

I. From Student to Teacher of Philosophy

Today is the first time that I have returned to Sewanee to speak since my graduation as a philosophy major in 1990. My introduction to philosophy at Sewanee was providential. I was trying to sign up for Religion 111, but it was full. A professor helpfully suggested Introduction to Philosophy instead; there was an opening in Jim Peters's 8 o'clock class. I signed up, and my life changed. I had come to Sewanee because of its English department. Of all the subjects in high school, I liked English the best. What I discovered the first semester of my freshman year was that what I liked in literature was really philosophy. I had culled the philosophical ideas from Emerson, Thoreau, and Wordsworth, but did not know what philosophy was. I had never heard of it! I can see now that what I liked most in literature were the traces of Plato. I became a philosophy major and learned as much as I could of the history of philosophy and the contemporary philosophical scene as an undergraduate. I gave a paper at the Southeastern Undergraduate Philosophy conference, as you are this weekend. That year it was held at Spelman College. As lacking in confidence as I was that day, I could never have imagined then that I would end up teaching philosophy at Spelman in the near future! After graduating from Sewanee, I went to graduate school in philosophy at Emory University, attracted by its program in the history of philosophy, aimed at educating generalists rather than specialists. At Emory I discovered Giambattista Vico, an 18th century Italian philosopher, who held the key to my most fundamental questions about the nature of philosophy and its place in the human world. I wrote my dissertation on *Vico and Plato*, and it was published as a book in 2001.

After I received my Ph. D., I began teaching philosophy, at Spelman College, where I taught for four years. I am now completing my second year at Oglethorpe University teaching both philosophy and literature in the Core Curriculum. Teaching is intrinsic to the ancient way of philosophizing. But it is also common sense. My grandfather used to explain to me based on his experience serving on a school board that there are teachers and there are learners, and he wanted to be sure that I became a teacher. Why? Because being only a student who absorbs but does not give back can isolate you from real human concerns. You can lose touch with what is fundamental. But teaching keeps the teacher on track, and keeps what is learned alive, for the teacher and the students. I was afraid that I could not make that transition when I first started teaching; now I cannot imagine myself without teaching philosophy as a central part of who I am.

II. Philosophy is what *you* make of it.

But what do I think philosophy *is*? "Philosophy" as it is usually understood, as one among many disciplines, one major among many, involves asking questions and studying the answers of great thinkers about, for example, the nature of reality, human nature, and what we ought to do. But being a philosopher is not the same as being an historian, even an historian of ideas. Being a philosopher means that you yourself are a lover of wisdom. "The love of wisdom" is the most ancient definition of philosophy and derives from Pythagoras's definition of the philosopher. When the tyrant Leon asked Pythagoras who he was, he replied: "a

philosopher (*philosophos*)” In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates similarly prefers the Pythagorean word “lover of wisdom” (*philosophos*) or something similar” as more appropriate for a human being than wise (*sophos*) because *sophos* “is proper only to a god” (278d). Our word philosophy is derived from this definition of the philosopher, but we tend to forget that it is the definition of the philosopher, the individual lover of wisdom, that is fundamental.

How do you become a philosopher? To become more than a student of the philosophical thoughts of others—which is the necessary, ineliminable starting-point— you must make the truth your own. In his *New Science* Vico explicitly states the need for his reader to be active. He directly addresses his reader and calls for him to meditate and narrate his Science for himself, and says that when he does he will feel “a divine pleasure, since in God knowledge and creation are the same thing” (NS 349). This philosophical method is not the same as relativism, the Protagorean formula of “man as the measure,” because God remains the ultimate measure of truth for Vico as for Plato. Vico makes central the idea of knowing through making, but I would argue that all the genuine philosophers want their readers to see for themselves what the author has seen.

Søren Kierkegaard also describes how philosophy is fundamentally about self-knowledge as follows: “The thing is to understand myself . . . to find the *idea for which I can live and die*. What would be the use of . . . working through all the systems of philosophy and of being able, if required, to review them all and show up all the inconsistencies within each system. . . ? . . . it must be taken up into my life, and that is what I now recognize as the most important thing” (211). The historian of philosophy W.T. Jones sums up what this means for the nature of philosophy: “The purpose of philosophy is . . . to ‘edify,’ that is, to improve us by changing us.” (213)

So you cannot be a philosopher from a safe distance. It cannot be merely your job; it has to be your life. It has to be what you would be asking, thinking, and reading even if you had another job. I am grateful that I was able through my parents paying for my college education and all the efforts of my teachers to discover that philosophy is a central part of who I am and to become a college professor of philosophy. For me this is the optimal work because it is what I love and follows the natural bent of my soul. The question is whether it is for you, and only you can answer that.

