

Philosophy—A Lifeline

THE DISCIPLINE OF psychology has the reputation, well earned or not, of attracting students who see it as a way to work through personal hang-ups. Not so with philosophy, probably the least likely of all disciplines to be thought of this way since it is generally seen as quite abstract and removed from what is designated “real life.” This common understanding was reflected by the categorization system in a used-book store in which I loved to browse when I lived in Chicago in the 1960s. When I wanted books on philosophy, I had to look under the category “Esoteric.”

For me, though, philosophy has been anything but esoteric. My initial reaction to it and my continued involvement in its study have touched me to the core; and, like the stereotypical psychology students, I turned to it for help as I fought my way through quandaries into which my culture and family had propelled me. My work in philosophy continues to inform my decisions as well as my outlook on most of the important aspects of life.

Understanding my initial reaction to philosophy requires, no doubt, some appreciation of what it was like for a white, generally middle-class girl to grow up in the southern United States in the 1940s and 1950s. Although I was only minimally aware of the broader picture, this was a time of segregated schools, churches, theaters, water fountains, waiting rooms, and seating on buses and trains. Jim Crow voting restrictions flourished. In the South, these features of daily life were generally presented by those in power as beyond question, not to be discussed. Throughout the country, there was frequent harassment, even terrorism, of blacks by groups of whites. These events, too, were often kept quiet, sometimes passed on in whispers, or else, reversing the roles of perpetrators and victims, trumpeted by the press and concerned politicians as evidence of the threat blacks constituted against whites. Moreover, it was a time when media, politicians, preachers, and educators told white girls and women, in no uncertain terms, that they were suited for nothing so much as for the care of men and children of their race. Other girls and women, whatever their own views and those of others around them, were assumed by many in the

dominant group to be suitable prey for its males, for the sexual initiation of boys and the fairly unconstrained sexual appetites of many of the men, activities seldom acknowledged and apparently never seen as the sort of interracial “mixing” banned by the laws forbidding miscegenation. Although race was seldom mentioned and class was frequently denied in political and religious discussions, they were nonetheless well understood as implicit in admonishments about sexual behavior.

While I cannot say exactly when, in what form, and by whose teaching these ideas entered my awareness, I somehow managed to imbibe a considerable number of rather perverse notions, but most of all I was infused with an enormous fear of change. Even challenging the status quo in any way was, I believed, anathema. I think creating such a fear of change and buttressing it with religiously enshrouded prohibitions on questioning and challenging were how the very repressive culture of the time, particularly in the South, managed to maintain itself.

The hold of convention over me and over many others as I was growing up was powerful, tenacious, and little understood by most of us. Lillian Smith discussed it in her book *Killers of the Dream*, but I didn’t discover this book until much later—in fact, not until I was in graduate school when, along with many others at that time, the mid 1960s, black friends of mine in Chicago began seriously seeking their cultural roots. Left wondering about my own, I returned from a visit with my family, armed with a jar of guava jelly to represent the Florida aspect of those roots and with Smith’s book vividly recounting the southern aspects.

Particularly revealing, I thought, was Smith’s discussion of a play presented by the children one summer at the camp she helped run near Clayton, Georgia, a play inspired by the story of *The Little Prince*, but depicting a child—Every Child—trying to grow up in a racist society. The campers who developed the play astutely symbolized the power of convention—southern tradition—with a horde of eight children always hovering about and encircling the child, constantly controlling her behavior with ominous warnings, invoking fear of its authority at every turn, and generally trumping the quieter, single, and timid voice of Conscience and the distant, more muted voices of Science and Religion.¹

Since, as I grew up, I had connected questioning the way things were with blasphemy, I, like the children in Smith’s camp, was thoroughly intimidated by convention. Not only could I not challenge *it* in any way, but I was less prepared to question anything about *religion*—and in my life the two had blended together, reinforcing each other, in a way not depicted by the separate voices in the children’s presentation.

Initially, at least, my college course work did little to alter this. After two years as an undergraduate at Emory University and the completion of almost all the mathematics courses needed for a major, I no doubt knew a good deal

more than when I began; but nothing had forced me really to think critically about my ideas and about the society around me until I took a required Bible and Religion course at the beginning of my junior year. I was spellbound each day in class, particularly when the different professors who lectured told us of archeological evidence disputing various biblical claims. My mind reeled from the constant challenges of interpretation after interpretation, conflicting as they did with each other as well as with what I had previously been led to believe was unproblematic and unchallengeable. My excitement was impossible to contain. I could hardly take notes, fearing I might miss something. In fact, I felt no need for notes since it seemed to me these revelations were being etched permanently on my brain. While the lectures were profoundly altering my whole way of seeing things, I was amazed to see other students, some of whom came from backgrounds as fundamentalist as mine, seemingly so unperturbed. Unlike me, they carefully took notes and wrote down refutations to much of what they too had been taught to believe, summarizing those amazing claims and accounts of discoveries but treating them as just items to be memorized and regurgitated on exams and thereby disarming the very threats in which I was reveling.

