
I. SOME TIMELY REFLECTIONS ON PHILOSOPHY

Four Philosophical Essays

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Prefatory Note. The remarks herein are a tetralogy of thoughts written as they came to mind. They are not intended to prove anything. They may be regarded as a series of suggestions. I consider suggestions as thoughts that lie between descriptions and prescriptions. Suggestions are neither true nor false. They are only what they are—suitable or unsuitable to a given subject matter. The subject matter in this case is wide-ranging, from education to the poetic as the basis of thought, to prudence as the basis of moral activity, and to beauty as the key to what is ultimate in human experience. I have included a brief Afterword on the nature of politics.

On the Educated Person

In the technological society—our contemporary society—we have lost the idea and presence of the educated person that had a place in traditional society. The educated person is replaced by the technical person. The technical person pursues thought as an instrument for the accumulation of information to be employed in a series of indefinite length of addressing one problem after another. The technical person has no ability to pursue thought as contemplation. Devoid of contemplation, the technical person has no inside, no awareness of Socratic self-knowledge that is the basis of humane education. The hollowness of incessant technical problem-solving leaves the individual without any grasp of the ultimates of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. These ultimates have no existence for the technical person. In the ongoing stream of technical engagement the individual is always waiting for Godot.

There are two words that apply to the sense of education embodied in the idea of the educated person—the Greek word *paideia* and the German word *Bildung*. *Paideia* is used by Werner Jaeger, the German historian of Greek culture, as the title of his three-volume work *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*. Jaeger interprets *paideia* as bringing together the

meanings of modern expressions, such as civilization, culture, tradition, literature, and education. The unity of these expressions in the one word, *paideia*, is grasped by the reading of literature. *Bildung*, in its meaning since the eighteenth century, designates a conception of education as the inner, intellectual development of an individual. It involves the assimilation of the individual into society and culture. It is associated with Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, the founding work of the *Bildungsroman*, or novel depicting the self-formation of an individual.

To be educated is not simply to be able to solve problems. Such ability is useful but it is a matter of training. To be educated is to engage in a process of self-development that depends upon the distinct human ability to join language and thought. This union rests upon the individual's ability to engage in contemplation. Contemplation differs from meditation. Meditation is a state of mind that seeks to comprehend the meaning of a given set of ideas or principles. Contemplation has the purpose of posing questions, the pursuit of which takes the mind to a new perspective. The educated person thinks in terms of questions and the possibilities for thought that questions reveal. The educated person has four characteristics—to be well-read, well-mannered, well-spoken, and well-reasoned.

Being well-read is a lifetime occupation. It involves reading the writings of the ancients and the moderns in all the traditions of world literature, beginning with the first books of the various religions and intellectual traditions. It is a task to undertake, but one that can never be fully finished. The act of reading is a means of the suspension of time. Reading is an act of contemplation, allowing the self to look inward, into the process of thought. The technical self has no means to achieve relief from the constant, ongoing sense of time. The technical self is always spread out in time, in an unceasing process of change and revision. The self thus becomes an instrument of time—always facing the next task.

Manners are the basis of morals. They are moral activity, pursued at the level of one individual in relation to another and as proper conduct within any given society. Manners constitute the foundation of prudence, and prudence is the foundation of moral action. The French word *mœurs* carries this double meaning of manners and morals. It is possible to speak directly of manners (*manières*), referring to the way something is done, in the sense of acting in terms of custom. But the double meaning of *mœurs* suggests that a person who acts to others in terms of man-

ners is in possession of the concept of right conduct, that there is a right and proper way to live in society. Rousseau, in his discourse on the question: “Has the restoration of the sciences and arts tended to purify morals (*mœurs*)?” has shown the interconnection between the two senses of the word. Closely connected to the philosophical interpretation of *mœurs* is the concept of taste (*goût*). Taste, as the term is understood in the eighteenth century, is essential in order to make distinctions in human experience. Taste, like manners, is not a subjective preference; it is understood as an objective standard developed through custom.

