

Ethos and Hermeneutics: An Ancient Example of Theories' Interaction

Ethos ve Hermeneutik: Teorilerin Etkileşiminin Antik Bir Örneği

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ABSTRACT

Ethos and Hermeneutics are the fruits of philosophical thought from about the same period of antiquity. It was a time when philosophy was faced with the task of understanding and translating into philosophical and scientific language all that knowledge, which mythology and religion accumulated in symbols. Many teachings of antiquity were based on certain ideas previously expressed in mythological symbols and signs. In order to translate these signs and symbols into philosophical meanings, fundamentally new tools of understanding and interpretation were needed. Such tools were provided by hermeneutics. One of the theories, in the field of which ancient philosophy used hermeneutic means, was the teaching of Ethos. Despite the fact that the theory of Ethos is the doctrine of ancient philosophy in the most classical sense, nevertheless, at the basis of this doctrine, one can hear the echo of ideas from the mythological past. Therefore, ancient philosophy took the mythological ideas, which were expressed symbolically, and translated them into philosophical language, creating a theoretical basis for them. This phenomenon of the interaction of two theories is interesting and may be useful in that it provides an example of the possibility of integrating the hermeneutic method into absolutely any sphere of knowledge, especially those that operate with symbols. Music, as we know, speaks the language of symbols. It is up to the person interacting with the music to interpret these symbols. Will the process of this interpretation take place in the individual field of a person's artistic experience or will it become a copy of the template that is always provided by ethics, morality, state, and society? The answer to this question is given by an artist with his work.

Keywords: Antiquity, Ethos, hermeneutics, philosophy, music

ÖZ

Ethos ve Hermeneutik, antikitenin aynı dönemine ait felsefi düşüncenin meyveleridir. Felsefenin; mitoloji ve dinin sembollerde biriktirdiği tüm bilgileri anlama, felsefi ve bilimsel dile tercüme etme göreviyle karşı karşıya olduğu bir dönemdi. Antik çağın birçok öğretisi, daha önce mitolojik semboller ve işaretlerde ifade edilen belirli fikirlere dayanıyordu. Bu işaret ve sembollerini felsefi anlamlara dönüştürmek için temelde yeni anlama ve yorumlama araçlarına ihtiyaç vardı. Bu tür araçlar hermeneutik tarafından sağlanmıştır. Antik felsefe alanında hermeneutik araçların kullandığı teorilerden biri Ethos öğretisidir. Ethos teorisi en klasik anlamda antik felsefenin doktrini olmasına rağmen, yine de bu doktrinin temelinde mitolojik geçmişten gelen fikirlerin yankısı duyulabilir. Bu nedenle antik felsefesi, sembolik olarak ifade edilen mitolojik fikirleri alıp felsefi dile çevirerek onlara teorik bir temel oluşturmuştur. Bu iki teorinin etkileşimi olgusu ilginçtir ve hermeneutik yöntemin kesinlikle herhangi bir bilgi alanına, özellikle de sembollerle işleyenlere entegre etme olasılığına bir örnek sağlaması bakımından faydalı olabilir. Müzik, bildiğimiz gibi, sembollerin dilini konuşur. Bu sembollerini yorumlamak ise müzikle etkileşime giren kişiye kalmıştır. Bu yorumlama süreci, kişinin sanatsal deneyiminin bireysel alanında mı gerçekleşecek, yoksa etik, ahlak, devlet ve toplumun her zaman sunduğu şablonun bir kopyası mı olacak? Bu sorunun cevabını bir sanatçı eseriyle verir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Antik çağ, Ethos, hermeneutik, felsefe, müzik



Introduction

The impact of music on a person is one of the main themes of philosophers' reflections. Even in antiquity, philosophy assumed that the extent and the nature of this impact is determined by both objective and subjective circumstances. For example, a person's ability for emotional and esthetical influence from the outside is a category of subjectivity. This feature is natural, and it can certainly be developed and is exacerbated in moments especially critical for a person—in periods of emotional instability; it is then that the emotions of a person are reflected in the esthetic object and thereby intensify. Maxim Gorky, in his story *In the World*, tells how he first heard the sound of a cello:

