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Il contributo degli antichi

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MIMESIS
1. Introduction: the Ancient Philosophers and Us

Sometimes, when discussing a philosophical view, or when making a philosophical remark which relies on an account provided by an Ancient thinker, one has to start by justifying why studying, reading or commenting on the philosophical texts of philosophers who lived more than two thousand years ago makes sense. In some cases, scholars devoted to investigating the thought of Ancient philosophers (whose works are often either preserved only in fragments or, what is worse, no longer extant, or were never even written down directly) are seen as odd because of their interest in clarifying what has been said by someone who has already been "overcome". And this is so, it is argued, because the thought or methods of analysis of such philosophers are already obsolete or "outdated". Furthermore, some point out the fact that Ancient philosophers speak of a world that does not exist anymore. These sorts of critiques may bear some truth: in fact, one might persuasively argue that a thought has been "overcome" by another inasmuch as the latter thought has been able to "solve" a problem that had been posited as a real puzzle by a former thinker. As is clear, that philosophy which supposedly overcomes a former philosophical stance generally employs a relevant amount of conceptual devices that may be entirely foreign to the philosophical doctrines that are under review.

It is also true that the world the Ancient Greeks talked about does not exist anymore. After physical reality began to be considered mathematically, this worldview caught on and the Aristotelian conception of the world was abandoned (just to mention a representative example that dominated the cosmological and physical ideas over the centuries). Thus, one should accept that the world the Ancient Greeks were in the habit of considering has disappeared. However, mutatis mutandis, one might also say, without
exaggeration, that the world is not today what it used to be one decade ago. The amazing technological revolution and its ongoing progress, the speed and sophistication of methods of communication, along with the appearance of new illnesses (such as AIDS, new syndromes, such as addiction to work, burnout, and so on) and calamities that (apparently) did not exist fifty years ago clearly indicate that our world is no longer the world that was known by the philosophers and scientists of the first three or four decades of the 20th century.

Obviously, Ancient philosophers did not have to face or explain these kinds of problems. But they had to handle similar difficulties contemporary philosophers still deal with: do we have criteria to distinguish between right and wrong? Is it possible to solve the problem between universalism and particularism? What is the nature of knowledge? In addition to being true, what condition should a belief satisfy in order to count as knowledge? What is truth and in how many ways can it be understood? What's the nature of our mind?

My claim in this paper is that Ancient philosophy can be regarded as living thought and hence not as a "piece of archaeology". One can find this to be somewhat of a truism; my point, though, is addressed to those people (including professional philosophers) who don't see what sense it makes to study Ancient philosophy. In what follows, I shall examine first some possible ways of considering the study of Ancient philosophy. Secondly, I will provide some examples of philosophical problems posed by Ancient philosophers that have been considered seriously by some distinguished contemporary philosophers and, in some cases, incorporated into their systematic discussions. Finally, I will give some concluding remarks.

2. Some possible ways to tackle the study of Ancient thought

If one is asked "why do you work on Ancient philosophy?" a number of answers may come to mind. For the sake of brevity, I propose to analyze the following four replies to that question. One may devote oneself to the study of Ancient philosophy: 1) purely out of historical interests; 2) out of the deeply rooted belief that the truth has already been sketched out and advanced by the past thinkers, and the more Ancient those thinkers are, the more genuine such a truth should be; 3) out of the belief that if one does not first work on the Ancient thinkers one will not understand contemporary thought; and finally, 4) because Ancient philosophers have something to say to us – both in terms of the content of their work as well
as the formal aspects of their thinking: i.e., their argumentative resources, the manner they posit some problems, their strategies for solving them, and so on. If this last answer were reasonably acceptable, it would be possible to incorporate the Ancient thinkers into many contemporary debates— if not into all of them, at least into some.

Answers 1, 2, and 3 seem unpersuasive to me: a philosopher, if he or she really is a philosopher, never has a purely historical interest. It is certainly true, however, that the Ancient authors also have a historical interest. In my view, answer 2 is the least convincing, as I do not believe in the philosophical truth as something which is closed off and finished. Sometimes each philosopher indicates which presuppositions should be considered in order to understand where the truth can be found within his or her own thought (a thought that generally is creative and is not limited to making an exegesis or exposition more or less accurate of a thinker of the past). One might be tempted to point out that one always has to face the problem of the legitimacy of philosophical assumptions: that is, to what extent the critique addressed by a philosopher P1 against a philosopher P2 is legitimate if P1 is taking as a starting point some assumptions that would not be accepted by P2 (of course, that’s a problem that I will not discuss here).

