Philosophy and Freedom

Some Remarks to Students in Yale's Directed Studies Program, January 29, 2004

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We have been asked to address the question: which best captures human experience — history, literature, or philosophy? Don Kagan has just made an eloquent case for history? And no doubt Charles Hill will make an equally eloquent case for literature. In such company, what case can I make for philosophy? In what sense can philosophy be said to capture human experience at all? And this quickly leads to the question: what is philosophy? Would I not have to have a good answer to that question before beginning to make a case that it is philosophy that best captures human experience? As you see, questions led to further questions. But questioning is indeed essential to the life of philosophy.

I agree with Ludwig Wittgenstein when he suggests in the *Philosophical Investigations* that philosophical problems have the form, "I do not know my way about."[1] To be sure, not all problems having this form are therefore already philosophical. To lose one's way on a hike is not sufficient to make one a philosopher; nor is failure to understand a new piece of equipment: say my computer misbehaves and I don't know what to do; I don't know my way about. But such a loss of way does not present us with a philosophical problem. But why not? I would suggest that it fails to do so because in such cases our disorientation is only superficial. In a deeper sense we still know where we are, know our way and what to do. Thus in the first case I might ask some fellow hiker for directions or study a map. The problem here poses itself against a background of established and accepted ways of doing things to which we can turn to help us decide what is to be done. The terrain has already been charted.

Genuinely philosophical problems, as I understand them, have no such background. There are no maps the philosopher can rely on. Philosophical problems are born of a deeper anxiety, a more profound uncertainty. It is thus hardly surprising that

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[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1959) par. 123.

philosophical reflection should flourish when traditions disintegrate and as a result human beings are forced to question the place assigned to them by nature, society, and history, and searching for firmer ground demand that this place be more securely established. Those secure in the knowledge of their place see little need for philosophy, just as those who think themselves at home will not suffer from homesickness. Philosophy, as I understand it, has its origin in a sense of homelessness that is intimately linked to the demand for authenticity, that is to say, to the demand that the individual should act and think for him- or herself, a demand that, I observe just in passing, stands in some tension with today's professionalization of philosophy. At the center of philosophy so understood lies something like an ethical concern, born of the demand that individuals assume responsibility for their thoughts and actions, and of the consequent refusal to rest content with what has come to be established and accepted, and is too often taken for granted. The demand for autonomy puts into question the authority of history or the place nature has supposedly assigned to us, puts into question also the authority of philosophy as a more or less well established discipline. Philosophy as I understand it is thus a critical, and especially a self-critical enterprise. Not that it can draw on a firm understanding of where to go. Quite the contrary: philosophy remains alive only as long as the question: what is the right way? continues to be asked because that way remains questionable, because our place and vocation remain uncertain. Were philosophy to determine the right way, were it able to really raise that house in which we can live happily and securely, it would have done its work and have come to an end. This is why the birth of a science has meant so often the death of a part of philosophy, where a science is defined at least in part by a determination of what constitutes the right way or proper method. Whenever a scientist calls that way into question, science returns to its philosophical origin.

But does not philosophy attempt to seize the truth? And does it not sometimes succeed? As should be expected, given an understanding of philosophy as a pursuit of the truth, part of philosophy are dreams of a philosophy to end philosophy. Descartes thus thought the project of philosophy near completion, the architecture that he hoped to raise not far from finished; similarly Kant concludes his *Critique of Pure Reason* with an expression of hope that that desire to know that had ruled philosophy for so many

centuries would finally, before the end of the 18th century, be satisfied and laid to rest once and for all; and realization of the Hegelian system would have meant the end of philosophy. I do not need here to show once more what has already been shown so often: that all these architectures turned out to be versions of the Tower of Babel and that philosophy continued to live.

