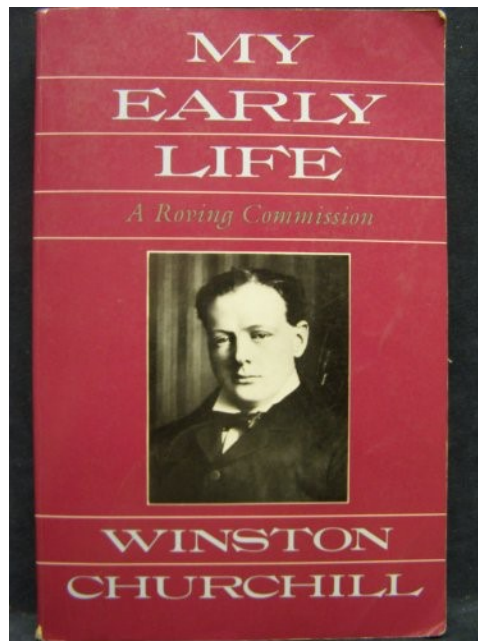


***Churchill on Philosophy
"Intellectual dynamite"***



Américo Pereira
Universidade Nova
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0874-689X

In his book, *My Early Life* (first published in 1930),¹ when discussing his grand lack of philosophical education, among other "spheres of thought", Winston Churchill affirms:

"It was not until the winter of 1896, when I had almost completed my twenty-second year, that the desire for learning came upon me. I began to feel myself wanting in even the vaguest knowledge about many large spheres of thought. I had picked up a wide vocabulary and had a liking for words and for the feel of words fitting and falling into their places like pennies in the slot. I caught myself using a good many words the meaning of which I could not define precisely. I admired these words, but was afraid to use them for fear of being absurd."

It is evident that his capacity to "fit words into their places" is proven beyond any doubt. He confesses to having collected many words and the inherent peril of, without proper intellectual training, misusing them. The preoccupation with the precise definition of words reminds us of the unique mode of clarity with which Churchill observed events, mainly the ones related to the coming to power and the use of power by the Nazi, and particularly those which were related to their deity-type leader, Adolf Hitler. Perhaps Winston's preoccupation with accuracy – that one can observe reported as early as when he arrived, very young, at school, as narrated in the scene of the Latin First Declension, when he declared that he did not 'address or speak to tables'² – is one of the main traits of his person.

¹ CHURCHILL Winston, *My Early Life*, London, Eland, 2000, p. 107, [first edition, 1930]; all other quotations pertinent to this text will be from this same edition, and are marked *ibidem*.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 9-11. "[...] 'But why O table?' I persisted in genuine curiosity. / 'O table, – you would use in addressing a table, in invoking a table.' And then seeing he was not carrying me with him, 'You would use it in speaking to a table.' / 'But I never do,' I blurted out in honest

Churchill on Philosophy "Intellectual dynamite", Américo Pereira

Winston was a man of great passion, vicious passion, perhaps, sometimes, but he was always overburdened with the sense of accuracy. He was a man of accurate passion for Britain, his wife and children, his nanny, even his most undeserving, unloving, parents.

A young and dashing cavalry officer, a sportsman, a promising front-line soldier, he felt himself "wanting in even the vaguest knowledge about many spheres of thought". He possessed some vocabulary, partly vague and lacking the due precision, and, intellectually, he possessed not much else, or so he thought. The bold man who defied bullets and blades and was used to killing³ confesses to be "afraid to use" those vague words in an absurd fashion.

He had had no formal university education, just the training due to an officer of the British Empire, whose main preoccupation was not to obtain a high intellectual score but to obey the orders coming from above and convey them to the ones under his power and range of commission. These men to whose class Winston belonged did not have to be learned, but to be military efficient. The intellectual matters mattered to the intellectuals and these were the civilians, for the British tradition is one of strict obedience of the Military to the Civilian in power representing the choice of the people. The Military are the servants of the interest and will of the people, not highly educated intellectuals. This is how things were viewed. Nevertheless, exceptions existed.

amazement. / 'If you are impertinent, you will be punished, and punished, let me tell you, very severely,' was his conclusive rejoinder. [...].

³ Though from a different period, the following words are demonstrative of how Churchill dealt with the perils of war (and of his sense of the frailty of life), *ibidem*, p. 191: "Suddenly in the midst of the troop up sprung a Dervish. How he got there I do not know. He must have leaped out of some scrub or hole. All the troops turned upon him thrusting with their lances: but he darted to and fro causing for the moment a frantic commotion. Wounded several times, he staggered towards me raising his spear. I shot him at less than a yard. He fell on the sand, and lay there dead. How easy to kill a man!". How easy it is, indeed. To what point did experiences such as this one marked him in the sense of not causing undue deaths?

The young man and officer began a whole new and decisive phase of his life, with this new desire that had sprung from the intuition of the lack of due knowledge, his newly perceived «mental needs». In his own words:

"This was only typical of a dozen similar mental needs that now began to press insistently upon me. I knew of course that the youths at the Universities were stuffed with all this patter at nineteen and twenty, and could pose you entrapping questions or give baffling answers. We never set much store by them or their affected superiority, remembering that they were only at their books, while we were commanding men and guarding the Empire. Nevertheless I had sometimes resented the apt and copious information which some of them seemed to possess, and I now wished I could find a competent teacher whom I could listen to and cross-examine for an hour or so every day."

