

BEYOND PHILOSOPHY : A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT IN ONTIC SUBJECTIVITY

Presenting a paper at a colloquia series is part of the ritual of being a professional philosopher. Often the ritualistic aspects of the presentation follow a pattern. The speaker begins by saying that the paper that has been distributed prior to the presentation has been altered in some significant respect due to critical comments of colleagues who took the time to read the paper. The presenter then goes on to say that the paper is far too long to read straight through, so the presenter chooses to outline the argument of the paper. After the presentation of the outline (which, at least on some occasions, is longer than the paper) the audience is often given the opportunity to ask questions. These questions range from points of clarification, to critical comments, to complete dismay that anyone could believe what the presenter apparently believes. Having participated in this ritual on a number of occasions, I am led to conclude that the presenter and the audience participate in a peculiar symbiotic relationship—a sado masochistic one. The presenter enjoys the sadistic pleasure in presenting the paper. The audience suffers through the presentation, unless, on rare occasions, a member has the courage to walk out in the middle of the talk. However the presenter has to suffer when the audience takes its turn at sadism by “cutting to pieces” everything the presenter said. All parties concerned seem to enjoy the contest as is evidenced by the almost undergraduate willingness to go out and drink beer after the battle is concluded. Thus, I am here tonight to engage in this ritual and eventually to drink beer. Since I will the end, I must will the means also.

Before I begin let me make one apology a la Socrates. As you may recall, Socrates asked his “jury” to forgive his lack of familiarity with the proceedings of the “court.” So also I beg you to understand that, although I have gone through this ritual before, it has always been at an “extension.” Should you find me guilty of impiety and corruption, I plead that my sentence be as Socrates proposed for himself—free room and board in the town

hall—rather than the sentence actually imposed—death by drinking hemlock. I may be ready to write my apology, but I am not ready to write my *Phaedo*.

My topic tonight, as evidenced by the rather foreboding title I have given this paper, is "Beyond Philosophy: A Thought Experiment in Ontic Subjectivity." But the manner of my presentation is going to be a bit unorthodox. I have prepared nothing of my own: I want to read to you a letter from a "friend" of mine whom I have not seen or corresponded with since graduate school—the letter just arriving at the beginning of this semester. My reason for being unorthodox is that I need your assistance in coming to grips with my "friend's" letter and my response to it, if I even should respond to it.

August 28, 1979

Dear Bill,

You'll never guess who's writing. Check out the end of the letter now to eliminate any further suspense! It's John D. Silentio. Remember we took a few years of classes together in grad school. I'm writing you because I heard that you're spending a semester on sabbatical at Purdue. I haven't heard a thing about you since I quit graduate school, but I happened to see a philosophy journal that listed sabbaticals and I found your name listed.

I'm now living with my wife and four kids (no Catholic jokes, please!!) on the coast of Ireland near Galway Bay. How we got here is a long story that I'll try to shorten. After I quit, I worked for a summer, then I entered grad school at another school—the name of which escapes me. I quit this programme also, basically for the same reason I quit the first programme—a kind of "gut" disillusionment with the programme and the people in it. I was too tender-minded for the first programme and too tough-minded for the second.

Interestingly enough, I had to start over at the second school, since the second programme would not accept any of the credits—48 hrs.—I had earned in the first programme. The second programme was as heavily continental as the first was analytic—apparently part of the reason for my schizophrenia. Anyway, I left the second programme after two years of course work and worked for a few years. I probably would not have gotten a job

teaching anyway had I completed my degree because the "market" was "glutted" with "fresh" PhD's. I am not one to admit failure, so after working those two years as a gardener at a monastery, I got my damn PhD, although I never got a job teaching philosophy. The third programme was not all that unlike the first or second programme I had to take 48 hrs. more. But for some reason, the old gut disillusionment didn't surface or I forced it to go hide for awhile.

During the trials and tribulations of the three programmes, Mary and I became parents a number of times and found some strength to go on. We wound up in Galway because I was able to find a job teaching elementary school. I had to take a six week course on teaching to get licensed-144 hrs. of graduate philosophy didn't qualify me to teach reading !! We live near a small fishing village. Our house is comfortable, but would be considered somewhat primitive by American standards. It's on the coast and the only other dwelling visible is a small hut that the local people claim hasn't been lived in for 30 years or more. There's no sign of even the rudiments of common conveniences. The local people claim the "hermit" used his bathtub as a sink to wash dishes in. The hermit was also supposed to excite the local people by his uncanny ability to whistle. So much for local folklore.