Answer 3 may be initially appealing but is not entirely persuasive either. One can encounter people who, though ignorant of much of the history of philosophy, read a philosophical text and immediately have a philosophical insight; not only regarding their understanding of what the text says, but also with respect to their own thought. However, it is certainly true that one’s knowledge of the philosophical past (or at least of part of it) can be very useful for doing philosophy, for shaping one’s own thinking and fostering it, or simply to avoid reinventing the wheel.

1 Naturally, there are many other responses one might give. E. Berti, Quale senso ha oggi studiare la filosofia antica, in Studi Aristotelici, L.U. Japadre, L’Aquila 1975, pp. 27-40, continues to be helpful.

2 The ability that Aristotle used to call ἀρχιθες, “shrewdness or quickness of wit, a sagacity for hitting upon the middle term in an unreflecting time” (An. Post. 89b10-11; cf. also Nicomachean Ethics 1142b5-6). Plato (Charmides 160a1) characterizes ἀρχιθες as a “kind of sharpness (or ‘cleverness’) of the soul” (ἔχειν τὸν τρόπον τῆς πνεύματος). For the Stoics ἀρχιθες is “a condition (ἐξωτικός) which instantly (ἐκ τοῦ παρακοτιμῆμα) finds out what the appropriate action is” (καθιστήριον; transl. Inwood-Gerson). In the Stoic view, the practical emphasis is clear, but both for Aristotle and the Stoics the crucial point is that this ability describes one’s quickness in understanding something.
Answer 4 is the one I personally find most persuasive and more stimulating from a philosophical point of view. Ancient philosophers indeed have something to tell us and sometimes it is possible to incorporate them into some contemporary debates. From the content viewpoint (i.e. the issues they deal with), Ancient philosophers have something to tell us because their problems somehow continue to be our problems: perception, thinking, knowledge, happiness, anguish, friendship, death (one’s consciousness of finitude), pain, grief, justice, the good and the bad, the irrationality and rationality of action, the legitimacy or illegitimacy of certain argumentative techniques, and so forth. From the formal viewpoint, i.e. regarding argumentative strategies, Ancient thinkers offer an interesting source of inspiration for many contemporary philosophers belonging to different interpretative traditions. The Ancient philosophers were shrewd arguers; a paradigmatic case of this is Plato’s Socrates or Aristotle with his per absurdum arguments. But we also can find very sophisticated arguments on the most diverse subject matters in the Stoics (especially Chrysippus), in the skeptic Sextus Empiricus, and in Epicurus and Plotinus – just to mention some of the most significant Ancient philosophers.

Epicurus is very illustrative regarding an issue that is worth briefly considering: one of his basic views is that we must examine our own beliefs when starting to investigate a topic. Among other things, he attempted to show that the fundamental causes of human unhappiness lie in the mistaken beliefs we have on the gods, death, or on the false value we bestow upon things that, actually, are not real goods. Epicurus’ suggestion clearly is to dismiss all that which, based on false beliefs, disturbs human life. Even if we do not agree with Epicurus’ views on some particular matters, his suggestion of trying to avoid founding the assessment of what one regards to be good on mistaken beliefs (and hence of attempting to establish which

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are the true and trustworthy beliefs) keeps all its freshness and vitality to this day.

3. Philosophizing with Ancient philosophers

To be sure, some topics have helped to "rehabilitate" Ancient philosophy. In what follows I shall limit myself to mentioning and briefly commenting on two such topics that, in my view, have been seriously entertained by some contemporary philosophers. My claim is that it is not odd that some contemporary philosophers have examined Ancient philosophical theories not merely for their historical import, but as philosophical issues in their own right.

When saying this, I'm not disvaluing the work of the historians of philosophy or suggesting it should be left aside; as a matter of fact, for the most part the "Ancient philosopher" must rely on the historians of philosophy as well as on philologists. The history of philosophy is indeed a historical discipline; but it is hard, I hold, to do history of philosophy without at the same time doing philosophy. In fact, when the historian explains a thinker of the past, he or she is interpreting such thinker (especially when the historian philosophically interprets the philosopher at stake). Certainly, there are interpretations that arguably are better or more faithful than others. This is so because a great philosopher is not mainly concerned with just doing history of philosophy, but rather philosophy itself. As suggested by W. Wieland, one does both history of philosophy and philosophy when one considers not only the doctrines represented by the thinkers of the past, but also the topics which such philosophers discussed and thought about. One must frame the object of study (let us say the Aristotelian theory of knowledge) in terms of its historical, social, and psychological conditions. But if one attempts to draw out the philosophical richness of the text, one should not limit oneself to investigating such conditions. Rather, on the basis of one's own philosophical interests, one must investigate whether the doctrines at stake reach the objects to which such interests direct