There was a gap between his skills as a young non-academically-learned cavalry officer and the ones of the "nineteen and twenty [years old] youths at the Universities" who were acquainted with an apparatus of reasoning and erudition that enabled them to "pose you entrapping questions or give baffling answers". This would not do. This had to be altered. Furthermore, psychologically, Churchill admits, he "had sometimes resented the apt and copious information which some of them seemed to possess". The psychological passion transformed itself into an ethic desire of resolving the matter, an act of the will: "I now wished I could find a competent teacher whom I could listen to and cross-examine for an hour or so every day." It was an almost-academic project designed to rapidly change his cultural condition.

This confession is amazing to be read, coming from a man whose later capacity for accumulating information and for dealing with it according to his best interests was to become world famous. Further on, we will discuss how Churchill thought he should proceed to implement such an almost-academic endeavour, and how he actually acted.

Meanwhile, there are two of his observations that deserve special attention. The first concerns the way he understands the possession of knowledge by the University youths. The expression employed is "stuffed with all this patter". It is not

a word of praise. Though for some time his most immediate convivial life had been spent with the Military type, he was not devoid of contact with civilian University youths. Therefore, the way he perceived them was not as sapient possessors of knowledge, but as "stuffed" with something ("patter"). One stuffs dead animals, dead people, children's toys, and the like. One "stuffs" the belly with unneeded food. Denotatively, one does not "stuff" living people.

So, those academic youths seemed to young Winston something someone had stuffed with something. Stuffed beings are not exactly people; not actually. One may call it envy. Certainly one may. Nevertheless, the later experience Churchill had with these people – kind of people – illustrates what one can perceive, in an objective and non-envious sight, as "stuffed people", that is to say, people full of ready-made notions, the kind of unprecise ones Churchill disliked, people, for instance, who observed what seemed to Winston the tyranny of Hitler and saw nothing of it, seeing eventually just another political clown.

Perhaps those stuffed academic people were the same ones who did address tables just because the Latin Grammar told them to. But not impertinent Churchill, the one who loved to understand not just how things were but why and what for they were. And this is the topmost height of impertinence. For impertinent he was, this odd grandson of a Duke.

The second observation deals with a comparison, the relation of importance, perhaps valour, between the Academic youth and the Military one. Interestingly, Churchill does not speak as an individual but as a member of a group, using a "we": "We never set much store by them or their affected superiority, remembering that they were only at their books, while we were commanding men and guarding the Empire."

This statement may seem innocuous and trifle, banal. It is far from it. This is the full embodiment of what Churchill assumed as the task and aim of his life: to guard the Empire, having, for that purpose, to command men. These were his favourite

activities (he, who, to secure the support of Roosevelt, had to concede losing the Empire).⁴

The importance of this materially minute bit of text resides not in any possible consideration respective to Churchill's psychology or to his points of view on society, rather in the affirmation of the main-stays of his action: the defence of the Empire and the command of men in order to defend the Empire. To not understand this point is to not understand anything of Churchill's action, mainly during his terrible dark years of homeland exile during the thirties and the also terrible but brightly fertile years of his command of men (and women, by the many thousands) while procuring to save the Empire, in the form of saving the British (and Western) Civilization from the barbaric onslaught of the new tyranny forces of pied fascism, mainly the Nazi one; and never forgetting the other form of barbarism represented by the Soviet way of envisaging the world and human relations.

Another note is pertinent: though the exact words Churchill uses when referring to the relation between the Academic youth and the Military are "remembering that they were only at their books, while we were commanding men and guarding the Empire", there is an interpretation that is not impertinent and that

⁴ The Atlantic Charter, in its third point affirms: "Third, they respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.". Imperialists may argue that the document does not speak about independence of colonies or dominions. Nevertheless, the notion of "self-government" is quite clear: it is not due to others, whoever they may be, to govern us, but that right and 'burden' is due to us. The first affirmation is undeniably clear: each people have the right to choose its form of government. «We don't want to be a colony, governed by the Government that sieges in London»: was this claim not to be perceived by cunning old political fox Churchill when drafting the document and then, when signing it? Who would believe that? The price to pay in order to get the world rid of the worst form of tyranny was very heavy, but there was no other solution, but for the setting down of all the principles on which the Western Civilization was built. The reference for this matter in Churchill's memoires is: CHURCHILL Winston Spencer, *The Second World War*. Volume III. *The Grand Alliance*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985, pp. 385-400. These pages correspond to "Chapter XXIV, The Atlantic Charter"; one can find the transcription of the final version on pp. 393-394; the first draft is reprinted on p. 395 and shows Churchill's handwritten corrections.

helps to understand the actual relation between Churchill and the other members of the British political elite who did not have a military past but had only an academic one. This interpretation is the one according to which the reason for the existence of the guardians of the Empire was that their action was the one that permitted peace and security enough for some people to deal with and in books and not in blood, as the men like Churchill did. This also means that the scholars owed it to the men with the sword the possibility of not using a sword, but rather a pen.

This is, therefore, a subtle declaration of the political superiority – also moral – of the self-sacrificing Military over the gentle Academic. Diamantine thinking Churchill at his best.

