

**PHILOSOPHERS AND SOCIETY:
CHALLENGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

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C. P. Snow talks about two cultures, and he deplores the fact that the inhabitants of the one are unable to talk with the inhabitants of the other. He laments the physicist whose idea of modern literature is Dickens, and he chides the poet who cannot state the second law of thermodynamics. Philosophers, in converse with well-meaning, intelligent, and educated laymen (if you will allow me to speak of all nonphilosophers as laymen), are much worse off than the physicist and the poet. It troubles me that for all practical purposes educated people don't even know that our subject exists. To be sure, they know that there is something called "philosophy" and that one can take courses in it in college, but they do not know how we use the word much less understand why we do it. They either confuse philosophy with psychology or religion, or they think it has to do with psychic phenomena or silly, useless jabbering about such matters as whether, if nothing existed, anything would be true.

Of course, reflection on abstract matters in metaphysics and epistemology is not silly, and it is a requirement of our profession that we engage in it. It is also a requirement of our profession that we introduce young minds to such reflection and that, in every way we can, we speak to its importance—both in itself and in its potential for advancing human knowledge. I know of no better creed for philosophers, or better example of inspired teaching, than the assignment given to Theodore H. White, at the time a student at Harvard University, by his professor and mentor, John King Fairbank. In his assignment to White, Fairbank wrote:

WHEREAS it is not possible to live (long) without thinking, and not possible to live well without thinking well; and

It is not possible to think well without making *distinctions* between this and that or heredity and environment, or cause and effect, or the group and the individual or the law and the facts, or tactics and strategy, or rights and duties, or man and woman, or nominalism and realism, or communism and fascism, or collectivism and individualism to say nothing of up and down, or backwards and forwards; and whereas

It is not possible to go very far in making use of *categories of thought*, such as a category of laws and a category of events, or a category of

noumena and a category of phenomena, or a category of spirit and a category of matter; and whereas

It is not possible to think with critical power without being *critical* of the categories with which one is thinking; and

It is not possible to avoid receiving certain categories at an early age from the contemporary intellectual environment;—

THEREFORE—Philosophy is a most necessary and *admirable* subject.

And Fairbank concluded his assignment by saying:

“You are cordially invited to be present at a meeting on Friday, January 8, 1937 at which there will be a discussion of Whitehead’s volume, *Science and the Modern World* (entire) conducted by none other than Mr. Theodore H. White.”

We all agree that philosophy is a most necessary and admirable subject. I am concerned, though, that we are failing as philosophers in important respects—not in the preparation of philosophy majors for graduate school or in the training of graduate students, but in what we accomplish with those students whose exposure to philosophy is limited to one or two courses. My concern stems from our shared belief that philosophical analysis should be brought to bear on a wide range of social, political, and moral issues and should be based on certain philosophical distinctions and principles necessary to sound thinking.

The truth is that after our students graduate and secure jobs in the world of work they must live off the intellectual capital stored up while in college. Never again will students have, or take, much time to read and think and question and develop the underpinnings for a coherent and responsible view of the world. It is very difficult, or at least very rare, for people to add to their intellectual capital after leaving college. Consequently, the foundations laid in college are, for many, all they will ever have on which to base their view of the world. This makes the job of the philosopher all the more important since some of the intellectual capital necessary for responsible citizenship can only come from those professionally versed in philosophy. Now I realize that I cannot, as a single individual, define what philosophers should be about, and certainly not to the satisfaction of all other philosophers. But I would like to sketch out, with the help of a few commonplace examples, representative kinds of issues I think we should address as philosophers, particularly in introductory courses.

I must confess that I have had some anxiety about speaking to you on the teaching of philosophy rather than presenting the usual paper on some philosophical topic. My anxiety was diminished somewhat on my flight here. For between Philadelphia and St. Louis this morning I sat next to a student from UCLA who was returning to California after interviewing at the University of Pennsylvania for a seat in their School of Veterinary Medicine. He had taken a course in philosophy at UCLA, and I asked him what philosophers he had studied and what topics were covered in the course. His answer reassured me that it is not entirely inappropriate to address our role as teachers of philosophy. Not only had he read no philosophers, but the thrust of the course, which concerned ethics, centered around the professor’s exotic notions about the levels of love between men and women. He had never even heard of the Categorical Imperative, the Utility Principle, or any of the major ethical theories. Our conversation, along with my personal knowledge of what is being taught at some eastern schools, reaffirmed my belief that occasionally we should discuss what we try to teach our students.

I see the role of the philosopher much as Socrates defined him, as a person who does seek wisdom and who in the process is profoundly aware of his own ignorance. In order to have wisdom one must possess some knowledge, but knowledge itself is not wisdom. Knowledge may be had by anyone with a good memory, dedication, and a modicum of intelligence. But wisdom, whatever else it might be, consists of insight, soundness of perspective, and balance and proportion in judgment. The essence of philosophy is to be found in the search for wisdom, the search for understanding—a better understanding of man, the world, and man’s place in it. And in any given generation the philosopher faces the problem of the assimilating of knowledge, of understanding the interconnections of knowledge, of trying to discover what are the conditions of meaningful existence in the period in which he happens to live.

