

vitalidade dos estudos gregos em muitos outros lugares, notadamente Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Campinas, Porto Alegre e Uberlândia. Esta crescente realização acadêmica foi um fator significativo, estou certo, para o Brasil ser eleito como o cenário para a reunião trienal da *International Plato Society* em 2016. E estou igualmente certo de que a reunião fará muito mais para reforçar o lugar dos Estudos Gregos no perfil acadêmico do País.

XAVIER: *Professor, deixe uma mensagem para os estudantes brasileiros. Muitos deles estudam Filosofia Antiga por meio dos seus livros e ficariam felizes em ouvi-lo.*

ROBINSON: Eu gostaria de expressar meu grande encorajamento a todos os alunos brasileiros de Filosofia Grega para perseguirem o que estão fazendo com paixão. Um interesse modesto produzirá resultados modestos; um interesse apaixonado, combinado com pesquisa meticulosa e atenção, produzirá estudiosos que colocarão a disciplina em um novo patamar de excelência. O Brasil merece nada menos que isso; e espero que os alunos de hoje cresçam com esse desafio e garantam que ele seja vencido.

**INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS M. ROBINSON FOR THE
COMMEMORATIVE EDITION OF THE JOURNAL *EDUCAÇÃO
E FILOSOFIA***

XAVIER: *Please, professor, tell us a little about your first contact with philosophy. When was that? What was it like?*

ROBINSON: My first encounter with philosophy was at the age of seventeen, when, as part of my final year of grammar-school Greek, I read Plato's *Phaedo* under the tutelage of Ronald Fox, a superb teacher and mentor to whom I had the pleasure and honour, some years later, of dedicating my first book, *Plato's Psychology*. The *Phaedo* seemed to me

a work of such elegance and beauty of style that, regardless of whether I found its arguments convincing or not, I knew I wanted to go on reading Plato. So once I got to university, and began reading for an honours degree in Classical and General Literature, I naturally gravitated towards Greek philosophy as my field of specialized interest. And it has remained my field of study ever since.

XAVIER: *Was your entire academic career developed in Canada? What experiences did you have abroad and how were they important?*

ROBINSON: Though all my teaching life has been in Canada, all my academic training was in fact in Europe. My first degree was at the University of Durham, England, from 1956-1960, where I absorbed a good deal of the Cambridge manner of reading Greek philosophy from J. B. Skemp, himself a former pupil of F. M. Cornford. I then moved on to Oxford, where, as a Reader at Jesus College, I worked under the tutelage of David A. Rees on a dissertation entitled 'Individual and Cosmic Soul in Plato', which was eventually published as *Plato's Psychology*. While there I had the privilege of meeting, and having a number of my ideas rigorously scrutinized by, some well-known scholars, not least Gilbert Ryle, G. E. L. Owen and John Ackrill. But the one who probably influenced me most was Erik Dodds. At his suggestion I spent the academic year 1962-1963 at the Sorbonne (*Ecole des Hautes Etudes*), under the guidance of André-Jean Festugière, before returning to Oxford for a final year of study. The Paris experience was important in that it took me out of the Anglo-Saxon orbit for a while, and introduced me to a different style of philosophizing, and, more specifically, to a mode of investigating Plato which was more neo-Platonic in tone and content than I had been accustomed to. And of course, like the holdings of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the holdings of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris were a magnificent resource for advanced study.

During these years in Durham, Oxford and Paris I also availed myself of the opportunity presented by summer vacations to travel widely in Europe, much of the time as an international tour guide, and this provided me with an opportunity to learn languages, something which has proved profoundly important in my career. I had already learnt French at high

school; over the next few years travel and appropriate book-study equipped me with the further ability to read and lecture in German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Modern Greek. What this gave me has been of incalculable value, in terms of the number and variety of scholars and students around the world whom I have had the privilege of meeting – and, as part of that experience, the number of scholarly *challenges* to my ideas that I have been compelled to grapple with!

