

Philosophers, Religion and the Dogs of Reason

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Recently, I presented a paper at a philosophical conference held at The New School, in New York City, the place where I completed my own graduate work in philosophy. The theme of the conference was “Philosophy and Liberation.” My paper was titled *Wade in the Water - Evasion, Transformation and Hope*. When the organizers told me the conference theme I suspected that they were looking for something along the lines of a critique of the prison-industrial complex or of the WTO, or concerning the problems of race and racism – the sorts of subject that are the usual fare at this annual gathering of philosophers. Had this invitation been extended to me a few years ago, I would likely have written something addressing one of those issues, something that had to do with the social problems that confront so many of our fellow human beings. But I am now in a different place, and so I pondered what it was I really wanted to say about philosophy and liberation. I certainly think philosophers should take-up questions of social justice – *and often*. But if one is going to talk about “liberation,” I reckoned, one must think more broadly. So I decided to take a risk.



Leftist and progressive intellectuals are good at attacking various topics having to do with social justice, but not so good at talking about existential liberation – the type of liberation that concerns itself with facing down the ever-present threat of nihilism. The Left’s lopsided focus on matters of social justice limits the notion of “liberation,” and defines it only penultimately; it is to turn *The Social* into an idol. It is to so focus on the penultimate question “What is to be done?” that the sister and ultimate question “Why go on?” drops from view, and with it much of human hope and concern. So, on my account, liberation must concern itself as much with the latter question as the former – *which makes things far more messy*. Nevertheless, is not liberation, conceived broadly, about the removal of those things that impede the living of a full, joyful and self-actualized life? A serious discussion of liberation must consider, at least at times, the soul – the full, undissected, uncategorized, human being – and must concern itself with the private answer one

speaks to a world that challenges us to find meaning in the face of tragedy, uncertainty, indifference, contingency, and mortality.

If all the classes of society collapse into one (or none), if the rancor surrounding issues of color and culture disappear from human discourse forever, and if sex roles were, around the globe, freely exchanged between genders so that one could not predict (or would want to predict), with respect to any household of any configuration, who wins the bread and who bakes it, the threat of nihilism would still loom, and still demand a powerful response. Full stomachs and freedom from human oppression cannot make it go away, and without some substantive answer to it, our hoped-for

classless and physically sated lives might very well only lead to a heightened existential crisis, as we turn our attentions, in our repose, to the meaning of everything that we had not the time to consider before. This is precisely the place that Prozac-dependent America finds itself today, the place that Nietzsche predicted long ago. To say, “Would that the oppressed and the poor had such a problem!” is to trivialize the issue, and to make the true complexities of liberation simplistic. It is to view Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in a false sequential light – first the belly, then the head. Human beings are always belly *and* head, *and* heart. It is odd to watch my fellow Du Boisians become Washingtonians when the discussion of liberation is seen in a different light; it is odd to see those who embrace full inclusion elide fullness of life when the messiness of the existential question is inserted into conversations about social relations.

So at this particular conference I suggested to my fellow philosophers, philosophers who proclaim that they are serious about liberation, that in addition to social forms of liberation we must re-engage with the need for liberation from nihilism, a liberation that I believe we must take equally seriously, a liberation that Marxian talk of “species-being” and Madisonian talk of “democracy” do not address adequately without Emersonian talk of transcendence, or Native American or Christian talk of Spirit, or Buddhist or Taoist or Hindu narratives when they, all, are understood *from certain points of view* – as wisdom discourses and literatures, rather than as hokum. There is the liberation that comes from having *a Big Picture* about the meaning of life, *a Big Picture* that need be neither dogmatic, nor unscientific, nor literalist, nor suffer from the problematics of Lyotardian meta-narratives, but that may be affective and romantic and sublime antidotes to nihilism for a species always in dire need of a meaning larger than the instrumental purposes that drive it, a need to view itself as vastly greater than the sum of its parts. There is the liberation that is derived from narratives (which are a kind of theory for living) that direct and economize one’s efforts and projects from cradle to grave, that provide the existential skeleton of a life of purpose, self-sacrifice and love. These have to do with existential rather than political forms of liberation, I suggested. We must, in fact, have both.



We “philosophers of liberation” would do well to find new ways to engage the big questions, and to find new ways to engage the various religious responses to them. Religion is, after all, the place where some 86 percent of the people in the country say they are and where I dare say 96 percent likely are when the slings and arrows of misfortune strike, even if but for a fleeting moment. And that’s just this country. A philosophy concerned with liberation needs to find a way to re-engage the religious as part of the context of a form of life, *and by that engagement perhaps affect religion’s own self-understanding* and elicit its enormous power to help create the justice we want to see emerge around the globe.