My head still spinning from witnessing this disputation of what I had thought beyond dispute, I enrolled in an introduction to philosophy. The professor, Jack Wilcox, infuriated me as day after day he took on the persona of the thinker we had just read and refused to budge an inch, generally and adeptly meeting from the particular perspective all of our challenges no matter how decisive we thought they were.

Furious or not, I was excited and almost overwhelmed by Professor Wilcox's demand that I *argue*, something I had previously viewed as unthinkable. And he communicated this in such a matter-of-fact, quiet way, as though people did things like this every day and as if there was absolutely nothing threatening, fearsome, or even particularly remarkable about it! I was positively giddy. I had never felt such a sense of freedom in my life. Interestingly, his response when he read an earlier version of this essay was that it had simply never occurred to him that he needed to give anyone permission to think. Of course, that is exactly what he, along with the discovery of philosophers' conflicting views, did for me.

During that second quarter of my junior year, I became completely hooked. I had found a discipline to help me sort through what I had been taught as well as what I had just osmosed from my culture. I no longer had to accept it all, regardless of whether it made sense and regardless of whether one part of it conflicted with other parts. Best of all, I realized that convention is not particularly hallowed and that nothing becomes right or good or true simply by virtue of being somehow enshrined in the status quo. I could challenge whatever victimized or oppressed me or those around me just as I saw others throughout history questioning and challenging the accepted

truths of their respective societies and of each other. I gradually became less tyrannized by the faceless, nameless “they” whose opinions and even malicious gossip I had been taught to respect, to heed, and to fear without ever inquiring into their correctness. Later, I was delighted to find John Stuart Mill characterizing such enforcers of the status quo as variations of “Mrs. Grundy,”² for him a commonplace characterization of the narrow-minded and often mean-spirited busybodies probably found in every society and at every period of history who, despite the unfortunate title in the expression, are no likelier to be female than male. In this way, Mill dismissed those who enforce convention as the moral imposters they are although they represent a serious threat since, as he says in *On Liberty*: “In our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest, every one lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship.”³

Though I loved the idea of the examined life, I soon found, as Peter De Vries has a character say in one of his novels, that “the examined life is no bed of roses either.”⁴ I discovered that it was frequently painful to challenge accepted “truths,” whether in myself, in others, or in society. As I began and continued my difficult, frequently demoralizing, and very nearly disastrous struggle to become an academic philosopher, I quickly learned that many of my professors and colleagues, some of whom were giving me the most grief about being out of my “element” as a woman, were, to say the least, not particularly enamored with or concerned to live an examined life themselves. While this recognition came as a hard blow to me, I nevertheless persevered. After all, no matter how much they tried to discourage, no matter how much they used convention and authority against me to show me that a woman had no place in academe, I had philosophy on my side since I knew (as these professors and colleagues supposedly also knew) that convention and authority are not sacrosanct and that they can and should be subjected to rigorous scrutiny.

After more than thirty years of teaching in colleges and universities, I still find myself to some extent on the outside looking in, although women have made great strides in striking down academic barriers and I have certainly made it over many of those hurdles. Although I am now in a position to influence the academic degrees of some and to affect the academic futures of others, I remain bemused and even mystified by the seeming self-assuredness of many of my colleagues, their sense of belonging and entitlement, what my father would have called their sense of being “to the manner born.” Frequently I am appalled by the arrogance and comfortable conventionalism of individuals who surely have read enough philosophy to know better.

Generally drawn to unpopular causes, questions, and philosophical positions, I have little doubt that I shall remain in an anomalous position vis-à-vis academe. It is not a comfortable position, and sometimes I envy those with a greater sense of belonging. Maybe, though, it is an appropriate position for one whose original attraction to the discipline and to the life of the mind arose from

a concern to be free from the tyranny of unquestioned convention and authority and whose continuing dedication to philosophy has led to a determination to disrupt as much as possible the oppressions embedded in the status quo. It seems also a particularly fitting stance for one whose quest for truth has always brought her back to an awareness of freedom and a conviction that values must be forged rather than discovered.