

## THE BUSINESS OF PHILOSOPHY

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You must know it is many a year that Agathon has been away from home and country, and not yet three years that I have been consorting with Socrates and making it my daily care to know whatever he says or does. Before that time, what with running about at random and thinking I did things, I was the wretchedest man alive; just as you are at present, thinking philosophy is none of your business.

Apollodorus, from Plato's *Symposium* (173A)

The purpose of this paper is to consider a way of pursuing the further development of philosophy in a more practical, sensible manner than that found in purely academic approaches. This is not to say that academic philosophy has no place in today's global environment, or that what it teaches is not important to teach. Rather, it is to suggest philosophy's obligation to the betterment of our species-life is more than a presentation of past history and a correlative development and teaching of logic. The basis for this suggestion is a veiled idea that appears in the writings of Plato, and made conceivable as a speculative move in the thinking of Immanuel Kant, a move that includes our love of freedom.

Philosophy is at the heart of all learning and community life. Yet, the business of philosophy as a matter of daily care is at times not a matter of common concern, not even among those of us who claim the title "philosopher." Instead, like Apollodorus, Plato's "most proper reporter" (*Symposium* 172B), namely the text itself, *Apollo's gift*, we run about at random, thinking that the things we do, particularly the things we teach, are the substance of this business, and that consorting with Socrates is to curl up in the corner with a book, or better yet, to write one of our own, most likely a book about a book. Seldom do we consider an alternative course. How can we, when our livelihood depends on employers and funding sources that pointedly ask the relevance of our activity to the academy and industry? How can we envision an alternative when the force of habit and history renders us impotent? How can we when the lover we seek is dead?

As a student and teacher of philosophy I am moved by three beliefs. One is that philosophy is a way of being here, i.e., a path of questioning, forming sound judgments, and taking action. Two, that *ideas* are distinct from *concepts*, is an insight from Kant. The third is that whatever it is I teach must of practical necessity trace a sensible connection to community concerns, the focus of which is the common *well-being* and *freedom* of our species-life. I do not apologize for this decidedly social bias, though it poses a profound difficulty. The difficulty lies in discerning how best to present these beliefs, particularly to those who

believe a practical social life is prudent in the Kantian sense of *pragmatisch*, i.e., utilitarian and dependent. If these beliefs are anything more than mere opinion, the challenge is to show how it is that they spring to life, and to do that in a manner that is infectious in a healthy way for both the individual and philosophy. Here, a *healthy way* is one conceived in light of the idea of freedom. It is my considered opinion that the business of philosophy is the work of making that idea a real practical possibility, both in our ways of thinking and by the actions that follow from thinking. However, to pursue that work we must re-conceive the connections that bind us to our livelihood as teachers of philosophy. We must rethink what it is that we teach.

### **Kant, History, and Practical Understanding**

Years ago, one of my undergraduate professors described academic philosophy as “a dragon that eats its own tail.” I can’t say that I understood him at the time, but once I began my career as a teacher of philosophy it became clear to me that the typical approach I found in texts and the syllabi of others was more sophistic than philosophical, more historic than becoming anything truly practical. Being the pragmatist that I am, this bothered me greatly, and I found myself continually asking what it is that I ought to be teaching. In raising this question I have continually returned to Kant’s claim that the philosopher is himself “the lawgiver of human reason” (CR [*Critique of Pure Reason*] B867), keeping in mind that neither my colleagues, nor myself are philosophers in this sense, but holding open the aim that it is nonetheless possible for us all to move beyond the merely scholastic concept of being an “artificer of human reason” towards a decidedly more productive purpose. I have also returned to what is commonly referred to as Kant’s question, namely, “What is man?,” or more precisely, “What is a human being?”. This fourth of a series of questions first appeared in Kant’s *Logic* (published 1800), and by most accounts, gathers the preceding three found in the *Preface* to his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). The preceding three are, “What can I know?,” “What ought I do?,” and “What may I hope?”. Though it may do this, the fourth is also a question that opens us to Kant’s view of history and the pursuit of his suggested *philosophical anthropology*, an ongoing critique of reason and cultural development. It was by this means of an ongoing critique of reason and cultural development that Kant envisioned a way to pursue the business of philosophy in the grand Socratic tradition, as opposed to the narrower Aristotelian approach as established by Scholastics and early modern thinkers.

