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The Problem of the Philosophical Person

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Introduction

IN THIS PAPER, I TAKE a fresh look at the philosophical and personal metamorphoses of two well-known philosophers, William James and Socrates. I also examine the philosophical person in the role of teaching philosophy students in a contemporary setting.

Xenophon reports that Cicero called Socrates's philosophical muse an "immanent divine something" (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*) that takes up residence in the person. It speaks and directs, remains silent when it wants, and has, I dare say, a *personality* of its own. How well does it get along with the other person in whom it resides?

Let us imagine the desiderata for becoming a philosopher. One knows that there is such a thing as, or imagines the concept of, a "philosopher." One acknowledges that the philosopher has attributes that make him distinct. Alternately, one learns of or imagines the definition of a philosopher as a distinct kind of being. In any case, the would-be philosopher aspires to become one.

The larval philosopher suffers from a special peculiarity in having a puzzle about his future identity. A child astronaut at play understands that she can wear a special suit and travel in a spaceship. A child chef at play understands working in a kitchen and transforming uncooked foodstuffs into meals. Even a child social worker at play understands working with people and helping them fit into society. Toys"R"Us supplies helmets and action figures for pretending to go on an Apollo moon landing, aprons and spatulas for pretending to be a Ninja chef, and plastic briefcases for pretending to make home visits.

The child philosopher might get a library card, and, like Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, charm the librarian into letting her check out books above her

normal reading level. But one usually waits until he has taken formal classes in college and then decides that philosophy is a more pleasant life's activity than, say, accounting. I shall examine these sorts of individuals after analyzing the historical cases of William James and Socrates.

William James: Crisis, Recovery, and a Case of Bad Faith in Later Days

Seldom has any philosopher become one in as dramatic a fashion as William James. Knocking about the world, this nineteenth-century male Paris Hilton bought out of Civil War service and tried out various careers, finding none to his liking. He returned to America and attempted a life in medicine at Harvard. James described experiencing, "without warning" during the winter of 1870, a profound fear of his own existence—that is, a horror of the supreme danger that faced him every living moment ("Personal Depression" 8). He associated this dread with a patient he recalled seeing in the asylum—an epileptic who "sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human." James recalled fearing *That shape am I* ("Personal Depression" 6). He marveled that others were not equally fearful and was severely depressed when left alone. Despair and suicidal thoughts plagued him for months. By April he resolved that his crisis must end. Upon reading Charles Bernard Renouvier's second "Essais," he adopted his definition of free will, seeing "no reason why this definition—'the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts'—need be the definition of an illusion" (James, "Personal Depression" 6+). James then declared that

My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will. For the remainder of the year, I will abstain from the mere speculation . . . and voluntarily cultivate the feeling of moral freedom, by reading books favorable to it, as well as by acting. After the first of January, my callow skin being somewhat fledged, I may perhaps return to metaphysical study and skepticism without danger to my powers of action. . . . I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power. ("Personal Depression" 7+)

This resolution marked the end of the waffling and malaise that had haunted James's life for so long. Ironically, however, James had never made decisions in any way other than freely. What compulsions, exterior or interior, had ever forced him to do anything in the past? At any rate, by 1875 he acquired the academic title of Psychologist at Harvard College, and by 1880 he was Pro-

fessor of Philosophy, thus completing a professional identity makeover that remained permanent until his death in 1910. John McDermott and others have remarked on the birth of James's foremost philosophical ideas from the time of his crisis (McDermott xxi +). The innovative *Principles of Psychology* presents the brain as a creative collection of adaptive functional processes—an idea in keeping with “belief in individual reality and creative power” (McDermott xxi). The essay “The Will to Believe” and others are derived from the crisis itself. However, McDermott asserts that “if it can be said that James assented to ‘The Will to Believe’ until the end, we must caution that it was a belief always shot through with irresolution and doubt” (xxi). Behind the consistent cadences of a rich and future-oriented prose, there lurked a well-controlled but omnipresent sense of despair. And John Jay Chapman writes that “the intellectual part of him was enfeebled by the agnosticism of 1870. And yet what difference did it make? Some sort of light shone out of his cloud as he took his way across the sand, and men followed him” (qtd. in McDermott xxi). For the person of James, it did make a noteworthy difference.

