

PAUL AMONG THE PHILOSOPHERS: FROM SENECA TO GIORGIO AGAMBEN

SEÁN FREYNE MEMORIAL LECTURE

Kieran J. O'Mahony, OSA

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Sequence

- ▶ The three worlds of Paul of Tarsus
- ▶ Paul, the Hellenised Jew
 - ★ Rhetoric
 - ★ Cynicism
 - ★ Stoicism
- ▶ Contemporary philosophical reception of Paul
 - ★ Peter Sloterdijk
 - ★ Giorgio Agamben
 - ★ Alain Badiou
- ▶ Towards a conclusion

Three worlds

- ▶ Apocalyptic Jew in the Pharisaic tradition
- ▶ Hellenised Jew from the Diaspora
- ▶ Christ-believer, grounded in his Damascus Road experience
- ▶ In recent study, a great recovery of the Greco-Roman culture of Paul of Tarsus
- ▶ Paul integrated his three world views
- ▶ Paul teaches an integrated theology and ethics

Paul the Hellenised Jew

- ▶ A rock in Corinth
- ▶ Gallio
- ▶ Seneca
- ▶ Much more to it than that
 - ★ Form (Rhetoric)
 - ★ Vocabulary (Cynicism)
 - ★ Content (Stoicism)

Rhetoric

- ▶ Tarsus: school of rhetoric
- ▶ Rhetoric: the art of speaking well
- ▶ Five stages of preparation
 - ★ Layout (*dispositio*)
 - ★ Proofs (*probationes*)
 - ★ For example, 1 Thessalonians

<i>Verses</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Epistle</i>	<i>Rhetorical</i>
1:1	Greeting	Prescript	
1:2-10	Thanksgiving	Thanksgiving	Introduction (exordium)
2:1-3:13	Relationships	Body	Proof 1 (probatio)
4:1-12	Holiness		Proof 2 (probatio)
4:13-5:11	Apocalyptic		Proof 3 (probatio)

5:12-27	Exhortation	Exhortation	Conclusion (peroratio)
5:28	Greeting	Postscript	

Cynicism

But to find a man who in plain terms (**katharos**) and without guile (**adolos**) speaks his mind with frankness (**parresiazomenon**), and neither for the sake of reputation (**doxes**) nor for gain, but, out of good will and concern for his fellow-men stands ready, if need be, to submit to ridicule and to the disorder and the uproar of the mob - to find such a man as that is not easy, but rather the good fortune of a very lucky city, so great is the dearth of noble, independent souls and such the abundance of toadies (**kolakon**), mountebanks, and sophists. In my own case, for instance, I feel that I have chosen that role, not of my own volition, but by the will of some deity. For when divine providence is at work for men, the gods provide, not only good counsellors who need no urging, but also words that are appropriate and profitable the listener.

Dio Chrysostom Discourse 32:11-12

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage (**eparresiasamethe**) in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives (**ek akatharsias**) or trickery (**oude en dolo**), but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery (**kolakeias**) or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise (**doxan**) from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Was Paul a hellenistic philosopher or a Christian pastor? It may well be the case that, when Paul is viewed as a theologian, the hellenistic elements do not lie at the centre of his thinking but provide the means by which he conducts his argument. But when he and others discuss his ministry, it is extraordinary to what degree the categories and language are derived from the Greeks. The same is also true when Paul is viewed as a pastor. Paul is so familiar with the rich Greek traditions of pastoral care and uses them in so unstudied a fashion, that it would be wrong to think that he only superficially mined the lode for his purposes. He is more consistent and unconscious in his appropriation of the pastoral tradition than most of his pagan contemporaries.

Abraham Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers*, pp. 76-77.

Stoicism

- ▶ Stoicism is a rich and complex phenomenon
- ▶ Early Stoa, from the founding of the school by Zeno to Antipater.
- ▶ Middle Stoa, including Panaetius and Posidonius.
- ▶ Late Stoa, including Musonius Rufus, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.
- ▶ Complete works: Late Stoa (Roman)

- ▶ Stoicism involved a world view: knowledge based on reason is essential to freedom (autarkeia)
- ▶ An ethics: the higher virtues (kathekonta) such as wisdom, courage, justice and temperance; attachment to these virtues is the practice of freedom
- ▶ A spirituality: it is possible to progress (prokopē), under the guidance of an enlightened person and with the help of certain practices (askesis)
- ▶ A social philosophy: we are all citizens of the world