XAVIER: *You are a leading expert on ancient philosophy. How did this contact with the world of the ancients come about?*

ROBINSON: I'm sure there are a dozen good reasons for choosing to live a life within the framework of classical Greek culture and thought. My own choice was inspired by the fact that so many fascinating things within the realm of philosophy (a domain within which I here include mathematics and the various sciences, as the Greeks did), the arts (especially drama), political theory and practice, and historiography, occurred *first* there. I suppose I like learning about *eureka* moments; and Greek civilization seemed to be full of them. And of course the discovery of such moments was on numerous occasions felt like a personal *eureka* moment for myself.

One such moment in the realm of philosophy was when I observed that the Greeks were apparently the first to involve themselves in an art which would effectively form the basis of philosophy, mathematics, and the various sciences, including moral science: the art of what I call 'fruitful generalization'. An awareness of the so-called '3-4-5 rule', for example, allowed the Egyptians to build pyramids; but it took a further, crucial step by a Greek thinker to draw the general inference that in the case of any three-sided plane figure the square of the hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares of the other two sides.

Another such moment was when I discovered that Greek atomists, aided solely by reasoning from general terms in language (such as 'space', 'time', 'infinity', and 'motion'), had managed to frame a remarkably compelling physical and cosmological theory. Hypothesize, for example, with Democritus and Leucippus, an infinity of space, an infinity of time, and the everlasting motion of a finite number of 'basic bits' of matter of

various shapes - and one can account for not just the present world we see but an infinity of possible others - a view which, arrived at as it was without benefit of telescope or microscope, still astonishes modern science for its overall plausibility.

I experienced another such moment was when I first realized that a Greek philosopher had actually demonstrated that there are *laws* of reasoning - that a syllogism of the form ‘*some x are m/some y are m*’, for example, can never be valid, on the simple grounds that a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for the validity of any deduction is that at least *one* of its premises be universal. I vividly remember the extraordinary sense of liberation this realization brought me; one could actually show why various invalid arguments *were* such, and that, by following certain basic rules of thought, one could construct arguments which would be at least be *valid* even if they were not *sound* (valid arguments about unicorns, for example).

These moments are merely those that spring immediately to mind; there are dozens more. And not just in the realm of philosophy. I remember being overwhelmed by the power of Greek *drama* to highlight issues that overwhelm the human heart. Aeschylus on the doom of the House of Atreus and what it took to reverse it. Sophocles on the tragedy of Oedipus. Sophocles on the moral stance of Antigone. Euripides on the Women of Troy. And so much more.

In the area of political theory and practice I was (of course) attracted to the whole story of the rise of democracy in Athens, and remember my astonishment when I first learned that some of the city’s most famous writers were also the biggest critics of that democracy. Sometimes this was overt, as in the case of Plato. Sometimes it was less overt, but clear enough nonetheless, as in the case of Thucydides, whose great *History* of the Peloponnesian War I read with fascination as another ‘first’, along with the work of his great predecessor Herodotus.

On so many fronts that interested me, Greeks were offering me, often in prose or verse of scintillating quality, a magnificent panorama of thinking in areas where they were often the very first, it seemed, to have articulated various views (in written form, at any rate), and I knew at once that I could spend a fruitful life reading and re-reading what they had to say. But not just reading it – *engaging* with it! Because the force and

vitality of so much of this was such that it demanded *response*. To admire Greek thought is not simply to agree with what Euripides, or Socrates, or Plato, or Aristotle has to say; it is to do them the courtesy of *challenging* them when it seems appropriate. And this I have tried to do for a lifetime.

So let this, in summary, be my attempt to answer your question. My ongoing contact with Greek culture and civilization has simply reinforced the feeling I experienced from the earliest moments: that there is here something so magnificently *expressed* as to be worth reading and re-reading in detail for its form alone, and at the same time so important and challenging in its *claims* as to be worth careful and detailed response. And that, to me, has been worth a life.