Being well-spoken depends upon a knowledge of grammar and diction. To speak well it is necessary to acquire the principles of grammar and to express thought in the words proper to the subject considered. Polydore Vergil, in the first chapter of his work *On Discovery*, explains the importance of grammar: “Grammar is the most excellent of all the arts, for it provides a way of approaching the others.” One of the errors that I notice today with considerable frequency is the incorrect use of pronouns.

Grammar is the means whereby the self orders the world and places itself in the world. A common error in the use of pronouns is to use “me” when “I” is grammatically correct. Another pronoun error is to use “him” or “her” when “he” or “she” is correct. The ability to use language grammatically is crucial to the development of thought and the concept of the self. This is why elementary education was originally designated as “grammar school.” The inability to use the proper pronouns derives from the involvement in electronic communication. The technical person has no selfhood. The lack of contemplation turns the person into an agent, moving things forward in a project. There is no need to pursue thought that can engage the self with itself. There is no expectation of happiness for the technical person because, as Aristotle says, happiness requires the practice of contemplation.

Being well-reasoned depends upon the mastery of grammar, and logic sets the standard for reasoning. In his preface to the second edition of the *Science of Logic* Hegel says: “The forms of thought are first set out and stored in human *language*. . . . So much is logic natural to the human being, indeed it is the very *nature* of the human being.” Logic is the extension of grammar into the pure forms of thought. Aristotle regards the syllogism as a natural form of thought. We reason in terms of premises connected to a conclusion. To be well-reasoned is also to be

well-spoken. As Aristotle says at the beginning of the *Rhetoric*, “Rhetoric is a counterpart of Dialectic.” They correspond to each other as the antisrophe to the strophe in a choral ode.

When reasoning, thought passes back and forth between what is in language and what is in logic. This internal movement of the mind is possible only if the self possesses the power of contemplation in the sense of the Greek word *theōrein*, the ability to look upon something so as to comprehend it as having a meaning in itself. The act of contemplation can be carried on only after a long process of education, learning the arts of reading, comportment, speaking, and reasoning, that leads to asking the question that Socrates asks of himself in his conversation with Phaedrus: “Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?” The Delphic inscription orders Socrates to know himself. Socrates does not claim to have fulfilled the instruction of the inscription. Thus Socrates passes it on to us. It is the oldest instruction in human consciousness, and it rests at the center of the being of the educated person.

On the Poetic Method

A poem begins by a metaphor suddenly appearing in the mind. It is the work of the Muses, and comes from outside of time. The metaphor that will become the poem has within it what was, is, and is to come. It is the result of what is in memory, perception, and anticipation. When expanded into the poem, the metaphor allows us to see through its words, with the mind’s eye, how there is similarity in the dissimilar. Opposites are always opposite through an underlying unity. It is to this sense of unity that the poem takes us.

Speculative philosophy is a form of poetic thinking. The poem has within it a narrative that moves from line to line. A poem is always a whole thought. Speculative philosophy takes the True to be the whole. This whole is reached by a conceptual narrative of one idea leading dialectically to another, until there is a rational sense of the whole, of all that there is. What the mind originally feels as a unity in the poetic image, the mind thinks in terms of what Hegel calls the “speculative sentence.”

The “reflective sentence” does no more than assert a connection statically, between subject and predicate. The speculative sentence contains an internal motion such that the meaning of the subject is to be found in its connection to the predicate. Once connected to the predicate, how-

ever, the predicate requires the presence of the subject to be a predicate. When thought moves from the predicate back to the subject, the meaning of the subject is redefined. As the mind moves itself forward in this manner it progresses toward a grasp of the whole, which Hegel calls “absolute knowing.” What begins in the poetic image of the metaphor becomes a way to think the whole by joining the imagination with reason. Speculative philosophy is the poetry of the rational imagination.

