PHILOSOPHY AND THE HUMANITIES: A MEDITATION UPON THE AESTHETICS OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

Presidential Address

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As the decade of the eighties draws to a close, the end of the century looms ever more upon us; it has already cast a pall of fin de sieclism over philosophy, which now celebrates its intangible "post-modern" phase. And not merely the end of the century is approaching, but the end of a millenium. This surely should give us pause for reflection upon philosophy's journey within the journey of western humanity. The last decade has redoubled the lingering diagnosis of the century that philosophy is dead, or finally ready to die or at least metamorphose into some post-philosophical culture that values "conversation" or "deconstruction" or some equally entertaining, but emphatically unserious enterprise. This is astounding if only because at no time since the emergence of civilized humanity have we stood at the convergence of so many crises, economic, political, and ecological. We stand virtually conceptually disarmed.

The current debate about the function and nature of the humanities is perhaps a symptomatic expression of this growing sense of cultural self-confusion. The astonishing impact of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* and E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* reflects more, I think, than just another episode in the American Puritan custom of exercising our love of self-abasement and sense of inferiority. Bloom's jeremiad against the widespread relativism of our culture is ultimately motivated by a sense of the problematic status of the humanities in modern society. Bloom has a touching humorless faith that the great books of "the Tradition" agree upon and teach confidence in absolute values. To save our cultural soul, Bloom asks us to stand in pious and passive awe of the Great Thoughts of Great Men. This might be called the "high church" defense of the humanities.

Hirsch has a more practical point: If there is to be any

basis of communication in a culture, it must rely upon a common referential body of knowledge, a context which is available to speakers. At the very least, education should ensure that this context is transmitted from one generation to the next. Hirsch's insight is valuable and, as far as it goes, I believe correct. It is sad, however, that he stops where he does, leaving the impression that cultural mnemonics is the essence of learning. His sequel, the great dictionary of basic cultural facts, is a ludicrous and misleading hodgepodge of information and misinformation filtered through Hirsch's not unbiased lenses.

Yet if one turns to the contemporary philosophical debate, one is not likely to find much in the way of a positive alternative. In the modern period the humanities have not been the direct theme of philosophical reflection, which has understood itself primarily, almost exclusively, in relation to the sciences. In the last decade, it is true that philosophers have begun trying to reflect more directly upon the question of the humanities. In the Anglo-American tradition, Cavell, Rorty, and MacIntyre are the major public representatives. Cavell's strange synthesis of linguistic analysis, Transcendentalism, and film criticism has left him a fairly solitary Thoreauvian voice, though his emphasis upon the tragic limits of human self-knowledge merits serious attention. Rorty's recent collection of essays, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, assures us that a philosophy of Protagorean relativism offers a sensible defense of liberal values and the "conversation" of culture. It is hard, however, to see why. In the end, Rorty sees culture simply as a moving kaleidoscope of shifting fads, traditions punctuated by poetic rupture and then crystalizing again into the literal geometry of social conformity to language habits.

MacIntyre, at least, has offered a critique and analysis of fairly substantial dimensions in his two pivotal works, *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* In the latter work, MacIntyre argues that rationality is tradition-based. Cultures or traditions can be understood as the history of their dialectical development as they gradually acquire inner

articulation and self-critical awareness in response to their conflicts and crises. The humanities, then, become important modes in which the ideals of a culture's virtues become expressed, providing thereby the needed basis for philosophical reflection. MacIntyre's analysis is also caught up with one of the most sustained attacks on liberalism ever devised. Though liberalism, child of the Enlightenment, counts as a tradition, it is tradition that is in unresolvable crisis. Its ahistorical view of reason combined with its subjective voluntarism with respect to values creates a culture in which disputes can only be settled by power, not by rational dialogue. Thus MacIntyre announces his commitment to the tradition of Augustinian Christianity and promises that his next book will be an *apologia pro fide sua.*

The Continental tradition fares a little better. Following de Saussure's disastrous cleavage of language from the world, in which signs stand in a completely arbitrary relation to things, the positions of Foucault and Derrida seem inevitable. Beneath the web of signs and meaning there plays the dissembling Will to Power. For Derrida, every effort toward speech, toward the establishment of meaning, generates a self-destructive counterattack in the field of signs. Every statement undercuts and eventually strangles itself. Foucault has undertaken one of the most sinister readings of human history ever conceived, one in which violence, repression, and power make and unmake worlds with the ruthlessness of Kali, bloodthirsty consort to Shiva. It may be said that Foucault's analysis of the social ideal of progress does what Thomas Kuhn's work has accomplished for the conception of scientific progress.