James was a social success and a popular lecturer, known for his clever turns of phrase and memorable images (the “cash value” of an idea, for example), but he became wary of precise technical work in the wake of his philosophical conversion. In 1903, he arranged for Charles Peirce to give a set of lectures on pragmatism at Harvard but warned him to back away from difficult concepts in logic. James cautioned Peirce that he could not “start with too low an idea” of the intelligence of his audience (Peirce, *Pragmatism* 16). He insisted that Peirce revise the lectures with an “ignoramus in view as [the] auditor . . . Look at me as one!” James admonished Peirce: “As things stand, it is only highly skilled technicians and professionals who will sniff the rare perfume of your thought and, *after you are dead*, trace things back to your genius. You ought to gain a bigger audience *when living*” (*Pragmatism* 16). Looking back to the year before, we find James writing a letter of recommendation for Peirce’s highly original 1902 Carnegie application for his project on scientific logic, otherwise enthusiastically supported on its philosophical and scientific grounds by numerous scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers. James wrote that Peirce was in the front rank of American thinkers whose

logic, when published will unquestionably (in spite of certain probable obvious oddities) be recognized all over the world. . . . Peirce has proved unable (some malignant witch having cast a spell upon him in his cradle, no doubt) to make more than the barest living, and now, as I understand it, with this Magnus Opus on his mind, has no regularly remunerative support. . . . [consequently, the Carnegie Institution] ig-

noring all personal questions, and regarding only the interests of originality in Science should consider Mr. Peirce's case as one for favorable treatment. (qtd. in Peirce 2)

James further assured the institution that he could think of no "more appropriate case for help" (qtd. in Peirce 2). Thus, Peirce's presumably oldest and closest friend recommended that Peirce's application not be rejected on the basis that his work would most certainly contain oddities. Rather, James preferred that Peirce be taken up by the Carnegie Institution as a charity case! When Peirce was refused the Carnegie grant in February 1903, James cobbled together funding for Peirce to give a series of lectures on pragmatism at Harvard. Not five days after Peirce's first lecture in March 1903, James's own charity was showing strain. James wrote to Dickinson Miller:

Damn your half-successes, your imperfect geniuses. I'm tired of making allowances for them and propping them up. As Alice [Mrs. James] says, Peirce has never *constrained* himself in his life. Selfish, conceited, affected, a monster of desultory intellect, he has become now a seedy, almost sordid, old man, without even any intellectual residuum from his work that can be called a finished construction, only "suggestions," and begging old age. (Peirce 11)

McDermott's concerns for James's omnipresent doubt and despair appear to be well grounded in these passages; moreover, James abandons his goodwill to a spiteful lack of self-control. Traditional wisdom has it that James frequently rescued Peirce from debt or interceded when Peirce committed social *faux pas*. But James made his favors known: his social reputation was at the forefront of his persona. In doing so, Peirce's reputation became a public matter also. Peirce was nothing if not a committed philosopher and scientist—writing, teaching, or working in the field every day of his life for up to eighteen hours daily. So the personal conflict between two philosophers who are associated with pragmatism's school of thought and who were understood to be friends is of keen interest when we examine it more closely. What can James have found desultory about Peirce's intellect? To have said that Peirce was unfocused, haphazard, or unmethodical is to have not known him at all. How could James have failed to regard the creative will of a fellow philosopher with reverence? In his resolve to protect his "powers of action," James somehow snaps off that part of himself which formerly was capable of thinking and feeling about another human being, "that shape am I." While James appears to select the manner in which he will suffer as a person once he has become a philosopher, he appears to have also selected to *know* less as well.