What is reasonable must be poetic and what is poetic must be reasonable. The sudden appearance of the metaphor to the poet is matched by the sudden appearance of the rational idea to the philosopher. Dimitry Gawronsky, in his biographical essay on Ernst Cassirer, in the Library of Living Philosophers volume, relates that the conception of symbolic forms flashed across Cassirer’s mind as he was entering a streetcar in Berlin, in 1917. Three years later, this conception appeared as the title and theme of his philosophy. It allows Cassirer to conceive human knowledge and human culture as a whole. J. N. Findlay, in his Foreword to A. V. Miller’s translation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, says of Hegel that “an afflatus seized him in the Jena lecture-rooms, an afflatus perhaps unique in philosophical history, which affected not only his ideas but his style.” Hegel writes in the manner of a philosophical poet, using images such as the “Unhappy Consciousness,” “The Law of the Heart and the Frenzy of Self-Conceit,” “Virtue and the Way of the World,” “The Spiritual Animal Kingdom or Zoo,” “Absolute Freedom and Terror.” Findlay compares Hegel to Shakespeare, to Rimbaud, and to Mallarmé.

The existence of speculative philosophy suggests that we may consider philosophy as a form of literature in which there are not only arguments but also images that situate arguments. Arguments never stand alone. They have meaning only within implicit or explicit narratives. Arguments are never final thoughts because, for any argument, it is not beyond human wit to devise a counter-argument, in a series that in principle has no end. Philosophy that is pursued simply as argument is scepticism. Scepticism is what philosophy must overcome. Sceptical mentality stands opposite to the poetic in experience. Scepticism thinks only in terms of one opposite after another. It is a dialectic of pro versus con, with each side of the opposition standing to the other as static. Once the speculative sentence is grasped scepticism is no longer possible as a philosophical position, because the two sides of its opposition are seen to

move in terms of each other in a progression. This progression eliminates scepticism as an intellectual position. Scepticism becomes no more than a prelude to the speculative sense of the whole.

The dialectic of the speculative sentence allows us to read the history of philosophy as a single tale, in which one philosophy stands as subject to a subsequent philosophy as predicate. This progression is not at all points a royal road because some philosophies fall by the wayside and remain cul-de-sac. The study of the history of philosophy is a source for the search for self-knowledge. In the opening sentence of *An Essay on Man*, Cassirer says: "That self-knowledge is the highest aim of philosophical inquiry appears to be generally acknowledged. In all the conflicts between the different philosophical schools this objective remained invariable and unshaken: it proved to be the Archimedean point, the fixed and immovable center of all thought." Cassirer's "Archimedean point" refers to Descartes's declaration of the *cogito*, by which Descartes begins modern philosophy with a new version of the inscription of the temple of Apollo at Delphi, from which Socrates begins ancient philosophy by bringing philosophy down from the heavens, as Cicero says. We read the history of philosophy to absorb the dialectic of the self with itself.

Poetry is always a way the self engages itself with itself. We read poetry, and literature generally, because of our inclination to grasp who we are as human beings. When we move our thought from poetry to speculative philosophy we find a second way to engage the self with itself, by joining feeling with thinking. This union is the basis of intelligence. There is no self-knowledge without intelligence. Intelligence fits with what Ovid, in *Ars Poetica*, says is the purpose of poetry—to instruct, delight, and move. It is through intelligence that we acquire knowledge, that we take pleasure in the nature of things, and that we come to direct our actions. What is said of the purpose of poetry can also rightly be said of the purpose of philosophy, especially when it is joined with the poetic. There is no philosophy that does not instruct and in such instruction does not also delight. What we acquire from a philosophical grasp of things gives us a rational basis on which to act. Through philosophy reason directs feeling, keeping us from acting blindly.

Without leaving the poetic sense of things behind, we may take up Hegel's dictum that what is rational is what is real, in the sense of what is actual. This dictum is the essence of philosophy but it requires a sense

of reason as dialectical, as a medium that can move through the oppositions of things in experience. Human experience takes place through opposition. Thought cannot confine itself to one side of an opposition as truth to error. Thought is self-moving through opposition, and in so doing it is the medium of reason. Through thought the poetic always takes us to the philosophic and the philosophic always takes us back to the poetic, in a process of the self attempting to know itself. It is a process that always comes back upon itself, bringing itself to a new standpoint. In this way thinking is teleological, but its purpose is itself. Its purpose is not to achieve a goal outside of itself.