The importance of seeking this kind of understanding and constructing a coherent view of the world is something that must be conveyed to our students—not to turn them into philosophers but to enable them to be true to their nature as rational human beings. If they are to be fully realized as thinking, feeling, social beings, we must help them to acknowledge the inescapable obligation to fashion a consistent and intelligible world view and to strive purposefully to make their behavior correspond to its highest ideals. We don’t talk like this much anymore. But this is the highest and most noble achievement possible to man—the attainment of theoretical and practical wisdom.

Our students need to have this vision, this image, this challenge, placed before them in a forceful and compelling way. And if philosophers don’t do it, who will? We must make it clear to them that being serious about these

matters will not, in most cases, provide them with absolute certainty. They will have to make decisive moves in their lives only on the basis of the likeliest account, the preponderance of the evidence, and in something far less than certainty.

I wonder how well the profession is doing in this regard? Not very well at the institution I now represent, where the "Philosophy of Love and Sex," the "Philosophy of Death and Dying," and the "Philosophy of the Occult" have replaced mainstream courses in philosophy because, frankly, they are so much more popular. In addition, we practice our profession in an age of extraordinary specialization. Even in really strong undergraduate philosophy departments there is a remarkable degree of specialization. There are epistemologists and metaphysicians, existentialists and phenomenologists, ethicists and logicians, philosophers of law and philosophers of mind, philosophers of science and philosophers of history. This variation in the interests and approaches of philosophers is not only quite acceptable, it is to be expected.

I cannot help but believe, though, that such specialization has had a fragmenting effect on the education we offer our students. Philosophy, more than most disciplines, is historically based, and we should countenance this in our teaching. We need to give our students some sense of the historical and cultural milieu out of which philosophical issues have arisen along with an appreciation of their applicability to present day concerns. Moreover, there ought to be a congruence of opinions among philosophers and there ought to be a mutual understanding of why some levels of specialization are all right. But philosophers ought to understand as well why too much specialization, especially at the undergraduate level, is a betrayal of the total purpose of philosophy, which is to accept no limitations at all.

We need to help students to see the world of knowledge whole, in its entirety. We must help them to understand how the knowledge gained in sociology fits with the knowledge developed in economics; how theories of man developed in psychology fit, or fail to fit, with theories of man developed in history or religion. And in all of these areas of the humanities and the social sciences we must see how such knowledge meshes with the knowledge we have in physics and chemistry and biology.

It won't do for us to live our lives and practice our profession in terms of isolated compartments. Somehow we have to pull ourselves together and make sense out of our existence. This concern for meaning and how to make sense out of life is one of the dominant concerns of any society. Surely, the philosopher is at the center of this effort—trying to make sense out of his own period of time. And surely our profession requires that we try to find some foundation from which to speak *sub specie aeternitatis*.

One of the more serious problems to be found among today's student population, and one which is reflected in society at large, is the pervasive

and insidious notion that everything is relative. We are dealing with students who, in large measure, endorse the view that truth is subjective and that man is the measure of all things. The great value we place on pluralism and the toleration of divergent views has allowed individuals maximum freedom to express their views and to pursue their own ideas of how one should live.

The perniciousness of this emphasis on the subjective is nowhere more evident or troublesome than in the area of ethics. One of the most important jobs of the philosopher is to disabuse people of the notion that products of the human mind and its mental processes are, therefore, merely personal and subjective. The distinction between what is subjective and what is objective turns on the quality of the argument and the nature of the evidence one may adduce in support of the view she advances. It won't do in refutation of an idea or opinion one rejects simply to utter "Oh, but that is only your opinion." The question is whether the opinion makes sense, whether there are arguments and evidence in support of it. Philosophers must speak to this and persuade students that the only rational course is to disavow both subjectivism—and its infinite capacity for tolerance—and dogmatism—and its exclusion of tolerance altogether.

The principal method these days for settling moral questions by non-philosophers is by an appeal to one's conscience. As philosophers we must rid people of the notion that conscience is self-validating. Less than a month ago in Evansburg, Pennsylvania, a jury was chosen to hear the involuntary manslaughter trial of a couple whose two and one-half year old son died after they refused him medical treatment on religious grounds. William Barnhart was quoted as saying, "We all have to do what we think is right. We trust in God and we followed our conscience. It is a real privilege to be here and prove my point." I said earlier that there ought to be some congruence of opinions among philosophers. I believe one instance of that congruence should be found in our speaking with one voice to demonstrate the worthlessness either of appealing merely to one's conscience or of pointing to one's sincerity as adequate grounds of moral responsibility. Since the 1960s, we have seen scores of examples in which the appeal to conscience and sincerity was offered as self-validating. Nowhere is this bogus doctrine given greater emphasis than in the Ford pardoning of Nixon. Ford said his conscience called for this despite the Constitution of the United States, despite the rule of law, despite the many concerns that were raised by a man exercising pardon authority by pardoning the man who appointed him to office. One of the oldest rules of English law is that it is not enough to be just, but the government must also appear to be just. Yet this was not done and we were forever denied the exploration in the courts of Mr. Nixon's responsibility for Watergate.