III. Philosophy as Consolation

If philosophy is part of who you are, then I believe that you have one of the best lots in life. No matter what else you suffer in your life, and all life involves challenges, philosophy can enable you to see it in perspective. Your attitude toward your challenges can be a consolation, and can prevent despair, even though it cannot prevent the pain. How is philosophy a consolation? Philosophy enables you to see what really matters and what ultimately does not. It helps you to understand exactly why it is better to choose justice over injustice; to choose to be the philosopher not the tyrant in Plato’s *Republic*, or to be the honest Cordelia not her flattering and deceitful sisters in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Most of you know the story of Socrates’s trial and death, and how he faced death with integrity, and preferred death to betraying his principles. He could not escape from prison and remain Socrates. He would have no longer been able to teach that “the most

important thing is not life, but the good life" (*Crito* 48b). There are others like him. For example, a Roman named Boethius, who was beheaded in 524, wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* when he was in prison waiting for his execution. He was framed by his enemies because he had always chosen to do what was right not what was politically expedient, and that makes enemies. In prison, he wrote a beautiful prose and poetry description of how Lady Philosophy consoled him, and enabled him to put in perspective his change of fortune. He understood that real happiness comes from within and that the real treasure is to have true friends, not the apparent happiness of having external goods like money, fame, and power. In fact, he discovers that bad fortune is better for human beings than good fortune, because good fortune is deceptive, while bad fortune reveals the truth that the goods of fortune come and go. I hope that you read Boethius's *Consolation* for yourself.

You might object that Socrates and Boethius both lived a long time ago in very different worlds from our own. That is true. But all the extraordinary individuals did not live in the past. Philosophy can still provide consolation today. The leader of Tibet, the Dalai Lama, is a moving example in our time. In fact, right before he went into exile, he took his final examinations to receive his degree of Master of Metaphysics. The examination was held in three sessions of dialectical debate with between 15 and 30 scholars in those areas as his opponents, and the audience was comprised of hundreds of lamas and thousands of monks (p. 134, 27-28). His rigorous study of philosophy as well as his religious faith gave him the inner strength to flourish despite the Chinese invasion and his exile. Like Socrates and Boethius knew, he knows what is real and what is not. He still feels the pain, the suffering of his people is not inhumanly ignored, but he sees it within the larger perspective of the meaning of life and death that makes it possible for him to keep his own balance and cheerfully and optimistically work for the liberation of Tibet. He writes that he does not hate the Chinese, and he does not see himself as a victim. Seeing oneself as a victim is one of the more common ways to abdicate selfhood today. Defining oneself as a victim is a stubborn refusal to be consoled; but this is completely foreign to the Dalai Lama's way of understanding himself. If you read his autobiography, you will be amazed that despite all that has happened to Tibet that the Dalai Lama is one of the happiest people on the planet, and lectures and writes books to teach others how to be happy. The key to understanding his happiness is the consolation of his study of philosophy--and of his practice of religion. What then is the relationship between philosophy and religion? According to Vico, and I think he is right, philosophy and religion have the common goal of creating and preserving our humanity--but that is a story for another occasion.

IV. Philosophical Heroes and the Courage to Become Human

Being a philosopher, as these examples show, is hard. But Plato says "fine things are hard." What is the greatest obstacle to becoming a philosopher today? I think it is propaganda. The best book to read on this topic is *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* by Jacques Ellul. Ellul observes that the most well-informed intellectuals are in fact the most vulnerable to propaganda, not the least, because they consume so much of it and need to have an opinion about everything.

Ellul warns us of the great danger we face, and it is even more pervasive since he wrote in 1965. The challenge is to make yourself actively, and not to allow the media to make you in its image, to oversimplify a complex phenomenon. The challenge is to think your own thoughts and not to parrot those of others and deceive yourself into thinking that they are your own. Ellul shows us in disturbing detail how hard it is in our age to be a philosopher, in his terms, to be "the outstanding man." Such an individual with "vast culture, great intelligence, and exceptional energy can find answers for himself" when faced with the rush of daily information, but this is not the case for the ordinary man, who with relief accepts ready-made ideologies (pp. 144-48). The good news is that propaganda can only take over your self if you let it; but the bad news is that if your self is empty and you are not inner-directed you are vulnerable. As Plato described in his famous image of the Cave, which Socrates describes as the image of "education—or the lack of it," it takes heroic effort to think for yourself and to reject the shadows, to take off your chains, to struggle toward the sun, and then to come back and teach others what you discovered.

Ellul's account can be discouraging. Philosophy can help you become fully human, but it takes courage. Fortunately, there are philosophical heroes, whose journeys out of the Cave we can read about, and they can inspire us to become better human beings. Their courage gives us courage. What is philosophical courage? According to Plato's *Republic*, "Courage is a preservative. Strengthened by education, it preserves convictions about things that are legitimately to be feared and those that are not" (*Rep.* 429c-d). Failing to become fully human is what I think we ought to fear most. Being human is a goal not a given. It is a potential we must work to actualize. John Locke makes this point in the *Second Treatise on Government*, which was an important source for America's founding fathers. In chapter six, Locke qualifies his claim "*That all men by nature are equal*" saying that "Children, I confess are not born in this full state of *equality*, though they are born to it" (p. 33, §55). He says the same of freedom and reason "*we are born free*, as we are born rational; not that we have the exercise of either: age that brings one, brings the other too" (p. 36, §61). So we all are born to equality, freedom, and reason, but these are only actualized, if they are at all, through education. Education is the means by which we can become human. And we can fail. That is the real impetus to study philosophy and become a philosopher despite its difficulty: to actualize your potential as human being.

I am happy to have the opportunity to come back to my origin in philosophy and speak about what philosophy means to me. I hope that hearing about my philosophical journey, and about some of the guides I encountered along the way, will in some way help you with yours. Good luck to all of you, and thank you for your kind attention.