Hermeneutics, at least, has attempted to meet the challenge in a constructive way. But Heidegger's radical divorce of truth from method left the meaning revealed through the primordial event of interpretation a matter of Being's self-disclosure—and Being seemed at best rather whimsical, if not out-and-out mystical. The end of Heidegger's life-long search to be open to Being's saving answer was the bleak pronouncement: Only a god can save us. Gadamer has attempted to soften this theme, emphasizing the fusion of horizons

achieved when an authentic encounter with a text is achieved. Some domain of continuity and meaning is established. But in the end, hermeneutics leaves one with an endless task of circling again and again over texts, yearning for moments of illumination, or with Ricoeur, for the ineluctible blossoming of the conflicts of interpretation that celebrate the ambiguous richness of meaning. Nonetheless, what has been accomplished is the fairly important destruction of the positivist idea of culture and the humanities, one which first of all relegated them to the secondardy status of "nonscientific" disciplines and secondarily sought to subject them to some kind of objectivist methodology.

In light of these stymied positions, I would like to sketch the outline of a possible alternative that in the end may turn out to be nothing more than an appeal for us to begin to think as thinkers of the twenty-first century. What I mean by this first and foremost is not the affected desire to achieve avant-garde status by "out-postmoderning" each other by showing just how anti-foundational we are or how clever we are in unmasking pretenses to accomplished meaning and communicative participation. These were the luxuries of the twentieth-century academic intellectual. Nor does this mean heading once more into the breach and trying for the nth time to find the true foundations that somehow Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Kant, Hegel, Mill, Frege, Russell, Carnap, Cassirer, and Husserl missed. The failure of foundationalism has been an important lesson, but I wonder if it is one that has been learned yet. Instead of driving us toward Rortian relativism, it should make us rethink our philosophy of nature and humanity. The modern view of nature as a great machine, whose laws are set and whose elements are blindly fixed on their course, is a dogma whose time has passed. Once we behold nature as a genuinely creative, temporal process, a chastened form of emergent or evolutionary teleology may be reintroduced.

Here is where I believe the humanities have a great deal to teach us. Modern philosophy was emancipated from its theological servitude as it emerged amid the ruins of Scholasticism and its discredited astronomy, and quickly allied

itself with the Faustian quest of the new sciences. Renaissance humanism was as ephemeral as a daffodil. The new philosophy had harnessed itself to the Baconian ideal of a utopia of technology, committing itself also to the Hobbesian image of humanity as a mere function of the aimless energy of matter. The latest incarnation of this effort to unmask our illusory "folk" self-understanding for the scientific image of humanity is being carried out in the name of "neurophilosophy." Behind the modernist agenda, which is really what all the recent talk about "foundationalism" is pointing to, lies the range of presuppositions that might be labelled "Objectivism." This includes the ideal of a neutral methodology for arriving at a set of propositions exactly corresponding with a fixed state of affairs, which proceeds by analyzing everything into its discrete constitutive units or elements, and thereby purifies reason of the distortions of tradition, subjective temperament, and imagination. The result would be a "science of humanity" as formal, impersonal, and unaffected by time and history as Newtonian physics. The "clarification" or "enlightenment" of purified human reason would establish human dignity by giving a good long peep into the God's-eye view of things. In short, the theology of human reason has replaced the theology of God, whose transcendence at least taught humility. The new *via moderna* was the employment of a succession of analytical methodologies—from Bacon's *Novum Organum* and Descartes' *Discourse* to Kant's transcendental methodology, to logical and linguistic analysis, and to Husserl's phenomenology.

However materialistic the new doctrines may have been, they all operated with a disembodied understanding of reason, knowledge, and meaning. The idea that human understanding was radically constituted through the organic dynamism of our distinctive bodies and our unique social behavior must surmount two and a half thousand years of Platonism and two thousand years of Pauline Christianity. Several thinkers in this century have attempted an exploration of an embodied view of human existence: one immdiately thinks of the work of people like George Herbert Mead and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but more recently one must add the important work of Mark

Johnson, especially as discussed in his *The Body in the Mind.* My grandfather, Hartley Burr Alexander, might also be mentioned.