As I read these things, and many more, to my audience, I realized that I was on thin ice, and that I was facing people who make a living slashing and burning the arguments of others, as I myself do – unfortunately – from time to time. I knew that the need to re-engage with deep existential issues did not necessarily entail re-engagement with the religious. I knew that in many ways there was little new in my suggestions – that thinkers and philosophers from Kierkegaard to Sartre already wrestled with the existential dilemma in which we human beings find ourselves. Nevertheless, there was a new slant, and a new slant is sometimes all you need. I was trying to kindle a new kind of existential discussion,

one deeper and richer in its understanding of religion, one that might see religion as more than the iterations found in the West. I was trying to rekindle the idea that the “dark mood” that attends the human predicament, as highlighted in past forms of existentialism, is but a function of a certain bad approach, and that existential discussions could be recharged with a new and more positive energy by pulling together different philosophies of life and different religious traditions from around the world. The gloom and joylessness of earlier versions of existentialism, the mundanity and uselessness of advice such as “just choose” (a path) and “just create” (your own meaning) seemed then, as now, to have fallen flat, to have resulted in little more than interesting discussions in graduate seminars and seminary foyers among jejune intellectuals who either had not yet tasted the bitter parts of life’s course, or were reeling from the betrayal of the promise that was “Europe” – a collection of overlapping civilizations supposedly built on belief in “progress” and “reason” but that drew the world into two catastrophic wars and became responsible for the slaughter of millions of innocent people. Europe’s bleak existentials of the 1950s and 1960s were the scorning of itself. To try to break the back of this gloomy existentialism, as well as of Eurocentric bad rationalism, was to me worth the risk I was taking. Whether I was risking my own intellectual reputation or not did not seem to matter as much as getting at least a few of these fellow “philosophers of liberation” to consider the poverty of discussions about, merely, The Social, and getting them to engage existential questions once again and from different and fresh perspectives.

There are philosophers out there who have been able to extricate themselves from narrow and thus bad approaches to the challenge of nihilism. Some I agree with more often than I agree with others, but that isn’t the point. These are philosophers who accept the career of Western philosophy as having ended in a place in which things like community, context, uncertainty, language, tradition and hope are where the action is. No longer are they concerned with the quest for certainty and false notions of “progress” that are the fantasies of much of Euro-American intellectual history and culture. These philosophers may be called holists – thinkers who push nothing off the table, who take all forms of literature and human insight into consideration as legitimate contributors to the discussion of both what is to be done and why one should



go on. They see science and the forms of philosophy that one finds in universities as but sets of vocabularies, different ways of talking about and describing the world, alongside other vocabularies like those of poetry, art, and religion. They think all have merit and that none should be shoved aside as inferior, for the judgment of superiority or inferiority is no longer unhinged from the question of “use,” and so must be rephrased or rethought as “Superior or inferior *for what purposes?*” Such philosophers – people like John Dewey, William James, Alain Locke, Judith Green, Cornel West, Richard Bernstein and others – have helped us break the back of the totalizing, even totalitarian discourses of science and instrumental reason, and have caused us to rethink the possibility that philosophers have a role to play in helping us find meaningful statements just about everywhere – from the *Principia Mathematica* to the *Torah*, from Plato’s *Republic*, to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, from *Being and Time*, to *Black Elk Speaks*.

The trope “wading in the water” came to me after thinking about the meaning of the old African/African-American spiritual at the same time I was considering a topic for my remarks. In a moment of creativity, I saw how the two could go together. The spiritual, of course, is, *Wade in the Water*:

*Wade in de water, Wade in de water, children
Wade in de water, God's a goin' to trouble de water.*

The spiritual is an instruction to slaves who would flee their masters to go through streams and creeks to throw off the master's dogs, which would be in pursuit. The creeks and the streams would help them evade capture and increase their chances of survival and success. Water is an oft used trope in literature and in religion, and even in our ordinary speech. It captures the essence of something that cleanses, that dissolves things into itself, that restores, that *transforms*. Thus, it is often the symbolic expression of rebirth and transformation, as much as the symbol of evasion in this spiritual. In Buddhist thought, the crossing of the *river* of illusion is that idea that lies beneath the names of the great *Hinayana* and *Mahayana* schools, which translate, respectively, as "little raft" and "big raft" (a reference to the availability of the two schools of thought to fewer or greater numbers of people, respectively). The schools are seen as rafts, rafts used to cross over – over the *waters* of illusion – to enlightenment. In the Christian tradition, baptism is a form of rebirth, and the use of water is well known. In *Exodus* the children of Abraham walk through the Red/Reed Sea to escape their bondage and the wrath of Pharaoh – the story from which *Wade in the Water* draws its metaphorical power. For Hindus, the river Ganges cleanses and purifies.