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Wittgenstein's suggestion that philosophical problems have the form, "I do not know my way about," recalls Aristotle's identification of the origin of philosophy in wonder, although Wittgenstein's remark communicates nostalgia for a homecoming that would mean also an escape from freedom and at the same time the end of philosophy, even though Wittgenstein no longer expected philosophy to be able to lay the foundations that would support such a home, looking for such support instead to ordinary language. Aristotle, by contrast, turns his account of the origin of philosophy into a celebration of free inquiry. "It is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e. g. about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and the stars, and about the genesis of the universe."[2] Philosophy here, too, is said to have its origin in those familiar dislocations or derailments that are part of everyday experience: we find ourselves stuck in some place; or we have lost our way, or we cannot find something we need to complete some task. We all run into difficulties that prevent us from just going on with whatever we were doing that force us to pause, take a step back in order to determine just where we have come from, where we are, what possibilities are open to us, and what should be done. Note how such derailments open us to possibilities that as long as life is on track are hardly considered. Opening up possibilities they also open us to our freedom. Dislocation, freedom, and wonder belong together. To say philosophy has its origin in wonder is to say also that its beginning is an awakening of freedom. Only a free being is capable of wonder.

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[2]Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, 2; ,982b, trans. W. D., Ross.

There is of course a decisive difference between such "obvious difficulties" and "the greater matters" that according to Aristotle concern the philosopher. While these "obvious difficulties" receive their significance from projects that are part of life, Aristotle's "greater matters" are pursued only to escape from ignorance, only for the sake of truth. Such a pursuit of truth only for truth's sake implies a leave-taking from the everyday world and its concerns; there is a sense in which the philosopher stands in this world as an outsider, as Plato took pains to show with his descriptions of Socrates: although placed in Athens, belonging to it by birth and upbringing, Socrates yet transcends such belonging, transcends himself as the Athenian he knows himself to be just because he is a philosopher. Such self-transcendence is inseparable from the freedom and wonder that define philosophy and its search for truth. Philosophy is an exercise in freedom.

That the first philosopher should also have been the first absent-minded philosopher is therefore no accident. I am referring of course to the anecdote Socrates tells in Plato's *Theatetus* of the pretty Thracian servant-girl who mocked Thales for falling into a well while gazing in wonder at the mysteries of the sky. Did he not have better things to look at? Socrates tells this story to show that only the "outer form" of the philosopher is in the city; the "mind, disdaining the littlenesses and nothingnesses of human things is 'flying all abroad'; as Pindar says, measuring earth and heaven and the things which are under and on the earth and above the heaven, interrogating the whole nature of each in all their entirety, but not condescending to anything which is within reach."[3] The philosopher reaches for what is not within his reach. Does he over-reach?

We may well wonder whether thus "flying all abroad," looking for higher truths, the philosopher does not become another Icarus, who trades the home given to us humans for no home at all. Aristotle himself asks whether the kind of knowledge sought by philosophy should not be regarded beyond human power: "for in many ways human nature is in bondage, so that according to Simonides 'God alone can have this privilege,' and it is unfitting that man should not be content to seek the knowledge that is suited to him."[4] The philosopher's search for knowledge would make him the rival of God. But

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[3] Plato, *Theatetus* 1973 E, trans. B. Jowett.
[4] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, 2, 982b.

Aristotle dismisses the suggestion of hubris: God is not jealous; nor is such inquiry unnatural, for "all men by nature desire to know," and not because such knowledge might prove useful; the pursuit of knowledge is not in need of such justification; it is its own reward. Without such autotelic activities life would be empty.

On this view the dignity of philosophy is inseparably bound up with its uselessness. Because it is not an industry or a business, because it is not good for anything else, but "exists for its own sake," philosophy is said by Aristotle to be "the only free science" and as such the worthy occupation of free human beings. Both Plato and Aristotle insist on this connection between philosophy and freedom: not only does the pursuit of philosophy require free time — only a person of leisure can be a philosopher — but it is precisely because the philosopher does not approach things and issues with a particular end in mind that he is able to see them with more open eyes. Freedom is a presupposition of the search for truth. Philosophy liberates. That is why it belongs at the very center of a truly liberal education.