XAVIER: *Among the ancient philosophers, Plato seems to receive most of your efforts. Why Plato, professor? What is his importance nowadays?*

ROBINSON: Why have I spent so much of my life studying Plato in particular? Probably because I like the dialogical nature of his mind. In saying this I take issue with all those who claim to find ‘doctrine’ in Plato, which they can then agree with or disagree with, either in part or in its totality. My own view is that he was a philosophical ‘searcher’ for a lifetime, and that he felt that the best technique for philosophizing was the use of the dialogue-form.

This does not mean that one cannot find certain broad commitments running through the dialogues - to essentialism, for example, and functionalism, and soul’s immortality. But Plato feels free at all times to scrutinize (and re-scrutinize) anything that strikes him as important - including the above commitments. His essentialism, for example, has a ‘transcendental’ cast to it in several of the central dialogues, but this feature seems to have vanished, or to be at any rate no longer a vital part of his argument, by the time he comes to write the *Laws*. And, tellingly, after a lifetime of writing about the soul, he still, apparently, in old age does not know whether the body of the sun ‘pushes’ it from without, ‘pulls’ it from within, or relates to it in some other way that is completely mysterious. This is an intellectual honesty that I like.

But what about his ‘unwritten doctrines’, it might be asked? On this I have always felt the need to be cautious. That he was, as he grew older, surrounded by people in the Academy who were inclined towards philosophical system-building (pre-eminently Aristotle and Speusippus) seems clear enough, and that he engaged earnestly with them at all times can hardly be doubted. However (and unsurprisingly, I would say, given the dialogical nature of his mind), very little of this ‘systematic’ material finished up in the dialogues, and the little that did was often ‘adjusted’ for reasons best known to himself (the distinction between the one and the indefinite dyad, for example, something greatly discussed in the Academy, comes across as a distinction between limit and unlimitedness in the *Philebus*). Or to put it differently, he was more than willing to learn from the system-builders among his pupils, especially as he grew older, but invariably he continued on in his own dialogical way, incorporating at various times into his thinking a piece of ‘doctrine’ currently in vogue, but also reserving the right to subject it, too, to continuing scrutiny, just as he was, from the *Parmenides* onward, forever re-examining the Theory of Forms. If we are to talk of a Platonic ‘doctrine’ running through all of this, it is the doctrine of essentialism; the *nature* and *details* of the essentialism, however, are forever open to continuing scrutiny. The same can be said of his belief in the soul: that it exists and is immortal is a basic tenet; exactly how it relates to *body*, however, and what *part* of it might turn out to be immortal, he is to the very end of his writing life re-visiting.

Is Plato still important today? The answer will depend a lot on one’s personal philosophical stance. For many people, myself included, Plato’s great ideas (the Theory of Forms, functionalism, the arguments for the immortality of the soul, the supposedly problematic nature of democracy) remain compelling as reading, but unconvincing as arguments. But they are arguments which demand to be engaged with. And this is why he should continue to be read and will be.

But equally important, it seems to me, and something we can all learn from, whether we agree with him or not on any particular topic, is his dialogical approach to the world. One cannot afford to read the *Republic*, for example, without reading in detail his final work on politics, the *Laws*, which reveals a man who has changed his mind in quite significant ways

on an array of important of topics, *including* the nature of justice. Much of this, it seems to me, is the result of a lifetime of dialogical thinking. The same can be said for his views, across various dialogues, of the relationship between true opinion and knowledge (I am thinking in particular of the *Meno*, *Republic* and *Theaetetus*), or about whether the soul really is tripartite or not: the philosopher is the *searcher*, unafraid to change his mind if good reasons present themselves for doing so, and willing to change his mind still further if yet other reasons seem to demand it.