When I was writing my remarks, *I* wanted to *evade* the old approaches to liberation that I thought were insufficient, and I considered the need for philosophers and other intellectuals steeped in Western tradition, who have already (at least in many circles) given-up on "universal reason" and a belief that science and logic will save us, to leave-off their narrow academic pursuits and become philosophers once again in the etymological sense of the word – to become, once again, "lovers of wisdom." After all, it is academic philosophy that is dying, while the need for good answers to perennial questions persists. I thought of Thoreau's famous observation, found in *Walden*:

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. . . . To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust.

Philosophy as the love of wisdom – a novel idea. The inability, for some, to be philosophers in Thoreau's sense has to do, perhaps, with allowing ourselves to be caught up in the controversies and puzzles that are largely sterile academic concerns. The academy is the workshop; the world is the place of application of the products. But too many Western philosophers, too often, think the workshop *is* the world, and it often doesn't matter whether the school to which one adheres is rooted in the analytic, Continental, or various American traditions.

The abandonment of a meaningful and respectful dialogue between philosophy and religion (and by that I do not mean merely a *philosophy of religion*) often attends a lack of understanding of the nature of religion and religious experience. It often, as well, attends an inability to take seriously the *affective* dimensions of life and the *intuitive* dimensions of human reason. Regardless of what many "philosophers of liberation" might say, many of them are still very much locked inside of a bad rationalism, a bad rationalism that causes them to use the tool of instrumental, means-ends reason and

tests for the validity of arguments as the exclusive tools for engaging the big questions of life. There are the logics of the heart into which only lived, human experience may peer or gain any access, and the kind of philosophy that has shaped itself, utterly, into a hammer of criticism tends to view life itself as but another nail. Perhaps the job of the true philosopher is not only to analyze, but also to synthesize; not only to expose, but also to clothe; not only to deconstruct, but also to build.

Philosophers and other Western intellectuals often miss the point of religion when they expose its common errors (and there are many, let us be clear) of literalism and dogmatism. But they are too quick with their conclusions. First, there are religious



perspectives that suffer from neither literalism, nor dogmatism. Second, when religion is seen as a collection of approaches to life that are expressed through collections of vocabularies that bear a family resemblance to one another – vocabularies that take-up the question of life’s meaning in the largest possible sense – it can be engaged respectfully and with seriousness. The philosopher can disregard the specifics and focus on the underlying impetus and internal logics of the religious *thinker*.

Further, when the philosopher stops seeing religion as offering-up competing epistemological claims (claims about knowing and truth), and views the religious individual as one who has made a *Decision* to engage life in certain ways, she will be able to find the handle that will grant her access to a new and very different dialogue with religion – perhaps even from the inside.

Philosophers and other Western intellectuals might do well to flee the dogs of their masters (their careers, the Universities, mere criticism) and take up the difficult questions of life once more, and to be fonts of wisdom rather than mere purveyors of criticism. Perhaps it is the case that if we are truly concerned with liberation we must first liberate ourselves, and leave off bad approaches and bad rules of engagement. Perhaps we must “wade in the water” and emerge with new minds and new sympathies. The hope of social transformation that we so often talk about will not be helped by us if we continue to operate pursuant to an old academic mind-set, if we continue to view ourselves as above the affairs of the heart and soul, and if we refrain from engaging the existential dimensions of life, as well as the political and economic ones, in serious ways and with serious sympathy and empathy for our fellow, suffering, brothers and sisters. The question “What is to be done?” is only one question. Our fellows are also asking “Why go on?” and both that question and the answers they elicit must be respected and not glossed or elided; they must be understood and translated so that they can be mined for the truth that is in them – yes, the truth that is in the questions themselves! The question “Why go on?” is in some sense the most foundational; for if no answer is given it, the question “What is to be done?” loses some of its urgency, or becomes an idol. To dwell on political and economic liberation while eliding the need for existential liberation is a huge oversight for people who would call themselves “philosophers of liberation.” And the assumption that such a question is the domain of another discipline (Religious Studies, or Literature, or Psychology) returns philosophers to the traps of dualism and domains of thought that are beneath the modern historicist, global, and cross-disciplinary thinker. We philosophers might do well to re-frame the meanings of tradition and religion so that we can again find our way to connect with those we claim to serve – if the love of our fellows and not the love of a discipline or career is what has compelled us to come

to the tortuous and troublesome life of the mind.

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