Included in this view would be an attempt to see how the body as lived provides initial structures of meaning, what Johnson calls "image schemata," that subsequently are appropriated and articulated by our verbal and cognitive behavior. For example, our upright posture is widely and deeply drawn upon to give meaning to our moral vocabulary. We speak of an "upright man," of a "fallen woman" (the sexism of our language never lets us speak of a "fallen man" in that sense!), of justice as a "balance," of a "straight talker," and so on. These elaborations are metaphoric, and Johnson (as well as my grandfather) has made the claim that our understanding is, from its roots on up, metaphoric in just this manner, that our embodied imagination, as it were, is the generative source of meaning in human existence. While the objectivist must strive to see language fundamentally as an effort toward literal speech, in which terms or propositions are the significant units standing in a determinant and determinable relation to a fixed state of affairs, this alternative obviously throws all that into question. Metaphor and symbol are not derivative phenomena, "fallen" meanings next to "upright" literal speech. They are the prescient, full symbols of our vital existence. Gone likewise is the primacy of reason, conceived in the objectivist's sense. It is not so much that this view, like Romanticism, displaces reason for the blind creativity of "imagination," but that our very understanding of reason and imagination must be reworked. Instead of distinct (and opposed) faculties, we see our imaginative reason as a diverse but functionally integrated web. In short, creativity, ambiguity, symbolic expression, and the interplay of social gesture and contextuality will be inextricable themes of our rationality.

Beyond the bodily schemata lie those schemata of the frame of the shape of the human vita itself, birth, the development of one's personality, and the lengthy process of initiation into the world of one's culture, social recognition,

sex, marriage, maturity, and the exercise of social responsibilities, aging, and death. This general shape of human existence is given a variety of symbolic interpretations by different cultures, but as schemata they offer a common mode for intercultural interpretation and understanding. The complexity of our social embodiment and the ranges of meaningful action that it establishes have hardly been explored. Nevertheless, the important conclusion is that not only is our imaginative understanding embodied, but it is socially embodied. Imagination is less the private faculty commonly assumed than the life of growing meaning articulated through the dynamism of our culture. Culture thus gives us the constitutive horizons for understanding through our social imaginative embodiment.

Another important topic also emerges, the narrative nature of our understanding. I may mention here an absolutely brilliant essay by Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science" (*The Monist* 60 [1977]). MacIntyre provides here the basis of a response to Kuhn's view of paradigm shifts as a radically unintelligible, irrational rupture punctuating rational progress in science. We understand such crises retrospectively in terms of the larger narrative interpretation that gives an account of the old view or theory, why it led to the paradoxes it did and so broke down, and how, out of the theoretical confusion responding to the problem, a new adequate theory emerged that resolved those paradoxes. Such understanding is not of the atemporal hypothetico-deductive model of reason given by objectivist accounts. Indeed, it was this view of reason that has led to the paradoxes of Kuhn and Feyerabend, paradoxes generated by the suppression of our embodied, temporal manner of understanding.

Given a wider range of application, MacIntyre's insight teaches that narrativity is one of the great modes of human self-understanding, a lesson also driven home by others, notably Paul Ricoeur. Our cultures are rich in stories and symbols by means of which we come to grasp who we are, where we are, and how we are to behave. Not only are we born

embodied in this human frame, we are born into what my grandfather called "a house of mind," a culture. Biologically we stand close to our Cro-Magnon ancestors of 20,000 years ago; between them and us lies an almost impenetrable narrative web of living symbols called culture. Hegel was pointing to an important phenomenon when he saw culture, symbolized for him by the term "Geist," as a transcendent moving force behind our individual subjectivity. We are shaped and structured by the world of socially embodied meanings into which we are thrust from the moment of our birth, which will forever localize us as members of a dramatic time and place, providing the narrative schemata for the living of our lives. I do not mean to suggest that we are passive creatures, however, for it is the very nature of our understanding to give creative life and transformation to such symbols.

The project revealed by such an approach begins with the thesis that human beings by nature desire to live lives of fulfilled meaning and value. The human quest is the search for our embodied meaningful existence. Human beings can endure the most extreme hardships and suffering if they are sustained by the sense of the valued meaning of their actions. Rob a human being of the meaning and value of his or her life, and you have destroyed that individual. This is why totalitarianism, social chaos, unrestrained ruthless capitalism, ubiquitous poverty, and a host of other ills are evil. This is also why it is a paramount quest of our shared social project that we seek to establish a society in which there is the possibility of human beings to live lives of fulfillment and significance. A culture that remains insensitive to this basic need will create a human hell; if it understands its basic mission as simply the development of economic hegemony or technological manipulation or imperial dominion over neighbors and foes, it will allow those delicate social structures by means of which we achieve a sense of place, purpose, and value to erode. And when human beings are frustrated in their utmost quest for meaning, the dark angels of nihilism and destruction will step in, as they have done several times in this century. Then truly only a god can save us.

