Conversion.
A tale of three etymologies

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ABSTRACT

Heidegger's approach to etymology concentrates on Greek and German, and mainly on the 'echoes' of Greek in German. However, a true 'hören' to language cannot be limited to one language. This research shows that a history of the broad idea of 'conversion', followed from Greek onwards, through etymologies and translations, reveals an unexpected wealth of semantic features and of views on world and life.

Martin Heidegger's fascination with etymologies is one of the distinctive features of his philosophical texts and one of the most frequently criticised. The German philosopher is attacked for what often appears to be pure wordplay (patterns such as "X of Y is Y of X") and for joking with etymologies, but the reason for this kind of obsession is deeply rooted in Heidegger's meditation on language. In the essay on *Logos*, starting from Heraclitus's fragment B50 (οὐκ ἐμοῦ ἀλλὰ τοῦ Λόγου ἀκούσαντας ὁμολογεῖν σοφόν ἐστιν Ἓν Πάντα)[1]. Heidegger criticises

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[1] «When you have listened not to me but to the Meaning it is wise within the same Meaning to say: One is all»: I quote Snell's translation from Heidegger

the standard translations of this fragment and analyses the deep meaning of λόγος – λέγειν; the meaning of "word" and "speech" cannot obviously be denied, but a comparison with the German *legen* / *lessen* / *Lese* leads to the emergency of a hidden meaning: the idea of "collecting / protecting / selecting" (German *Lese*, *Auslese*). Before the idea of λόγος as "word", i.e. something that is done by someone in order to connect with someone else, there is a deeper layer that emerges and wants to be heard: we can "shelter" if and only if we "gather select".

This well-known example illuminates the inner structure of Heidegger's etymologies. Greek and German are the languages he is interested in; whenever he discovers a kind of 'echo' of Greek roots (or of what he pretends to be Greek roots, of course) in a German word, his argument flows smoothly and is even easy to follow – despite Heidegger's reputation for being often incomprehensible. The masterpiece of this type of essay is, in the opinion of the present writer, the lecture *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (1951), where Heidegger, through the interplay of modern German, Greek, Old German and even Gothic, produces one of the most powerful and robust theoretical structures of his thought, which is still extremely active in contemporary philosophy[2]. In Heidegger's own words (Heidegger 2000a, 150):

> Daß die Sprache die eigentliche Bedeutung des Wortes bauen, das Wohnen, gleichsam zurücknimmt, bezeugt jedoch das Ursprüngliche dieser Bedeutungen; denn bei den wesentlichen Worten der Sprache fällt ihr eigentlich Gesagtes zugunsten des vordergründig Gemeinten leicht in die Vergessenheit. Das Geheimnis dieses Vorganges hat der Mensch noch kaum bedacht. Die Sprache entzieht dem Menschen ihr einfaches und hohes Sprechen. Aber dadurch verstummt ihr anfänglicher Zuspruch nicht, er schweigt nur. Der Mensch freilich unterläßt es,

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(1984: 59). Heidegger's essay (composed in 1951) was published in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Heidegger 2000b: 211-234).

[2] See Heidegger (2000a); English translation Heidegger (1971: 145-161). Needless to say, Heidegger's etymologies are criticised by linguists: see e.g. Belardi (2002: II 478-479).

auf dieses Schweigen zu achten. Hören wir jedoch auf das, was die Sprache im Wort bauen sagt […][3].

What language tells us through the Greek roots and their German 'echo' is the basis of Heidegger's approach to etymology: more precisely, it consists in 'listening' to the original meaning of a word. The philosopher's interest is entirely focused on the 'original' meaning: in this perspective, there is no room for studying the 'development' of meaning(s). In order to 'listen' to language, the philosopher must 'deconstruct' any development of meaning and return to the clear, unpolluted waters of the 'Grund' hidden beneath modern words.

But what if a person's first language is not German? Is he condemned to not being able to discover a 'Grund', even if he tries to 'listen' to the language? A different approach, less charming than Heidegger's example and certainly more down-to-earth, is possible; and, to put it as a bit of a joke, it gives some hope to non-Germans. There are *languages*, not just 'language'; and languages 'speak' their civilisation, not an abstract 'generic man'; and if a civilisation is strong enough, the encounter with another civilisation means that the old words will be able to interact with new meanings, partly overlapping the old ones, partly enriching them with new semantic fields: and the old words will be the same, but not the same. The example of the present essay is the word "conversion", or rather the words that our civilisation has used to convey this

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[3] English translation (Heidegger 1971: 148): «The real sense of *bauen*, namely dwelling, falls into oblivion. At first sight this event looks as though it were no more than a change of meaning of mere terms. In truth, however, something decisive is concealed in it, namely, dwelling is not experienced as man's being; dwelling is never thought of as the basic character of human being. That language in a way retracts the real meaning of the word *bauen*, which is dwelling, is evidence of the primal nature of these meanings; for with the essential words of language, their true meaning easily falls into oblivion in favor of foreground meanings. Man has hardly yet pondered the mystery of this process. Language withdraws from man its simple and high speech. But its primal call does not thereby become incapable of speech; it merely falls silent. Man, though, fails to heed this silence. But if we listen to what language says in the word *bauen* […]».