Socrates Hears the Call

Shall we count the cost of personhood to other philosophers? Socrates paid for his commitment to philosophy with his life, but Socrates claimed to die happy. If we apply to Socrates Aristotle's notion that we cannot know whether a man is happy until long after his death, it appears we have an outstanding candidate for an additional kind of happiness. For one thing, Socrates became the stuff of legends, a celebrity. His persona evolved from the time he made his appearance in the ephemera of Xenophon's *Memorabilia* and as a buffoon in Aristophanes' *The Clouds* to when he became the host and star of Platonic dialogues. Regardless of the fact that in true Socratic dialogue there are no winners or losers, Socrates the man is never humiliated. No man is wiser than Socrates, and, no man ever bests Socrates.

The long run was good for Socrates, but the short run reveals a cramp: persecution and, later, punishment. Earlier in *Apology*, Socrates states:

This investigation has led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind, and has given occasion also to many calumnies, and I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and in this oracle he means to say that the wisdom of men is little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, *he is only using my name as an illustration*, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, *like Socrates*, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing. (Plato, *Apology* 23a-b; emphasis mine)

Who, then, is the persecuted one? Shifting perspectives from a persecution motif to a birth motif is helpful here. When Socrates declares that "no evil can happen to a good man" (Plato, *Apology* 41c), is he not saying that he is not to be thought of as a man but the illustration of a man in the service of the "immanent divine something"? The cramp in his mortal life is simply a labor pain—Socrates the midwife assures us that Socrates the person is the parent of Socrates the philosopher and, as such, must suffer the pains of childbirth. Thus the short run is a trifling episode since being a man is a trifling matter.

Let us further examine how Socrates's transformation to philosopher is said to have taken place. Under the influence of hallucinatory elixirs, the oracle would have spoken for hours in response to *any* question. Some of the reply would be gibberish, but not all. The question and answer regarding whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates seem to have been given all along. What would Socrates's life have been like had there been a different

question or if Chaerephon had been open to hearing other answers? Nonetheless, Socrates takes Chaerephon's word that the oracle agrees that "no man is wiser than Socrates." Socrates protests that "When I heard the answer, I said to myself, what can the god mean? And what is the interpretation of this riddle? For I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men?" (Plato, *Apology* 21a-b). Socrates makes others seem lackluster by comparison. How it humbles our contemporary egos that while philosophy entreated Socrates into her arms via a god we contemporary philosophers must apply for fellowships, jobs, tenure, and other filthy lucre . . . and risk rejection! To be realistic, this is as much as we should expect once we understand that the world is neither charmed by what we do nor by how we do it.

The Debt of the Philosopher to the State: the Contemporary Person's Debt to the Philosopher

Hannah Arendt invented the term "the banality of evil" for those who refuse to think deeply, for they are accessories to evil and are themselves evildoers. Student response to the argument below is an occasion to consider Arendt's notion. The following argument is posed in an exercise set in an introductory logic text intended to give students practice in detecting whether arguments contain informal fallacies. The student is asked to detect whether the arguer has committed an ad hominem fallacy: *Rudolf Höss confessed to murdering over a million Jews in the Auschwitz camps. Therefore he must have been either insane or evil* (Hurley 125). There is no fallacy here since the argument does not direct attention away from an argument by directing it to a person.

All the same, students claim that this argument is fallacious because it is "abusive to Rudolf Höss." A sampling of their responses typically includes the following: (1) "I thought you told us that whenever an argument said something bad about a person it contained an ad hominem fallacy"; (2) "Maybe Höss didn't know what he was doing"; (3) "It depends on your definition of 'insane' and 'evil'—who are you to say he was insane or evil?"; and finally, (4) "He might have had to because he was ordered to do it." Students who respond in any of these ways are not paying attention nor are they thinking very much. Response (1) is unthinking because, despite knowing that it is appropriate to criticize people for being in the wrong, students have now used my lecture on the ad hominem fallacy as an excuse to stop being critical of anyone at all. In my lecture I am careful to point out that it is appropriate to criticize individuals for evaluative purposes. I cite examples of arguments

comparing job candidates, electoral candidates, and individuals making marriage proposals. Response (2) permits anyone the most outrageous behavior. Response (3) is a mild attack on me. Fortunately, "insane" can easily be defined within the scope of an innocent person confessing to over a million executions, and "evil" ought to be easy to define by pointing out that Höss confessed to murdering over a million people.

