THE BELOVED UNKNOWN AND THE LEARNING SOUL

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BOOK REVIEW: *THE BELOVED UNKNOWN AND THE LEARNING SOUL*
ALFRED GEIER
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In addition to my duties as an English professor at Houston Baptist University (HBU), I have the privilege of lecturing once a week for the honors college on ancient Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and Romanticism. But the lectures only make up a small portion of the honors college curriculum. For four hours per week, honors students engage in vigorous Socratic dialogue over the classic works of literature, history, philosophy, theology, art, and science they are assigned to read. I often sit in on these marathon Socratic sessions and have been impressed by how much meaty discussion can be inspired by just a sentence or two from Homer or Plato or Augustine.

Most classes begin the same, with the professor asking a well-crafted question that offers an opening into the book under discussion. Often that question will be linked to a brief passage that most students (or teachers) would skim over on a first or second reading. For example, one of the sessions I attended on the *Iliad* zeroed in on the famous scene in Book I when Achilles, angered by Agamemnon's threat of taking away his war prize, approaches him, sword in hand, with the intention of killing him. As swift as thought, Athena rushes in and grabs Achilles by the hair, counseling him to put up his sword. "I have come down," she says, "to stay your anger—but will you obey me?—from the sky" (I.207; Lattimore translation).

The passage is well known, but the professor turned the class's attention to the oft overlooked phrase set off by dashes: "but will you obey me?" "Why," he challenged the class, "does Athena ask this question? Is she afraid Achilles will not obey?" After some gentle prodding, the students engaged the seemingly minor question and the conversation spun off in several directions, taking up such larger issues as the relationship between gods and men in Greek mythology, the paradox of divine predestination and human free will, the fabled wrath of Achilles and how it manifests itself in the epic, the nature and extent of obedience that mortals owe to imperfect gods, and the two levels of action that give shape to the *Iliad.* The dialogue was bracing, and it pushed the

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students to make new connections, think outside the box, and risk offering their own readings.

I learned early on that many of the professors and administrators who founded the honors college at HBU had been discipled, directly or indirectly, by Alfred Geier, who attended St. John's College, studied under Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago and Ludwig Edelstein at John Hopkins, and taught in the University of Rochester's Department of Religion and Classics for fifty years. Several years back, I had attended part of a weekend Socratic roundtable on Plato's *Republic* led by Geier himself, but it wasn't until recently that I had the chance to read one of his books. Doing so opened my eyes, not only to the Platonic dialogues that Geier considers in his book, but to the full power of the Socratic method to offer surprising new insights, to train the critical and creative faculties, and to instill both wisdom and humility in young minds.

In *The Beloved Unknown and the Learning Soul,* Geier takes his readers through—you guessed it—oft overlooked passages in Plato's S*ymposium, Charmides, Theaetetus, Lysis*, and *Phaedrus*. As he does so, he reveals new perspectives on Socrates/Plato and defines more precisely the nature of the ideal Socratic (or honors college) pupil. Geier lifts his central concept of the "beloved unknown" from Plato's great exploration and celebration of love (Eros), the *Symposium*. According to Socrates, Geier explains, the object of Eros (the beloved unknown) is "that which is *not* at hand, that which is *not* present, that which one does *not* have, that which he himself is not, and that which one is *lacking*" (40).

Readers of *The Beloved Unknown* may be frustrated by Geier's focus on the *lack* of knowledge and presence, but they will be less so if they remember why Socrates, in Plato's *Apology*, believed the oracle was right to dub him the wisest of men: "I am wisest because I know that I do not know." This Socratic disclaimer is a staple of Philosophy 101 classes, but Geier takes it further. In Plato's dialogues, the knowledge that one does not know does not mark the end of the search but the beginning. We will only seek after the beloved unknown when we know that we lack it, and we will only continue our search if we *continue to know* that we lack it.

Geier explains this with reference to Agathon, who, in the *Symposium*, is asked by Socrates what kind of a thing love is. Geier interprets Agathon's answer thus: "*Love is the sureness about the existence of 'something' without yet knowing at all what that 'something' is"* (16). He then goes on to explain Agathon's proper orientation toward that "something" (that is, the beloved unknown): "And the only way that that 'something' can remain to him not yet known at all is if he does not forget at *all,* that is, if he remembers that the 'object' is *still* something indefinite, is *still* not yet specified and *still* not yet known, is still, to him (and to us), as Socrates precisely characterizes it, 'whatever'" (17).

Geier's book is filled with such tangled sentences, but he is forced to write in such a manner by the inherent paradox at the core of the Socratic search. If we were ever to know fully the beloved unknown, our search would be over, but it would also be over if we were ever to forget our lack of—and thus need for—the beloved unknown. So we must continue to remember we do not know, lest we lose our eagerness for the search.