In one other of his many and long literary monuments, Churchill refers to the 'revolt' of some student members of the University of Oxford⁵ refusing to serve in the military, the same ones who not much later were some of the first to sacrifice themselves for the sake of Britain, some as the youths on board the fighter planes

⁵ CHURCHILL Winston Spencer, *The Second World War*. Volume I. *The Gathering Storm*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985, p. 77: "In this dark time the basest sentiments received acceptance or passed unchallenged by the responsible leaders of the political parties. In 1933 the students of the Oxford Union, under the inspiration of a Mr. Joad, passed their ever-shameful resolution. "That this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country." It was easy to laugh off such an episode in England, but in Germany, in Russia, in Italy, in Japan, the idea of a decadent, degenerate Britain took deep root and swayed many calculations. Little did the foolish boys who passed the resolution dream that they were destined quite soon to conquer or fall gloriously in the ensuing war, and prove themselves the finest generation ever bred in Britain. Less excuse can be found for their elders, who had no chance of self-redemption in action.". At this point, Churchill introduces a quite graphic footnote: "I cannot resist telling this story. I was asked to address the University Conservative association in the Oxford Union. I declined to do so, but said I would give them an hour to ask me questions. One of the questions was, "Do you think Germany was guilty of making the last war?" I said, "Yes, of course." A young German Rhodes Scholar rose from his place and said, "After this insult to my country I will not remain here." He then stalked out amid roars of applause. I thought him a spirited boy. Two years later it was found out in Germany that he had a Jewish ancestor. This ended his career in Germany."

who valiantly pushed back the Luftwaffe attack during the high Summer of 1940, the same ones who merited one of his most famous phrases: «never in the...".⁶

So, good old History, with its dramatic and tragic options, bluntly put on the table of events, to be finally reconciled, the scholar and the military. Clearly, and with no great room for doubt, in Churchill's mind the aim and the task of the military were to guard what was comprehended under the notion of «Empire». In so doing, they also arranged the necessary peace, time and leisure needed for the academic type to define what the "Empire" should consist of.

In terms of the definition of what political society is and should be, this relation is paramount. For Churchill, there is no doubt that there can be no society – the Empire – without either the academic, the ones who think the society and define it formally, or the military, the ones destined to materialize that form, holding its identity, autonomy, its life, ultimately.

This is a Platonic structure, less its third kind, the makers or producers. These are the ones for whom Churchill provided better working and living conditions, acting politically as if he were an academic. History does have its ironies.

Irony apart, what one encounters here is the mental form through which Churchill thinks society, articulated – never "divided", this is not a notion that Churchill would accept – in three kinds, the producers, the guards, the academic. This is the Platonic form for the "polis", and it is of great significance that Churchill mentions Plato in the text that is being studied here, as we will soon see.

⁶ CHURCHILL Winston Spencer, *The Second World War*. Volume II. Their Finest Hour, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985, p. 300: "[...] The carefully-wrought organisation of Fighter Command, without which all might have been in vain, proved equal to months of continuous strain. All played their part. / At the summit the stamina and valour of our fighter pilots remained unconquerable and supreme. Thus Britain was saved. Well might I say in the House of Commons. "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." These few comprised not just these special pilots but other people struggling in the fronts and struggling in the rear, namely at Bletchley Park, the brain force who broke many Axis war codes.

Churchill on Philosophy "Intellectual dynamite", Américo Pereira

Knowing what and how the long life of Winston Churchill developed, one has to acknowledge another subtle historic irony: this man embodied the three kinds of men he recognized as the makers – and doers – of the city: he was an academic in fact if not formally; he was, by trade, a military; he was also a proud brick-layer. The Old Bulldog was an entire city on his own. Nevertheless, this tripartite mode of being gave him the unique perspective and experience, in a world where commonly one would have a flat just-one-kind life, perhaps, if one was non-compliant with traditional class dividing, two, very seldom, three. Winston had them all, he could think and act like an academic, like a soldier (both front-line and general-staff one), like a working man. He was always a working man with the intelligence of a scholar and the discipline and resilience of a soldier.

As is known, this was of consequence, permitting a triple, though integrated view, on political things that no one else had. It was not always the best possible view, but, when he got it right, he was capable of not only leading the views on common decency politics but also seeing beyond the common near-sighted vision of traditional policy making and general political practice.

Young Churchill was discovering a whole new world of sense, of a "logos" previously unsuspected to him. There were many and much higher layers of intellectual reality than the ones present to his intelligence and memory. His inner intellectual possibilities were emerging to his own intelligence as something pristine, un-thought, perhaps deemed impossible before this logic shock. He found himself capable of dwelling, or, at least, capable of trying to dwell where the finest of the scholars abode. It is almost tender to listen to the words he streams conveying this discovery:

"One day, before I left England, a friend of mine had said: 'Christ's gospel was the last word in Ethics.' This sounded good; but what were Ethics? They had never been mentioned to me at Harrow or Sandhurst. Judging from the context I thought they must mean 'the public school spirit', 'playing the game', 'esprit de corps', 'honourable behaviour', 'patriotism', and the like. Then someone told me that Ethics were concerned not merely with the things you ought to do, but with why you ought to do them, and that there

were whole books written on the subject. I would have paid some scholar £2 at least to give me a lecture of an hour or an hour and a half about Ethics. What was the scope of the subject; what were its main branches; what were the principal questions dealt with, and the chief controversies open; who were the high authorities and which were the standard books? But here in Bangalore there was no one to tell me about Ethics for love or money. Of tactics I had a grip: on politics I had a view: but a concise compendious outline of Ethics was a novelty not to be locally obtained."⁷

The memorial narrative is almost childish. However, it shows, if true to a memory itself true to the reality of the past, the traits, one may say the main traits of Churchill's mode of living as a man in search of sense, of a sense that corresponds as best as possible to the true core of reality. The axial love of reality, of truthfulness, patented symbolically in the scene of the child who did not address tables or speaks to them, lingers on within the pertinence of the questions reported above: "What was the scope of the subject; what were its main branches; what were the principal questions dealt with, and the chief controversies open; who were the high authorities and which were the standard books?".

Was this not the intellectual way mature Winston used to approach – with better or worse outcomes, as in the usual walk of human action – all the issues that came under his range of duty and power?