(for the moment) broad meaning: changing one's life, giving one's life a new direction, leaving mistakes and horrors behind in the hope of redemption or at least some form of better life… Very broad indeed; but better that way, for now. And what about the etymology? In his groundbreaking book, now an essential working tool, not just a reference work, for any decent student of Latin and Greek (Maltby 1991), Robert Maltby demonstrated that in order to understand a civilisation, it is essential to know how that civilisation 'heard' the words of its own language. On the other hand, historical etymology has its place: it shows the life of words 'below the surface', behind the scene of the speakers' actual consciousness. Etymology does not work miracles, but without its double contribution (synchronic and diachronic) we lose our bearings[4].

When we 'listen' to the Greek language, several words convey the broad idea of "conversion". The New Testament, of course; but when the Christian idea of "conversion" found its place in the Greek language, had an *inhabitatio* already been prepared? Nock's classic book on *conversion* contrasts the pre-Christian religious tradition with the Christian one, the former being inclusive, the latter exclusive; in a 'pagan' perspective, one is peacefully allowed to develop a devotion to a new god or goddess while still retaining his loyalty to the deities he previously worshipped, and especially to the religious traditions of his political environment. Nock acknowledges that things were different in philosophy: «Particularly in Hellenistic philosophy, the change of allegiance had the 'force' of what we might aptly call 'conversion'»[5]. Let me say a few words on this essential point. Behm's article on μετάνοια in Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* is excellent, but it gives too little weight to the idea of 'radical change' in pre-

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[4] See the wise *mise au point* of Maltby (1993); from another point of view, see Petrosino (2007: 97).

[5] See Nock (1988). Hadot's lucid chapter on conversion does not refer to Nock's book; he emphasises the idea of "conversion" «sous de multiples perspectives», distinguishing – as Nock before him – between religion and philosophy in the pre-Christian world: Hadot (2002: 175-177).

Christian antiquity (Behm – Würthwein 1942). Obviously, examples such as Plato *Euthd.* 279c (καὶ ἐγὼ αὖ πάλιν μετανοήσας, "having changed the subject again") have nothing to do with the idea of "conversion"; but Chrysippus' criticism of μετάνοια as unworthy of the wise man shows that the subject was not unknown to the philosophical schools of the Hellenistic age[6]. As Nock has already noted, the Epicurean philosophers demonstrate the need for radical conversion[7]: see *Gnomologium Vaticanum* 46, where the focus is on the adverb "completely", τελείως:

> Τὰς φαύλας συνηθείας ὥσπερ ἄνδρας πονηροὺς πολὺν χρόνον μέγα βλάψαντας τελείως ἐκδιώκομεν.

> Let us completely rid ourselves of bad habits as if they were evil men who have done us harm for a long time.

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[6] SVF III 147, 21: the wise man will not μετανοεῖν, because this implies a wrong opinion previously hold, a situation incompatible with the wise man; see also D.L. VII 122. In his review of Norden (1913), Werner Jaeger noticed: «Die Polemik der Stoiker gegen μετάνοια, die sich bei mehreren Autoren findet, weist m.E. auf die Verbreitung eines Typus von Ethik hin, für die dieser Begriff im Gegenteil einen hohen Wert in sich schloß» (Jaeger 1913: 590; Michel 1942: 630; more recently Sevenster 1966: 256.). Arianna Fermani's research on error, fault, regret, remorse in Aristotle shows that one of the components of the 'Biblical' idea of μετάνοια (but not the word) was active even before the Hellenistic age: see Fermani (2014): Aristotle's technical word is μεταμέλεια (see Michel 1942, particularly apropos of the difference between μετάνοια and μεταμέλεια). On the 'Socratic' relationship between error and moral guilt Fermani (2011): the problem is of the greatest importance, noticed already by the author of the Aristotelian (?) *Magna Moralia*, I 1, 1182a 15-23 see also the criticism about Socrates in *Eudemian Ethics*, I 5, 125b 3 ff.

[7] Nock (1988: 172-173); «The real note of Epicurus and of his followers is a simple evangelical fervour» (p. 173).

If we consider the firm resolution to a radical change of life to be a distinctive feature of "conversion", then this could be seen as a statement of "conversion"[8]. In the Epicurean world, the hope of converting disciples was an important aspect of philosophical discourse. Lucretius's calls to the reader could be seen as an example of this, as could the moving beginning of Diogenes of Oenoanda's inscription[9].

[ὁρῶν τοὺς πλείστους τῇ περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων ψευδοδοξίᾳ νοσοῦντας καὶ μὴ ἀκούοντας τοῦ σώματος ἐνκλήσεις] κατω|λοφυράμην μὲν αὐτῶν | τὸν βίον καὶ ἐπεδάκρυ|σα τῇ τῶν χρόνων ἀ|πωλείᾳ, χρηστοῦ δέ τινος ἡγησάμην ἀν|δρός, ὅσον ἔστ' ἐφ' ἡμῖν, τοῖς εὐσυνκρίτοις αὐ|(col3) τ[ῶν φιλανθρώπως βοη]|θεῖν.

[observing that most people suffer from false notions about things and do not listen to the body]] (…) I bewailed their behaviour and wept over the wasting of their lives, and I considered it the responsibility of a good man to give [benevolent] assistance, to the utmost of one's ability, to those of them who are well constituted.