- ▶ Example: the letter to the Philippians
- ▶ Paul uses key terms: knowledge (gnōsis), progress (prokopē), self-sufficient (autarkos)
- ▶ The letter is generally one of advice (paraklēsis)
- ▶ But there is more to it than simply matching up terms
- ▶ Paul models himself on the wise philosopher, guiding others to the same understanding and ethics

- ▶ We all start with the self “I”, living directly out of emotions, living “unfree” lives
- ▶ The philosopher comes to insight, leading to freedom and inner peace; he can engage with the world seeking good
- ▶ The philosopher guides others to the same insight
- ▶ However, they have to come to it themselves
- ▶ The shared world view will lead to a communion of good people seeking justice

- ▶ Paul came to a new insight in Christ; it revised all he previously valued, including the “indifferent” (adiaphora)
- ▶ This freed him to live a completely new life, focused fully on the good of others
- ▶ Paul models this to the Philippians, in his life and in his letter
- ▶ Paul bases his model on his understanding of Christ
- ▶ He hopes, thereby, to encourage the Philippians, both as individual and as a community/society, to live a new, Christ-centred, complete non-egoistic pattern of existence

- ▶ Paul is not a stoic philosopher
- ▶ But he uses the language of “spirituality” of his day to communicate with the believers in Philippi
- ▶ This is not simply a matter of words used
- ▶ Rather, he takes up the role of the Stoic guide, precisely to lead the listeners to transformed living in Christ
- ▶ Thus he makes use of and integrates cultural norms

Philippians

Phil 2:1 Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort provided by love, any fellowship in the Spirit, any affection or mercy, 2 complete my joy and be of the same mind, by having the same love, being united in spirit, and having one purpose. 3 Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself. 4 Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but about the interests of others as well.

Phil 1:6 For I am sure of this very thing, that the one who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. 7 For it is right for me to think this about all of you, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defence and

confirmation of the gospel all of you became partners in God's grace together with me. 8 For God is my witness that I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And I pray this, that your love may abound even more and more in knowledge and every kind of insight 10 so that you can decide what is best, and thus be sincere and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

Phil 1:12 I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that my situation has actually turned out to advance the gospel: 13 The whole imperial guard and everyone else knows that I am in prison for the sake of Christ, 14 and most of the brothers and sisters, having confidence in the Lord because of my imprisonment, now more than ever dare to speak the word fearlessly. Phil 1:15 Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. 16 The latter do so from love because they know that I am placed here for the defence of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, because they think they can cause trouble for me in my imprisonment. 18 What is the result? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is being proclaimed, and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, 19 for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. 20 My confident hope is that I will in no way be ashamed but that with complete boldness, even now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether I live or die. 21 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22 Now if I am to go on living in the body, this will mean productive work for me, yet I don't know which I prefer: 23 I feel torn between the two, because I have a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, 24 but it is more vital for your sake that I remain in the body. 25 And since I am sure of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for the sake of your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that what you can be proud of may increase because of me in Christ Jesus, when I come back to you.

Phil 3:2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! 3 For we are the circumcision, the ones who worship by the Spirit of God, exult in Christ Jesus, and do not rely on human credentials 4 —though mine too are significant. If someone thinks he has good reasons to put confidence in human credentials, I have more: 5 I was circumcised on the eighth day, from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. I lived according to the law as a Pharisee. 6 In my zeal for God I persecuted the church. According to the righteousness stipulated in the law I was blameless. 7 But these assets I have come to regard as liabilities because of Christ. 8 More than that, I now regard all things as liabilities compared to the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things—indeed, I regard them as dung!—that I may gain Christ, 9 and be found in him, not because I have my own righteousness derived from the law, but because I have the righteousness that comes by way of Christ's faithfulness—a righteousness from God that is in fact based on Christ's faithfulness. 10 My aim is to know him, to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, and to be like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Phil 3:12 Not that I have already attained this—that is, I have not already been perfected—but I strive to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus also laid hold of me. 13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have attained this. Instead I am single-minded: Forgetting the things that are behind and reaching out for the things that are ahead, 14 with this goal in mind, I strive toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Therefore let those of us who are "perfect" embrace this point of view. If you think otherwise, God will reveal to you the error of your ways. 16 Nevertheless, let us live up to the standard that we have already attained.