Let us try to apply these many questions to the "matter Hitler". "What was the scope of the subject"? Did Churchill not study with the utmost interest, vastly, the "scope of the subject" Hitler? Did he not, during the major part of the thirties, obtain and shared an incomparable knowledge on the "scope of this subject"? Apparently he did, indeed. The study and the insight obtained navigating largely and profoundly the "scope of the subject" were what permitted him to be ready for dealing, precisely, with "the subject" as soon as the latter urgently had to be dealt with. No one else possessed such an appropriate knowledge.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 107-108.

"What were its main branches"? The study carried on the subject under discussion lead Churchill to being able to appreciate uniquely great many of the "branches" of the "problem Hitler", its background and foundations, its possibilities, its dangers, its degree of political and anthropological perversion; and, of course, its ethic grounds and the ethic practice one could expect coming from the "subject", Corporal Hitler.

"What were the principal questions dealt with"? Undoubtedly Churchill, during the phase of studying "the subject", perceived and interiorized the "principal questions", some of which constituted the matters of his addresses to a Chamber in a House that did not concern itself with such trivial subjects, until faced with the inevitability of having to fight and perhaps die or become enslaved. The inhumanity of the Nazi regime was one of the subjects; the rearmament of Nazi Germany and the miserable military situation of the Great Democracies was another of such subjects; many others are available for consultation as already common historiography.

"The chief controversies open"? Most of these controversies were opened by Churchill himself, in a period of appeasement, when people preferred to not think about impending perils, magically hoping that a godless providence of political relations would solve what just the ethic of a human common good oriented action could. Perhaps the main controversy in the United Kingdom versed on Churchill being or not being a simple warmonger. Nevertheless, the main real controversy consisted on the possible destination of the world and the future of humanity as a thing of freedom or as a mass of slaves under one tyrant or a few oligarchs.

"Who were the high authorities and which were the standard books"? These are the easiest questions to be answered, for there were just two authorities of the highest rank, precisely Hitler, as the man who devised the sense of the new order wantonly expected to invade the whole world; and Churchill, the man who, continuously being the child who did not address tables as normal people were supposed to, was capable of having an intelligent approach to Hitler's ideas,

believing that – as the old Corporal wanted – they were created to be put into political existence.

As to the "standard books", Hitler facilitated the task when he wrote and published *Mein Kampf*, a repertoire of many things, mainly of the ones that were the "granite pillars" of the dictator's ambitions – which are psychological beings – and aims, finalities, which are not psychological, but necessarily objective, thus palpably doable.

This objectivity of the aims situates the discussion on a ground of human possibility – not of human magic mania or psychological daydreaming – which is to say, on the grounds of ethics and politics. Those were the grounds upon which Churchill was able to situate Hitler's ideas, Hitler's aims.

Therefore, the youngish 'Winstonian' curiosity on philosophical things such as «ethics» played a major role in the drama of Churchill's public life as the man who always acted bearing in mind that action is not just "anything", but the core of the human ability to construct human world, not as "anything", but as a thing of goodness.

A quote of a part of his narrative prior to the one under analysis is quite revealing. It affirms: "Ethics were concerned not merely with the things you ought to do, but with why you ought to do them". For instance: why on earth does one address a table? This intellectual encounter with ethics as a thing, better said, as an act of questioning, an act of interrogation prior to making or doing things, does, indeed, fit the deepest mode of being of this odd aristocratic youth. Action, practice, doing or making things revealed themselves not just as matter of fact, based on tradition – 'people do address tables, young man!' –, but as a necessarily thought out, pondered, process. Action does not derive mechanically from tradition or regulations, but from human beings who have to think about the reasons for acting.

Therefore, this is not a young-odd-Winston's problem wanting to know the reason for addressing tables. On the contrary, seemingly, there is an old and prestigious philosophical discipline that deals with action and its reasons, its

justifications, pre and post implementation. No wonder, old Churchill, writing about young Churchill, seems to feel good finding this new intellectual horizon.

This permanent want for knowing the reasons of acts is structural to the person Winston Churchill. Why would such fine people, such fine and devoted women, such as his Nanny, after many years of labour end up abandoned? Why should miners have to endure such harsh working conditions? Why should prisons be so wickedly built and run? His own life experiences made him pose questions of this sort, finding practical and pragmatic answers to them, reforming many sectors of British society and tradition. His was a profoundly ethic marked action.

Why address tables? Why abandon aged workers? These are not the same words. Nevertheless both phrases carry the same intellectual attitude. This ethic trend persists when an again odd Winston starts questioning the acts, and their ethics, perpetrated by a notorious former German Army Corporal named Adolf Hitler. Why act the way he acts? What are his aims? What does Hitler, beyond or within his rhetoric, really want? Is he talking truthfully when he barks his inflammatory diatribes, or is it just another clown playing the inflated toad?

The man who did not address tables soon found out that the old Corporal 'meant business'. Hitler's talk was for real. What he had put down in writing on *Mein Kampf* was to be overviewed with caution and purpose, the purpose of identifying what that really meant and what was to actually spring out of that already open box.

For about seven years no one or very few payed the due attention to the questions being raised by Churchill. When they at last did, it was already too late to take effective measures to avoid what was to become the up to now deadliest human conflict.

There is a strong irony in some parts of the text under analysis here: "But here in Bangalore there was no one to tell me about Ethics for love or money.". Laying aside the irony, one wonders if, other than the academics, anyone really knew anything about what ethics was, not as an academic thing but as the core of the intimate sense of human action, past, present and to be. The stupid question "where

was God Here and There" comes many times to the mouths of ethic incapable people: in Churchill's odd action in those odd times, the question, not stupid, to be made was: "how was it possible that almost no one sees what is cooking exactly before their eyes and under their noses?"; perhaps, while Churchill was ethically pondering upon Hitler's diverse moves, the rest were addressing tables. How comforting this thought must be to the ones who both address tables and wait for "God" to do what they should do but cannot for they are busy addressing tables.

