



UNTRoubLED PURSUITS VASILIS POLITIS

I was born in Athens in 1963, and went to Aarhus in Denmark, in 1970, where I spent my childhood and adolescence. In 1982 I went to Oxford to study Philosophy, with a year spent at the Stiftung Maximilianeum in Munich, and in 1992 came to Trinity College in Dublin to teach and work, and this has since been my home. Though I have wide interests in philosophy, Plato and Aristotle are what I concentrate on. For some time now, what has been occupying me is the place of *aporia* in philosophical inquiry – *aporia* understood as the puzzlement that befalls one when, facing a certain kind of question, one is pulled in opposite directions. I have written quite widely on this, regarding both philosophers. (“Explanation and Essence in Plato’s *Phaedo*.” In *Definition in Greek Philosophy*, ed. D. Charles, Oxford University Press, 2010). I am currently occupied with a major project, which is to show that we must seriously wonder why the demand for definitions is so important for Plato; and that, if we grasp the place and role of *aporiai* in the inquiries that make up his dialogues, then we can see what motivates and justifies this thoroughly distinctive Platonic (and Aristotelian) demand. – Address: Department of Philosophy, Trinity College Dublin, College Green, Dublin 2, Ireland. E-mail: vpolit@tcd.ie

But come now, let us look at this thing together, and see whether what we have here is really fertile or a mere wind-egg. (Plato, *Theaetetus*)

It is, for reasons that are not altogether transparent to me, somewhat with a sense of shame that I confess to my uppermost thoughts and desires on coming to the Wissenschaftskolleg. For these were attached not so much to the twin prospects of sharing in a

hub of excellent Fellows from such diverse disciplines, or the delights of a German metropolis, but more private passions, concerning that man, Plato, and those irresistible if intractable questions that I had set myself for a good while: Why, and with what justification, did he keep asking “What is that?” or “What makes this thing what it is?” (for example, “What is courage?”, “What makes us have courage?”); and Why, and on what grounds, was he so troubled and torn by certain questions of a quite different form (such as, for example, *whether or not self-knowledge is possible, and, if so, whether it is of any use to one*) as apparently to dismiss even that trace of humility in his mentor, that other man, Socrates, who at least seems to have harboured some suspicions that such questions had better be left to the gods. If, therefore, true happiness lies in the untroubled pursuit of those thoughts and desires by which we are most drawn, then not only did those ten months with the Wiko present for me no less a prospect, but fulfilled the promise. For having decided that trying to answer these questions was what I was going to do, it is what I did: starting on page 1 on October 2, 2009, and finishing on page 385 exactly nine months later, in time for the Old Fellows Meeting, the End of Year Party, and leaving only winding down and preparing for departing. But this I did with the assistance of the kindness, good humour and everyday practical support of the good people in the library and kitchen especially; the happy regular distractions occasioned by friendships made among the Fellows along the way; the play, fun and noise when my two children came for their regular visits and got together with the other children in the Villa Walther; and in the company and by the side of a true scholar, constant friend and kindred spirit.

I realize now, of course, that this, our individual projects, cannot represent the principal focus of the Wissenschaftskolleg, which, once having offered us Fellows a precious and generous opportunity to attend to these in whatever way and to whatever extent each of us may wish, leaves us to get on with it while enlisting us in the communal activities and larger matters, in essence political as it seems to me, in which it properly deals; in the sure expectation, that is, that these common things will in more or less direct and evident ways feed back into and sustain those private ones. Whether, to what extent and in what ways I trust that I, through my active participation, have lived up to this expectation, I find hard to tell with much confidence or clarity when looking back only a short while after. One or two things stand out at this point with some distinctness. *That*, be it as the result of random chance, good fortune or wise forethought in the allocation of Fellows to one year or the other, I was able to share my studies more or less daily with a scholar working in a genuinely related area, and of this much I am in no doubt, that this has

made a difference to and left marked traces in my studies, in whole and in part, and beyond. *That*, quite apart from being such a thoroughly distinctive spectacle, for it is probably the most richly polyphonic academic seminar of its kind, the Dienstagskolloquia, those weekly get-togethers so expertly organized by the Wiko staff in which each Fellow gets a single chance to present his or her current project and interests to a critical plenum, most of whom know little if anything about the subject, not only taught me a good many particular things that I fear I will soon forget (e.g. about the life of ants, bees, dolphins; the relationship between Galileo and the figurative artists around him; what it takes to look at an ancient sculpture with any appreciation; and much more); but also stimulated in me some hopefully fertile wider thoughts (e.g. that making sense of the paradoxical aspects of quantum theory may require a metaphysical re-orientation not unlike that recommended by Heraclitus when he said that “all things are one”); as well as teaching me the following lesson: that there really does appear to be a difference in how we academics, be it in the sciences, humanities or however we like to divide ourselves, go about our core business, but that this may be a difference not so much between distinct approaches as between having a recognizable approach – a problem to articulate, a claim to defend, an argument to pull apart, evidence to collect or to assess – and not having any approach that is at all easy for an outsider to detect. *That*, finally, those same good natural scientists, and friends, whose methodological acumen stands out as a model when they are working squarely within their discipline (I have, on that account, resolved from now on regularly to attend science lectures at that end of College) appear to be at a loss of compass or direction when it comes to such more general and diffuse questions as used to be called “philosophical” (such as “What makes us human?”, the question on which a handful of us met every two weeks as part of a working group whose “findings” were presented at the Old Fellows Meeting), and to be all too ready to take hold of some momentous assumption (such as, for example, that questions such as this one are properly to be addressed, and an answer attempted, on the basis of the latest findings in evolutionary biology) of whose claim to belong within a science, or any one specialist discipline, it might be thought that there is at least a question mark; and do so not only without apparent hesitation or worry (possibly excepting for the curious excuse that the assumption may justly be adopted for methodological purposes) but with some suggestion that to think it might be questionable and that alternatives might be considered, or at least aired, would amount to intellectual suicide, or at any rate is not worth our while.