If the approach I have sketched out has a substantial offer to make, it is this: philosophy stands in a crucial relation to the humanities and the humanities stand in a crucial relation to the need of a culture to provide a basis for self-understanding, for the life of embodied meaning and value. The humanities are the cultural activities in which the quest for embodied meaning has been consciously undertaken. They speak with those rich symbolic voices that induce us to participate with our whole being in a world of human affirmation. Their subtlety, ambiguity, emotional power, and imaginative play bring us into a world constituted out of the great themes that mark our humanity. They engage those powers of understanding that are vital, necessary, and operative throughout all our consciousness—and subconsciousness as well. They educate us by bringing us into contact with worlds of human meaning alien to us in time and place as well as that world that is our culture. This engagement of imaginative understanding is perhaps the most important talent for us to develop in order to participate in a global community.

Because philosophy has attempted to follow the lead of the sciences and their objectivist methodologies, it has dismissed the humanities and relegated them to the level of folk-wisdom, confused and "poetic" errors to be supplanted eventually by a totally enlightened culture. Hermeneutics, perhaps the only serious philosophical tradition to question this assumption and pursue an alternative, has been riddled with a subjectivism stemming, I believe, from a tendency to dismiss the sciences in terms of their content as well as their latter-day positivist ideology. German hermeneutics consequently has undertaken its project almost in opposition to or at least in indifference to the sciences, even the human sciences. This, I believe, can only lead to a hot-house humanism. Be that as it may, the resulting tendency to turn everything into "text" leads unfortunately to a rather bookish metaphysics attractive only to academicians. The work of historians, sociologists, cognitive psychologists, and especially cultural anthropologists, like Clifford Geertz, has immense bearing on our discipline.

The function of philosophy, then, is not the objectivist

ideal of an autonomous, isolated discipline, a specialized *"Fach"* analogous to physics, mathematics, or linguistics. Philosophy, like Socrates, has been "atopos," unlocatable, a misfit roamer encountering anyone and everyone, full of questions and short on answers. I believe that our strength lies in freely exploring the way things interconnect and trying to articulate the sense of that interconnection. Aside from the value of our analytical skills is our ability to seek integrative visions, our synthetic and imaginative side that establishes philosophy as a great art. If the material of this art is, as I have suggested, the very quest of meaning and value essential to our human nature, it is incumbent upon us to seek not knowledge but wisdom, the art of living well. This is a social, not an individual, issue. Against the nihilism of deconstructionism or the bland impotence of Rorty's name-dropper culture of redescription, philosophy must engage the positive project of the construction of meaningful ideals tempered to the crises, needs, and problems of our localized human drama. In short, with Emerson, it is the office of the philosopher to be a voice of hope and cheer, to reveal the possibilities amid the facts. To be a voice of hope these days is not the task of the innocent optimist. It calls for Herculean fortitude and must exist with a lively sense of the perpetual presence of tragedy.

The challenge set forth, then, is that the beginning of philosophical reflection must be the aesthetic mode of experience, rather than the cognitive; that is, experience must be intelligently shaped so as to bring forth the blossom of human meaning and value in its complex, rich, and chiaroscuro voice. Our philosophical voices have striven to efface the tonality of our contexts and our individuality and have sought to take on the awesome Oz-like persona of that disembodied entity called Universal Reason. Even though we have always spoken with our own localized voices, we have urged others to pay no attention to the little man from Kansas behind the curtain. Others, striving to escape this fate, write as Foucault says "in order to have no face." Post-modern individualism is an individualism of evasion since it identifies structure with the institutions of power. My final appeal, then, is that philosophy

recognize that the personal voice is the true voice of sophia. Perhaps I should say the "interpersonal voice." For, against the deconstructionists, we are human beings speaking to human beings and not mere markers in the endless play of language's signs. But this ability to claim the "I," the "you," and the "we" cannot be assumed as given. It is something that must be achieved. The recovery of the human voice is one of the most fundamental tasks philosophy can set for itself. If we can begin to accomplish this, perhaps we will have begun to effect the difficult travail that will give birth to the wisdom to be sought by a twenty-first-century philosophy.