Inquisitive, odd, Winston carries on:

"Then someone had used the phrase 'the Socratic method'. What was that? It was apparently a way of giving your friend his head in an argument and propping him into a pit by cunning questions. Who was Socrates, anyhow? A very argumentative Greek who had a nagging wife and was finally compelled to commit suicide because he was a nuisance! Still, he was beyond doubt a considerable person. He counted for a lot in the minds of learned people. I wanted 'the Socrates story'. Why had his fame lasted through all the ages? What were the stresses, which had led a government to put him to death merely because of the things he said? Dire stresses they must have been: the life of the Athenian Executive or the life of this talkative professor! Such antagonisms do not spring from petty issues. Evidently Socrates had called something into being long ago which was very explosive. Intellectual dynamite! A moral bomb! But there was nothing about it in The Queen's Regulations."⁸

Apparently fascinated with 'the Socratic method', that "moral bomb", with the power and consequences of "Intellectual dynamite", Churchill does not let himself be wronged by illusions, for, after knowing about the old Men-Sculptor's fate, he clearly understood that "Such antagonisms do not spring from petty issues.". These antagonisms sprung from Socrates' attitude towards the ethic, religious and political traditions of old Athens. "What were the stresses which had led a government to put him to death merely because of the things he said?"

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

The Winston living these anxieties was a young man and not a very learned one, but the Winston writing about the young one was differently shaped: he already had tasted the bitterness of political failure, political triumph as well, always acting as an independent mind. To what extent does the old Churchill writer interpret old Socrates as 'another himself' and himself as this old Churchill, the inquisitive, unloved political troublemaker, incapable of toeing his party's lines, daring to think for himself, pointing out – rightly or wrongly – to what he could perceive as the correct analysis, the correct way, the correct thing to do?

When he wrote these memoirs, he knew perfectly what kind of quarrels he had had with the powers in power, the quarrels he was having with them. Being himself gloomy in many moments of his life – the "black dog", always lurking inside his person –, was he transferring to himself the fatal ending, political ending due to the ethic stance of Socrates? The following quote seems – but for the part of the nagging wife, which Clementine never was – to fit almost too well: "A very argumentative Greek who had a nagging wife and was finally compelled to commit suicide because he was a nuisance!".

During the thirties, especially with the failures of his defence of a hard stand on the Empire's relation with India's possibility of self-rule and independence, and of the politically foolish King Edward VIII, to which he added the early and persistent denouncement of Hitler's aims, ways and methods, seemingly old nagging Winston was committing a political suicide. Had not historic reality given him due reason, though ingloriously vain for the price it implied, and Churchill would end his political days as a political suicide. Really, he would amount to nothing more than a perished, forgotten "nuisance".

However, his active nuisance almost daily rested on solid matters. Solid and utmost perilous were they. The point of dissent was grave. Therefore, saying that "Dire stresses they must have been: the life of the Athenian Executive or the life of this talkative professor!" was most accurate, for those stresses did not emerge from petty troubles or causes, and the friction they caused between British Executive and talkative Churchill was not unimportant, for «Such antagonisms do not spring from

petty issues.». Winston's latest favourite matter of political attrition was a 'grand' issue, made with the stuff of grand evils: Corporal Hitler.

In Bangalore, Winston found out that he was made of the same «explosive» «intellectual dynamite» that shaped the life and death of Socrates. Intellectually, the ethic and philosophic novice encountered a mentor: Socrates of Athens. The encounter and the choice could not be better, for the old philosopher embodied many of the main principles that were to guide adult Churchill's live, the ponderous one, under the surface of alcohol and cigars.

On page 109 of *My Early Life*, we encounter the following:

"...] Now I wanted to know more. / So I resolved to read history, philosophy, economics, and things like that; and I wrote to my mother asking for such books as I had heard of on these topics."

"Things like that" is an expression that seems to show that Churchill did not have in great consideration the matters into which he was plunging. Lacking proper academic guidance, perhaps the neophyte also lacked the necessary intelligence to perceive the greatness of the issues not just at hand, now that he spotted their existence, but, really «in hand», having the physical vectors – the books – that carried with them this high knowledge in his possession.

However, a few words ahead, the same apparently frivolous student affirms:

"From November to May I read for four hours every day history and philosophy. Plato's Republic – it appeared he was for all practical purposes the same as Socrates; the Politics of Aristotle, edited by Mr. Welldon himself; Schopenhauer on Pessimism; Malthus on Population; Darwin's Origin of Species: all interspersed with other books of lesser standing. It was a curious education. First because I approached it with an empty, hungry mind, and with fairly strong jaws; and what I got I bit; secondly because I had no one to tell me: 'This is discredited'. 'You should read the answer to that by so and so; the two together will give you the gist of the argument'. 'There is a much better book on that subject', and so forth. I now began for the first time to envy those young cubs at the

Churchill on Philosophy "Intellectual dynamite", Américo Pereira

university who had fine scholars to tell them what was what; professors who had devoted their lives to mastering and focussing ideas in every branch of learning; who were eager to distribute the treasures they had gathered before they were overtaken by the night. But now I pity undergraduates, when I see what frivolous lives many of them lead in the midst of precious fleeting opportunity. After all, a man's Life must be nailed to a cross either of Thought or Action. Without work there is no play."