While Kant retains a determined sense of addressing all four questions in his writings, his suggestion for developing a history of human being as *philosophical anthropology* remains an undeveloped notion as found. What is significant is that Kant does not present history to be mere reporting where it is combined with philosophy. His criticism of Wolff’s view of history (CR B864) points to this interpretation. History is an essential part of critical reflection, but only a part, not the whole of it. The view that Kant’s question “What is human being?” subsumes the others he raised, requires qualification. Though it is presupposed by the above mentioned three, this question is itself subsumed

under the subjective limits of our being here in the world and in time, a view that suggests a shimmering, shifting constellation rather than synthetic gathering of totality. Any comprehensive understanding, or *synthesis* of Kant's philosophy as presented, must lie in the idea of the *conceptus cosmicus* and *unity* of purpose that is expressed in the *philosopher* as the lawgiver of human reason (CR B867). But there, it appears only with the understanding that *lawgiver* is one who uncovers the law, not one who *authors* the law. It is also with an understanding that is correlative with the thought that our *hope* lies in the cultivation of practical judgment and purposive conduct, conduct that for Kant aims to actualize real *freedom* and well-being with others, a freedom and well-being that is both aesthetically pleasurable and morally *upright*, i.e., in conformity with the supreme moral principle. The idea of *anthropology* in light of Kant's aesthetics implies a *critique* and descriptive judgment, or aesthetic interpretation of life and culture, not merely a critique of modernity's metanarrative discourse and represented empirical history. One does not find sensible presentations of principle and live human beings in the representations of books. We find them in our autonomous encounters in community with other thinking bodies, living bodies of taste and *free* beauty when conceived unconditionally.

Accordingly, represented history may not be taken as an account of practical well-being as such. Presentations of well-being are unaccountable except as a presentation of the conceivability of freedom through the movement and taste of real people. Well-being with others cannot include experience for Kant without it being shown to our understanding that the immediate presentation of such practical encounters is predicated on freedom and practical judgment. In other words, living well is an encounter beyond representation but not beyond an intuitive, tasteful grasp. To live strictly according to experience as one's represented history, does not provide any additional movement for life. It is to live by reason alone. Represented history neither discloses a distinct moment for well-being, nor principles of interpretation for noting such moments. An understanding of history for Kant is predicated on a practical understanding of life, one where reason plays an important but strictly limited role. Un-tethered reason is both tasteless and contrary to moral law. The task of the lawgiver is to uncover that limitation.

### **Practical Inquiry**

It is common to think that an area of inquiry is determined *scientifically* by content, which is its object (*das Objekt*). Accordingly, history is viewed as an inquiry into history. The object of psychology is psychology. The object of language study is language. Philosophy in general, and *practical* philosophy in particular is determined by a sensible deprivation of content, a recognition of being without a determined object, a subject who knows (*kennen*) herself to be a living, thinking body and distinctive appearance for others (*der Gegenstand*), but whose kinesthetic responses are too often sensibly lost to the temporalizing confines and *contentiousness* of conscious rational experience (*das Wissen*).

The question before us is whether philosophy is science. British philosopher Bertrand Russell once commented, "Science is about the things we

know. Philosophy is about what we do not know." Things we know, we know (*wissen*) as *facts*. Things we do not know are nonetheless included in the sensible presentations of being here, those with whom we are personally *acquainted* (*kennen*). We are acquainted with beauty. Are we not also acquainted with contentious thinking and being here in an all-pervasive world? Shortly before he died, John Dewey wrote in correspondence that "Philosophy has been discredited as far as it has claimed to be itself a science. . . practical philosophy today is largely in academic doldrums—its *professors* rarely make even an attempt to use it in its application to life's issues to say nothing of developing it so it can and will apply. . ." (Williams 88). The implication is that Dewey believed philosophy ought to be pursued as science, but not as an academic endeavor, which is not to say philosophy has no business in education, but that its interest in that later regard is distinct from all other disciplines.