The final words in this passage (τοῖς εὐσυνκρίτοις αὐτῶν in Greek) are the key of the problem. Smith's commentary:

οἱ εὐσύνκριτοι (II.14), mentioned again in fr. 3.III.4-5 and perhaps fr. 119.III.1-2, are those whose minds, thanks to nature (cf. Us. *epic.* fr. 178, on the case of Epicurus himself) and training (Lucr. 3, 307-322) have a suitable atomic composition, so that they are capable of philosophy. Not all persons are able to become wise (Smith 1993, 436).

The question arises as to who is capable of philosophy and who will be converted to a better way of life. This concern is also evident in other

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[8] See Grau (2008: 79), who emphasises the importance of a complete «ruptura con el propio pasado».
[9] I quote from Smith's translation: see Smith (1993: 367). This passage had already been taken into account by Nock (1988: 172-173).

texts by Diogenes[10]. Smith's fragment 127 offers a genuine account of conversion[11]:

> οἶξαι τὰ[ς εἰς] | τὸ συνελθὸν ἡμῶν [συν]|παθεῖς εἰσόδους, καὶ τῶν ῥητορικῶν ἀπο|κάμψεις λόγων ὅπως | ⁵ ἀκούσῃς τι τῶν ἡμεῖν | ἀρεσκόντων. ἔνθεν | σε καὶ κατελπίζομεν | τὴν ταχίστην τὰς φι|λοσοφίας κρούσειν θύ||[ρας]

> […] (fr. 127 I-II) to open the congenial entrances to our community, and you will turn away from the speeches of the rhetoricians, in order that you may hear something of our tenets. Consequently, we even hope confidently that you will knock very soon at the doors of philosophy.

The philosophical message able to 'save your life' is σωτήριον, as we read again in Diogenes[12]:

> καὶ τήν|δε μέν//τοι τὴν γρα|φὴν οὐχ // ἑαυτῶν χά|ριν, ἀλλ᾽ ὑ//μῶν, ὦ πο|λεῖται, κ//αταβεβλή|μεθα, σ//ωτήριον οὖ|¹⁰σαν ὑμε//[ῖ]ν, ὡς ἐν εἰ|σόδῳ τ[ο]//ῦ παντὸς λό|γου κατ//επηγγέλμε|θα

> Moreover, we have set down this inscription not for our own sake, but for your sake, citizens, as a means of salvation for you, as we announced at the opening of the whole discourse.

For instance, one might consider the concept of "conversion" as discussed by Lucretius (as recently explored by Asmis 2016). However, a

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[10] See Hammerstaedt and Smith (2009: 7-8): NF 167 III + NF 126/127 I refers to the moral behaviour of «those of them who grasp arguments based on nature».

[11] Smith (1993: 316); the text was later revised by Jürgen Hammerstaedt and Smith himself (Hammerstaedt and Smith 2009: 27-28). The translation is cited from the revised edition.

[12] Hammerstaedt and Smith (2012). Text at p. 72, translation at p. 73. About σωτήριον, the authors remark: «In addition to fr. 3 V 14 – VI 2, cf. fr. 116.6–8: τὸ γὰρ σωτήριο[ν] ἐνταῦθά ἐστιν. Also fr. 72 III 12–13: ὑμέτ[ερος] κῆρυξ ὃς διέσωσε[ν ὑμᾶς], of Epicurus, for whom as σωτήρ see also PHerc. 346 VII 24, XII 27 Capasso; Plotina in her letter to the Epicureans in Athens (IG II 2 1099 = SIG 834.21).

challenge arises in determining the source of this conversion. In the insightful ethical treatise of PHerc 346, the relationship between "salvation" and "ability to receive" is a pivotal theme[13]:

> ὑμνεῖν καὶ τὸν σωτ[ῆ]ρα τὸν ἡμέτερον … καὶ πρὸ ὀμμάτων θέσεως
> ἁπάντων τῶν ἐκε[ί]νου ΄τε ἀγαθῶν καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς΄ καθηγήσεως
> γεννωμένων [ἀνδράσι δ]εκτικοῖς αὐτῶν}

> praise our saviour … and put in front of our eyes the goods that derive
> from him (= Epicurus) and his leadership to men who are in the right
> disposition (to receive them)

As with Diogenes, a philosophical change of life ("conversion") is possible, but not to all: individuals must be "apt to receive" the message in order to be saved. I am inclined to regard this as a feature of later stages of Epicurean philosophy[14].

The issue at hand is once more the *primum mobile*. If one is to initiate a change in one's life, it is necessary to identify the agent or agents responsible for initiating the process. In Epicurean philosophy, the outcome is determined by chance. If an individual possesses the requisite atomic disposition in their body and mind, he will be able to assume the role of the *sotér*, alter their way of life, and achieve a state of happiness. Otherwise, the teachings of Epicurus (and his followers) will not be able to reach the unfortunate humanity that is trapped in error and suffering. Over a century after Norden's *Agnostos Theos* and Jaeger's exemplary review (see above note n. 6), significant research remains to be conducted in this field. It is this author's view that the New Testament concept of "conversion", despite its novelty and originality, could be comprehensible to a Greek reader of a Greek version of the Bible due to its alignment with the philosophical concept of "conversion". In his article on conversion, Herrero de Jáuregui (2005: 74) links the Christian idea of

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[13] Capasso (1982): text p. 72, Italian translation p. 84, commentary pp. 120-121. For an analysis of this topic see Milanese (2014).
[14] Capasso (1982: 121) rightly refers to Phld. *Oec.* XXIII 23-3 (PHerc. 1424), removing any doubt about the integration [ἀνδράσι δ]εκτικοῖς.