It was an extraordinary sound, as if someone very strong and kind was singing with his mouth shut; I couldn't hear the words, but the song seemed familiar and understandable to me ... I sat down on a pedestal, realizing that they were playing some kind of violin, of wonderful power and unbearable – because it was almost painful to listen to it. Sometimes it sang with such force that – it seemed – the whole house was trembling and the glasses in the windows were buzzing. Raindrops fell from the roof, and tears fell from my eyes... (Gorky, 2004, p. 305).

The hero of this autobiographical story, Maxim Gorky himself, who in childhood had a high esthetic sensitivity, in this case fell under the influence of music, which turned out to be consonant with his state of mind. The emotions of the hero, hitting a resonance with the music, found its reflection in it and increased to such an extent that led to catharsis, expressed in the physical release through tears.

But, in addition to subjective (emotional susceptibility of a person), there are objective properties of music that affect a person. According to the ancient theory of Ethos, music has some objective qualities that are capable of influencing a person in any case, even with his emotional insensitivity to music and even against his will. So, in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, an episode was repeatedly cited, saying that Pythagoras by playing the lyre somehow pacified a rowdy young man, previously excited with playing a flute. It is important to note here that the musical influence was made against the will of this young man (Iamblichus, 1998, p. [XXV 112]).

In antiquity, especially in Ancient Greece, in the conditions of the flourishing of philosophical thinking, the birth, and activity of the scientific approach, musical knowledge received an excellent basis for its development precisely as a scientific branch. Young philosophy and science, with all their youthful fervor, took up the study of musical phenomena. It is impossible to overestimate this time for musical science, since it was then that all the main musical theories were born. So, then the music was looked at from different angles. Philosophy applied its philosophical methods to music, and science its own. For example, Pythagoras, as one of the first philosophers (or rather, the man who was the first to call himself a philosopher) and as the one of the first scientists, studied music both philosophically and scientifically. His musical-physical experiments with strings are well known. But the philosophical and even esoteric circumstances of these experiments are little known. Namely that, Pythagoras applied the results of his experiments to the students at his school. This religious society of Pythagoras was closed, with an oral tradition of knowledge's transferring. Therefore, almost no documentary

sources have survived. But, from those ancient materials that exist, and they are informationally quite consistent with each other, we understand that music was quite actively used precisely as a means of influencing a person and, in this particular case, a collective of people. For example, Pythagoras empirically determined the songs that need to be performed at his school at different times of the year and even at different times of the day:

... he employed such a melody as this about the vernal season. For he placed in the middle a certain person who played on the lyre and seated in circle round him those who were able to sing. And thus, when the person in the center struck the lyre, those that surrounded him sung certain peans, through which they were seen to be delighted, and to become elegant and orderly in the manners (Iamblichus, 1818, p. [XXV, 110]).

These musical and psychological experiments were apparently quite successful, since the Pythagoreans (in particular, the Pythagorean Damon) had an idea of a broader and more systematic application of this experience. So, for the first time in the history of mankind, we come across the idea of the possibility of the influence of music on society on a national scale. Then, this idea, through Socrates, passed to Plato, was transformed by him into a theory, and then it was developed by Aristotle. The genealogy of the Ethos theory is just that.

The theory of Ethos is based on a simple idea of the possibility of using music as a force of mental impact on a person, on a collective, on society. This theory assumes the presence of a subject who will make a musical impact and an object of this impact—a person or a certain society of people which will be subjected to this impact. It is assumed that the subject of the influence must know and understand the procedure of the influence of music and know about all its instruments. What about the object, should he understand music and all its mechanisms of the influence?

