hoped to overcome this divide, and ultimately to do away with the violence beneath the social surface. Politics can become rational; original sin is a myth. Philosophy can come out of its esoteric hiding place and enter the public square. In what might be seen as its first, optimistic moment, rationalistic universalism and its doctrines of human rights and free expression reign supreme. Unfortunately, as Melzer suggests, this universalism has fallen foul of the criticism that in practice it led to intolerance and imperialism, politically and intellectually. Nor in its own practice and choice of causes to declare rational, universal, etc., has it been aware of its own historical contingency, or indeed of the historical contingency of the beliefs of others. So in its second phase Enlightenment openness and rationalism has retreated to historicism – looking at positions and beliefs, including our own, as always conditioned and limited by their times. Along with historicism goes non-judgmentalism, a pluralism which tolerates anything and everything. In this relativistic anarchy, philosophy and public discourse themselves becomes inauthentic, in which anything and everything can be criticised, but from no point of settled conviction. (Post-modernist 'irony'.) And this is disastrous, because if everything is tolerated or tolerable, then who or what wins will simply be that which has most power at the time, whether that power comes in the form of votes or bombs.

Melzer's book is provocative and thought-provoking in many levels, and will certainly repay study and reflection. In its implications it raises the question as to whether in our days of philosophic

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openness there is still a place for esoteric philosophy, for what Melzer calls writing between the lines. That there might be comes somewhat paradoxically from a discussion by Melzer himself of the way homosexuals had to disguise their orientation and interest even as late as the 1990s. This reflection of Melzer's prompts the contrary thought, that those in academia wanting to defend views which do not conform to to-day's political and sexual orthodoxy, but which were commonplace only a few years ago, may well find themselves increasingly having to write between the lines. Orthodoxies may change, and may change for the better, but like the poor, they will always be with us; hence there is always likely to be an esotericism of resistance, for better or for worse.

After an immersion in esoteric philosophy, it may be refreshing to turn to Lenn E. Goodman's *Religious Pluralism and Values in the Public Sphere* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), and refreshing too to note that it is published by Cambridge. Goodman's book is a hard-hitting response to the attempt of John Rawls and other secularists to frame the types of consideration which will be permitted in political discourse in terms of a minimalist, and largely procedural liberalism. Metaphysical, including religious, considerations about the deeper sources of value and the value of life, where they cannot be deemed reasonable by everyone, are, on this Rawlsian view, to be discounted in the public sphere. Even in our voting we are supposed, on Rawlsian principles, to be guided by standards of reciprocity, standards which all could accept (which unsurprisingly turn out to be just those of secularist liberalism).

Goodman argues that the intellectual resources envisaged as permissible by Rawls are too weak to support what many, including probably Rawls himself, would regard as decent (the inestimable worth and dignity of all persons, in Goodman's view). Further, the pluralism which Rawls seems to envisage both within one country and then throughout the world is one which may well not support the inestimable worth and dignity of all persons, but reduce to the sort of relativism deplored by Melzer.

In developing this latter point, Goodman has strong things to say about terrorists: 'pleas to see the terrorist's point of view, as if it were unknown, pretend to ignorance of the widely bruited aims of most terrorist attackers'. He is even more forceful in dismissing Rawls' vision of Kazanistan, an imaginary Islamic state, filled with an acceptable degree of liberalism and light. The trouble is that this overlooks Quranic teaching on *jihad*, to say nothing of widely accepted Muslim practices regarding women, homosexuals, adulterers and formicators. Some, no doubt, would see this last point as

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supporting Rawls on the excision of the religious from public debate; others would no doubt prefer that Goodman had not raised these troubling issues. But Goodman is not arguing that religion should rule, but that religious voices should be heard and taken into account. A relativistic pluralism, in not taking them seriously, or keeping them in effect unheard and in a sense esoteric, will do nothing but foster illusions about religions of peace and the like, where robust and exoteric argument of the sort we find in Goodman is what is needed.

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