μετάνοια to the philosophical tradition, aptly emphasising the linguistic originality of the Christian lexicon. However, it could be argued that Köckert's article on *Rhetoric of Conversion in Ancient Philosophy and Christianity* undervalues the novelty of the Christian semantics of μετάνοια[15].

In the New Testament, the location of the *primum mobile* of conversion is clearly defined. The reign of God is not distant; action must be taken without delay, and there is an obligation to reconsider one's beliefs. God is engaged in a process, and it is the responsibility of humanity to align with this divine action. Μετανοέω, meaning "change one's mind", is a pivotal concept in John's teachings and in the preaching of Jesus[16]:

> *Ev. Marc.* 1, 15:
> Πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ· μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ.
>
> The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.

> *Ev. Matt.* 3, 2:
> Μετανοεῖτε, ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.
>
> Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

> *Ev. Matt.* 3, 11:
> ἐγὼ μὲν ὑμᾶς βαπτίζω ἐν ὕδατι εἰς μετάνοιαν· ὁ δὲ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἰσχυρότερός μου ἐστίν.
>
> I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I.

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[15] Köckert (2013: 212): «A study of other conversion narratives will show that conversion accounts within Christianity fulfil the same functions as they do in the debate about philosophy: they support the self-presentation as a Christian and they serve as instruments to advertise and to negotiate competing claims and ideals concerning a Christian life».

[16] The English translations from the Bible are cited from the "King James".

Ev. Luc. 3, 3:
καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς πᾶσαν περίχωρον τοῦ Ἰορδάνου κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν.

And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

As observed by Behm and Würthwein (1942: 996), a mutual interaction between μετάνοια and καιρός is evident in the Gospels. The "change of mind" is not solely a consequence of acknowledging sins; rather, it occurs within a prophetic perspective. The act of μετανοεῖν is one that enables the individual to move away from a state of evil and looks towards the reign of God (*Ev. Matt.* 3, 2). This process of μετάνοια is made possible within an appropriate καιρός (see also Sevenster 1966: 257-258).

λέγει γάρ Καιρῷ δεκτῷ ἐπήκουσά σου καὶ ἐν ἡμέρᾳ σωτηρίας ἐβοήθησά σοι· ἰδοὺ νῦν καιρὸς εὐπρόσδεκτος, ἰδοὺ νῦν ἡμέρα σωτηρίας.

For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation (*2 Cor.* 6, 2: see Konstan 2015).

For a Greek reader of the period, the 'pagan' tradition of the word μετάνοια, which was not always welcomed due to its implication of mistake, acquired a new significance. Further research on the use of these words in later Hellenistic and Jewish literature would undoubtedly prove fruitful. Scarpat's note on *Wisdom* 5, 3 is of great merit, and the frequency of these words in Philo of Alexandria and perhaps also in Flavius Josephus (see Behm – Würthwein 1942: 988-991; Michel 1942: 631-632; Scarpat 1989: 320) provides evidence of an interest in the concept of "conversion", albeit one that differs from the Christian interpretation.

The terms μετάνοια / μετανοεῖν were situated within a lexical field that included other words such as μεταμέλεια and ἐπιστροφή. As Laurel

Fulkerson observed, the semantic field of remorse, repentance and moral change requires further investigation:

> *Metanoia* or its verb *metanoeo* is similar in meaning to *metagignosko* but appears far less frequently… *Metanoeo*, however, may differ from *metagignosko* insofar as the speaker seems usually to suggest that the item under reconsideration is a mistake rather than simply a decision. […] *metagignosko* simply involves a change of mind, *metanoeo* is a more serious reconsideration (especially where there is some harm done), and *metamelei* is a result of *metanoeo*, specifically the realization, upon reconsideration, that one has made a serious mistake and that it cannot be fixed[17].

Michel's article in Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* demonstrates that the New Testament establishes a distinction between μετάνοια and μεταμέλεια, despite the frequent and almost inevitable semantic overlap between the two words. It is possible for God to change his judgement (μεταμέλειν), but he will not change his mind (μετανοεῖν). With regard to human beings, it is necessary for μεταμέλεια to be followed by μετάνοια, otherwise the destructive power of sin will not be overcome (see the narrative on Judas, who reaches μεταμέλεια but not μετάνοια). A definitive act of μετάνοια is irrevocable: μετάνοια ἀμεταμέλητος (*2 Ep. Cor.* 7, 10: Michel 1942: 632-633), as already e.g. in *Ps.* 109 (110) 4: ὤμοσεν Κύριος καὶ οὐ μεταμεληθήσεται = *Iuravit Dominus, et non poenitebit eum*).

The Latin (Vulgate) version of the above cited passages offers a stable translation[18]:

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[17] Fulkerson (2004: 25-256). To Fulkerson's considerations on the need of further research I would add that this field is located at a crossroad between linguistics, literature, history of philosophy, history of religions, Jewish and Christian theology. As a consequence, a research published e.g. in a theological journal is frequently unknown to scholars interested in linguistics, and *vice versa*. On μεταμέλεια see also Chantraine (1968-1980: 684).

[18] Greek texts and English translations at page 63-64.

Marc. 1, 15:
Quoniam impletum est tempus, et appropinquavit regnum Dei: poeni-
temini, et credite Evangelio.