Kant's transcendental philosophy of *practical* freedom is not science, though it too claims to be. At the same time, despite my own unconventional reading, Kant's thinking is not quite practical, though I believe one can sensibly say he is close to the mark in theory concerning what it means to be practical. Kant's *concept* of a speculative idea, *critically portrayed* is nothing short of being a practical rule for moving past the barriers of academic philosophy, which Kant also portrayed in negative terms. Conceived from the vantage of a less formal, mechanistic Kant, his correlative concept of practical freedom indicates a shift away from modern science and Scholastic reason toward enlightenment. His genius, to add the *idea of freedom* to the concept of empirical nature, shows freedom in thought and action to be the one necessary *practical* condition for any science whatsoever, especially his *critical* science of political freedom and beautiful culture—his operative practical philosophy. Yet, while this appears to be the thought, Kant's own *practical* thinking body remains elsewhere, in *contention* with the many-headed monster Reason", caught somewhere outside his speculative practical concept and the sensible space of nature, even as we *empirical beings* read his whorish descriptions.

It is my contention that Kant's difficulty accounting (*ratio*) a free, practical body in the empirical world is first a problem of attitude or spatial orientation. Second, it is a problem of conception. Kant lacks a certain skill, mainly an *immediate* grasp of the very sensibility by which he *transcendentally* marks supersensible distinctions. What is needed is a *form* of sensibility, the order of which is itself distinct from the order of marking appearances in time. It is not reified identities, or *things* that a practical philosopher like Kant thinks about, but the active spacing of all sensibility and thinking, in terms which honor a difference between living well and mere existence. This is the thinking and sensibility of an all-encompassing kind of knowledge, or *technai*—*the aim of conceiving a conceptus cosmicus* (CR B867). While Kant is able to point at this aim more clearly than most, he cannot do it beyond thinking a distinction that produces a seemingly inescapable tension between human understanding and empirical law. It is not only a matter of free actions becoming empirical causes. It is a critical boondoggle where Kant oversees his own blend of what is no more than fanatic reason and superstition trying to police itself in the *interest* of a beautiful show—nature's endless parade of naked bodies dancing freely about,

while Kant remains wrapped and tethered in Königsburg—waiting to be, or not to be circumcised. (Compare with Kant's well-known dismay concerning the revolution in France which culminates in a *reign of terror* after the sovereign's head is cut off.) Or, to be, or not to be impregnated, as Derrida pointed out in calling Kant a *winking hymen*. Hamlet should be so fortunate since his is a question of far more practical significance.

Accordingly, the practical philosopher's lack of interest in *things* is not a lack of interest in sensible life. She wants sensible life to be beautiful—and *naked* in the sense it appears beyond the rule of concepts. However, by this very reason, it cannot be beautiful where we follow the guide of empirical law as Kant conceived it. It cannot be naked where we derive *practical law* from representational experience, i.e., already determined, past. The practical philosopher cannot be practical without intimacy, intercourse, playful participation (*methexis*). Instead of closure, one is presented an intentionality toward a context for understanding those difficulties of well-being that are posed by our representational markings of lived-experience, namely, those that limit our grasp to differences among things, and conscious movement. Experience teaches that these markings are problematic for no other reason than the confusion that surrounds the difference between mediated and unmediated presentations of life where all empirical understanding is mediated, relational understanding. At the same time, to speak of presentations without representation is equally problematic, particularly when called to teach the idea. The scope of practical inquiry is thereby restricted to matters of intuition (*die Anschauung*) and how does one teach intuition, unless it would be to teach ways to cultivate intuition? Lacking the means for sensible representation without judgment, this idea's recognition (*das Erkennen*) by any but those immediately engaged is denied, as is all experience of conceivable fact (*das Wissen*). Either choice leaves one with neither beauty, nor understanding. Without understanding, learning in any practical regard becomes lost in confusion, a common condition for many of our students, one that I might add is not of their making.

Complementing this view, is another that situates all of practical philosophy within the contextual space of representation, inscribed by shifts in thinking, away from any consciousness of immediate, immanent presentations, to one of reflection and conception. Continuing in a practical direction, these representations present a *mediated* history of practical freedom, the reasoning and concepts of sensible presentation in discourse, a mediation to which our thinking is habituated. Captured in the midst of practical nature, the *science* of history makes it possible for practical philosophy from an academic standpoint to entertain the idea that it has content in the same sense that other disciplines have content. That content is an inscription of thinking as conscious movement, e.g., Hegel's *phenomenology*. Unfortunately, here too sensibility appears only as a reflective representation that is subsumed under the particular concept of action in the world. What ought to be sensible ends up being without substance, abstract, alien.