Even though I am teaching elementary school, I haven't given up philosophy. I have kept a few of my books from graduate schools and have gone to the library at the local college once or twice. But basically I am cut off from the current literature that is being published. Of course, I prefer being cut off that's at least one of the reasons we chose this place and this job—to get away from academic philosophy. The only new reading I do is read the detective magazines the kids found in the hermit's hut—old magazines that the hermit apparently read many times. An odd combination—detective magazines and a hermit.

One of the reasons I apparently had so much trouble in graduate school was that I never was convinced that "being up on the literature" was the first commandment of philosophical scholarship. In fact, my advisor at the first school often chided me for not having done computer searches for my papers. At present

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thought, I am in a state of innocence since it is physically impossible for me to consult the literature even if I wanted to. Since I cannot, I ought not. The local college phased out its philosophy programme before we came—declining enrollments—and sold most of its library holdings in philosophy in order to help finance a technology programme. Since I haven't the faintest interest in publishing in philosophy, I really don't need the current literature. But even if I had that literature, I still would have to decide if any of it was worthwhile.

Of course, academic philosophers might object that philosophy takes its rise in the cooperative effort of the philosophical community, and at each level, acquires its perfection only therein. My response to this is : I, the solitary individual philosopher, owes much to other; but what they accept as true, what they offer me as allegedly established by their insights, is for me as first only something they claim. If I am to accept it, I must justify it be a perfect insight on my own part. Therein consists my autonomy—mine and that of every genuine philosopher.

My present philosophical interests center around trying to find out just what philosophy is. God knows I've had enough courses in philosophy to be able to give a straightforward answer to the question about what philosophy is. My graduate school experiences gave me conflicting answers. Philosophy is the logical analysis of language aimed at the clarification of thought. Philosophy is concerned with the realm of transcendental subjectivity which is reached by bracketing the natural world. Philosophy is *x*; philosophy is non-*x* . . . ad infinitum and ad nauseam. I might be a bit more accurate by saying that philosophers, at least professional, academic ones, are in search of their own identity because they don't know what their discipline is. But of course, they won't admit that they don't know what their discipline is. I might even go so far as to say that what philosophy really is is a perpetual beginning to find "something" only the something isn't found because it was never lost, just forgotten. Of course, if I said that at an APA convention, I would be booed roundly.

My gloss on my first experience in graduate school is that these people defined philosophy as the objective account of how to say anything correctly, no matter what one wanted to say.

The second school defined philosophy as the search for subjectivity and that sounded pretty good at first; but the search ended and subjectivity was described not only finally and completely but objectively. The third school I really don't remember and really don't care about because all I did was do what they told me to do and get out.

All of the schools placed a great deal of emphasis on the idea of rationality. Of course, each thought the other two were irrational, but, being liberals, tolerated the others' views. But their parochialism was never apparent to anyone in the school, although it was apparent to everyone not in the school. Truth was something each had achieved at least in outline, if not in detail. Their truth status was not always blatantly stated and defended, but it was nearly always manifested in their everyday manner of doing what they called philosophy. Their everydayness was "they," since they had no individual autonomy.

Rational people groan for the truth; they know their reasoning is no more than tentative, that other considerations may supervene to cast doubt on it. They never see very clearly where they are going; they are "open." But there are people who are attracted by the durability of a stone. They wish to be massive and impenetrable; they wish not to change. Where, indeed, would change take them? We have here a basic fear of oneself and of the truth. What frightens them is not the content of truth of which they have no conception, but the form itself of truth, that of indefinite approximation. It is as if their own existence were in continual suspension. But they wish to exist all at once and right away. They do not want any acquired opinions; they want them to be innate. Since they are afraid of reasoning, they wish to play only a subordinate role wherein one seeks only what he has already found, wherein one becomes only what he already was. This is nothing but passion. Only a strong emotional bias can give a lightening like certainty; it alone can hold reason in leash; it alone can remain impervious to experience and last for a whole lifetime.