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4 It is interesting to note that the more philosophical the one who is doing history of philosophy is, the less accurate he or she is (or can be) from a historical point of view (two significant examples of this in antiquity are Plato and Aristotle. Of course, they were not "historians of philosophy", but sometimes they refer to other thinkers in a historical vein).

their attention, whether or not the arguments presented by the author are correct, whether their starting points are acceptable, and so on. This being so, the solution may be to do history of philosophy by doing philosophy, and hence, one might argue, a good historian of philosophy must have a “philosophical touch” when dealing with a philosopher of the past.

The focus of my discussion in what follows somehow will go in that direction: what I intend to show now is that some important contemporary philosophers have taken Ancient philosophy seriously as living thought, not as a piece of archeology. In fact, when some contemporary philosophers refer to Plato or Aristotle (just to give an example), they take into account such philosophers as serious, challenging, and up-to-date interlocutors in their effort to deal with philosophical problems.

3.1 Plato and the so-called Tripartite Theory of Knowledge

In contemporary epistemology philosophers speak of what they call the “Tripartite Theory of Knowledge” (TTK), a tradition that, according to them, goes back as far as Plato. In accordance with the TTK, three conditions must be satisfied in order for one to possess knowledge: if one believes something (e.g. that “knowledge is perception”), one’s belief must be true. Furthermore, one’s belief should be justified. Thus if one has a true belief, and such belief is justified, then that belief counts as knowledge; otherwise, it does not.

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7 Once again, this is Zarka’s view (op. cit., p. 151), who is drawing on what Hegel suggests.


10 On the “value of knowledge” (a view that, according to contemporary epistemology, dates back to Plato) see M. Weiner, Practical Reasoning and the Concept of Knowledge, in A. Haddock, A. Millar, D. Pritchard (eds.), Epistemic
Plato famously distinguishes knowledge (ἐπιστήμη; γνώση) from ignorance, (ἀγνώστη; ἀγνώστη) and, placed between these, belief or opinion (δόξα; Republic 479a9-11). Knowledge is always true and ignorance always false; belief is an intermediate state (of one's mind: διανοία. Republic 476d5-6) as far as it can be both true and false (Republic 476c-477c). Plato also distinguishes true or correct belief (or "opinion", ἀληθική ἀγνώστη) from knowledge (Meno 97a-98c). But knowledge, Plato contends, cannot be true belief since knowledge is stable, whereas true opinion is not; besides, while the person having knowledge will always hit the mark, the one having true opinion sometimes hits the mark, and sometimes he will not (Meno 97c6-8). Now a true opinion is always weak since he who just has a true opinion without knowledge is liable to be easily persuaded to change his mind (a stance that Plato continues to maintain at Timaeus 51e, where he emphasizes that true opinion arises by way of persuasion and lacks any account, i.e. it is ἀληθική). True opinion consists in judging things rightly, but that does not necessarily require being able to give an account (λόγος). But if this is the case, there is no knowledge. So, true belief cannot be identified with knowledge, since knowledge is a psychological state that cannot lack an account (Plato, Symposium 202a; Phaedo 76b; Theaetetus 177b, 202c).

According to TTK, belief (or opinion) is the first condition for knowledge. Unless one believes something, one cannot know it. In Plato's Theaetetus (Th.). after providing a number of arguments against Theaetetus' first definition of knowledge as perception (ἀισθητή), the character Socrates ends up by rejecting such a definition. This allows

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Value, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, pp. 163-182. Weiner's paper (like many others in this field of research) starts by considering Plato's question of why knowledge is more valuable than mere belief or opinion (doxa), and argues that in the post-Gettici area the question must be "why knowledge is more valuable than mere justified true belief". As is obvious, the idea stems from the TTK, supposedly based on what Plato argues in the Meno and the Theaetetus (among other dialogues).

11 I just provide here a quick description of Plato's argument; Migliori (M. Migliori, Il Disordine ordinato. La filosofia diallettica di Platone, Morcelliana, Brescia 2013, pp. 260-267) furnishes a complete analysis of the passage.

