

CONFESSIONS OF A RATHER QUIET PHILOSOPHICAL REBEL

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I am a rebel in that I do not take any philosophical system very seriously, and since I have been rather quiet about it I assume that I am a rather quiet philosophical rebel. This has prevented me from attaching myself to the system of Husserl, Wittgenstein, or Peirce—as the manner of some is—for rations and quarters. This is no merit or demerit of mine; I was driven to it. I have developed an interest in the sociology of knowledge and a passion for logic (for logic at the do it yourself level, that is, back to the fundamentals and all that). But rather than talk about anything in a meager publication list that is not even enough to be ashamed of, let me expand a little on why I suffer from systems disenchantment.

It began in the Fall of 1938 at the University of Nebraska, to which I came after reading philosophy with young Archie Bahm at Texas Tech for two delightful years. At Lincoln I seem to have been drafted for Anglo-Hegelian studies by the aging and kindly Dr. E. L. Hinman, who had my schedule prepared for me at the beginning of each semester. Being a scholarship recipient and living on the stipend it provided, I took what was offered. Incidentally, I am still very grateful for the scholarship. The other members of the Department of Philosophy at that time were: Dr. W. H. Werkmeister, epistemology and philosophy of science; Dr. O. K. Bouwsma, himself an original Wittgenstein-type, language analysis (in any course he taught); and Dr. C. H. Patterson, ethics and philosophy of religion. Each of these had his own excellence, and I profited from the courses that I took under them.

At first I was attracted to Anglo-Hegelian studies. I especially enjoyed the trenchancy of F. H. Bradley, but I suspect that it was my early engrossment with religion that led me to believe that Hegelian philosophy could cure me of the religious skepticism to which I had fallen an unwilling prey in my teens. But it was fellow-student Martin Lean from

Brooklyn who helped me to realize the intellectual quicksand that I was becoming mired in. He asked me if I knew what was being said in Dr. Hinman's classes and in the reading assignments. I told him that I thought that I understood everything well enough, and he accused me of intellectual dishonesty—that is, lying. At first I thought that he was assuming the role of the logical empiricist, but soon I realized that he was sincere: he simply did not understand. I directed him to a few articles that I believed to be clear; one in particular compared the Hegelian concrete universal to a living vine. Martin, who had seen vines, appreciated this reference.

My break with this doctrine came as I wrote my master's thesis, "Two Theories of Political Obligation: Bosanquet and Hobhouse." My primary topic in the thesis was the Hegelian theory as Bosanquet presented it in *The Philosophical Theory of the State* and as Hobhouse bitterly refuted it in *The Metaphysical Theory of the State*. My sympathies at the end were with Hobhouse rather than Bosanquet,¹ for I found that the highly cultivated, aesthetically refined, and urbane professor of Hegelian philosophy sponsored individual freedom *while acceding to the despotic demands of any state whatever over the carefully reasoned pleadings of any individual whatever*. In all probability I included the following paragraph in the thesis in exasperation toward both Bosanquet and Dr. Hinman, who was also an aging and cultured gentleman:

When aged and cultured gentlemen from the safety and comfort of their padded chairs declare that the bloody battlefield is merely the price that men must pay for the triumphant spiritual unfolding of the Absolute throughout history, there is only one conclusion to be drawn: whatever is is right and whatever comes to be . . . ought to be. Any transitional stage of suffering is but the means to an end, but in this case it is the *means* which justifies the *end*; otherwise an unmerited, unearned good might become the lot of *merely finite* individuals (i.e., merely mortal men).

I do not recall whether the following two statements excerpted from a text by Bosanquet helped trigger the foregoing outburst, but I strongly suspect that they did:

I have been reading, like many others, I suppose, Miss Johnson's *The Long Roll*, the terrible story of certain campaigns in the American Civil War. I might be challenged, 'Would I maintain that such things could exist in a just universe?' I am not going to answer . . . , but to point out . . . an absurd implication in it. Am I, an elderly gentleman almost tied to his arm-chair, to be asked to dictate the limits of heroism and suffering necessary to develop and elicit the true reality of finite spirits?

Does the aged and cultured gentleman renege on a declaration of any kind here? Not for long, because there is great comfort in armchair security, and from indecision genuine decision can emerge. But note again that, if whether to suffer or not to suffer is left to the individual, the option for less rather than more will be selected:

. . . to go deeper, take more cruel and less brilliant suffering, of which, if offered, every one will pray that the cup might pass away from him (is not this reference, indeed, sufficient for my argument?), is it not clear that *finite judgment would practically always be wrong* [my italics], and one would refuse what alone could recast one as a less worthless being, or what made the value of an age or nation?²

Jesus, with a touch of finitude, prayed for the cup to pass; men likewise would almost universally seek its passage, but then they would be wrong. But we can be of reasonably good cheer because the state can—and does—bolster our courage so that we drink from the cup by the massed millions. It is interesting that Camus' *The Rebel* provides the rationalization

rather than the reason for the suffering that the nations of the world have so generously bestowed upon people during the twentieth century. With respect to the relation between Christ's suffering and the suffering of men, Camus says:

. . . as long as the Western World has been Christian, the Gospels have been the interpreter between heaven and earth. Each time a solitary cry of rebellion was uttered, the answer came back in the form of even more terrible suffering. In that Christ had suffered, and had suffered voluntarily, suffering was no longer unjust and all pain was necessary.³

Unfortunately, the context from which this passage is lifted is too complicated to reconstruct except to say briefly that certain critics of religion and society had tried to blame the causes of suffering on the "vengeful" God of the Old Testament. But when God sacrificed himself through Christ, a more appealing rationale had been offered to believers, at any rate. For Bosanquet the parable is exemplary, for when God joins the ranks and suffers even to death with and for humanity, the die is cast: to be as God, persons must suffer.

But my own aversion to a system of philosophy that exalted the whole over the part, the infinite over the finite, and the collective over the individual stemmed in part that year of 1940 from the sure and certain foreknowledge that our President was announcing our own entry into the European war then in progress by repeatedly telling us, "Not one of our boys will set foot on foreign soil." The "Day of Infamy" came and went, and approximately a year later I received a letter from the *Zeitgeist* beginning with "Dear Neighbor" and ending with "Franklin D. Roosevelt."

The aversion mentioned blossomed into a sickness unto disgust. Consequently I shifted my focus of studies to the Department of Sociology until my summons came. Firm, resolute soul that I am, I removed the offending paragraph when Dr. Hinman gently demurred. After World War II, I was offered

a position in philosophy and remained happily in that great discipline while dancing to no piper's tune.

NOTES

¹Bernard Bosanquet (1848-1923), exquisitely educated and keenly intuitive, was trained to be a snob but wrote like a warm sensitive human being. He made you think that the Absolute is a next door neighbor. Leonard T. Hobhouse (1864-1929) did not like the life of an Oxford don, and so he joined the staff of *The Manchester Guardian*.

²Bernard Bosanquet, *The Value and Destiny of the Individual* (London: Macmillan, 1913) 157-58. This benign but sly old rascal spends page upon page talking even the most ardent Christians out of their desires for personal immortality. For if reality endures in individualized forms, it would have the coherence of the indivisible whole. Would it? Of course not. When you think it through, you really do not want personality, except the personality of God, the Absolute. Or do you?

³Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956) 34.