XAVIER: *You had a “television” experience with philosophy ... what was the impact of this work? It is possible to speak about philosophy to such an audience?*

ROBINSON: I have always believed that, if one considers something to be deeply important, one is under an obligation to promulgate it to the widest possible audience. So when opportunities have presented themselves to me to speak to television viewers and radio audiences about what we might learn from philosophy in general and Greek philosophy in particular, I have always availed myself of them. It is, of course, a challenge to speak about topics which often sound abstruse to an audience which knows little or nothing about them, but no more daunting a challenge, I think, than the task facing thousands of teachers of philosophy in universities when they face a classroom of students half of whom specialize in something quite different (say, physics), and are only present in the course for purposes of completing a minor in some topic within that strange and remote area, ‘humanities’. What is teaching if not the attempt to show the possibly bored or skeptical that the subject at issue is compelling and fascinating if they can be persuaded to give it a little of their attention?

Having said this, I must admit that television is a very peculiar entity, with its desire for ten-second sound-bites of information. But there are exceptions to this rule, not least in the case of TV Ontario, which once gave me six half-hour periods of television-time (uninterrupted by commercials!) to interview six of the world’s finest scholars of moral philosophy on topics of current ethical concern. The same can be said for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, which once allowed me five

hours of radio air-time (again uninterrupted by commercials) to speak on Greek culture and civilization, then proceeded to publish the lectures as a University Paperback titled *The Greek Legacy*. I know, however, that I am fortunate in this regard; many other countries, I have observed, are not quite so generous with their radio and television time with regard to things of the mind.

Does this sort of thing have an impact? It is hard to know. I can only say that both of the programmes I have just talked about reached an audience of about a third of a million people; each was re-broadcast several times; and *The Greek Legacy* sold out. Are scholars wasting their time doing this sort of thing? Some might think so. But from what I myself have experienced, I am optimistic enough to think that the truth may be otherwise.

XAVIER: *In fact, you have created a novel (and very interesting) way to talk about philosophy ... your philosophical plays. Tell us about it, professor.*

ROBINSON: I have been convinced for a long time that Greek philosophy would prove attractive to many people, including those outside the confines of universities, if only they could be introduced to it in an engaging and stimulating way. And one such way, I have come to think, is through drama; in particular drama about how major figures on the Greek literary and philosophical scene might have interacted with one another had they met. One feature of Greek life – the Olympic Games that took place every four years - has offered me a wonderful device for doing this.

We know that, among the many types of people who attended the Games – and sometimes participated in them – were the *literati* of Greece. Sophocles, for example, was a wrestler when young; so was Plato. So what I needed to do was research the particular date of one of the Games (say, the Olympic Games of 456 BCE), find out who might conceivably have been there – and then *put* them there! I could then imagine them congregating each evening after sundown for an evening of wine-drinking and discussion, at which they would spend a few minutes talking about the various sports they had seen that day but then quickly move on to

matters of more compelling interest to them, not least one another's work, especially work in progress.

Each play consists of three acts (one for each evening of the Games) and is, in effect, an Olympic Games of the Mind, where this time the finest *intellects* in Greece engage with one another, both seriously and light-heartedly. (The presence of philosophers like Parmenides and Socrates and comic dramatists like Cratinus and Aristophanes – ever ready to puncture any over-inflated-looking balloon in their vicinity – ensures this). Since 2006 I have completed fifteen such plays; the most recent one, set at the Games of 404, will do reasonably well as an example of what I am talking about.

At the Games of 404, which take place only three months after the great defeat of Athens by Sparta, I have on stage at various times Socrates; three of his young proteges whom he has brought along with him (Xenophon, Plato and Aristippus); the historian Thucydides; the comic dramatist Aristophanes; the sophists Hippias and Thrasymachus; the physician Hippocrates; the mistress of young Aristippus (the *hetaera* Lais); and the mistress of young Plato (the *hetaera* Archaeanassa). (*Married women weren't allowed at the Games, as everyone knows; but 'other' women were...*).