12 In a rather Platonic vein, Aristotle states that what is object of knowledge (epistēmē) differs from what is object of belief (doxastōn), and he also contrasts knowledge with belief (Posterior Analytics 75b21-26; 88b30-89a10. Nicomachean Ethics 1140b3-1141a8).

13 Among those arguments, the following can be mentioned: I) in certain pathological states (such as madness or lack of consciousness, like dreams) in which the perceiver perceives badly (παθητικά νόσου; Th. 157e3-4), the thesis that knowledge is perception is unsound, for there could be false perceptions for the perceiver and then it will turn out to be that things are not such as they appear
Plato a way out from the domain of perceptual experience and to enter into the sphere of what the soul “examines alone and through itself” (*Thet.* 185c6-7: ὡς μὲν ὑπ’ ἑαυτῆς ὑπ’ ἑαυτῆς ἄλεξη). Thus if a person fails to get at the truth of a thing (where, getting at the truth of something amounts to getting at its being or essence: οὐσία. *Thet.* 186c6-d1), knowledge is to be found not in perceptual experiences (Ἐν μὲν ἀρα τοῖς παθημασιον) but in one’s reasoning about them (ἐν δὲ τῷ περὶ ἑκείνων συλλογισμῷ; *Thet.* 186d2-3). After rejecting the perceptual definition of knowledge, Plato is convinced that the interlocutors have made “some progress” (*Thet.* 187a3: προβλέψεικακαν), since they will not search for knowledge in the domain of perception, but in the realm of what the soul examines by and through itself. And what the soul does by itself is to believe (*Thet.* 187a8: δοξάζειν).

Like contemporary epistemologists, Plato claims that knowledge requires having a belief. But insofar as a belief or opinion can be false, knowledge cannot be any kind of belief, but true belief (*Thet.* 187b4-5). Thus whatever knowledge may finally be, it must be true; it would be counterintuitive to assume that knowledge can be false: “false knowledge” is not knowledge at all, so if knowledge is a kind of belief, it must be true belief. As is well-known, this second definition of knowledge is turned down as well. For the sake of brevity, I omit Plato’s arguments for rejecting this definition, so I can briefly focus on the last definition of knowledge provided by the character Thaetetus: “true belief plus * logos*” (*Thet.* 202c7-8: δόξαν ἀληθή μετά λόγου ἑποτῆμεν εἶναι).

Interestingly, one may notice that a long-held belief is discovered to be false. If this happens (and unfortunately it happens very often), one should grant that the supposedly known object (described in one’s belief or opinion) actually was not known. This explains why the role of account or justification can be so important for knowledge. If the subject *S* knows something, it is not enough that *S* believes it to be true. *S* must have a reason for believing it. As we know, Plato also rejects the thesis that knowledge is true belief plus * logos*. A Plato scholar might argue that it is always hard to

to each one but the contrary: nothing is as it appears to be (*Thet.*, 157e-158a). 2) If knowledge is perception, and if one knows the object *x* in *t* and continues to know such an object in *t*!, insofar as one recalls what one knew in *t*, it does seem to follow that a person having been taught something in the past and recalling it now does not know it, since he is not perceiving it anymore. 3) If perceiving is the same as knowing, not perceiving must be the same thing as not knowing. It follows that he who does not perceive does not know, even though he recalls what he was taught and knew. But this is absurd or, as Thaetetus says, “monstrous” (*περὶ ἔνδοξας; Thet. 163d6; see also 154a-b; 165b).
know if by logos Plato means exactly the same thing as "justification", such as this word is used in contemporary epistemology. However, in so far as in contemporary philosophy it is assumed that an "epistemic justification" is the reason (or line of reasoning) which warrants the veracity of one's belief or assertion, it seems that Plato is not too far from what contemporary philosophers suppose about this matter.

Now despite what Plato argues in the final section of the Th. (where the definition of knowledge as "true belief plus a logos" is rejected), some contemporary epistemologists demand that epistemic justification be one of the key ingredients of knowledge. Of course, it should be recalled that, no matter what Plato states in the Th., there are other passages where he apparently endorses the view that one has knowledge only if one is able to give a logos about what one declares to know (Meno 98a2-4; Protagoras 336b9-c1-2; Symposium 202a2-9; Phaedo 76b4; Republic 531e3; 534b3-7). Whatever the case maybe, it is clear that contemporary philosophers took seriously Plato's intuition that the three key ingredients of knowledge are belief, truth, and account. To be sure, some philosophers recently have taken great pains to reject the TTK (or some version of it), but this way of considering knowledge continues to be part of the current discussion. For the reasons already given above, I think that this can be a good example in order to show that Plato's epistemology is still living philosophy and not an archeological fossil.

