

## Philosophy of the Beard

Joost Hengstmengel<sup>1</sup>

*If we may believe folk wisdom, true beauty resides internally. Every culture, of course, formulates its own external ideal of beauty. Nowadays, low facial hair appears on the list of the seven masculine beauties. Not the untrimmed hippy beard, but the professionally trimmed beard or mustache. Passing by the current illusions, Joost Hengstmengel dives into the treatment of beards in philosophy.*

### Philosophers' Beard

“*Barba non facit philosophum*” was a popular medieval maxim meaning “The beard no philosopher makes.” This saying harks back to a story about the ancient writer Herodes Atticus who once was visited by a panhandler dressed in a mantle and sporting a beard that reached down to his middle. When asked about his identity, the man responded that it was clear that he was a philosopher. Herodus answered with these undying words, “I see a beard and a mantle, but I do not yet see a philosopher.” In an equally comical anecdote recorded by Lucianus, a certain Bagoas applied for the position of philosophy instructor established by the Roman emperor of the day. The fact that Bagoas sported a clean-shaven chin

---

<sup>1</sup> Transl. Jan H. Boer. The original title: “*De filosofie van de baard*” in *Sophie* magazine 2022.

met with incomprehension on the part of the solicitation committee. Was a long beard not the most important attribute of a philosopher in order to carry authority among his students? Bagoas was of another opinion: A philosopher did not need a beard to achieve such authority.

Both of these apocryphal stories underline that in ancient times there was something like a “philosopher’s beard.” The poet Horatius, though himself beardless, wrote somewhere about developing a *barba sapiens*, a wise or philosophical beard. The great ancient philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were bearded throughout their lives, but that was nothing spectacular. It was not till the third century B.C. that shaving became a practice among the Greeks. They and the Romans could now be recognized as philosophers by their facial hair. From that time on, the beard became *the* identification of the philosopher. Where shaving became a symbol of culture, the beard was considered natural and the philosopher wanted to live in accordance with nature. There are even indications that the various schools of philosophy had their own characteristic beards. The Cynics were known by their longest and least kempt beard; the Stoics by their long but reasonably kempt beard; Aristotelians by their most trimmed beard.

### **Beardology**

Along with the philosopher beard there also arose a push to extol the beard. The Stoic Epictetus gloried in

his wise facial hair as no other. He described the beard as more lovely than a cock's comb and more imposing than a lion's mane. In an imaginary discussion he was even prepared to defend it with his life. As it allegedly went, "'Epictetus, shave your beard off immediately.' 'If I am a philosopher, then I refuse,' he said. 'But then I will have you beheaded.' 'Just do what you must,' he responded."

The Church Fathers also upheld the tradition of praising the beard. For them, a clean shave indicated a tendency towards degradation and feminization.

Unfortunately, no expanded apologies for the beard have been passed on to us from ancient times. About the only pre-modern texts devoted to the beard that are left are the *Misopogon* (hater of beards) by Julianus the Apostate (AD 331-363), a Roman Emperor, in which he defended his beard against the clean-shaven residents of Antioch and the medieval *Apologia de Barbis* by Burchardus of Bellevaux.

The golden era of pogonofilie ("pogon" is Greek for beard) began approximately with the Reformation. Whether or not there is a causal connection is a question requiring further research. The fact is that in the early modern period a growing number of panegyrics, dissertations and historical works about and of the beard were published. Some developed into actual beard ideologies with titles like *Pogonology* and *Barbologia*. We read about the imposing beards of famous personalities, about its various forms through the ages and even about curiosities like women with beards (Bartel Graetje

from Stuttgart). Its enthusiasts have found further discussions about whether Adam had a beard or whether the cheeks and chins of angels were covered or whether priests were not required by their status to grow a beard. Beard lovers can feast on Biblical-theological argumentation. The patriarchs and prophets were adorned with beards; Leviticus 19:27; the clean-shaven head as disgrace or token of remorse. Jesus and His disciples sported beards. Even God Himself wore a beard, for He created man after His image.

### **Beard Theology**

This writer, having earned his doctorate with a dissertation on divine providence, enjoys most the arguments about providence of growing a beard. Why should the Creator have hair grow on the cheeks and chins of men if it served no purpose? Nature does nothing in vain! Is the beard not an ornament that immediately distinguishes a man from a woman? Does the beard not provide protection against heat and cold? It can also be seen as proof of divine providence. This fundamental insight did not surface merely in the early modern time, but is found already in ancient times.