The young, unlearned officer attacked history and philosophy four hours a day, which, battle times wise, is a considerable feat of arms. Winston's mind seemed to be capable of pairing with his body; his intellect capable of going along with his memory. The fields of battle chosen could not be better or even more vast and profound: Plato and Aristotle, first and most, among others. Plato indeed, within the framework of his Republic, "appeared he was for all practical purposes the same as Socrates». The same "intellectual dynamite", both of them? Certainly the same deeply rooted love for common good. Common good, in Churchill's very own perspective, will be the passion and love of this mature and old imperial soldier, even when he had to forfeit the Empire in order to obtain the help of President Roosevelt. Common good as the antithesis of fascism had to be worth the loss of imperial power, perhaps just a childish illusion, even a deeper fascist one. This terrible movement of political 180° inversion must have been terribly painful to Churchill. In the end, at least provisionally, fascism was defeated.

Someone who had the pleasure of reading Plato's dialogues in which his beloved master Socrates exposed what Churchill intelligently perceived as their general common doctrine, understands that both the Master and the pupil, through the way they thought and acted, were themselves «intellectual dynamite». The love for common good, that is, the good for all who want to share it (it is impossible for those who don't want to participate) is the political and ethic 'dynamite' that blows up all trends and facts that centre good – the possession of good, of which the possession of "goods" is part, not coinciding – on just one – tyranny – or on just a few, even if in an apparent majority form – oligarchy.

Churchill on Philosophy "Intellectual dynamite", Américo Pereira

In a very patent sense, Churchill himself assumed the part of "political dynamite", having understood the power that the "intellectual dynamite" created when practised by people who devoted themselves to the promotion of common good.

Plato's *Republic* starts with the descent of Socrates from Athens to the Piraeus, and ends with a vow of "farewell", literally "fare well"; fare well for the rest of your eternal life. Not at all a mean trip for the old Master to utter, conveying the words of his pupil. Winston is right: the old sculptor and the frustrated scribbler of drama do share a profound 'likeness'. This same ethic and political paradigm is also shared by the Old Bulldog.

Such an understanding of the Socratic way as a blasting mode of thinking and acting must surely have sprung from the already mentioned lack of proper academic orientation. The thus poor victim of that lack of proper guidance is the first to admit that. On pages 110-111, he writes:

"It was a curious education. First because I approached it with an empty, hungry mind, and with fairly strong jaws; and what I got I bit; secondly because I had no one to tell me: 'This is discredited'. 'You should read the answer to that by so and so; the two together will give you the gist of the argument'. 'There is a much better book on that subject', and so forth."

His mind was "empty" of academic 'things'. It was "hungry", though. Hungry perhaps because his mind was not stuffed with the same things that other people fed on. Let us not forget that the moment of emptiness – of "ignorance"; but not a stupid one – is the first Socratic step towards the possibility of acquiring "science", "knowledge", "intelligence"; it is the step without which there can be no metamorphosis of the human being, for in a full space there is no room for anything else.

The hunger for knowledge, for a higher intelligence of 'things', of the world and its foundations is not another step, but the necessary "eros" that moves the human

being from this emptiness of litter to a possible fulfilment of divine beauty and goodness, as Plato, through the voice of Socrates, explains in the *Symposion*.

This "eros" would achieve little if not equipped with "strong jaws": the will – not just the desire, but its concrete realizations – to bite and rip intelligence from where it abides, that is to say, the courage to look and see; the courage to climb the stairs of knowledge. No one can advance in intelligence, in knowledge without this act of permanent courage. Science is not for the ones with a coward ethic fabric.

The lack of academic tutorial may help to understand Churchill's intellectual stance and the general mode through which he interpreted life, his own and political life as a whole. He was not impeded by formal traditional education to think autonomously, he had not had thwarted his brilliant capacity to grasp unapparent political and ethical sense, that is to say, unapparent to the ones to whom the capacity of thinking free from academic reductive vices had been diminished or annihilated.

Though the academic critical sense is fundamental, precisely in a Socratic-Platonic sense – forget not that Plato was the founder of the first ever Academy –, there is always the danger of pedantic metamorphosis of such a good tool. Therefore, the words that follow are both a confession of lacking and a kind of admission of freedom from pedantic shackles: "I had no one to tell me: 'This is discredited'. 'You should read the answer to that by so and so; the two together will give you the gist of the argument'. 'There is a much better book on that subject', and so forth."

Churchill, when writing this memoir of his youthful times, as a mature man and politician, a prolific writer and an old soldier, knows perfectly that the ones who did not act as they should have acted, in peace and in war, the ones who, during the foreboding decade of 1930, did nothing to prevent the utmost perilous swelling of fascism, mainly the "hitlerite" one, belonged almost all of them to the number of those who had academic training, many of them in some of the best Universities of the Empire and of the world. It did them no good as far as political intuition was

concerned. It seemed to have bound them to traditions and values that had not the plasticity and actability necessary to interpret and act in modern day political life.

It matters not in a positive way, intelligence of political facts wise, if, after having perceived Hitler's finalities as stated in *Mein Kampf*, one goes and reads ten «opinions» on the same subject. One just finds himself afloat perhaps even drowned in a sea of words. Human life is not a matter of words, for the sake of words, but of sense. It is the sense that has to be found, "insighted": this alone permits an action pertinent and effective, if that is the case, if what one perceives demands action.

What should the Old Bulldog compare *Mein Kampf* to? Hitler's action is comparable to what? All was terribly new back then. Reducing that novelty to already known thoughts or actions would do nothing more than to lead astray intelligence from reality, actual and alive, to a side show of intellectual agonistic struggle, all of it illusion and smoke.