According to the theory of Ethos, music should at least be in the cultural field of this person, that is, its intonations should cause recognition and should belong to a person's intonation stock (according to musicologist Asafiev). Then, its influence is intensified. But it can be multiplied or, on the contrary, can be completely leveled out when a person understands and realizes all the means of this influence.

And here we naturally enter the field of hermeneutics, since understanding is its main category.

Understanding

In its most general sense, hermeneutics is the science of understanding. It is often said that hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. Yes, it is, but not quite. Because it is impossible to interpret what is not understood. Therefore, the act of understanding precedes the process of interpretation. In addition, understanding already differs from interpretation in that understanding is an action of an internal character, and interpretation is of external one, it acts outside. Therefore, understanding is a fundamental hermeneutic category. Everything else is based on it. The entire huge historical and philosophical construction of the hermeneutic worldview, with its theories of the hermeneutic circle, pre-understanding, and so on, is all built on the foundation of the category of understanding.

Augustine Aurelius was one of the first to define this category. And to this day, almost nothing has changed in this definition. So,

Augustine Aurelius said that understanding is a transition from a sign to a meaning (from a signifier to a signified). During this transition, the idea of the sign, which is acting on the soul, becomes imprinted in it. And thus, cognition is carried out.

This formula carries the universal meaning of understanding, finding its application in musical hermeneutics. The simplest example is the following: the second minuet of Bach's first cello suite begins with the minor third, which is an ordinary sign in music. A sign only takes on meaning when we understand it. Here we understand that the minor third (interval of m3) function is the main minor indicator. We understand and feel all the penetrating power of this sudden minor third after the major minuet. We understand that light has changed to shadow and joy to sadness. It is this understanding that translates a sign into a meaning. This requires a hermeneutic approach. The ancient Greeks implemented this approach and understood well that music consists of signs that ought to be turned into meanings. This postulate builds the hermeneutic foundation of the Ethos doctrine.

The Hermeneutic Element of the Ethos Theory

The hermeneutic idea of the Ethos theory consists in the need to understand and know the mechanisms of musical influence on the human psyche. The ancient philosophers understood well that music consists of signs, each of which carries a meaning, from the understanding of which the perception of music and the nature and strength of its impact on a person change. Ancient philosophy approached this issue systematically and analyzed in detail every sign presented in music.

What is a sign in music for ancient philosophy? If we look at this question as a whole, we can say that any element that may carry a philosophical meaning is a sign in music. And therefore, almost every category of music was thought as a sign in ancient Greek philosophy. For example, what can we say today about descending scale? Modern music theory says that a descending scale is a sequence of sounds in a descending movement. And that's all. In our today's understanding, the descending scale is not a sign, because it does not carry any philosophical meaning. The ancient Greeks looked at it completely differently. For example, the descending scale was a sign for Aristotle. He says: "Why is it more satisfactory for a singer to pass from a high to a low note than from a low to a high note?... is it because a low note is nobler and more euphonious after a high note?" (Aristotle, 1927, [XIX 33]). That is, for Aristotle, the descending scale is a sign, for him it has the meaning of nobility and pleasantness, since it had such an understanding in antiquity.

The same descending scale in the Middle Ages, which was then called *catabasis*, symbolized sadness and was a symbol of dying (Nosina, 2008, p. 18). Moreover, one of the varieties of *catabasis*—the so-called "difficult passage" (*passus duriusculus*)—a descending sequence of sounds (usually in bass), symbolized "the deepest sorrow, mortal torment" (Nosina, 2008, p. 39).

As we can see in this example, the sign (descending movement) remained the same, but its meaning changed almost to its exact opposite. Plato describes such a phenomenon in *Cratylus*, where he claims that by naming, we grasp the essence of a thing, but its nature remains absolutely fluid.