Matth. 3, 2:
In diebus autem illis venit Joannes Baptista praedicans in deserto
Judaeae, et dicens: Poenitentiam agite: appropinquavit enim regnum
caelorum.

Matth. 3, 11:
Ego quidem baptizo vos in aqua in poenitentiam: qui autem post me
venturus est, fortior me est.

Luc. 3, 3:
Et venit in omnem regionem Jordanis, praedicans baptismum poeniten-
tiae in remissionem peccatorum.

The question arises as to why the term *poenitentia* was selected. In her chapter on the Latin vocabulary of "conversion" in Latin, Bruna Pieri notes that while Christian writers typically employ the term *conversio* or *converto* to translate both ἐπιστροφή and μετάνοια, the translations of the Bible use *paenitentia* / *paeniteo* as a standard translation of μετάνοια[19]. This raises the question of whether the Latin word *conversio* was inapt for the purpose of translating μετάνοια. It is also possible that the reason for the choice was something else.

In addition to its established meaning ("translation"), the term was employed by numerous authors in a manner that made it a potential candidate for translating μετάνοια / μετανοέω. See for example Hor. *epist.* 2, 17, 23-26; the topic is a potential "change of manner of life"[20]:

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[19] I refer to Pieri (2018: 261-299): *Il lessico della conversione*. Pieri's previous works are partly incorporated in this book: see e.g. Pieri (1999) and Pieri (2014). Moving from Apuleius, Lucia Pasetti provides important considerations on this lexical field (Pasetti 2014: on *converto*, pp. 138 ff.). See especially Pieri (2018: 263), with Hadot (2002: 175).
[20] See e.g. Kilpatrick (1986: 43-48); McCarter (2015: 191-204).

omnis Aristippum decuit color et status et res,
temptantem maiora, fere praesentibus aequum,
contra, quem duplici panno patientia velat,
mirabor, vitae via si conversa decebit.

Every color and status and circumstance suited Aristippus, who at-
tempted greater things but as a rule was content with what he had. On
the other hand I would be amazed if the opposite way of life suited the
one whom suffering wraps in a double rag (trans. McCarter 2015: 196).

Seneca's portrayal of the response of a moderately wise individual to
the vicissitudes of life is particularly intriguing (*dial.* 9, 1, 10-11)[21]:

Promptus, compositus sequor Zenona, Cleanthen, Chrysippum, quo-
rum tamen nemo ad rem publicam accessit, et nemo non misit. Ubi
aliquid animum insolitum arietari percussit, ubi aliquid occurrit aut
indignum, ut in omni vita humana multa sunt, aut parum ex facili fluens,
aut multum temporis res non magno aestimandae poposcerunt, ad
otium convertor *et, quemadmodum pecoribus fatigatis quoque, velocior*
domum gradus est.

I readily follow Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus, although none of
them entered public life, and none of them failed to send others. (11)
When something has shaken my heart, unaccustomed to being buffeted
around, when something occurs either undeserved — as many things
are in all human life — or too slow in progress, or when insignificant
matters demand a great deal of time, I turn away to leisure, just as for
wearied cattle too the homeward steps are faster.

The Latin words *ad otium convertor* are indicative of a 'change of
life', albeit provisional and almost self-mocking in nature. «I adhere to
the *genus vitae* of the Stoic great masters (even if they never did what
they recommended others to do…)». However, when confronted with
disagreeable circumstances, I adopt a different approach, seeking solace
in the comfort of my home. Despite Seneca's irony and the subtle light-
ness of his style, the topic is of the utmost importance, referring to the
'choice of life'. Grilli's *Vita Contemplativa* demonstrates that Seneca's

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[21] Fanthams' translation, cited from Fantham *et al.* (2014: 183).

analysis of the choice of life is firmly rooted in a rich and diverse tradition, encompassing the teachings of figures as diverse as Democritus, Antiochus of Ascalon, the Stoics, and particularly Panaetius[22].

A change in one's orientation towards a subject (*convertit mentem*) is likely to entail a shift in one's interests. Philosophy cannot be regarded as a mere pastime; it demands our attention and should occupy the central position in our lives[23].

> «*Non sum hoc tempus acceptura, quod vobis superfuerit, sed id vos habebitis, quod ipsa reiecero*». Totam huc converte mentem*, huic adside, hanc cole; ingens intervallum inter te et ceteros fiet. Omnes mortales multo antecedes, non multo te di antecedent. Quaeris, quid inter te et illos interfuturum sit? Diutius erunt.*

> «I am not going to accept just the time you have left over; rather, you will have what I reject». *Turn your entire mind to philosophy*. Sit by philosophy and serve it, and you will be much above other people. Mortals will all be far behind you, and the gods not far ahead. Would you like to know what difference there will be between you and the gods? They will have a longer time of existence.

The framework is clearly Epicurean, as often in the final sections of Seneca's letters. The *Letter to Menoeceus* is here behind the curtains; a complete 'change of point of view' is required to reach the promised 'change of life'[24].

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[22] Grilli's work was never translated into other languages, and the dense style of its Italian prose is probably the reason for its little influence outside Italy. I refer to the second edition of this work (Grilli 2002); the first edition was published back in 1953, half a century before. On the problem of the choice of 'style of life', as we could now translate γένη τοῦ βίου, in Seneca's age, see also Grilli (1992).
[23] Sen. *epist.* 53, 10-11. English translation cited from Graver and Long (2015, 155).
[24] Epicur. *Ep.* III 135. No need to stockpile information on the subject; I would just refer to Mutschmann (1915) and to the valuable researches of Marcello Gigante: Gigante (1998); Gigante (1999), and (on a possible relationship with Philodemus) Gigante (2000). On the *Letter to Menoeceus* and Seneca see Setaioli (1988: 184 ss).