3.2 Plato and the first and third person authority in knowledge

In this sub-section my focus will be on the way in which Plato treated some other philosophical issues that would allow him to be incorporated into some contemporary debates. Nowadays the discussion about the first and the third person authority in knowledge is still a hot topic. This issue, as treated in analytic philosophy, dates back to G. Ryle, who argued that each individual has a "privileged access" to his mental states (a proto-

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14 By way of example, cf. T. Williamson, Knowledge and its Limits, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000. Williamson's argument against of TTK states that, according to the received idea, it is possible to conceptualize the factors whose conjunction with belief (i.e. "true" and "justification") is necessary and sufficient for knowledge independently of knowledge. Williamson's point is that, given that knowledge entails belief (but not vice versa), knowledge is taken to be the conjunction of belief with any other ingredient that must be added to belief to yield knowledge, "truth and other more elusive features" (cf. p. 3). But belief cannot be conceptually prior to knowledge (of course, Williamson's argument is much more sophisticated).
Cartesian view): the mind’s “self-knowledge is superior in quality [...] to its grasp of other things. I may doubt the evidence of my senses but not the deliverances of consciousness or introspection”. But as pointed out by D. Davidson, first person attributions often are based on no evidence at all. However, a person, Davidson emphasizes, never loses his special claim to be right. 

Both Ryle’s and Davidson’s views do evoke some Platonic issues: Ryle’s point that each person has a privileged access to his own present mental states is suggested in a striking passage in the Th., where Plato argues thus: 1) when what acts upon me is for me and not for someone else (έμοι ἐστιν καὶ οὐκ ἄλλοι); 2) and not someone else, perceive it. 2) Therefore my perception is true for me —because it is always of my own being— and, according to Protagoras, I am the judge of the things which are for me, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not (Th. 160c4-9). This well-known passage of the Th. is taken to reflect Protagoras’ “subjectivist” view, as interpreted by Plato, but it also can be read as part of Plato’s exploration of what knowledge is in perceptual terms, a view that he finally rejects but that at the same time he takes seriously. The basic reason the Platonic knower has for thinking that there is an extra-mental object with such and such characteristics (sweetness, for example) is that he is having a perceptual experience of this sort.

The above passage from Plato is part of the concluding section of an argument that attempts to prove that the state in which the person is when having some perceptual experience is crucial. Of course, I’m not assuming that in this passage of the Th. Plato explicitly suggests that we have “secure access” to our mental states. But it is possible to maintain that the problem Plato here considers is not (radically) different from the issue.

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17 I avoid engaging in the nuances regarding the discussion; for discussion of Th. 159-160 see M. Burnyeat, Idealism and Greek Philosophy, in Id., Explorations in Ancient and Modern Philosophy, 1, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, pp. 245-275, pp. 251-254, where a contrast between Plato and Berkeley is provided. See also F. Ferrari, Platone, Teeteto, BUR, Milano 2011, pp. 46-50.
18 It could be thought that the use I make of this (and other) Platonic passages takes no account of the context in which the texts are embedded. I certainly am aware of that, but this is the way I have to put into dialogue Plato with some contemporary views and to show that he noted some philosophical problems that also are familiar to contemporary philosophers.
of the access to our mental states. In Th. 159aff. he argues as follows: 1) there is an infinite number of both active and passive things. So, 2) when one thing mixes at one moment with one thing and at a different moment with another, it won’t produce the same effect each time but different effects. Now 3) if this is applied to us, one could notice that, for example, “Socrates ill” and “Socrates well” are different states of Socrates, i.e. “Socrates in sickness” is different from “Socrates in health”. This should mean that when anyone of the active factors finds Socrates in health, it will be dealing with “one Socrates” and when it finds him ill it deals with “a different Socrates”. In Plato’s example, if Socrates drinks wine when he is healthy, the wine appears (σημεῖον) to him pleasant and sweet (159e11-12), but when the same active factor (e.g. wine) finds Socrates ill, it appears to him differently. 4) Thus both Socrates (ill) and the draft of wine generate different things: a perception of bitterness on the tongue and bitterness coming to be and moving with regard to the wine. But the wine, Plato insists, is not “bitterness”, but “bitter”, and the person is not “perception”, but “perceipient” (οὐκ ἀισθητικὸν ἄλλο ἀισθητικόμενον; 159e4-5). (v) Hence, the subject will never become thus percient of anything else, since a perception of something else is another perception, and makes one a changed percient. But what acts upon the subject, when encountering another person, cannot generate the same effect since such an effect depends both on the active factor (the wine) and on the state in which the person is (healthy or ill!). Finally, Socrates states that perception is an “intentional item”, i.e. when the subject becomes percient, he becomes percient of something (160a-b), and when the perceived object becomes sweet or bitter, it must become so for somebody. Then both what perceives and what is perceived “are or become for each other, for our being is by necessity tied to a partner” (160b6-7). Whatever it is that we are or become, we (as perceipients) are in a reciprocal relation to the perceived object. Thus, it cannot be said that something is or becomes in itself and by itself.

