

The Secret and Unfortunate History of Philosophy #23

I bet you have never heard of Asparagus the Philosopher.

He was a Neoplatonist. That's not a Greek who smashes plates at Greek restaurants for wedding parties in poor taste, but a thinker who, like Plotinus, adapted the thought of Plato - transcendent entities called 'forms' are the embodiment of 'true' reality and ultimately reside in 'The One,' and are the source of the unreality we call 'appearance'; this 'One' is a supreme being, the Lord of Everything, in whom universals such as 'The Good', which is the biggest and the best of the forms, exist; he kind of runs the universe, if by 'run' is to be understood a reductionist process from mere appearances to reality - to his modern world, and by modern we mean the world of the later Roman Empire, soon to become the latter Roman Empire, which has provided the reason for so much of the tenure enjoyed by academic historians.

I hope I have not discomfited you thus far. If you have tried to read Heidegger, the previous excruciatingly long two sentences should be easy. Consider yourself lucky I have avoided the mystical elements of Neoplatonism. You can take a breath now and we will go on.

'So how come I haven't heard of Asparagus?' I hear you say.

By his own estimation, Asparagus was a giant intellect and one of the most original creative minds in human history. But he had the misfortune that everything he discovered had previously been revealed to the world by others, many of who were intellectually not in the same watt range as himself. Fate had simply sprinkled them in the world earlier to his own timeline.

For instance, he discovered the syllogism one day, when he was haggling over the price of onions with an extremely unpleasant and smelly farmer in the Corinth bazaar - the main one in the square near the harbour, not the upmarket boutique bazaar catering to the 'villa set' near the estates on the foothills; after all, Asparagus was a philosopher who had to work for a living, not some puffed-up Roman proconsul.

He had to haggle, cajole, glare, and sometimes assume a haughtiness that would make even an Athenian blush. But this farmer would not budge on his price for onions.

These village types are stubborn like mules, whom they closely resemble in appearance. So in a flash of inspiration (he called it 'Eureka!' but wouldn't you know...) Asparagus developed the syllogism. This is a form of argument that is nowadays called 'valid' because if you accept the premises, you are bound (if you are rational and a nice guy) to accept the conclusion. In the simplest outline it's got things like a singular statement, a universal statement, and the big whammy is the conclusion: 'You are a man, all men are fair- you must therefore sell me these onions at this fair price!' Unfortunately, the farmer was neither rational nor a nice guy, but he was willful, so he made Asparagus cough up an exorbitant price for some ordinary looking onions which his domineering wife later turned into an indifferent onion soup.

At least in compensation, Asparagus thought he had invented the syllogism as well as deriving a humiliating insight into the 'Will to Power' ordinary mortals could display. He went home and wrote up the outlines for a rational discourse whose centrepiece was the structure of argument he had used to such poor effect on the ignorant farmer. But then some Stagirite relic called Aristotle had beaten him to it by

at least 400 years, as one of his precocious students pointed out (the upstart son of a Roman Centurion granted land in Greece as part of his pension plan), ruining his day completely. The soup tasted particularly rancid that evening.

If only he had thought of turning to an analysis of the role of the will in human affairs, he might have discovered psychology (a science!) and beaten those dour German philosophers by a thousand years. He would also have been better prepared to haggle over the price of onions.

Great ideas, lousy timing. That's our Asparagus.