This entertainment provided by temporalized, represented history—while interesting to academics, restricts the presentation of practical thinking and

sensibility to conceived objects of reflection, i.e., empirical experience. The all-pervasive sensible world of immediate encounters in open terms fades from significance, along with any thought of predicating qualitative differences for life beyond those of variable judgments of subjective taste. Immediate presentations to thinking and sensibility are rendered unrepresentable without some notion of prior representation. As Nietzsche notes in *The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, no living person appears to occupy the space that representation provides. Living there is only a predicate of things represented, past appearances. The content presented is not present in the sense of a living person whose own sense of presence is correlative with the immanent presence of being here. Anyone who sees himself to be an active practical participant in our species-life is left to starve for lack of a substantive living body.

The difficulty I find in all of this is that by joining practical philosophy with history, academic philosophy has located sensible practical thinking in a file cabinet, or data-bank, alongside every other modern academic discipline. Yet, the dog carries its bones in both directions. Though starving in the presence of represented history, practical thinkers are driven to satisfy their own bodily needs by moving towards contextualizations of life that eclipse such history. Like Russell said, we go looking for what we don't know, for what is non-present in our account. My point: It is doubtful that anyone has the ability to sensibly engage non-presence within a context where *presence* itself is nothing more than a concept. History's exclusion of non-presence is given to be nothing other than philosophy's own aberrant ways in light of its represented presence, particularly its practical, or moral side where all we find is an absence of ethical determination. This form of absence makes further developments for practical understanding in history inconceivable without having something present. The problem is "What?"

It is my belief there is a way to conceive a practical approach to both our understanding of history and its relation to practical thinking, not only as it applies to our grasp of teaching practical philosophy, but also as it applies to furthering the work of freedom. This is particularly true when one considers the thinking of Kant and Enlightenment philosophy. While represented history may correctly deny the presence of an immediate content for practical philosophy, the latter need only proceed to represent its encounter with the sensible world as a matter of intuitive judgment and the cultivation of relational understanding, one that in principle is a relation between ideas and sensible encounters with others.

Practical philosophy thereby discloses itself in history to be immediate to the question of a kind of sensible non-presence in discourse. This immediacy is thereby found as a real absence of spatial distinctions for the separation of non-presence from the conceived presence of represented history. To raise an unmediated question about absence distinguishes the work of practical philosophy from the *applied* ethics or *politics* of academic philosophy *qua* practical. Furthermore, it separates philosophy from conceived presence, accepting the immanent sensibility of non-presence to be a presentation of immanent *freedom* to the living person who questions in this manner. The

limitation posed for this freedom is a limitation that we recognize as the limit of human reason to remain sensible, meaning neither *fanatic*, nor *superstitious*. As such, reason's represented presence displays its own spacings of history by representing a body that is not alive and never was. Any philosopher who claims to be practical *ought* to withdraw from that representation and instead make it her practical aim to teach the way to freedom and well-being with others as a way of being that is both philosophical and sensible—a worthy purpose. Strictly speaking, by this approach we find that practical philosophy has no presence in human history beyond noting its own immediacy to the understanding and to the immanent presence it affords for thinking with a living body in an all-pervasive, sensible presentation of world. In short, it is a way of being that can only accomplish this aim by pursuing non-presence, when and where it sensibly may, in spite of represented history. In other words, we must live our lives by always pressing beyond the very history we create, and that is an idea that is teachable. It is also one that allows for teaching the long history preceding it and for noting philosophy's relevance to the academy and industry. In that context the only danger is fanaticism and superstition, not rigorous scholarship. And, it is by this that the business of philosophy becomes practical in a presentational sense, namely the ongoing law-giver of human freedom, a path and way of being to freedom's sensible acquisition and extension in concrete evolving terms.

### WORKS CITED

Williams, R. *John Dewey Recollections*. Washington: UP of America, 1982.