One could oppose these two phenomena and suggest some kind of revolutionary change in musical hermeneutics, which occurred somewhere between these two events, over a period of about

one and a half thousand years. However, neither would be correct. It would be right to understand the same epistemological nature of the approach to these two phenomena. No matter how they may seem opposite, and even antagonistic, they have one hermeneutical basis. It consists in the desire to understand the sign. Yes, the sign can be understood in different ways, sometimes, as we have seen, antagonistically, since philosophy and culture attach a meaning to the sign, and this meaning changes. What is important here is the striving to signify, to attach meaning, to understand a symbol. It is this that determines the hermeneutic approach to music both in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, when any structure-forming means of music was considered from the point of view of what it is a sign of. This is the process of symbolizing a musical object, when properties from a non-musical field are given to a musical category. In fact, music loses to a large extent its own significance and acquires the meaning of symbols with which culture and philosophy associate it. The most amazing thing is that between these musical phenomena, some kind of relationship is formed that reflects the cultural system of values.

So, for example, in Ancient Greece, a musical-philosophical system was formed, which is bipolar in terms of the moral impact of music on a person. The most striking example of this is the confrontation between the lyra and the aulos. Lyra was declared by ancient Greek philosophy as an instrument that carries all the best virtues (led by morality) to a person. On the other hand, aulos, which is often incorrectly translated into modern languages as flute, was discredited by philosophy as an instrument that is one of the most harmful and dangerous both for the human psyche and for the morality (Isababayeva Apaydin, 2015). The psychological and moral characteristics of these two instruments were critically different. It is surprising for us not only that a musical instrument can become a symbol, a sign of categories that are completely far from music (morality and ethics), but moreover, that these signs may be opposed to each other. But it should be understood that for antiquity, this symbolism, designation, and opposition are not surprising. Plato says: "We are not innovating, my friend, in preferring Apollo and the instruments of Apollo to Marsyas and his instruments" (Plato, 1969, p. [Rep. III 399e]). Such an attitude toward instruments is natural if they acquire a meaning that goes beyond just their practical use. If we understand the lyra as an instrument of Apollo, identifying it with the image of this god and attribute all his qualities to it, then its meaning changes with this understanding. It becomes a sign that carries meaning. The same applies to the aulos and other instruments of antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Antiquity sought to understand the sign. Reflecting on this problem, philosophy realized that there is a certain distance between the sign and the meaning, to overcome which it is necessary to make an effort. The best way to do this was the hermeneutic method, which provided the theoretical tools for this. It can be said with absolute certainty that all theories operating in symbolism (the theory of Ethos is among them) need hermeneutics. A symbol in art (and not only in art) exists precisely for this, in order to be interpreted.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The weakest side in this system, from the point of view of ancient philosophy, is the factor of an individual hermeneutic decision. This greatly complicates the task, for example, of the educational doctrine of Plato. Interpretation, as a way of individual creative

thinking, could not be accepted by the philosophers of the classical period. In an ideal state, a symbol could have only one meaning—that which would be most useful to society in an ethical sense. From this point of view, neither hermeneutics nor music were free. The philosophical ethics of antiquity placed them in rigid frameworks. This limitation could greatly damage the development of both music and hermeneutics, if the theory of Ethos had not turned out to be, from the beginning to the end, an absolutely utopian doctrine.

Based on this, we can say that since music, like any other art, operates with symbols, these symbols must be interpreted somehow. The tools for this are provided by hermeneutic. Ricoeur says:

I call any structure of meaning a symbol, where one meaning—direct, primary, literal—in addition, means another meaning—indirect, secondary, allegorical—which can only be understood through the first. This circle of expressions with a double meaning forms the hermeneutic field proper. In this regard, the concept of interpretation acquires a very definite meaning—... interpretation, we say, is the work of thinking, which consists in deciphering the meaning hidden behind the obvious meaning, in identifying the levels of meaning contained in the literal meaning (Ricoeur, 2008, p. 51).

Art requires an interpretive solution, but it will always be distorted if it is limited by outside forces, be it a state or society. Hermeneutic thinking is the work of the individual creative consciousness, and it cannot be a field for either censorship

or any other restrictions. Musical hermeneutics provides clues and tools for interpretation, and the only question is how they would be used.

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