Seneca and Epicurus, yes; but, more obviously, Seneca and Lucretius[25]:

> *Haec Venus est nobis; hinc autemst nomen Amoris,*
> *hinc illaec primum Veneris dulcedinis in cor*
> *stillavit gutta et successit frigida cura;*
> *nam si abest quod ames, praesto simulacra tamen sunt*
> *illius et nomen dulce obversatur ad auris.*
> *sed fugitare decet simulacra et pabula amoris*
> *absterrere sibi atque alio convertere mentem…*

> This pleasure is for us Venus; from that desire is the Latin name of love, from that desire has first trickled into the heart yon drop of Venus' honeyed joy, succeeded soon by chilly care; for though that which you love is away, yet idols of it are at hand and its sweet name is present to the ears. But it is meet to fly idols and scare away all that feeds love and turn your mind on another object…

The phrase is likely to have originated in everyday speech, and Lucretius's passage is considerably less compelling than Seneca's appeal for a radical shift in perspective[26]. In this context, *converto* emerges as a particularly suitable candidate. For a Latin translation of *metanoia* of the New Testament, it is important to consider that the Greek New Testament text was "rooted" in the Greek of the Septuaginta, whereas the translation of the Bible into Latin was a completely new enterprise. The selection of *paenitentia* and its cognates is a long-standing and well-established one. A review of the Vetus Latina database (available from Brepols, http://www.brepolis.net/) reveals that all the passages referenced above (see p. 66) are translated with *paeniteo / paenitentia*, without exception. Even Christian authors of the Late Antiquity observed that the Greek word μετάνοια had frequently been inadequately translated. Lactantius offers a critique of the choice of *resipiscentia* for

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[25] Lucr. 4, 1058-1064, translation Munro (1903: 159). Brown's commentary rightly notices that *alio* means "to another subject" and not "to another person", and that 4, 1072 echoes this line (*alio … animi traducere motus*): Brown (1987: 207).

[26] See Catull. 62, 125, with Kroll's commentary *ad loc.* (Kroll 1989: 125).

metanoia: *Graeci melius et significantius* μετάνοιαν *dicunt quam nos Latine possumus resipiscentiam dicere* (*inst.* 6, 24)[27]. However, it is worth considering whether there were any inherent flaws in the use of *converto*. The Latin philosophical tradition that we have just traced from Lucretius to Seneca *via* Horace rendered the new Christian concept of "conversion" perfectly intelligible. The rationale behind this choice may be found in a linguistic feature of Christian Latin, as observed by Christine Mohrmann, for instance, regarding the seemingly curious decision to employ the term *salvator* (Greek σωτήρ) despite the availability of more suitable alternatives in Latin, such as (*con*)*servator*. Preaching to his people, Augustine says[28]:

> *Christus ... Iesus, id est Christus Salvator — hoc est enim latine Iesus. Nec quaerant grammatici quam sit latinum, sed Christiani quam verum. Salus enim latinum nomen est.* Salvare *et* salvator *non fuerunt haec latina, sed antequam veniret Salvator; quando ad Latinos venit, et haec latina fecit.*

> Jesus Christ means "Christ our Saviour": this is the meaning of the word "Jesus". Philologists, refrain from asking if this is good Latin! Christians are interested in the truth of this word. *Salvare* and *salvator* were not Latin words before the coming of our Saviour; when he came to Latins, these words were made Latin.

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[27] This word would deserve a research on its own merits. It is frequently used by Ambrose and Augustine (see Aug. *quaest. euang.* 2, 33, 2, with *recogitatio*: Pieri 2014: 47 and Pieri 2018: 81). Isid. *orig.* 10, 236: *resipiscens eo quod mentem quasi post insaniam recipit, aut quia resapit qui sapere desierat* (Maltby 1991: 525). If Lactantius criticises this translation, in the Renaissance it was proposed by Erasmus as a better rendering of μετάνοια (*Epistula ad Ioannem Botzhemum*, p. 26 Allen); also Martin Luther proposed *resipiscentia* as a possible translation of μετάνοια (*Resolutiones*, p. 18 Knaake); his opposer Lawrence of Brindisi discusses the translation against Luther (*Lutheranismi hypotyposis*, in his *Opera omnia*, II 3, p. 204). On Lactantius and linguistic problems, see recently Denecker (2017: 28-32).
[28] *Sermones ad populum* 299, 6; new edition by Dolbeau (2017: 475); see also *serm.* 293, p. 460 in Dolbeau's edition.