Let’s turn now to Davidson’s stance that first person attributions often are based on no evidence at all. I don’t mean to suggest that Davidson is drawing on Plato when maintaining this kind of view; however, his thesis has a Platonic background that I intend to briefly draw to the fore in what

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19 At this point the Greek is ambiguous (ὁλογρφ can be both neuter and masculine). I take it to be masculine since the whole argument stresses the fact that the state of the person isn’t innocent in the account of perception. So, the way in which the subject is disposed somehow determines the kind of perception such a subject will experience.
follows. Davidson’s remark that a person continues to claim that he is right, even though his claim is challenged or overturned, is reminiscent of the Platonic view that no one is willing to believe that what one believes is false:20 when one (honestly) says that \(x\) is \(p\) it is because one really believes that \(x\) is \(p\) (i.e. one believes that the proposition “\(x\) is \(p\)” is true). As explicitly observed by Plato, nobody admits that his own belief (οἶνος; δήλα) is false.21

In a similar vein, Davidson reminds us that “from the time of Descartes, epistemology has been based on first person knowledge”; thus, one should begin by regarding the issue of knowledge as being the knowledge of one’s own sensations and thoughts.22 Like Plato, Davidson proposes to revise this picture and suggests that all propositional thought requires possession of the concept of “objective truth”, this kind of concept only being accessible to those who are in communication with others. This is why one’s propositional attitudes are understood by another person solely if one can assign his own propositions to the attitudes of the other. In Davidson’s view, “the third-person approach to language is not a mere philosophical exercise”, so the relevant point is to grasp how it is possible to come to understand the speech and thoughts of another person, “for this ability is basic to our sense of a world independent of ourselves”. Thus, even though third person knowledge is crucial to all other knowledge, it is impossible independently of the knowledge of a shared world in which other people play a significant role.23

A “Platonic version” of this approach appears in the Alcibiades I (129a; 132d-e): when attempting to explain the meaning of the Delphic sentence “know thyself” Plato suggests that what the inscription is saying is “see yourself” (ἰδοὺ σαυτόν; 132d6). Given that Plato makes use of sight as the proper example for accounting for the injunction, one can suspect that he will be talking about two kinds of seeing: both perceptual and non-perceptual seeing, i.e. the way in which humans are eventually able to see

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21 Cf. Tht. 171a1-b5; 200a 3-5. For a similar approach in D. Davidson, First Person Authority, cit., p. 4.
22 See D. Davidson, Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, cit., p. xvi. Cf. Descartes, Rules for the Guidance of our Native Powers XII: «if ... Socrates says that he doubts all things, it necessarily follows that at least he knows this, that he doubts...»; AT X 421, transl. Kempt Smith.
with the “eye of the soul” (Republic 533d2; Phaedo 83a-b). One’s eye looks at that by looking at which it would see itself. This is what happens when one looks at someone else’s eye, such eye working as a sort of mirror. Thus one can look at someone and, in doing so, one can see one’s self, this self being one’s own soul. Now what appears to the one who looks at someone else’s eye, as in a mirror, is his face (or his own “person”: τὸ πρόσωπον), and this is the “pupil”, which is a sort of image of the one who is looking. So, if one is going to know oneself, he must look at one’s soul, but in order to do that, one is in need of someone else’s mediation. This is the way in which Plato introduces the issue of the self: what I really am is “soul”. So, if one intends to know oneself, one must look at one’s soul, but in doing this, one must look at someone else’s soul first. This is the way in which Plato introduces the issue of the self, and also suggests that in order to know oneself one needs the other person’s sight (the third person). This is a crude and incomplete summary of the argument, but it’s enough for the sake of my purpose here.