As shown immediately as soon as he was put into office, action is the only way to contradict action. For the possibility of success of that action the knowledge of your enemy's aims and methods is paramount. You learn it by studying it, not by collating opinions on it. "Will Hitler attack or not?": this is not a question that can be effectively answered through the discussion of different opinions, but by the insight on the man's aims; aims, not intentions, for these are, but for a divine or magic intervention, unfathomable. Are the ways of action exhibited coherent with the proclaimed aims? For Churchill, the answer was "yes", which meant that, sooner or later, Hitler would attack, which he did more than once, tentatively, and, having obtained no counter action worthy of worrying, finally launched the main attack. This is nowadays commonly known history.

In Churchill's wasteland times, the ones in which he wrote the memoir that concerns us here, this history had not yet developed. Nevertheless, Churchill endlessly shared his insights on Hitler and his aims. Too late was he heard, and even then, the sense of relative opinion prevailed, right to the end.

Platonic Academy was based on the doctrine exposed in Plato's *Symposion*, where the aim of the human being is to erotically ascend ontologically via acts of ever growing and ever higher intelligence of the beauty present in the world as manifestation of the good the constituted the ontological core of reality, ending – that is, not really ending – at the eternal contemplation of beauty itself, the "phainomenon" of goodness itself, Plato's "God".

Thus, the truly academic, under a Platonic perspective, is Churchill, who, unimpeded by the shackles of academic perverse pedantic fashion, was able to look at reality in a perhaps apparently childish manner, but one that centred him on the acute point, the one on which everything depended.

It is therefore no acid irony or even the sarcasm of a frustrated man what we read in this next and final quote taken from the youthful memoirs:

"When I am in the Socratic mood and planning my Republic, I make drastic changes in the education of the sons of well-to-do citizens. When they are sixteen or seventeen they begin to learn a craft and to do healthy manual labour, with plenty of poetry, songs, dancing, drill and gymnastics in their spare time. They can thus let off their steam on something useful. It is only when they are really thirsty of knowledge, longing to hear about things, that I would let them go to the University. It would be a favour, a coveted privilege, only to be given to those who had either proved their worth in factory or field or whose qualities and zeal were pre-eminent. However, this would upset a lot of things; it would cause commotion and bring me perhaps in the end a hemlock draught."⁹

If any doubt subsisted on what to understand as the definition of "intellectual dynamite" presented by this ever biting Old Bulldog, the present paragraph says it all. It even anticipates the effects on the Author of such upsetting mode of thinking, so un-academic, perhaps so 'proletarian'. Let us not forget that this same man was a brick mason with trade union certification. This prole would be prized with hemlock. He really was, in a certain way.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

Churchill on Philosophy "Intellectual dynamite", Américo Pereira

As he himself says, under – perhaps "in" – a "Socratic mood", Churchill would be, Churchill was platonically diamantine. Having seen the results of the highest education on "well-to-do citizens", and considering that the others hardly had any chance of reaching such a privileged level, he would act to radically change the way people were (and still are) educated – in fact, instructed, for education is always an happening of the rarest kind – altering the entire structure of education. Good old Winston never forgot the marking experience of dealing with people who thought one can address tables just because Latin Grammar formally permits it. Reality has a proper grammar, but it cannot be confused with the academic one or substituted by it.

What would he indeed do, under the spell of a Socratic disposition, planning his *Republic*? The answer is quite objective: "[...] I make drastic changes in the education of the sons of well-to-do citizens.". The justification, implicit only, comes immediately after: «When they are sixteen or seventeen they begin to learn a craft and to do healthy manual labour, with plenty of poetry, songs, dancing, drill and gymnastics in their spare time. They can thus let off their steam on something useful.". Quite a heavy punch on the gut of these youths and their happily proud parents this is.

The not well to do people have an experience of hard and painful work. Most of them, even if capable, will never have the means to undergo a more intellectual path. The well to do, even if devoid of real intellectual capacity, do have the means to receive a higher education. Some of them make bad use of this opportunity, thus occupying a place, which should not be theirs by right. This right and place are for the ones who are willing to work. Learning, though plentiful of joys, is not a joke, but a work of intellectual art. These artists are the real aristocrats. Real aristocrats like Mrs. Everest, the Old Nanny. This intellectual, ethic and political stand on education and its access is paradigmatically platonic.

For this in-the-Socratic-mood Churchill, first you prove yourself as a worker – broad sense of the term – then you can, if that is your will and capacity, pursue a path of higher knowledge. Here, there is waste of resources. Therefore, «It is only

when they are really thirsty of knowledge, longing to hear about things, that I would let them go to the University», for such a possibility is "a favour, a coveted privilege, only to be given to those who had either proved their worth in factory or field or whose qualities and zeal were pre-eminent."

No wonder this Socratic pupil would be destined to swallow a plentiful cup of hemlock. Education would not come as a privilege of birth or wealth, but as a privilege – a deserved one, but, nevertheless a privilege for it would not be for all – of "qualities and zeal". One supposes qualities and zeal of and for good, for goodness, for common-good.

This would be an academic world where there would be no acceptancy for people who were imbecile enough to address tables (except in excellent metaphors in excellent poems, of course), granting access for everyone who had good enough qualities and zeal. Again, old Plato present; unloved, hated Plato, who does not accept that the city should be built on bloodlines, who demands that the city be built on intelligence and hard work. For all. Otherwise, the door of the city is the way out for the ones who do not comply.

Philosophy is the pursuit, the loving pursuit of sense, of «logos», the one reality that both Heraclitus and John the Evangelist place as the absolute axis of reality. It can be totally unreligious or totally religious, what it cannot allow is the annihilation of sense practiced by the people who address tables just because grammar allows them to. It is through this black hole of intelligence that senselessness penetrates humanity. One can always find a person ready to give in to Hitler in a person magically addressing a table. Intelligence, in its zeal for goodness, should "never surrender".