The poetic sense of things also shows that beyond this internal dialectic there is always a *Jenseits*, a transcendent beyond, an opposition that is never fully included in the self's internal dialectic. This beyond is that of which the poetic always reminds us and which makes the poetic always the starting point for thought. The poetic inserts into memory that in one instance—what is transcendent—there is an opposition that remains beyond the reach of the dialectic within the self.

On the Ethics of Prudence

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle says that the prudent human being embodies the intellectual virtue of prudence (*phronēsis*). This intellectual virtue is necessary for the practice of the moral virtues because prudence is concerned with those things in human activity about which it is possible to deliberate. The purpose of such deliberation is to choose the right course of action. Prudence requires correct reason (*orthos logos*). To choose rightly in accordance with the good for human beings depends upon the power of contemplation to distinguish what is reasonable in regard to a particular action and what is not in accord with reason. To act prudently may be in the self-interest of the person who is making a choice but it must also be in the interest of what is noble.

We act on the basis of our character. Our character is who we are as a particular human being. Our character, when properly formed, inclines us to the good. We act in terms of the good but not simply in a general sense. A particular action requires the guidance of a particular virtue. The particular virtue is the sense of the good that applies in a particular choice of action. To act calls for correct reason to determine the virtue that applies to this choice. In Aristotle's terms, for example, if courage is the appropriate moral virtue, the intellectual virtue of prudence takes the indi-

vidual to a mean (*mesotēs*) between the two extremes of excessive fearlessness or reckless action (*thrasutēs*) and cowardice (*deilia*). We arrive at the mean because of the formation of our character.

How is good character acquired? Character is first formed in the child, by parents who train the child in proper behavior, in manners and custom. Once the individual has acquired a moral sense and the ability to act in terms of it, moral choice becomes a deliberate occupation. Moral choice is an art. Like any art, it develops through practice. Morality becomes what we tell ourselves after we have acted. Moral choice depends on memory. We remember how we have acted in past instances of choice that involved the exercise of prudence and the application of moral virtue, and we find ourselves in a better position to act in the present and in the future. In this way we continue to develop character as a thinking human being, seeking a good and proper life. Such a life opens to us the possibility to attain happiness, what Aristotle calls *eudaimonia*, literally, having a good daimon. We contact the good daimon that is within us. We achieve self-determination that is the basis of human freedom.

Once we are successful at the art of forming character from which to act we have no need of a decision procedure by which to direct our actions in a moral situation. We have no need for what Kant states, in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, as the “categorical imperative”: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” There is no question but that such an imperative is a presupposition of anyone acting through true prudence. Prudence is not a means for acting in less than a wholly ethical manner. Anyone claiming to act as rightly as possible is also claiming that such an action is the one that should be taken by any rational human being in the same situation. True prudence is not a lesser form of ethical choice. The categorical imperative as such does not offer the individual instruction regarding how to act in a given situation. Instead, the individual always is naturally guided by character.

Mill, in his *Utilitarianism*, states another principle to guide moral action, that of “utility” or the “greatest happiness principle.” This principle is compatible with action in accord with virtue. But as a universal principle it offers no specific guidance for deciding how to act in terms of it. Mill acknowledges that this principle provides no such guidance, but holds that it is better to have such a principle than to have none. Mill says: “Though the application of the standard may be difficult, it is bet-

ter than none at all.” Granting this principle, we still require character and prudence, joined with the moral virtues, as an actual basis from which to practice the art of morality. We always act out of who we in fact are, out of how we have come to be ourselves as capable of correct reason. No one acts rightly who acts against what is truly a concern with the production of the greatest happiness.