3

I called philosophy both a pursuit of truth and an exercise in freedom. There is tension between these two determinations. Is the pursuit of truth not a pursuit of what binds freedom? But does freedom remain freedom when thus bound? Some philosophers have seen no great difficulty here: Descartes, e.g., insists that the will binds itself willingly and freely to whatever it clearly knows and thereby perfects itself and comes to rest. And similarly according to Kant freedom perfects itself when it binds itself to the rule of reason. But is such perfection of freedom not also its death? Consider this passage from Kant's *Foundations*: "The rational being must regard himself always as legislative in a realm of ends possible through the freedom of the will, whether he belongs to it as member or as sovereign."[5] But this rational being who must so regard himself is at some distance from that being I am, bound to the body, and possessed of a freedom that reveals itself in the question: Why be moral? This freedom does not belong to human beings in so far as they are members of the kingdom of ends, but to

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[5] Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: The Library of Liberal Arts, 19590, p. 52.

Kierkegaard's solitary individual who places himself higher than the universal, who experiences what Kant calls our membership in the kingdom of ends as problematic, as something he can refuse. Kant recognizes the possibility of such a refusal, but considers it evil. But the very possibility of evil forces us to question any too intimate association of freedom with Kant's practical reason. Freedom is disposed not just to the good, but also to evil. But perhaps we should say: ours is a freedom that calls into question even the authority of pure practical reason. Kantian autonomy here is transformed into existentialist authenticity, which does not recognize a given transcendent measure of human actions or a God who created human beings in his image.

This may seem to leave the subject's own radical freedom as the only source of value. But divorced from the ability to respond to what already claims us, freedom loses all content and evaporates. Our freedom demands such ability to respond, demands response-ability in this sense. To be sure, our finite freedom is haunted by the possibility of a more complete, godlike freedom. But this is a temptation: freedom alone lacks the strength to found anything resembling values. If value had its foundation just in human freedom a person who found life without meaning could cure him- or herself just by an act of will. Values or meanings cannot finally be willed, cannot be freely invented; they must be discovered.

Self-affirmation requires that freedom be bound. But what first of all has always already bound freedom is the body, which limits our possibilities, also our access to reality. That also holds for our reason: unless mediated by the body, reason's claims remain hollow. Consider once more the spiritual architecture raised by Kant's ethics: his categorical imperative bids us treat all rational beings as ends in themselves. But this presupposes that we are able to respond to, and that means able to recognize persons as persons, able to experience other human beings as worthy of respect. Moral responsibility presupposes such response-ability. This is of course a platitude, but a platitude sufficient to show that any understanding of experience that reduces the self to a thinking subject and reality to mute facts that lack meaning until endowed by that subject with meaning does violence to our experience of both persons and things. To the embodied self, experiencing care and desire, reality gives itself first of all as always already charged with meaning. Every time we recognize another human being we

experience the incarnation of meaning in matter as a living reality. Without such experiences of meaning incarnated in matter moral precepts would be without application and life meaningless. To repeat: freedom must be bound by such response-ability.

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Experiences of meaning incarnated in matter are the ground of the moral life. But talk of meaning incarnated in matter seems at odds with that commitment to objectivity that is a presupposition of the scientist's pursuit of truth. That presupposes an understanding of reality as a collection of mute facts that lack meaning until appropriated and put to use by human subjects. Science knows nothing of incarnations of meaning in matter, knows nothing of freedom, knows therefore nothing of persons as persons. Technology has carried that understanding of reality into our everyday, inviting us to look not just at the earth, but also at persons, including ourselves, especially our bodies, as material to be used and shaped as we see fit and are able to do. This is why science presents philosophy today with what I take to be its most pressing problem, a problem that, since science, too, has its origin in freedom, is but a timely expression of philosophy's unending attempt to determine its own origin and essence.

Freedom gives an open mind. But ours is a finite freedom: we are bound just by having the senses, the bodies we do have, by living in this particular place at this particular time, as members of this particular community. Whatever we experience we experience from a particular perspective, where reflection just on this simple fact is sufficient to establish a first distinction between appearance and reality. Subject to perspective, we are cut off from the truth. How then do we gain access to reality? There would seem to be an obvious answer: by freeing our understanding from the relativity of perspective. Objectivity demands freedom from all sorts of perspectival distortions. The truth of scientific propositions can thus be understood as a correspondence to the objects that make up reality, where it is important to keep in mind that these objects are not given to our senses as they are, but must be reconstructed in thought. Such reconstruction is the task of science. And there is no reason to think that such reconstruction could or even should ever be fully adequate to these objects, which function as regulative ideals. The test of truth, so understood, turns out to be coherence: and coherence here means not only

the fit of such a reconstruction with our other relevant judgments: to commit oneself to the pursuit of truth so understood is to commit oneself also to the freedom of those who join us in this pursuit.