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

CHURCHILL Winston Spencer, *My early Life*, London, Eland, 2000, p. 107, [1st edition, 1930].

-----, *The Second World War*. Volume I. The Gathering Storm, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985.

-----, *The Second World War*. Volume II. Their Finest Hour, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985.

-----, *The Second World War*. Volume III. The Grand Alliance, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985.

PLATO, *Republic*, Books I-V, translation by Paul Shorey, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, Harvard University Press, 2003.

-----, *Republic*, Books VI-X, translation by Paul Shorey, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, Harvard University Press, 2006.

-----, *Symposium*, in, idem, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, translation by W. R. M. Lamb, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, Harvard University Press, [1925].

ANNEX: The whole fragment quoted from *My Early Life*

"It was not until the winter of 1896, when I had almost completed my twenty-second year, that the desire for learning came upon me. I began to feel myself wanting in even the vaguest knowledge about many large spheres of thought. I had picked up a wide vocabulary and had a liking for words and for the feel of words fitting and falling into their places like pennies in the slot. I caught myself using a good many words the meaning of which I could not define precisely. I admired these words, but was afraid to use them for fear of being absurd. One day, before I left England, a friend of mine had said: 'Christ's gospel was the last word in Ethics.' This sounded good; but what were Ethics? They had never been mentioned to me at Harrow or Sandhurst. Judging from the context I thought they must mean 'the public school spirit', 'playing the game', 'esprit de corps', 'honourable behaviour', 'patriotism', and the like. Then someone told me that Ethics were concerned not merely with the things you ought to do, but with why you ought to do them, and that there were whole books written on the subject. I would have paid some scholar £2 at least to give me a lecture of an hour or an hour and a half about Ethics. What was the scope of the subject; what were its main branches; what were the principal questions dealt with, and the chief controversies open; who were the high authorities and which were the standard books? But here in Bangalore there was no one to tell me about Ethics for love or money. Of tactics I had a grip: on politics I had a view: but a concise compendious outline of Ethics was a novelty not to be locally obtained.

This was only typical of a dozen similar mental needs that now began to press insistently upon me. I knew of course that the youths at the Universities were stuffed with all this patter at nineteen and twenty, and could pose you entrapping questions or give baffling answers. We never set much store by them or their affected superiority, remembering that they were only at their books, while we were commanding men and guarding the Empire. Nevertheless I had sometimes resented the apt and copious information, which some of them seemed to possess, and I now wished I could find a competent teacher whom I could listen to and cross-examine for an hour or so every day.

Then someone had used the phrase 'the Socratic method'. What was that? It was apparently a way of giving your friend his head in an argument and prodding him into a pit by cunning questions. Who was Socrates, anyhow? A very argumentative Greek who had a nagging wife and was finally compelled to commit suicide because he was a nuisance! Still, he was beyond doubt a considerable person. He counted for a lot in the minds of learned people. I wanted 'the Socrates story'. Why had his fame lasted through all the ages? What were the stresses which had led a government to put him to death merely because of the things he said? Dire stresses they must have been: the life of the Athenian Executive or the life of this talkative professor! Such antagonisms do not spring from petty issues. Evidently Socrates had called something into being long ago which was very explosive. Intellectual dynamite! A moral bomb! But there was nothing about it in The Queen's Regulations.

[...] From November to May I read for four hours every day history and philosophy. Plato's Republic – it appeared he was for all practical purposes the same as Socrates; the Politics of Aristotle, edited by Mr. Welldon himself; Schopenhauer on Pessimism; Malthus on Population; Darwin's Origin of Species: all interspersed with other books of lesser standing. It was a curious education. First because I approached it with an empty, hungry mind, and with fairly strong jaws; and what I got I bit; secondly because I had no one to tell me: 'This is discredited'. 'You should read the answer to that by so and so; the two together will give you the gist of the argument'. 'There is a much better book on that subject', and so forth. I now began for the first time to envy those young cubs at the university who had fine scholars to tell them what was what; professors who had devoted their lives to mastering and focussing ideas in every branch of learning; who were eager to distribute the treasures they had gathered before they were overtaken by the night. But now I pity undergraduates, when I see what frivolous lives many of them lead in the midst of precious fleeting opportunity. After all, a man's Life must be nailed to a cross either of Thought or Action. Without work there is no play.

When I am in the Socratic mood and planning my Republic, I make drastic changes in the education of the sons of well-to-do citizens. When they are sixteen or seventeen they begin to learn a craft and to do healthy manual labour, with plenty of poetry, songs, dancing, drill and gymnastics in their spare time. They can thus let off their steam on something useful. It is only when they are really thirsty of knowledge, longing to hear about things, that I would let them go to the University. It would be a favour, a coveted privilege, only to be given to those who had either proved their worth in factory or field or whose qualities and zeal were pre-eminent. However, this would upset a lot of things; it would cause commotion and bring me perhaps in the end a hemlock draught."¹⁰

¹⁰ CHURCHILL Winston, *My Early life*, London: Eland, 2000, pp. 107-111, [1st edition, 1930].

ABSTRACT

Mature Winston Churchill, writing his memoirs on his youthful days reflects on his tardy found desire of academic type knowledge and the wonders and joys he discovered practising philosophy in a Socratic mood, manifesting his view on education, higher and lower. This article also discusses the possible influence of his odd education path on his ability to comprehend political reality in a very different way, allowing him to perceive Hitler's aims with almost pinpoint accuracy.

Key-words: Churchill, philosophy, education, Socrates.