The principles of Kant and Mill are absorbed within the Aristotelian doctrine of character and the virtues. Prudence is the basis of human dignity. In this regard, we can turn to the humanist doctrine of Pico della Mirandola’s oration, *De hominis dignitate*. Pico reminds us that what is human is wonderful. To explain this claim, Pico takes us back to the three surviving inscriptions on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: “Know thyself” (*gnothi seauton*), “Nothing overmuch” (*mēden agan*), and “thou art” (*ei*). These show the three aspects of human existence: the self’s relation to itself, the self’s relation to other selves, and the self’s relation to the divine, to what is beyond itself (interpreting the epsilon as Plutarch does in his *Moralia*). Prudence must always take these into account—there is always the self and the other self and what is beyond the self. The formation of character is the pursuit of a center within this threefold. We are always acting in a manner that takes the self into itself, and that takes the self into relation with other selves, and that takes the self beyond itself.

Law is the repository of civil wisdom. What begins as custom that provides order in society can become codified into a body of law. Law presumes that individuals can act prudently and can develop character. In so doing individuals become law-abiding and society becomes a structure of laws. The presence of law as the basis of society is a means to human dignity. In turn the individual strives to engage in correct reason in human affairs. It is necessary for each person to recognize the interconnection of *sapientia*, *eloquentia*, and *prudentia*. Wisdom requires the thought of the whole. Eloquence puts the whole into words. Prudence allows the person to act in terms of the whole of any situation.

The fundamental problem of ethics is not how to make decisions in particular instances. The fundamental problem of ethics is how to identify and achieve the best life for any individual. I am in agreement with Aristotle, that the best life is based on contemplation. Contemplation gives the individual access to correct reason, without which there can be no prudence. The essential act of prudence is for the individual to find a

place within society in which to live and flourish. Once such is found, character can develop. It is a way for the individual to be human. Prudence becomes a way of using the past to be in the present and to prepare to confront the future in a complete manner. In so doing we find a way to live in time. Through the ethics of prudence we can come to accept our mortality and thus accept ourselves as human.

On the Sense of Beauty

One of Santayana's best books, and one of the best books to be found in the field of aesthetics, is *The Sense of Beauty*. Santayana begins his work by saying that: "We know on excellent authority that beauty is truth, that it is the expression of the ideal, the symbol of divine perfection, and the sensible manifestation of the good." To the reader of poetry it is evident that Santayana has in mind the line of Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' —that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

Keats recalls for the reader the three ultimates given to us by the Greeks: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Santayana recognizes that the good is the middle term that allows us to connect truth and beauty. It is an enthymematic statement, implying a loosely constructed categorical syllogism of the first figure, with its conclusion a loosely converted proposition. Keats's claim is not fully logical but it is poetic, showing that of the three terms beauty is the key, the major term. What is beautiful presents us with a truth that cannot be subjected to criticism. It is a good to be accepted. It is not Keats's opinion that he gives the reader; it is what the urn itself tells us to which Keats calls our attention. When we fail to have the sense of beauty, we lose access to the truth and the good that truth brings to us.

Beauty is something good. It is never what is negative. The experience of beauty allows us to overcome the negative. Beauty is objectified pleasure, but it is also more than this pleasure. Beauty belongs to the imagination. Consider the poem of William Carlos Williams, *The Red Wheelbarrow*.

so much depends
upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

These are beautiful words and a beautiful image. The beauty of the words comes from their combination. The key to the poem is “depends.” There is no way to paraphrase what “depends” means. We accept it as a matter of fact and know that all is what should be. The poem fits what Archibald MacLeish says, in *Ars Poetica*: “A poem should not mean/But be.” The imagination lets us know we are, just as beauty lets us know we are. We arrive at truth by means of reason, by an act of the mind. We arrive at the good by an act of character, an act of the human spirit. We arrive at beauty by an act of the imagination.

Beauty is in the beholder, but beauty is not relative to the beholder. It is not likely that the reader has seen a red wheelbarrow, or one wet with rain, or one beside white chickens, but through the poem these have entered the reader’s imagination and, as present in imagination, this image is immediately stored in memory. From memory it can be recalled. It becomes part of the reader’s ongoing experience of beauty. When the wheelbarrow and chickens are recalled, they are there before the mind, like a perception. There is a truth to their presence, but it is not clear what it is. And there is a goodness to this presence. It is a self-contained good, not pointing to anything beyond itself.