Now even though one usually links the “know thyself” to the Socrates of the early dialogues, the injunction appears again in a significant passage of the Philebus, which is certainly a late dialogue. But the issue of self-knowledge also appears in a vivid passage of the Phaedrus (229b-230a), where Socrates says that he has no time for things such as what people say about Boreas carrying Orthilia away, if he still is unable to know himself. And he adds that indeed it seems to him ridiculous (or “laughable”) to look into other matters before he has understood that.

In order to understand this issue of “ridiculousness,” it is helpful to turn to a striking passage in the Philebus, where lack of self-knowledge is linked together with what is laughable. Plato suggests that ridiculousness—a certain wickedness (vovpiπα) — should yield an affective state which is opposed to what the oracle at Delphi recommends. If this were not the case, wickedness, which is ignorance, would be knowledge (quod non). According to Socrates, those who do not know themselves experience such a state of ignorance in three respects: first, with regard to money (people think that they are richer than they really are). Second, people usually

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24 To a modern (and naturalistic) view it can sound strange to talk about a “non-perceptual seeing”; but for Plato, “realizing that θ is the case” is an immaterial activity of the soul. For a detailed discussion of this Alcibiades passage, cf. Napolitano Valditara, Platone e le ‘ragioni’ dell’immagine. Percorsi filosofici e deviazioni tra metafora e mito, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2007, pp. 239-241.

25 Plato, Charmides 165a; 164c. Protagoras 345b. See also Xenophon, Memorabilia IV 2, 24.
think that they are stronger or more handsome than they really are. Finally, the largest group of people believe that they are more virtuous, even though they are not (48c9-10). It is with regard to wisdom (σοφία) that most people are full of rivalry and of a merely illusory and false wisdom (49a2). An affective state (πάθος) like this one (taking to be true what actually is not) definitely is a bad thing (49a4-5). As is clear, Plato was aware that we don’t enjoy a secure access to our character traits. If this is so, knowledge of oneself couldn’t simply be knowledge of one’s own present mental states, and this should be taken to be a serious restriction on the first-person perspective in knowledge.

The link of the whole argument with the examination of ridiculousness or “that which is ridiculous” (γελοιον) now is clearer: ridiculousness is the opposite condition to self-knowledge such as it is prescribed by the Delphic injunction, since if I do not know myself but I think I know myself, I can think wrongly about myself. This can be regarded as a case of self-deception, i.e. a case where there is a bad fit between one’s own perception of oneself and what effectively is the case. In this kind of situation, the privileged position of knowledge from outside (i.e. the third-person viewpoint) is considered as the most reasonable; presumably this is so because it permits one to abandon a “solipsistic” consideration of oneself. Once again, the basic problem is that no one believes that what he or she believes is false. But beliefs can be false, so the only thing that can make one avoid being ridiculous is self-knowledge. Thus, how can I get out of the first-person standpoint, a perspective that, in the case of someone who is unwilling to listen to another’s reasons, can acquire a dramatically solipsistic character? A reasonable Platonic answer to this question is, I hold, the cooperative dialogue, a conversation without rivalry (φιλοσοφία), since if you are involved in a real philosophical conversation, you are not contending for the sake of love of victory, so yours or the other

26 On “apparent wisdom” (δοξασσοφία) see also Philebus 49d. Sophist 231b, and Phaedrus 275b2, where Plato mentions those who imagine they have come to know much while merely appearing to be wise instead of really being so (δοξασσοφία γεγονότες ἀντὶ σοφίων). This can be taken as a case of self-deception (Cratylus 428d3-4: τὸ γὰρ ἐξεμπαθεῖσθαι αὐτῶν ἐὰν τῷ αὐτῷ), the opposite of self-knowledge, “the worse thing of all”.

27 Anyway, one should grant that self-deception always presupposes some form of knowledge. Otherwise there could not be self-deception. This “knowledge”, though, cannot be the kind of knowledge Socrates is looking for.
person’s view prevails. Philosophical speakers should act together as allies (συμμαχεῖν) because of what is truest (Philebus 14b1-7).  

Let me be a little anachronistic again: I think that Plato would have agreed with the contemporary stance according to which, if objectivity is possible, it should be based on intersubjectivity, and this is so not because what people agree on is necessarily true, but because intersubjectivity depends on interaction with the world.  