This quite ordinary understanding of the meaning of truth as correspondence is sufficient to allow us to claim an unambiguous sense in which science has progressed since the Greeks. The measure of that progress is given just by the idea of objectivity. The progressive securing of the method or way to be taken by this pursuit has meant also the progressive emancipation of science from the tutelage of philosophy.

I thus cannot agree with the philosopher Alvin Plantinga when, divorcing science from the commitment to objectivity, he claims that "What the Christian community really needs is a science that takes into account what we know as Christians."[6] A Christian science is not what we need; is not what the Christian community needs. Science cannot surrender its commitment to objectivity. A Christian science is an oxymoron. What we need today is something quite different: a critique of science that both recognizes its legitimacy and its limits. Humanists who, citing Nietzsche out of context, would deconstruct the edifice of science only help render the humanities marginal in a world increasingly shaped by technology and science. Such humanists may well cite against me a provocative remark made by Richard Rorty in *The Mirror of Nature* that today we can no longer say that Cardinal Bellarmine's objections to the Copernican theory, on the ground that it conflicted with the Scriptural description of the heavenly fabric, was illogical or unscientific.[7] According to Rorty we simply do not know how to draw a clear line between theological and scientific discourse. This opens the door to a Christian science such as Plantinga demands. I would like to counter with the opposite claim: if the humanities, and more especially philosophy, are not to become marginalized, they have to be able to explain just what it is that makes Cardinal Bellarmine's objections unscientific. The key to such explanation is once again provided by the commitment to objectivity as a regulative ideal. That this remains an ideal must be accepted. But as such it is sufficient to give a direction. That nonscientific and more especially

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[6] Alvin Plantinga, "Methodological Naturalism?" *Origins & Design,* Winter 1997, p. 25.

[7] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 328.

theological considerations have as a matter of fact played an important part in the history of science is no argument against this.

But if we are not to surrender freedom, and that means also philosophy and finally our humanity to science, we must be able to show that reality may not be identified with the objects pursued by science. Just to be able to respond to a person as a person is to experience a reality that transcends what science can know, which is not to deny the legitimacy of science and its pursuit of the truth. But the very successes of science do raise a question, not for science, but for human beings concerned for their and the world's future. Just what room are we to give science in that world? Born of freedom, the successes of science and technology promise to finally make us masters and possessors of nature, including our own nature; promise thus an unheard of freedom, but threaten at the same time to leave that freedom so empty that it will evaporate altogether. That loss of way in which philosophy has its origin remains very much with us.

And how could this not be so: some loss of way is inseparable from facing the future responsibly, that is to say from freedom. The future is open. Different possibilities present themselves. And the more open the future, the more insistently the questions: What should our place be? Where should we be going? will present themselves.

I cited the story told by Socrates of the Thracian servant girl who laughed at Thales. The Athenians may similarly have laughed at Socrates. At least at first. They ended up condemning him to death for corrupting the young and believing in gods of his own invention instead of those recognized by the State. From their point of view the charges were quite justified: the freedom of philosophy is contagious and the young are more likely than the old to be led by it to question what tradition is supposed to have established; and although Socrates does invoke God and gods, he does not believe as his accusers do. To them the philosopher has to look like an atheist. But the freedom of Socrates remains bound, bound by a reality that calls him, a reality that he serves and pursues, even though in the end all his conjectures about it remain inadequate. Despite all he has to teach, to the very end Socrates knows about his ignorance. And only such learned ignorance sustains philosophy. And only such learned ignorance makes us free and able to respond to the claims that issue from persons and things. Perhaps in this

sense philosophy, understood as an exercise of freedom, can be said to capture what makes human experience human.

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