Beauty, unlike Truth and Goodness, comes as a judgment of the mind, without qualification. We assert something to be beautiful as a single, self-contained affirmation. When we assert something to be true or good, the possibility is present that more can be said to affirm the way in which it is true or good. Of beauty, nothing more need be said. Beauty is affirmed but it need not be explained.

The poem brings to us what is already in memory. Imagination brings before the mind what is in memory, as if it were an immediate perception. Beauty holds the mind for a moment before what is. We come away from the apprehension of beauty with a sense of security, a sense that things are as they are; they are whatever they are. Beauty gives us peace of mind. From beauty nothing is expected beyond itself.

The labor of the negative that takes us dialectically toward truth is suspended. Action toward the good is not needed. Beauty takes us out of the confines of time.

In beauty we have before us the harmony of the nine Muses, whose mother is Memory. The moment in which our imagination responds to beauty passes, but the experience of beauty passes into memory. We then know we are the better for the experience. We do not cause beauty, even if we are the poet. Beauty simply comes forth from outside time and stands before us as something self-caused. In this sense beauty is an ultimate.

How, then, is Beauty co-extensive with Truth? As ultimate they have no opposite. Truth, as something in time, stands in opposition to error. Something is true given certain conditions. Beauty, as something relative to certain forms of preference and custom, to certain periods of history or types of culture, is opposite to what is considered not to be beautiful or desirable. In the trilogy of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, each is an aspect of the Absolute. The Absolute is that to which there is no opposite in principle. The Absolute has nothing that qualifies it as such. Thought may approach the Absolute from various perspectives, but as Absolute it is itself and not in any sense subject to modification. Beauty is experienced as absolute. What is beautiful is just that. It is an idea that allows us to apprehend various embodiments of it, but it itself remains just what it is—that from which we can call something a thing of beauty.

In holding to this sense of the Absolute we find ourselves outside the ordinary sense of aesthetics. We find ourselves with the conclusion of Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by;
And that has made all the difference.

The Absolute can be said but it cannot be fully thought. It is there in thought by necessity but it is not present in any form that can be spoken. The self-determination of Beauty as it is experienced takes us as close to the sense of the Absolute as we can come. Beauty is essential to the speculative sense of things. It causes us to speak beyond physics, and that makes all the difference.

Afterword: On the Understanding of Politics

There are two senses of politics: (1) the extension of moral judgment and practical reason and action to matters of public concern, and (2) the attempt to gain and hold power over the populace of a society.

The pursuit of politics in the first sense is based on ideas that can be put into practice for the good of the public in a manner analogous to the pursuit of moral action by the individual within society. Political thought of this type is practical in the sense that it is directed to the solution of problems present in social life. In this respect political action or legislation is like custom except that it arises and is undertaken with deliberation and it may be revised on the basis of an evaluation. Thought and action are continually adjusted to each other. Whatever may be arrived at theoretically is constantly modified by practice.

The pursuit of politics in the second sense has none of the above characteristics. Political thinking and acting is a matter of constant scheming to secure power. What is to be done with this power is determined by an ideology that is affirmed to be true, not subject to correction. If what the ideology dictates does not produce the results that are expected for it, all effort must be extended to make what occurs fit the claims of the ideology. The theoretical dominates the practical. When the ideology, which is wholly theoretical, fails in practice, it is not claimed that the ideology is in error. The conclusion that is drawn is that the principles of the ideology have not been adequately applied. The belief is firmly held that if such principles were so applied, they would be proven to be politically effective. In this way, those who hold power continue to hold power.

The politics of ideology cannot truly see the light of reason. Such politics are usually pursued as if they were a politics of some higher good, and thus at their base is a duplicity. This duplicity takes in those who support the ideology. They are the true believers, or they are those who are simply unable to think well. Once anyone has embraced an ideology and allowed it to command not only one's thoughts but also one's emotions, there is no exit. The ideology becomes what one is. Common sense is closed off from common sense and the ordinary powers of reason that accompany it. The Inferno now exists above ground.