Before I can concern myself with the academic sense of philosophy, I must concern myself with the personal issue of being a human being. And I'm quite afraid that being an academic philosopher and being a human being are *nearly* logically contra-

dictory. Academic or institutional philosophy is usually a kind of cheating both of oneself and of one's students. And this cheating is not only not rational—it's not a groaning—it is also unethical. Nonetheless let me attempt the impossible—to run against the boundaries and try to say what I cannot say, but only show.

What academic philosophers offer in answer to ethical questions is a theory called cognitivism or non-cognitivism or whatever terms are being used today or a theory about the ontological meaning of finitude, or care, or being historical. But what if ethical questions need to be answered by something other than a theory? What if the very form of the question ruled out a theory as an answer? What if the ethical is non-theory? How can one establish that ethical questions need theories for answers?—by a *theory* of ethical questions? What if theories were not what is required? Then, what? Then I can only speak in the first person and any speaking not in the first person is "clearly" an indication of a misunderstanding. But it is very difficult to so speak, in fact, I'm sure that ethics (understanding ethics not as theory, but as first-person discourse) cannot be put into words. Academic philosophers always tell us what ethics is; and they do so by *saying* objectively that ethics objectively considered is such-and-such or by *saying* objectively that ethics subjectively considered is such—and such.

But I must keep silent about ethics by speaking about ethics. Does that make any sense at all? Keeping silent is a possibility even in discourse. In talking with you, I am keeping silent and can make you understand, and I can do so more truly than an academic philosopher who is never short of words. Speaking at length about something does not offer the slightest guarantee that thereby understanding is advanced. On the contrary, talking extensively about something covers it up and brings what is understood to a sham clarity—the unintelligibility of the trivial. But to keep silent does not mean to be dumb. On the contrary, if a man is dumb he still has a tendency to "speak." Such a person has not proved that he can keep silent; indeed, he entirely lacks the possibility of proving anything of the sort and the person who is accustomed by nature to speak little is no better able to show that he is keeping silent or that he is the sort of person who can do so. He who never says anything cannot keep silent at any given

moment. Keeping silent truly is possible only in genuine discoursing. To be able to keep silent, human beings must have something to say—that is, they must have something at their disposal which is an honest and rich openness to themselves. In that case one's reticence makes something manifest, and does away with idle talk (surely most academic philosophy is idle talk). As a mode of discoursing reticence articulates the intelligibility of human beings in so fundamental a manner that it gives rise to a potential for hearing that is genuine and to a sense of community that is clear.

If the above is correct, then there is something wrong with this letter—at least, it is entirely too long. But the wrongness (and the rightness, if there is any) is not *in* the letter, but in me and/or in you. There is much silence in this letter—the silence between the words and the lines. If this letter says anything at all, it says it because you and I have understood each other's silence. I suppose the reaction to all of this is that if one is condemned to silence, then one ought to shut up and not try to whistle one's way through.

The whole tone of this letter is paradoxical and mystical and perhaps non-sensical. If you begin to understand what I am doing, you might be tempted to throw the letter away. Only make sure you throw it away for the right reasons.

By the way Mary and I have decided that we are going to return to the States as soon as I can find a teaching position—in academic philosophy, no less. Even though I have seen the light I feel some obligation to return to the darkness of the cave where philosopher see only shadows. But I am not interested in a job where there is any pressure to publish or be “professional.” I want to teach philosophy although I am quite sure that those who are taught will not feel that they are being taught philosophy and surely academic, professional philosophers will not feel that I am teaching philosophy. I am not all that optimistic that we will quickly find such a job, but we are willing to wait until the “right” job comes along. We would appreciate your forwarding to us any information you have about jobs that we might find worth pursuing.

Since I have no pretensions about making my work known by publishing my thoughts, you may consider this letter as my *magnus opus*; and, therefore I request that you act as my literary executor

in order that my work is passed on to posterity. Should *The Library of Living Philosophers* express any interest in doing a volume on my philosophy, I urge you to keep this letter in a safe place, since I did not make a carbon of it.

By the way the philosophers who have most influenced my thought are Alexis Zorba and Randall Patrick McMurphy.

Sincerely,

John D. Silentio

P. S. Whatever you do, do not read this letter at a colloquium session while on sabbatical. They'll cut me to pieces.

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