Briefly

- ▶ Rhetoric
- ▶ Cynicism
- ▶ Stoicism
- ▶ These represent the cultural, linguistic and ideological context of the Pauline proclamation.
- ▶ In fairly different mode, the *reception* of Paulinism in three contemporary philosophers

Peter Sloterdijk

- ▶ German-Dutch philosopher and cultural theorists
- ▶ Writes highly provocatively (and can be difficult to read)
- ▶ Topics: globalisation, rage, politics
- ▶ *You Must Change Your Life* (translation by Wieland Hoban, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013)
- ▶ Religion is *not* making a return
- ▶ Key: the path of self-transcendence
- ▶ We take from the religions their *practices*. There are no “religions” only misunderstood spiritual regimens
- ▶ In the course of YMCYL, he turn to conversion as topic
- ▶ Chapter 9: *Change of Trainer and Revolution. On Conversions and Opportunistic Turns*
- ▶ “...but rather a complete reversal—a turn away from the superficially manifest, which means turn towards something that is better, true and real on a higher level.”
- ▶ “All education is conversion; all conversion is subversion.”
- ▶ “Taken as a whole, what happened to Paul is more than the ‘reprogramming’ of a zealot in the precise sense of the world (sp?).”
- ▶ Properly not ethical-revolutionary but rather apostolic-zealotic.
- ▶ Conversions do not exist: “only re-occupations of vacant position in the fixed structures of a culture’s field of options.”

Giorgio Agamben

- ▶ Italian philosopher, as well as literary figure and cultural commentator.
- ▶ Most famous work is perhaps *State of Exception*
- ▶ In 2000, he published an interesting commentary on the the Letter to the Romans, called *Il tempo che resta. Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani*.
- ▶ Fruit of a seminar held twice in the preceding years.
- ▶ Title: The time which remains captures the energy of the book, which is really about the nature of time and our experience of time.
- ▶ Restores Paul as a Messianic teacher (an aspect obscured in both Jewish and Christian “institutionalisation” of vision)
- ▶ Paul reflects on the present moment: “ho nun kairos” (the exact expression occurs in Romans 3:26; 8:18; 11:5)
- ▶ Agamben distinguishes: *kairos* / *chronos* and apocalyptic / eschatological
- ▶ Spacial (linear) representation of time leads us astray.
- ▶ *Chronos* is so-called linear time, which cannot properly be represented.
- ▶ *Kairos* is the time of the messianic event (the resurrection of Jesus)

- ▶ “*Chronos* is that in which there is *kairos*, and *kairos* is that in which there is little *chronos*.”
- ▶ Thus, *kairos* takes place within *chronos*, but utterly changes the experience. In Pauline terms, *kairos* is that quality of time which follow the resurrection of Jesus: contracted and abbreviated *chronos*.

Alain Badiou

- ▶ Paris-based, left-wing philosopher and public intellectual
- ▶ Key conditions: art, love, politics, and science (and *not* culture, sexuality, management and technology — all reductive manipulations)
- ▶ Key concepts: being, truth, event and the subject
- ▶ Anxiety: relativism of truth, especially to interest groups (which he dares to name; his ferocious frankness can get him into trouble)
- ▶ Truth is an event, a rupture, which makes the indiscernible always present truth discernible
- ▶ Undergoing such a rupture, the person becomes a bearer of truth and make speak it into different real contexts

- ▶ St Paul: la fondation de l’universalisme
- ▶ Jew and Greek: discourses which are interdependent and mutually exclusive
- ▶ For Paul the “Christ event” triggers a new, third discourse, the discourse of universalism
- ▶ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female—for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28 NET)
- ▶ Paul is the first significant figure to see that all humans are equal without distinctions imposed by culture, society or nature.

Towards a conclusion

- ▶ Biblical scholars: note the embedded cultural assumptions in language and world of reference.
- ▶ Paul teaches the spiritual journey in culturally “available” vocabulary.
- ▶ Biblical scholars notice the gap created by Paul’s faith in Jesus’ resurrection.

- ▶ Philosophers: use the great figures of the past, such as Paul
- ▶ They also notice the “gap” created by the resurrection; they reject this a fable / mythology and usually try to extract a spiritual path independent of Judaeo-Christian tradition.
- ▶ For example: the essential conversion, our experience of time and need for objective values such as universalism.

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