While the Christian Greek «happily adopted the already existing word σωτήρ, the Latins, albeit after some hesitation, employed the neologism *salvator*, after *salutaris* had proved 'inviable'. The already existing *conservator* was not taken into consideration for the Christian popular speech, and even less for the theological»[29]. It may therefore be surmised that the success of *paenitentia* followed a similar path. The term μετάνοια is particularly rich in meaning: «elle est fort complexe, intraduisible par un seul mot dans nos langues modernes et déjà en latin. Il s'agit à la fois de regret, de remords, de repentir, de pénitence et de conversion» (Joly 1961: 149). In this context, *paenitentia* may be a more suitable option than *conversio*, which lacked the notion of regretting one's previous actions and seeking redemption through penance. In Mohrmann's *salvator*, there is no doubt; however, in the case of *paenitentia*, we encounter an unexpected and pagan figure. Seneca employs *paenitentia* as an exact translation of μετάνοια. As previously observed in the context of Stoic Greek sources (see above, note n. 6), the *sapiens* will never repent[30]. It is therefore pertinent to inquire whether the Christian Latin translators of the Bible were influenced by Seneca. If this is the case, it would indicate that the translation was *docta*, which seems a reasonable assumption given that Seneca was widely read. Conversely, if this is not the case, the translation would be perfectly parallel to the choice of *salvator*. In any case, the term *conversio* was not abandoned but employed for the translation of another technical word from the Greek New Testament (see below, p. 73). The term *conservator* subsequently achieved prominence in subsequent Christian literature, coinciding with the fulfilment of the need to define the new meanings associated with the nascent religion. *Conversio* subsequently became a

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[29] Mohrmann (1957: 28). See also Mohrmann (1949: 83); Mohrmann shows an interest for this word already in her dissertation of 1932 (Mohrmann 1932: 145-146). On *salvator* in Augustine's *sermo* 299 see also Mohrmann (1951: 278).

[30] Sen. *benef.* 4, 34: *numquam illum paenitentia subit*; *dial.* 7, 4, 1: *summum bonum immortale est … nec satietatem habet nec paenitentiam*. May all of this be Seneca's semantic innovation? the word is used by Cicero only twice and outside any philosophical connotation.

highly prevalent term in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, as effectively demonstrated by Pieri's chapter (see above, note 19).

The translation of μετάνοια as *paenitentia / poenitentia* proved inadequate as it encompassed merely a single aspect of the multifaceted process of μετάληψις/μετάνοια. In the opinion of Isidore, the term was associated with *poena* : *quasi punitentia, eo quod ipse homo in se poenitendo puniat quod male admisit* (Isid. orig. 6, 19, 71: Maltby 1991: 441). The spelling *poenitentia* provided an easier link to *poena*, which in turn was explained by Varro as *a poeniendo aut quod post peccatum sequitur*[31]. Initially, *paenitentia* was not associated with *poena*, a loanword derived from the Greek ποινή and the Doric ποινά[32]. However, the comparison was straightforward and facilitated by the common, and subsequently standardised, pronunciation of *oe/ae* as *e*. Centuries later, the criticism of the alleged semantic weakness of *p[ao]enitentia* was a key argument in Luther's rejection of the Catholic practice of penance (*Resolutiones*, p. 20 Knaake: *poenitentiam agere, actionem magis sonet, quam mutationem affectus, et graeco illi, Metanoin, nullo modo satisfacit*).

One of the anecdotes about philosophical conversion cited from Nock onwards is the story about Polemon's conversion (D.L. 4, 16):

Πολέμων Φιλοστράτου μὲν ἦν υἱός, Ἀθηναῖος τῶν δήμων Οἴηθεν. νέος δ᾽ ὢν ἀκόλαστός τε καὶ διακεχυμένος ἦν οὕτως, ὥστε καὶ περιφέρειν ἀργύριον πρὸς τὰς ἑτοίμους λύσεις τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν· ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τοῖς στενωποῖς διέκρυπτεν. καὶ ἐν Ἀκαδημείᾳ πρὸς κίονί τινι τριώβολον εὑρέθη προσπεπλασμένον αὐτοῦ διὰ [τὴν] ὁμοίαν τῇ προειρημένῃ πρόφασιν. καί ποτε συνθέμενος τοῖς νέοις μεθύων καὶ ἐστεφανωμένος εἰς τὴν Ξενοκράτους ᾖξε σχολήν· ὁ δὲ οὐδὲν διατραπεὶς εἶρε τὸν λόγον ὁμοίως· ἦν δὲ περὶ σωφροσύνης. ἀκούον δὴ τὸ μειράκιον κατ᾽ ὀλίγον ἐθηράθη καὶ οὕτως ἐγένετο φιλόπονος ὡς ὑπερβάλλεσθαι τοὺς ἄλλους

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[31] Varro *ling.* 5, 177; Maltby (1991: 481). While the link *poena/poenire* is clear, the relation with *peccatum* is obscure: Traglia (1974: 166).

[32] *Paenitentia*: Ernout and Meillet (2001: 474); Walde and Hofmann (1938-1954: 235); Vaan (2008: 439). *Poena*: Ernout and Meillet (2001: 518); Walde and Hofmann (1938-1954: 329-330).

καὶ αὐτὸς διαδέξασθαι τὴν σχολήν, ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ τῆς ἕκτης καὶ δεκάτης καὶ ἑκατοστῆς Ὀλυμπιάδος.

Polemo, the son of Philostratus, was an Athenian who belonged to the deme of Oea. In his youth he was so profligate and dissipated that he actually carried about with him money to procure the immediate gratification of his desires, and would even keep sums concealed in lanes and alleys. And one day, by agreement with his young friends, he burst into the school of Xenocrates quite drunk, with a garland on his head. Xenocrates, however, without being at all disturbed, went on with his discourse as before, the subject being temperance. The lad, as he listened, by degrees was taken in the toils. He became so industrious as to surpass all the other scholars, and rose to be himself head of the school in the 116th Olympiad (transl. R. Hicks)[33].