Having established the paradoxical nature of the search, Geier devotes most of his book to demonstrating how Socrates draws four young men—Charmides, Theaetetus, Lysis, and Phaedrus—into being ideal seekers after the beloved unknown. Each of the four is introduced to Socrates as a bright young man of good character, which proves to be true, but not until Socrates frees them to understand both their strengths and their limits.

What makes Geier's analysis of these dialogues so effective is how much attention he pays to the framing narratives. While most readers rush by the frame and the small talk to get to the philosophy, Geier lingers on the chitchat; for, it is often through the

chitchat that Socrates—sometimes gently, sometimes forcefully—guides the title characters into a realization of their lack and their potential. As a professor, I was particularly interested in how Geier showed Socrates as simultaneously teaching these young men to respect their teachers and the tradition, while pushing them to break boldly from old presuppositions.

Consider Geier's description of the transformation that Socrates effects in Charmides, who changes

> from a beautiful but lifeless statue-like shy, modest person . . . into someone who now recognizes he is lacking, and hence acknowledges he absolutely needs, the knowledge of moderation, and thus someone who is now a highly eager and demanding pursuer of that knowledge, and, who, moreover, for that end, is willing to use force and, thus who is completely willing to converse . . . Charmides is now completely ready, that is to say, he is determined, immoderately, to know moderation. (37)

Not easy this, to get a student to accept his doubts with such all-consuming conviction and eagerness that he will cast all obstacles aside to engage in fruitful dialogue. But that is the only way to form a true and devoted seeker after the beloved unknown.

Sometimes this process is relatively quick; at other times, as with *Theaetetus*, it calls for a wiping clean of a student's previous false notions. In *Theaetetus*, Socrates does so by taking on the roll of a midwife delivering a thought child, but, in the case of the raw young hero of the dialogue, that process necessitates first the delivery of what Plato calls wind-eggs, false preconceptions about the nature of knowledge. Only by having his soul emptied of these wind-eggs can Theaetetus have his soul enlarged and deepened. The result of this process, Geier explains, is that "by becoming empty, that is to say, by recognizing that what he thought he knew he does not know, *Theaetetus has become filled with depth* and is no longer docile but has become able to learn" (74). And is that not the central role of the teacher: to enable a student to be able to learn?

There were many moments as I read *The Beloved Unknown and the Learning Soul* that I could have sworn that the author shared my Christian faith. But he does not. Like most of my key mentors at the secular universities I attended, Geier, far from being a self-congratulating liberal Christian in flight from his "narrow-minded" church upbringing, is a humble, secular Jew. As such, he has no axe to grind with Christianity and feels no need to attack out of hand any supernatural reality or absolute truth. To the contrary, like a modern-day Plato, Geier remains unpretentiously open to transcendence.

Consider this remarkable footnote to his claim that the learning soul must remain "in touch" with the beloved unknown: "Here and throughout the rest of the book 'in touch' will be in quotation marks to reflect two things: first, to preserve the extraordinary condition of there being contact between two intangible things, the soul and the Beloved Unknown; and, second, to affirm that nevertheless there is such contact" (18). Geier is not playing games with transcendence. The non-physical soul that journeys and the metaphysical object toward which it journeys are both realties and, as such, must be taken with high seriousness. As he boldly asserts in his final chapter, "The Beloved Unknown establishes the real existence of somewhere else as well as of something else" (99).

Just as Geier presents the learning soul and its object in terms that accord well with the teachings of Christ and the Bible, so he further presents Socrates himself in a way that makes him seem a proto-Christian saint. Socrates, Geier explains, never claimed to be himself the beloved unknown; rather, he acted as a conduit for it. As the perfect teacher, Socrates "never loses sight of, or always remains 'in touch' with, the Beloved

Unknown, because he is *always perfectly* receptive to the suspicion of being mistaken" (102).

There is nothing in Geier's (or Plato's) discussion of the beloved unknown that need be rejected by the Christian; indeed, there is much that should challenge him to be both a teacher like Socrates and a student like Charmides or Theaetetus. Still, the Christian professor who reads Geier's fine book should be thrilled and humbled by the glorious fact that, as a believer, he can lead his students one step further than Geier or Plato. For the secret that the Christian professor knows is that the beloved unknown not only exists in Plato's World of Being—"In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1)—but that it (He!) became incarnate in our physical World of Becoming and can thus be known as a real, tangible Presence—"The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

FAITHFUL IN LITTLE

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"For who has despised the day of small things?" — Zechariah 4:10

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