Both the so-called “pogonophile” Epictetus as well as the church father blessed with a prophetic beard, Theodoretus of Cyrhus, used the beard as proof of the existence of divine providence. The relevant

passages deserve to appear in full in the columns of this magazine:<sup>2</sup>

*Avoiding the larger works of nature, we will look at what it does in passing. Can you think of anything more useless than a beard? But has nature nevertheless not given a fitting function even to the beard? Does it not distinguish between man and woman by the beard? Do not all of us hear from a long distance the call of nature, "I am a man; approach me as such and adjust your speech accordingly. Do not look for something else, for this is my characteristic." Nature did the same thing with women. In the timbre of her voice, softness predominated and it did not provide them with a beard. "If only it had not done so!" I hear someone say. "If only it had not given any external gender feature so that each one of us had to constantly exclaim, 'I am a man!'" But is the beard not a handsome and impressive feature? It is not more handsome than a rooster's comb and much more imposing than the mane of a lion? For this reason we should intentionally cultivate the features God has provided and definitely not treat them in a nonchalant way or to dim these differences between the genders in so far as this lay within our capacity (Epictetus, Colloges 1:16).*

*Thus He has adorned those men who have left puberty behind and entered the age of maturity*

---

<sup>2</sup> These italicized paragraphs have been translated from the Dutch as they appear in this article,, not from the original.

*with a beard on part of their cheeks and chins. Initially it is more downy or fluffy hair, but then there appears a greater quantity to indicate the different phases of life by means of the beard. It also serves to convince him by means of his exterior to leave childish behavior behind and to accept more serious responsibilities. Since for women labour pains are sufficient to teach that lesson, He has encircled only the cheeks of men.*

*And should there be certain individuals who have only studied in order to oppose the truth and object that hair also grows on other parts of the body, even in this they have no reason whatsoever for ingratitude. For nature on its own covered those parts that we attempt to dress artificially. That is why nature has not provided a hair covering to those who are not yet capable to distinguish between good and evil. But God has fittingly adorned those who have a budding understanding of the purpose of each part of the body with this belt as if to prevent them from blushing, even though there is no reason for that.<sup>3</sup>*

=====

A provisional last milestone in the history of “beardology” is the eccentric *The Philosophy of Beards*. This small book was written by T. S. Gowing and appeared in 1854 at the time of a newly revived question of the beard in both Great Britain and the

---

<sup>3</sup> Theodoretus of Cyrillus, *About Providence*, 4. 31-32.

United States. It does little more than repeat the physiological, theological, artistic and historical arguments: “The Creator intended it for distinction, protection, and ornament.” Or it is the short refutation of four modern objections against sporting a beard, namely, it is not as clean as a shaved face; it takes more time to maintain a good shape; women dislike it; and it is too hot in the summer. This is all nonsense, according to Gowing, who ironically enough had “Thomas Shave” as his first and middle names! The reader who wants to know more about the promised *philosophy* of the beard is unfortunately deceived. We already knew that the ancient Greeks and Roman philosophers were famous for their beards, but what is the philosophical meaning of the beard?

### **Beard Philosophy**

A group of prominent Dutch philosophers claims that philosophy deals with everything. However, neither they nor other thinkers have arrived at a kind of phenomenological philosophy of the beard. Also in philosophical history beard philosophy has been treated more like an orphan. The analytical philosopher Willard of Orman Quine somewhere introduced the “doctrine of Plato’s beard” to indicate the platonic problem that “not being” must in a certain sense exist. One who denies that there exist winged horses, must at the very least admit that the *idea* of a winged horse is reality and exists. The doctrine that “not being is” is according to Quine historically seen as tough and hardy and has often blunted the sharp edge of Ockham’s razor. That’s the

origin of Plato's beard that could not be gotten rid of. The clean-shaved Quine seems to have been the only philosopher who seriously wanted to involve the beard in philosophical discussions. It seems as if we have to return to the classics such as Plutarchus who jeered at *barba tenuis sapientes*, at philosophers as long as their beard reached.

Perhaps the beard should be restored as a criterion for selection of docents in philosophy. However true it is that "the beard no philosopher makes," with so many bare chins among philosophers, the first real philosophy of the beard is further off than ever.