As one may imagine, with this particular configuration of bright and articulate people on stage (including Lais and Archaeanassa, who have lots of brains to go with their beauty) there are some strong philosophical and political confrontations, and some bitter comments on why and how Athens lost the war. But there is a good deal of hilarity too, as Aristophanes in particular makes fun of the love-struck young Plato, and Hippocrates offers a tongue-in-cheek medical disquisition on love as pathology. It also offers an opportunity for individuals to read short passages from what they are working on; Thucydides, for example, has a chance to read from his soon-to-appear *History* of the Peloponnesian War, while others recite passages from dramas of the recently deceased Euripides, including the *Bacchae* and *Iphigeneia in Tauris*.

My hope is that the plays will prove stimulating and useful either as standard theatrical performances for a general audience or as play-readings by students as part of, say, the introductory seminar to various university-courses. The play of 476, for example, featuring Parmenides, Heraclitus

and Zeno, among others, could serve as an introduction to a course on pre-Socratic philosophy. The plays of 456 and 440, which feature Pericles and Aspasia, Cimon, Sophocles, Zeno and the young Socrates, among others, could serve as an introduction to a course on the Age of Pericles. The tetralogy of plays running from 424 to 404, featuring Socrates, Aristophanes, Euripides, Sophocles, Democritus, Thrasymachus, Thucydides, Cleon and Alcibiades, among others, could serve as an introduction to courses on the philosophy, drama and politics of the late fifth century. And the three plays set in the fourth century could serve as an introduction to courses on – among other things - the philosophy and political theory of Plato and Aristotle. None of the plays, of course, is planned as a *substitute* for a given course; the aim is to arouse interest in the issues, and to satisfy students that the course they are about to embark on is worth their time and energy.

So far, I'm happy to say, things are working out as I had hoped. My first play, *The Diaries of Socrates*, has to date been performed in Greece (Samos), the USA (Oakdale, NY), Venezuela (Caracas), and China (Beijing). The second, *Plato's Monologues*, has been performed in Spain (Benasque). And the third, *The Other Olympians* (Part One), the central figure of which is Parmenides, was performed recently on the site of the ancient city of Elea, where Parmenides spent his teaching life. So I'm feeling encouraged.

XAVIER: *You have been to Brazil a few times. What do you think of the studies in Ancient philosophy here? Are we on the right track? Brazil will host the IPS Symposium in 2016 ...*

ROBINSON: Yes, I have had the pleasure of lecturing in Brazil a number of times. In 1997 I lectured in Sao Paulo, Campinas, Rio de Janeiro and Porto Alegre. In 2002, 2004 and 2006 I gave lectures at the Catholic University of Sao Paulo. And most recently, in 2009, I gave individual lectures in Uberlandia, Belo Horizonte, Sao Paulo and Natal, along with a series of eight lectures at the University of Brasilia which have recently been published as *As Origens da Alma*. In all of this I count myself most fortunate, since I have had a chance to observe the vitality of the Brazilian scene in the area of Greek Philosophy. Two things in particular have struck me: the

enthusiasm of both faculty and students for the subject in so many of the places I have visited, and the quality of the academic journals and research programmes in the field. Naturally, those which I have come to know best are in Sao Paulo and Brasilia, given the amount of time I have spent in each place. But I was also impressed by the vitality of Greek studies in many other places as well, notably Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Campinas, Porto Alegre and Uberlandia. This growing academic ‘track record’ was a significant factor, I am sure, in Brazil’s being elected as the venue for the projected triennial gathering of the International Plato Society in 2016. And I am equally certain that the meeting itself will do much to further reinforce the place of Greek Studies in the academic profile of the country.

XAVIER: Please, professor, leave a message for Brazilian students ... many of them are studying ancient philosophy through your books and they would be pleased to hear you.

ROBINSON: I should like to express my strong encouragement to all Brazilian students in Greek philosophy to pursue what they are doing with passion. A modest interest will produce modest results; a passionate interest, combined with meticulous research and attention, will produce scholars who will move the discipline onto a new plateau of excellence. Brazil deserves no less; and I hope that today’s students will rise to the challenge and ensure that it comes about.