Intersubjectivity, Davidson observes, is the opinion that the acquisition of knowledge should not be understood as a “progression” going from the subjective to the objective. Such acquisition emerges holistically in an interpersonal manner. Plato, of course, does not speak of “intersubjectivity”; he doesn’t even have the term and, one might object, he probably is not thinking about this when he suggests that the important point in a philosophical discussion is that the speakers get what is “truest” as allies. However, Plato appears to think that the collaboration requirement in dialogue is indispensable for getting what is “truest”. Such a cooperative dialogue should always start from certain agreements. To be sure, such agreements are established in an interpersonal way by the speakers themselves. This is the sense in which I think that one might suspect that both the first and the third person point of view should be regarded in a complementary fashion: even though it seems to be certain that the authority of the first person regarding one’s own mental states is particularly powerful (as suggested by the Thit. passage commented on above), it is arguable that the third person point of view could contribute

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28 Research is a shared task; see Plato, Meno 80d3-4; μετὸ τοῦ σαφῶς καί συμμαχεῖν 90b5; συμμαχεῖν (cf. also Crito 46d; Charmides 158d; Laches, 187d; Protagoras 330b; Cratylus 354c; Theaetetus 151e; Sophist 218b).

29 This is Davidson’s view; see his Indeterminism and Antinomism, cit., p. 83; Id., The Irreducibility of the Concept of the Self, in Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, cit., pp. 85-91, p. 91; Id., Rational Animals, in Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, cit., pp. 95-105, p. 105.

30 Expressions such as “Here is a further point we need to agree on” (Philebus 11d2; transl. D. Frede. See also Philebus 37c; 40d; 60b) are common in Plato since the early dialogues. The agreements between the two speakers involved in the debate can be understood both as the departing points of the conversation and as the consistency of one’s speech (see Gorgias 461b, 468e, 482d, 487e). However, as noted by D. Nikulin, Dialectic and Dialogue, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2010, p. 81; p. 99), complete agreement between speakers can mean the death of dialogue; disagreement fuels conversation and thereby stimulates thought.

31 There are some psychological states, such as the sensation of pain that seem to be “irrefutable”; who can tell me that I’m not feeling what I’m feeling?
to making some contents of one's own mind more reliable (especially what one thinks about oneself).

My aim is not to suggest that, in emphasizing the relevance of the third person as the condition for all other knowledge, Davidson is necessarily developing or drawing on what Plato argues. My point is, rather, that both Plato and Davidson share the idea that if objectivity is possible, it must be based on “intersubjectivity”. To be sure, this is a point that in the case of Davidson does not require to be proved;32 it's the well-known Davidsonian view that the acquisition of knowledge should not be understood in terms of a “progression” from the subjective to the objective. Of course, Plato does not talk about “intersubjectivity”; however, he seems to be thinking of a similar thing when he emphasizes the requirement of a cooperative dialogue in order to get at what is “really true”, a cooperative dialogue that should always start from some basic agreements (homologiai) interpersonally established.

4. Concluding Remarks

Among the many topics philosophy has studied the most, the issues of knowledge, thought, perception, action, time, and so on have drawn especial attention to philosophers. Even in the technological era, Ancient philosophers afford an outstanding starting point for reflecting on these topics. At the outset of this paper I suggested that the cultivation and study of Ancient philosophy should not have a purely historical character; a good history of philosophy, I think, requires a “philosophical touch” on the part of the historian of philosophy. In this vein, it seems to me that as the scholar investigates a philosophical doctrine, examines its starting points, theses, and arguments, he should try to animate the thought he is dealing with, and to dare to make a “constructive” interpretation of the thinker at stake. If Ancient philosophy is philosophy, as I believe it is, and it has something to tell us, one might attempt to exert one’s thinking in the reading of Ancient philosophers. Like Aristotle, I am convinced that “the activity of the intellect is life” (Metaphysics 1072b26-27), and Ancient philosophers offer us an extraordinary possibility of carrying out such an

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32 He states this explicitly a number of times in his writings; cf. D. Davidson, Indeterminism and Anterealism, cit., p. 83. Id., The Irreducibility of the Concept of the Self, cit., p. 91. Id., Rational Animals, cit., p. 105.
activity. Furthermore, Ancient philosophy can be an illuminating pursuit in itself, and also a fascinating way to understand contemporary philosophy.\footnote{This paper draws on an article published by me many years ago ("¿Por qué ocuparse de filosofía antigua hoy?, Kléos, Instituto de Filosofía e Ciências Sociais, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, N°4, vol. 4, (2000), 131-153). This new version contains a significant amount of new material. Some ideas of this paper were presented at Université Pierre-Mendès-France, Grenoble II (March 2015), in the colloquium "L’âme dans la philosophie antique" organized by Michel Fattal. I am grateful to the organizer for his invitation and remarks.}