Betram's article on ἐπιστροφή in Kittel's *Wörterbuch* shows that ἐπιστροφή/ἐπιστρέφω reach a stable meaning related to "conversion" not in the Gospels, but in the *Acts* (Betram 1964). Paul says (*Act. Ap.* 26, 20):

ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἐν Δαμασκῷ πρῶτόν τε καὶ Ἱεροσολύμοις, πᾶσάν τε τὴν χώραν τῆς Ἰουδαίας καὶ τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ἀπήγγελλον μετανοεῖν καὶ ἐπιστρέφειν ἐπὶ τὸν Θεόν, ἄξια τῆς μετανοίας ἔργα πράσσοντας.

But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.

The Latin translation features an intriguing use of the verb *converto*: *sed his qui sunt Damasci primum, et Jerosolymis, et in omnem regionem Judaeae, et gentibus annuntiabam, ut poenitentiam agerent, et converterentur ad Deum, digna poenitentiae opera facientes*. This same choice is seen in Acts 11, 21, where ἐπέστρεψεν is rendered as *conversus est*. The old word *conversio* had not been abandoned; its semantic

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[33] The same story, with some more details, is narrated by Philodemus in his history of Plato's Academy (Dorandi 1991: 144). The passage should be added to the list of examples of «imagen de la "caza" filosófica» in Grau (2008: 73-79).

feature of "motion" could convey ἐπιστροφή much more successfully than μετάνοια.

Motion, indeed. Jesus asks to turn to him (*conversio*), and to change life (*paenitentia*) following him: ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς λέγει αὐτῷ Ἀκολούθει μοι (*Ev. Matt.* 8, 22: «But Jesus said unto him, Follow me»). The disciples leave everything after finding Jesus (*Ev. Luc.* 5, 11):

> καὶ καταγαγόντες τὰ πλοῖα ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν, ἀφέντες πάντα ἠκολούθησαν αὐτῷ.

> And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him.

> *Et subductis ad terram navibus,* relictis omnibus, *secuti sunt eum.*

Doesn't the Latin translation sound familiar to any reader of Latin philosophy?[34]

> *hoc se quisque modo fugit, at quem scilicet, ut fit,*
> *effugere haut potis est: ingratius haeret et odit*
> *propterea, morbi quia causam non tenet aeger;*
> *quam bene si videat,* iam rebus quisque relictis
> *naturam primum studeat cognoscere rerum,*
> *temporis aeterni quoniam, non unius horae,*
> *ambigitur status, in quo sit mortalibus omnis*
> *aetas, post mortem quae restat cumque manendo.*

> In this way each man flies from himself, (but self from whom, as you may be sure is commonly the case, he cannot escape, clings to him in his own despite) hates too himself, because he is sick and knows not the cause of the malady; for if he could rightly see into this, relinquishing all else each man would study to learn the nature of things, since the point at stake is the condition for eternity, not for one hour, in which mortals have to pass all the time which remains for them to expect after death.

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[34] Lucr. 3, 1068-1075, with Munro's translation.

We may return to the fundamental concept of conversion, but this time with a focus on motion. In both Lucretius and the Gospel, we observe a transition from an ongoing, ultimately futile attempt at escape to a decisive and definitive conversion. This transition is marked by a striking similarity in wording, with the Epicurean poet and the Latin Gospel both employing the same phrase, *relictis omnibus* and *rebus relictis*.

A consideration of the German word *Bekehrung* reveals the presence of the concepts of "movement", "change", *Kehre* (Kluge 2012: 107; 485): *wenden*, change. The earliest example of conversion that can be identified in Old English is the transformation undergone by Beowulf, who departs from a life characterised by cowardice and fear to embrace one of courage and bravery. This transition can be described as *edwenden*[35]:

> *Hean wæs lange,*
> *swa hyne Geata bearn godne ne tealdon,*
> *ne hyne on medobence micles wyrðne*
> *drihten Wedera gedon wolde;*
> *swyðe wendon þæt he sleac wære,*
> *æðeling unfrom. Edwenden cwom*
> *tireadigum menn torna gehwylces.*

> He had long been despised, so that the sons of the Geats did not reckon him brave, nor would the lord of the Weather-Geats do him much gift-honor on the mead-bench. They strongly suspected that he was slack, a young man unbold. Change came to the famous man for each of his troubles.

We now return to Heidegger's concept of «hören auf das, was die Sprache sagt» (above, p. 56). The three 'true stories' (*etymo-logiai*) commenced with a comprehensive concept of "conversion," encompassing three distinct forms: a change of mind, a behavioural alteration,

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[35] Lines 2183-2189: translation cited from Donaldson and Howe (2002: 37).

and a shift in position through motion. The concept of the *Kehre* is pivotal to Heidegger's philosophy[36]: by turning towards the act of listening to language, we do not merely *hören* Greek, or the echo of Greek in German; rather, we engage with a broader linguistic landscape.

We listen to a lengthy narrative, namely the history of European languages. The broad and unrefined concept of "conversion" we moved from is 'complex': this is because the true listening to the European intellectual lexicon is made possible by recognising the voices of the multiple civilisations which, in continuity and discontinuity, have played a part in its construction[37].

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[36] Heidegger (2006a); English version Heidegger (1977).
[37] The 'hidden reference' of the present essay is Brague (2005).

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