As philosophers we must show that nothing whatever follows from appeals to conscience or sincerity alone. Hitler was sincerely convinced he was doing humanity a favor in the extermination of six million Jews. Mr. Barnhart followed his conscience and sincerely believed that God wanted him to reject medical treatment for his son. Susan Atkins said, "I knew it was right when I was doing it because it felt good." And that was while she engaged, along with a few other people, in the murder of Sharon Tate.

That one's actions should be consistent with one's conscience and sincerely performed is not the most, but the very least, we can expect of anyone. How can students who have never read Plato or Rawls or Kant or Mill deal with such contemporary issues as abortion, euthanasia, genetic engineering, or whether or not to register for the draft? There are some among this generation of students who believe they are owed a freebie, that somehow they have the right to be the inheritors of freedom in this society and the beneficiaries of its spoils, without having to pay their dues. What happens when a student says, "My conscience tells me it is wrong to register for the draft?" I say, "Well, that's fine. If you think it is wrong, don't register for the draft. But if you violate the law, then take the consequences for violating the law."

There have been cases in Pennsylvania recently where students have refused to register for the draft and have claimed there should be no sanctions imposed because they are following their conscience or religious principles. If they had read Socrates in the *Gorgias*, or if they had read Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," or if they had read Rawls' "Legal Obligation and the Duty of Fair Play," they would know perfectly well that if you want to violate the law while being a responsible citizen you have to show respect for lawfulness.

Now, showing respect for lawfulness requires one, in the midst of violating the law, to accept the penalty of the law. Socrates argued that by accepting the penalty required by the law he was showing his high respect for law even though he couldn't modify his life-style to accommodate the people of Athens. Martin Luther King pointed out that although he would not ride in the back of the bus, and although he would not obey an edict that prevented him from having a march, he would go to jail and put his conscience before the American people. He would accept the penalty because he understood that law is necessary to any society. John Rawls argues that when one has accepted the benefits of a mutually beneficial and just scheme of social cooperation, and when the advantages it yields can be obtained if, and only if, most people cooperate, one is then bound by the duty of fair play to sacrifice when it comes his turn, even if that means obeying a law one believes, correctly, to be immoral or unjust. Plato argued that under the principle of nonparasitism every individual is obligated to contribute something to the society on which his own self-fulfillment de-

pends. A person who wants to fulfill himself but who doesn't want to meet the conditions for the survival of the society is a parasite. He wants the enjoyment of fulfillment, but he doesn't want to pay the price for the fulfillment which is the protection, the defense and the support, at least to the extent of obeying the law of the society on which his own personal fulfillment absolutely depends.

Now, these are questions and issues on which students cannot be ignorant and at the same time claim to be educated. No one can treat these ideas better than a philosopher. This is one reason why I believe any sound curriculum must include philosophy. Students must learn, as Aristotle taught us, that the development of character and integrity may require a lifetime. Character and integrity have a duration, extend over time, and cannot be achieved in an instant. The development of character must be principled and must have a continuity to it. How better can one acquire such understanding than through the study of philosophy? And who better can direct such study than the philosopher?

I am not saying that we should ridicule appeals to conscience, but I am saying that such appeals must be subjected to a very careful procedure of thought. The Categorical Imperative or the Utility Principle are not just phrases, they are elaborate procedures for testing the universality of one's volitions or of determining classes of actions which tend to promote the common good. The point is that only through the completion of some such procedure does one acquire any right to talk about the dictates of his conscience. And only when such principles are brought into play does one develop a truer notion of self and what it means to be true to one's self.

In his article entitled "Moral Dilemmas," E. J. Lemmon says that if anyone is equipped to give moral advice to others it is the philosopher, who at least may be expected to detect bad reasoning from good. He says it is a corollary of this view that a philosopher is not entitled to a private life, that he is not entitled to hold his moral beliefs in the way in which many non-philosophers hold them, as mere articles of faith. Lemmon is right in what he says about philosophers, but he is wrong in what he says about others if he means there is no general duty to scrutinize one's moral beliefs.

In fact, I believe that W. K. Clifford puts the matter squarely and accurately in "The Ethics of Belief" when he argues that there is a moral dimension to all belief. I often think that Clifford's essay should be required reading of all students in introductory philosophy. Clifford demonstrated clearly and powerfully that the sincerity of one's belief has nothing whatever to do with the soundness of the belief. He shows that the important question surrounding belief has to do with the origin of the belief, the evidence for it, rather than its ultimate truth or falsity. It seems to me that Clifford was teaching us an enormously important lesson, namely, that no man's belief is ever a private matter which concerns himself alone. He shows that every