For reasons that continue to baffle me, the confession of murdering "over one million people," presumably made in earnest, does not appear to satisfy some students that the confessor is "evil." When asked to imagine murdering five or ten or twenty, by any method, most students break down and admit that one would have to be a "different kind of person than I am" to get that far. However, in every class in which I have tried this experiment, there is at least one student who will not admit that murdering a million people is enough to define one as "evil." According to this view, confessing to murdering a million people, even allowing that one's guilt is unquestionably assumed, is not enough to properly allow an arguer to call the murderer "evil" in an argument. When asked what then would be sufficient to warrant a claim asserting that a mass murderer is "evil," the student typically avers that nothing whatsoever would warrant the claim.

I own up to concluding, even before encountering such a claim, that any student's defense of Höss on the grounds that he was following orders indicates that the logic class session per se has arrived at a crisis point for me. The issue of *ad hominem* has long departed. The question under discussion at this stage is whether Höss is guilty of war crimes. Shall we now discuss the Nuremberg trials, the general indefensibility of "following orders" in logic class? The Höss example is one of many such teaching dilemmas that my colleagues and I encounter. The presumptions of students present formidable challenges. Some students have attitudes that prevent them from becoming philosophers. In short, they believe themselves to be already as well educated as they need to be, to be entitled to rewards they did not earn, and to be "good" without having any idea what "goodness" means.

As a philosopher, I believe I should engage in rational discourse with my students. To the student who challenges me with "Who is to say?" I reply, "Who better than you and me to work out the solution to this problem?" As gently and sincerely as my reply is posed, it can produce paroxysms of self-doubt or even anger in my student. But a nearby student may interpret it as an invitation to engage in genuine intellectual exchange. To a student who learns from me that history judged "following orders" to be an unacceptable defense, I am an unwelcome messenger. But to another who listens carefully,

the world becomes more orderly, and he begins to gain an appreciation for justice and human rights.

Students typically vary in their maturity, sensitivity, and ability to take on issues that challenge their view of the world. Their assumptions about their own centrality in the world and the certainty with which they assume the primacy that accompanies centrality are sometimes astonishingly naïve. Their unspoken edicts come from a place deep inside Plato's cave which, as we know, is a dangerous place for philosophers. In spite of this, Plato argues that in his republic philosophers ought to repay the state for educating them to live in the light by going back into the cave and laboring there: "Thus for you and for us, the city will be governed, not like the majority of cities nowadays, by people who fight over shadows and struggle against one another in order to rule—as if that were a great good—but by people who are awake rather than dreaming" (*Republic* 192). This is a small price to pay for the philosophical person to be free to choose rationality over superstition, clear-headedness over quackery. Being a philosopher, in any world, is no luxury. By laboring in the cave, "people who are awake and not dreaming" are not only paying down a debt but are maintaining their own self-determination and contributing to the self-determination of others. In Plato's world, the unreflecting person is prey for tyrants. It is likely no less so in any world.

The case of William James further demonstrates the personal cost of forgetting one's own philosophical struggles. His retreat into pained soliloquy in response to feeling anger at Peirce's inaccessibility demonstrates the diminution of self that is possible when one loses the sense of how important it is to struggle for light and then lapses into thinking of persons as having been issued as they are by the fiat of the universe. In discussing the murderer Brockton in "The Dilemma of Determinism," James argues against interpreting the occurrence of either good or bad as being necessary from eternity: "Calling a thing bad means, if it means anything at all, that the thing ought not to be, that something else ought to be in its stead. Determinism, in denying that anything else can be in its stead, virtually defines the universe as a place in which what ought to be is impossible—in other words, as an organism whose constitution is afflicted with an incurable taint, an irremediable flaw" (*Pragmatism* 221). And, according to James, such a conviction is tainted with an infection of pessimism so profound that *it* is practically incurable. Had James been able to follow one of the best of his own principles—the belief in liberty despite the weight of arguments for determinism—he might not have made the fatal error of excluding Peirce from his moral life and, as it turns out, his genuine friendship and philosophical collaboration.

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